Editorial 16.2

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As Val Plumwood writes in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* with regard to the current economic and extractivist practices that are rather absurdly considered "rational" despite wreaking havoc on the Earth's ecological systems, "such monological and hegemonic forms of reason" fail in "that they misunderstand their own enabling conditions—the body, ecology and non-human nature" (Plumwood 17). She deems our industrialized, "Western" cultures instead as "irrational," since they tend to assume that undermining our "enabling conditions" is irrelevant in the face of human power and profit that benefit the privileged. Plumwood thereby inspires us to seek more rational perspectives, those that are actually rational and based on reason, rather than being primarily power-driven. Reasonably, our human social conditions would acknowledge the living world around us, the living atmosphere, our co-species, and the more-than-human beings on which we depend, especially the vegetal. We might therefore pose two questions as part of this quest for ecological rationality: are plants vital and agential beings whose lives compose the green force enabling the very existence of large animal beings (including humans) on Earth; and, can industrialized cultures that have lost sight of the obvious power and central relevance of plants for our lives regain better ecological knowledge by attending to cultures who retain a more rational understanding of our vegetal enablers?

In the introduction to the special section of *Ecozon@* Volume 16.2 (2025) guest-edited by Patrícia Vieira, Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, "From *Hylaea* to *Kawsak Sacha*: Introduction to the Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon," Vieira makes it clear that the answer to both questions is yes. She contrasts the European colonial terms and concepts of the Amazonian forest to that of the Kichwa Indigenous community of Sarayaku, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, who "call their ancestral land *Kawsak Sacha*, or 'living forest.'" Alexander von Humboldt's simultaneously proto-ecological and yet also inevitably colonial/imperial response to the Amazonian rainforest led him to coin the German neologism, "Hyläe," taken from the ancient Greek term, *hylē*, or "forested plain," a concept that Vieira notes still reflects the connotations from Aristotelian philosophy, in which it signifies "amorphous matter that needed a given form to become a concrete thing." While the tendency of "Western" cultures to describe the vegetal (irrationally) as passive matter,

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

mere backdrop, or something unformed has very old roots, the more recent visions of plants as mere resources to exploit are not limited to German or European cultures but rather characterize most contemporary industrialized cultures to varying degrees. Vieira describes in contrast to Humboldt, etc., the Sarayaku community's knowledge that the rainforest is an "interspecies community" of more-than-human and human relations composed of many beings, all with their own intelligences, volition, and communication forms. Alongside the long-term Indigenous understandings of the living rainforest, recent work in botanical science is awakening to recognize (once again) the actively agential, communicative, and social lives of plants, as are numerous fields in the arts and humanities such as critical plant studies (of which *Ecozon@* has previously featured in numerous individual essays and in entire volumes such as Volume 15.1, "Plants, Plant Relationships, and Plant Metaphors in Children's and Young Adult Fiction" (2024); and Volume. 14.1, "Gardening in the Anthropocene" (2023)). This current volume 16.2 undertakes just such work of re-recognition alongside, and with the guidance of, Indigenous perspectives.

The three essays in the special section offer new insights to critical plant studies with their particular focus on Amazonian Indigenous thought. The first essay, by Kevin Ennis, Yale University, USA, "Narrating in Multinatural Word and Color: Vegetal Vitality in Lastenia Canayo's *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo*," presents a vision of "vegetal vitality" as a counternarrative "to extractivist deforestation and destruction on Shipibo Amazonian lands." Combining Shipibo language with Spanish, Canayo enables vegetal-human and more-than-human relations to emerge in her works with a focus, according to Ennis, on both long-term Indigenous knowledge and current cultural challenges wrought by industrialized practices transforming green life into capitalist objects. The second essay, by Cinthya Torres, University of South Alabama, USA, "Rooted Resistance and Vegetal Life in the Poetry of Ana Varela Tafur," turns to the plant beings portrayed in her poems that actively grapple with the "Rubber Boom" in the Amazon. Torres explores how "three recurring plants in her [Varela Tafur's] work—the rubber tree, the Ayahuasca vine, and the shihuahuaco tree" offer insights into vegetal-human relationships, the exploitation suffered by the Indigenous peoples as their local plant beings are transformed into objects of mass consumption, but also, as Torres describes it, "the potential of plant life to resist, heal, and foster ecological and cultural regeneration." Finally, our guest editor herself, Patrícia Vieira, University of Coimbra, Portugal, provides the third essay, "Phytopoesis: Plants in Amazonian Women's Poetry." Vieira begins with the "ontological turn" in anthropology and related fields that have been influenced and inspired by Indigenous "worlds, realities and thought," thereby greatly enhancing non-Indigenous, Western thinking. With a focus on the impact of Indigenous worldviews, particularly ideas centered on "*phytopoesis*, or the poetry on/with plants," she studies here the poetry by "two Amazonian women authors from different countries and generations—Brazilian Astrid Cabral (1936-), and Peruvian Dina Ananco (1985-)." This poetry, Vieira states, continues the rhythms and expressions of

Amazonian artists in oral and textual traditions and allows the readers to glimpse a world and worldview with wild plants in the active and sonic center rather than in the quietly potted periphery.

The general section of Volume 16.2 includes seven essays with a wide range of topics including an interview with Scott Slovic covering his experience with four decades of ecocriticism; two blue humanities contributions, one on "Hydro-irrealism," and the other on the Norwegian ocean; an exploration of "Post-extractivist" futures, and one of "Planetarity;" a study of the social revolution of Wole Soyinka's dramas, and a contribution on a Norwegian oil film. While not on critical plant studies, these seven essays offer relevant and related views to those of Vieira's Amazonian focus critiquing extractivist and colonial practices. The volume features scholars from around the world contributing analyses of texts from many global regions including, again, Latin America, as well as the U.S. and Mexico in North America, Norway in northern Europe, and Nigeria in Africa. As such, these seven essays represent *Ecozon@*'s ongoing commitment to publish studies utilizing diverse ecocritical approaches while also attending to a broad array of earthly areas and an impressive spectrum of more-than-human beings.

The general section opens with a retrospective, Lifu Jiang's (Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, China) interview, "Four-Decade Studies of Ecocriticism and Beyond—Retrospect and Prospect: An Interview with Professor Scott Slovic." Jiang and Slovic discuss both his own contributions to the field as the founding editor of the first ecocriticism journal, the U.S.-based *ISLE*, but also his thoughts on the ongoing development of the much broader theoretical and international work emerging from the expanding contributions of the environmental humanities, with a particular focus on the newer area of empirical ecocriticism. Continuing with contributions presenting North American contexts, Lya Morales Hernández, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico, discusses in her essay, "Dammed Ecologies, 'Hydro-irrealism,' and Aesthetic Slowness in Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* [*Kings of Nowhere*] (2015)," how the documentary film portrays "community-scale experiences of socio-ecological degradation, land clearings and mass displacement produced by the damming of a regional river for neoliberal hydro-development." Utilizing what Morales Hernández calls a "surreal and spectral visual grammar," the film's "realist" camera portrays dying fish, an altered river, and a vast coastal area damaged to the extent that almost seems to be a science-fictional spectacle of devastation. Morales' essay thus explores systems collapsing under the impact of extractivist practices in García's striking visual documentation. The next essay shares a focus on water but takes us to Florida, the sinking city that speaks not of climate change. Stacey Balkan's (Florida Atlantic University, USA), "*Losing Miami*: Imagining Post-Extractivist Futures in the "Magic City," also addresses collapsing systems based on the "rationalist" (irrational) practices that, as Plumwood notes, "misunderstand their enabling conditions." In this case, Balkan refers to the consequences of "agrocapitalism" in order "to explore the impacts of Florida's feckless development schemes on Miami's coastal precariat." As

Florida sinks with rising waters, its population grows, and its reliance on sugar and phosphate industries creates new disasters. Balkan's study of Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué's book-length poem *Losing Miami* presents what she describes as the "grotesque metaphor" of an emerging "undercommons" expanding with each movement of every tide. In the next essay, Madalina Stefan, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain, returns us to Latin America in "Knowledge Production and Planetarity in the Latin American Essay: An Ecocritical Reading of *Nuestra América* by José Martí." Stefan studies Martí's essay to demonstrate its decolonial and ecological views, offering thereby the possibility of writing "nature as a narrative that contests the anthropocentric, colonial exploitation of the environment and fosters a planetary vision of the human." Countering the colonists' writings, Stefan sees *Nuestra América* as "a milestone of Latin American literature" one that should no longer be understood as merely an anti-modern work but rather a ground-breaking vision that draws "on the language of nature (trees, stones, mountains, octopus, jaguar, condor, seeds etc.)," and thus already in 1891, when it was written, offers a view of immersion and entanglement, "rooted in the knowledge of the inhabited land and nature."

The fifth contribution to the general section is the award-winning essay for EASLCE's 2024 graduate student competition by Călina-Maria Moldovan, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, a blue humanities study, "The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature." Moldovan studies an array of recent Norwegian works, *Mandø* (2009), by Kjersti Vik, the so-called *Barrøy Chronicles*, by Roy Jacobsen (2013-2020), *Shark Drunk* (2015), by Morten Strøksnes, and *The End of the Ocean* (2017), by Maja Lunde, considering how each author projects different human stories "onto places where they are clearly absent: some read whales as planets, other interpret the movement of waves as a sea chantey." With the methodological frame of material ecocriticism, the essay demonstrates the foundational challenge of writing the sea from our land-based human perspectives, concluding with the excellent insight that anthropomorphizing is not only inevitable but likely our best tool to grapple with the physical realities of the more-than-human worlds and creatures with whom we exist. Jumping ahead to the seventh essay in the general section because it, too, addresses Norwegian literature, but this time from a petro-cultures approach, we have an essay from Ernesto Seman, University of Bergen, Norway, who writes "With or Without Oil: *Nordsjøen* and the Persistence of Norwegian Exceptionalism," exploring how the film *Nordsjøen* (*The Burning Sea*, 2021), presents an oil spill that reveals much about "Norway and its relationship with fossil fuels." The film, in fact, presents the oil spill not so much as an image of horror as in more traditional disaster films, but rather also a moment of national unification and heroic action, revealing how oil extraction provides much of Norway's considerable wealth without impacting their "romanticized idea of the national relation with the tenets of national exceptionality: economic equality, consensual politics and harmony with nature."

Bringing an important revolutionary focus, the sixth essay, "Nature, and a Social Revolution in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta*," is co-written by John Olorunshola Kehinde, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Nigeria, and Sule E. Egya, Nigeria.

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Described by the authors as being "about the agency of nonhumans and its use to achieve a social revolution in Wole Soyinka's play *Alápatà Àpáta*," this essay nicely rounds off the volume's attention to the non-human or more-than-human beginning with plants and moving through the ocean to a wide array of forms and beings in Africa, including "trees, rocks, waters, animals, ancestors, gods and goddesses." As the authors write of Yoruba cosmology, "most people believe that they are organically linked with nonhuman beings, which might be spiritual or nonspiritual," a vision that firmly places human beings within the larger living world. Soyinka's play contextualizes human social revolution in terms of this cosmology as a form of resistance to the oil-seeking, petro-culturally defined practices.

One of *Ecozon@*'s particularly unique and compelling aspects is its inclusion of an Arts section in each volume, a section dedicated to other forms of telling stories, other possibilities to portray the world's living beings, and/or non-narrative or visual frames that share the same topic as the special section of the volume. Collected by, and presented with, the inspiring insights of our Arts Editor, Elizabeth Tavella, The American University of Rome, this particular selection of contributions in Volume 16.2, similarly titled "Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon," provides exceptionally vibrant artworks and poetry that transform and transport us poignantly into the world of the rainforest. Tavella opens the Arts Editorial with the words of Amazonian poet Márcia Theóphilo, who "describes the Amazon forest as a pulsating body resonant with history and survival," noting much like Vieira how such a forest "stands in stark opposition to how the vegetal world has been represented in dominant Western traditions." These artists reveal the "living archive" of pulsating life in the Amazon, where they find a plethora of agentic beings who are typically overlooked in, as Plumwood writes, "the rationalist" and hegemonic forms of reason that perceive only anthropocentric acts as relevant.

Tavella begins with the cover image by Elena Valera Bawan Jisbe, a Shipibo-Konibo artist, *Preparing the Diet with Medicinal Plants*, a depiction illustrating, in Tavella's words, "a sacred *dieta*, a dietary ritual that involves the ingestion of plants who are acknowledged as guides of transformation, transmitters of knowledge, and agents of purification." The vibrant image features a spiritual engagement with plants portraying bold vegetation that weaves and grows in lucid patterns across most of the space, a space also including one human woman whose face presents similar geometric patterns and who shares her much more limited place on the far left of the picture with a very large butterfly. Central, of course, are the lively, colorful, vegetal beings and bodies entwined across the entire image.

In the first contribution to the section, "The Cosmopoetics of Plants: A Dialogue Between Shipibo-Konibo Botanical Knowledge, Ecology, and Science," Pedro Martin Favaron Peyon, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Perú, and Chonon Bensho, Artist, Perú, provide a collaborative dialogue containing words and images such as the "koros kene design" that the artists say symbolizes "the complementarity of left and right, of above and below, and of the spiritual world with our own." Furthermore, they state that the "*koros kene* design does not merely embellish cloth; the act of

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embroidering it is itself a meditative practice through which the artist synchronizes with ancestral rhythms of balance." Much like the design itself, with its central core composed of geometrically vegetal patterns surrounded by a leafy frame, Peyon and Bensho, who are both descendants of a Shipibo-Konibo family, create art that is lived and part of, in Tavella's description, "ancestral medicine, Indigenous research, food sovereignty and reforestation projects, and the care of an ethnobotanical garden." Human beings are obviously part of these projects and artworks, but are not in the center of the cosmopoetic works; instead, it is the vegetal beings whose patterns that shape the world.

The second contribution, "*Urihi* (The Jungle) – The World That Inspires Yanomami Artist Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe," is, as Tavella describes it, "an exclusive selection of eight illustrations by Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe, an Indigenous Yanomami artist from Sheroana, a community along the Upper Orinoco River in the Venezuelan Amazon." These beautiful images all express vegetal bodies in forms of Yanomami imagery that reshape our expected, and all-too-often culturally determined, visual perception. Tavella explains that in Hakihiiwe's works, "the Amazon not only escapes the 'dichotomous depiction of vegetation either as reminiscent of Earthly Paradise or as a green hell' [...] but also challenges the ocularcentric construction of plant-experience that dominates Western visual culture." The vivid vegetal patterns embody not what is often termed "the non-human" but rather the broader living patterns of the cosmos in which we participate.

Next, Maria Thereza Alves provides examples from her series of paintings of non-apricots and one of her previously unpublished poems: "Selection of 'This is Not an Apricot' and the Poem 'The Umbragiade.'" The bright yellow paintings show five different fruits, all round, but not apricots, being sold in a market in Manaus in the Amazon. As Indigenous fruits, the seller did not know their names and so simply called them all apricots. Tavella explains the fabulous images, commenting that through the title, Alves "intertextually nods to René Magritte's *This is Not a Pipe*," and so "undertakes a powerful act of semiotic resistance and botanical decolonization." Utilizing "Western" visual language, Alves brings forth the actual fruits, unnamed but present despite colonial interventions. In her poetic work, "The Umbragiade," Alves documents efforts to "preserve forested areas on Indigenous lands;" specifically, as she notes, a diverse group of peoples working to survive and sustain the forest. "The forest agents come from various reservations throughout the state of Acre and belong to different Indigenous peoples, such as the Huni Kuin, the Shanenawa, the Asháninka, the Shãwãdawa, the Yawanawá, the Katukina, the Nupiquin, the Poyanawá, and the Nawa, among others. All have survived genocide campaigns, first by the Portuguese and then by Brazilians." Her long poem of history is a collective work by, and about, the Indigenous peoples within the forest who themselves experienced being extracted from the forest, killed and used by colonists. The poem derives directly from the Indigenous statements taken from interviews that Alves undertook. In just one example, she references the words of the Yawa Kushu, Yawanawá people, TI Yawanawá do Rio Gregório, and the Tene, Huni Kuin people, TI Alto Jordão, in the

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following verses describing the colonial devastation to the forest, the people, the land, the animals but then also the return of the *Cupuaçu* trees:

> And then after the Captivity, they…
> they cleared much of the forest
> for cattle,
> for large plantations,
> and they did not use the land more than once.
> Just once, and then it was over.
>
> In that past, there were no more plants.
> Now we have our plants, the *Cupuaçu* trees.

In the fourth contribution are four illustrations, "*Untitled* from Jatobá Series and Senhora das Plantas" by Afro-Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino, whose works are, as Tavella describes them, "[d]eeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian cosmologies," and offering "a vital voice attuned to the experiences of Black women navigating the enduring consequences of racism and enslavement in Brazil." Her works are composed of "sewing, collage, drawing, video, and installation," and they portray various woman-plant interspecies beings growing and flourishing with their roots exposed to reveal, one might say, both the standard Linnean portrait of plants not surrounded by their fellow green beings, but depicted alone against a blank background in the middle of the painting, but also, in contrast, the rootedness of all beings in the forest, directly in the soil or in the atmosphere of the world. Tavella describes the rootedness of the composite beings as "agents of connection," "The hybridized figure lifts her forearms and extends open palms, which evokes feelings of nurturing care and protection. Here, plants act as threshold beings, as agents of connection, and as symbols of cultural resurgence, marking a movement from diasporic fracture to collective rootedness."

The fifth and final piece of the arts section features Tavella's and Sophie Schrey's, Northumbria University, UK, joint interview with the Dutch artist Thijs Biersteker, the Netherlands, "Translating Data into Art: A Conversation with Thijs Biersteker on Ecology and the Amazon." Combining images from Biersteker's collection of "data-based" artworks bridging art and science with the conversation among Tavella, Schrey and the artist, this contribution plays with the scales of ecological damage, of deforestation and reforestation, and the possibilities of actual sustainability in our industrialized world. His Amazon-focused works are based on collaborations with UNESCO and include, in his own words from the interview, "projects on plastic pollution, air quality, glaciers, or root communication of trees," that are "rooted in data-driven storytelling." While featuring vegetal forms evoking the Amazon rainforest, tumbling as plastic leaves from the ceiling (photo taken at the Barbican Centre London, 2022), Biersteker avoids romanticization and instead inspires, in Tavella's words from the Arts Editorial, "affective materialities where viewers can experience loss, urgency, and the possibility of regeneration." The works document not just data of devastation but also the possibility of collaboration,

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reforestation, and the bridging of data and story that might bring hope for the future of our vegetally-based lives in our industrialized and industrializing world.

The book review section of Volume 16.2 includes seven individual book reviews, and one review essay on Ecocinema studies by Lenka Filipova, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, "From Representation to Material Entanglement: Tracing a Decade of Ecocinema, in which she reviews Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012), 344 pp.; and Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* (Routledge, 2023), 268 pp.

The individual book reviews include another study of eco-films undertaken by Anda Pleniceanu, Vilnius University, Lithuania, who reviews Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick, *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2024), 222 pp.

Other books reviewed covered a wide array of topics and works done in English, German, and Spanish. Helga Braunbeck, North Carolina State University, USA, for example, reviews a German volume on shared species attributes edited by Roland Borgards, Frederike Felcht, Verena Kuni, Frederike Middelhoff, Robert Pütz und Antje Schlottmann, eds. *Von Fliegenfängern und Katzenklappen: 39 Kleinigkeiten zwischen den Arten* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2024), 379 pp. Additionally, there is a petro-cultures study reviewed by Reinhard Hennig, University of Agder, Norway: Daniel Worden, *Petrochemical Fantasies. The Art and Energy of American Comics* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2024), 212 pp. And Bryan Yazell, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark, reviews a study of satirical and humorous works on environmental crises: Massih Zekavat and Tabea Scheel, *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 248 pp.

Contributing to the vegetal focus of the volume, Marie Müller, McGill University, Canada, reviews Christina Becher, *Zwischen Mensch und Pflanze. Vegetabile Hybriden in literarischen und grafischen Texten des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2024), 440 pp**.** And, similarly, contributing to the Latin American focus of this volume, is the review by Valeria Meiller, Stony Brook University, USA, who comments on: Azucena Castro. *Postnaturalezas poéticas. Pensamiento ecológico y políticas de la extrañeza en la poesía latinoamericana contemporánea* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2025), 238 pp.

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From *Hylaea* to *Kawsak Sacha*: Introduction to the Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon[1]

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In the opening paragraph of "Impressões gerais" ("General Impressions"), the introduction to Part I of the book *À margem da história* (At the Margin of History, first published in 1909) titled "Na Amazônia – terra sem história" ("In the Amazon – Land without History"), Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909)[2] describes Amazonia as a "prodigious *hylaea*" ("hiléia prodigiosa," 11).[3] Da Cunha, who travelled in the Amazon between 1904 and 1905,[4] recognizes the land's greatness, which inspired in him a feeling of terror that evokes Immanuel Kant's theorization on the natural sublime.[5] Still, he admits to being disappointed in Amazonia, which does not meet his high expectations, fueled by an idealized conception of the territory based upon his readings on the region.

Da Cunha blames his disappointment partly on Amazonian vegetal life, which, in his words, displays an "imperfect greatness" ("imperfeita grandeza," 12). He considers that Amazonian flora evokes earlier geological ages of the planet, when human beings still did not roam the earth. For the author, man (gender intended) is an "impertinent intruder" ("intruso impertinent," 12) in the Amazon, which leads him to regard local nature as "portentous, but incomplete" ("a natureza é portentosa, mas incompleta," 12). His summary assessment of Amazonia is that "it has everything and

[1] This text is part of the project ECO, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 101002359).
[2] Da Cunha wrote various texts about the Amazon, including newspaper articles, reports, reflections, and so on, some of which were drafted before the author had been to the region. Once in the Amazon, da Cunha wrote in letters to several friends that he intended to write a book about the territory, a plan left incomplete due to his untimely death. The volume *À margem da história*, published posthumously in 1909, gathers several of the author's texts about the region. For a detailed analysis of da Cunha's writings on the Amazon, including the circumstances of their publication, see Bolle.
[3] All translations from an original in a language other than English are mine.
[4] Da Cunha was head of the Brazilian commission charged with mapping the course of the river Purus all the way to its headwaters. The Brazilian commission was accompanied by a Peruvian counterpart, and its aim was to ease tension between the countries, both interested in that remote region of the Amazon in the wake of the rubber boom. The Brazilian and Peruvian joint commissions were tasked with demarcating the exact borders of the two countries.
[5] As the author puts it: "The mass of water is, certainly, without equal, and capable of eliciting the terror mentioned by Wallace" ("A massa de águas é, certo, sem par, capaz daquele terror a que se refere Wallace," 11). For an analysis of the feeling of the sublime as a response to Amazonian nature, see Vieira "Rainforest Sublime."

it lacks everything, because it lacks that chain of phenomena […] where the truths of art and science are clearly highlighted, which is like the great and unconscious logic of things" ("Tem tudo e falta-lhe tudo, porque lhe falta esse encadeamento de fenômenos […] de onde ressaltam, nítidas, as verdades da arte e da ciência — e que é como que a grande lógica inconsciente das coisas," 13). Da Cunha regards Amazonian nature as monstruous,[6] since it does not neatly fit into Western artistic, scientific and logical categories. By overflowing these paradigms, the territory is perceived as lost in immemorial geological eras and therefore as inhuman, i.e., as unwelcoming for "man." Such a view of the Amazonian natural environment as hostile for outside, usually male, explorers has been a staple of writings about the region since colonial times. Significantly, da Cunha wrote the Preface to his friend Alberto Rangel's collection of short stories about the Amazon, titled *Inferno verde* (*Green Hell*, first published in 1908), where the rainforest is depicted as a hellish landscape.

Da Cunha's views on Amazonian plants are indebted to a tradition of writings about the region by naturalists from Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) to Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), both of whom the Brazilian author mentions in the beginning of his text. Da Cunha's description of the territory as a *hylaea* harks back to von Humboldt, who employed the German term *Hyläe* to designate a "forested plain" ("Waldebene," 54). The word has since been widely used to refer to the Amazon, which testifies to the enduring influence of early European explorers' understanding of the territory in contemporary assessments of the Amazon. The German neologism derives from the Ancient Greek word *hylē*, which meant wood or forest. In Aristotelian philosophy, *hylē* came to signify amorphous matter that needed a given form to become a concrete thing.[7]

Von Humboldt's labelling of the Amazon as *Hyläe* clearly draws on *hylē*'s vegetal meaning, but it also echoes the connotation of the term in Aristotelian thought. As Mary Louise Pratt noted, European naturalists such as von Humboldt used their privileged position to establish a conquering, imperial gaze over Latin American territories like the Amazon, all the while couching their domineering approach in the language of science. By calling the Amazon a *Hyläe*, von Humboldt hints at the fact that it is formless matter in need of structured orientation to be provided by European scientists like himself. This view of the region chimes in, *mutatis mutandis*, with da Cunha's conception of the Amazonian natural environment as incomplete, lacking the human guidance required for it to achieve its full potential. Depictions of Amazonia as a *hylaea*, an assemblage of trees, or simply a gathering of unstructured matter, undergird present-day extractivist approaches to the territory. The rainforest is reduced to a set of resources ready to be appropriated for the higher purposes of progress and economic development.

[6] Da Cunha describes Amazonian fauna as "singular and monstruous" ("singular e monstruosa," 12).
[7] It is telling that, in the absence of a general term for matter, Aristotle chose the Ancient Greek word for "wood" to designate formless matter, which both speaks to the understanding of vegetal life as the basis for every thing, and to its instrumentalization.

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Indigenous peoples, who have inhabited the Amazon for thousands of years, have a significantly different approach to the rainforest. Diverse as their cosmovisions are, Indigenous communities espouse a biocentric view of Amazonia and consider that human life involves a constant process of cooperation with more than humans to guarantee the harmonious coexistence of all beings. They regard the territory as a living entity, composed of myriad sentient, cognizant plants, animals and other forms of existence with whom humans interact on a daily basis. It is in this sense that the Kichwa Indigenous community of Sarayaku, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, call their ancestral land *Kawsak Sacha*, or "living forest." In a proposal to create protected areas in their land, the people of Sarayaku explain the notion of *Kawsak Sacha*:

> Whereas the western world treats nature as an undemanding source of raw materials destined exclusively for human use, *Kawsak Sacha* recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations they have with each other. These selves, from the smallest plants to the supreme beings who protect the forest, are persons (*runa*) who inhabit the waterfalls, lagoons, swamps, mountains, and rivers, and who, in turn, compose the Living Forest as a whole. These persons live together in community (*llakta*) and carry out their lives in a manner that is similar to human beings. *To summarize, in the Living Forest the economic system is an ecological web; the natural world is also a social world.*

For the Sarayaku community, the rainforest entails the different beings who inhabit the land *and* the relationships they establish with one another. Each entity has a specific approach to its environment, its own world that interconnects with the world of all others in the territory. Or, to put it differently, each entity's world entails a specific constellation of the worlds of all of those around it. These more-than-human beings are regarded as similar to humans, in that they have volition, intelligence and the ability to express themselves. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among other anthropologists such as Tânia Stolze Lima, highlights that, for Amazonian Indigenous peoples, all beings have their own perspective on the world—or their own world—none of which is considered hierarchically superior to the other. He calls this way of engaging with reality "perspectivism," which presupposes that all more-than-human beings are akin to people, thus making the rainforest a wide interspecies community.

In their text, the people of Sarayaku draw on Western concepts to explain their understanding of the Amazon. For them the "economic system" of the territory is an "ecological web." Their economy—which etymologically means the norms or management of the home—is an ecology, i.e., a multifaceted discourse about a common home, including the myriad perspectives of all those who comprise the collective that is the rainforest. What is usually called "nature" in the West becomes a "social world" composed of various human and more-than-human peoples. As Déborah Danowski and Viveiros de Castro put it, "every transpecific interaction in Amerindian worlds is an international intrigue, a diplomatic negotiation or a war operation that must be conducted with utmost circumspection. Cosmopolitics" (96). Human life in the rainforest therefore requires constant negotiations with more than humans, an ongoing diplomacy is a cosmopolitical world.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

In their statement about *Kawsak Sacha*, the community of Sarayaku emphasize that their understanding of the living forest is "buttressed by recent scientific studies." To be sure, research in plant science (Chamovitz; Mancuso; Gagliano *et al*., etc.), to remain only in the field that most directly speaks to the topic of this special issue, has challenged the traditional view of vegetal life as passive and unresponsive and has shown that plants are complex social entities that behave intelligently and communicate with one another and with beings from other species. At the same time, plant studies in the humanities—in disciplines such as philosophy, literary, film and art studies, and related fields (Aloi; Coccia; Hall; Laist; Marder, etc.)—have questioned the traditional role ascribed to flora as a mere background to human action and underscored the centrality of plant life in human culture. Scholars have emphasized human indebtedness to plants from the most basic physiological level of the need of oxygen, to the use of plant life in culturally significant human practices and have sought to determine what humans can learn from vegetal existence.

This special issue follows in the wake of recent scholarship on critical plant studies and is inspired by Amazonian Indigenous understandings of plant life. It draws on research on multispecies ethnography in Amazonia such as Eduardo Kohn's *How Forest Think*, which builds on fieldwork with the Runa people from the Ecuadorian Amazon to explore the semiotic abilities of more than humans and recognizes the ability to think beyond the confines of the human mind. The special issue is also a rejoinder to Juan Duchesne Winter's challenge to "amazonize" current plant philosophy and theory by incorporating Amazonian writings and ontologies into plant studies.

The title "Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon" refers to the recent "vegetal turn" in environmental humanities research and foregrounds the contributions of Amazonian Indigenous thought to these debates. It hints at the vegetal substratum of human life, something widely recognized by Amazonian communities that, beyond sources of material sustenance, regard plants as their ancestors, teachers and spiritual guides. It also highlights the humanity of plants as "persons," as stated in the community of Sarayaku's explanation of the notion of *Kawsak Sacha*. The ambiguity inherent in the expression "vegetal humanities" points to the porous boundaries separating human and plant existence and emphasizes the links uniting human and more-than-human beings in the rainforest.

The first article in the special issue, Kevin Ennis's "Narrating in Multinatural Word and Color: Vegetal Vitality in Lastenia Canayo's *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo*" analyzes Peruvian Shipibo artist Lastenia Canayo's 2004 work *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo* that includes images of plant *dueños*, or master spirits, paired with descriptions of these entities that include the location of the plant and its significance in Shipibo culture. The *dueños* usually assume a human shape, underscoring the agency of vegetal life. Ennis persuasively shows how Canayo's work draws on ancestral knowledge to reinforce the Shipibo connection to their territory, in opposition to extractivist claims on their land.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

In "Rooted Resistance and Vegetal Life in the Poetry of Ana Varela Tafur," Cinthya Torres examines the Iquitos-born Peruvian writer Ana Varela Tafur's most recent poetry collection, *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* (2022). Torres argues that Tafur's book draws on Indigenous cosmologies to lend a voice to Amazonian plants and criticize the reification of the rainforest and its systematic destruction by extractive industries. The article homes in on Tafur's engagement with specific plants— rubber trees, the ayahuasca plant and the shihuahuaco tree—to discuss the legacy of colonial violence and neo-colonial exploitation of Amazonia.

Patrícia Vieira's "Phytopoesis: Plants in Amazonian Women's Poetry" analyzes the work of Brazilian, Manauara writer Astrid Cabral (1936-), and of Peruvian, Awajún an Wampis poet Dina Ananco (1985-), focusing on their texts on vegetal life. Vieira argues that these poems reimagine ancestral bonds with plants and recast them as sources of women's empowerment. Both Cabral and Ananco build upon Amazonian communities' strong ties to vegetal life to advance a plant infused ontology that defies the categories of mainstream Western philosophy.

The articles in "Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon" reveal how recent cultural productions from/about Amazonia counter stereotypes of the region's vegetal life as a "green hell" or as an inert *hylaea*. The essays show how Amazonian literature and art incorporate Indigenous cosmologies to present the living forest as a community of human and more-than-human entities where vegetal beings occupy a prominent position as pivotal for Amazonian cosmopolitical existence.

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Narrating in Multinatural Word and Color: Vegetal Vitality in Lastenia Canayo's *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo*

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Abstract

Shipibo artist and writer Lastenia Canayo's 2004 visual/textual work *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo* presents images and descriptions of more-than-human beings of the Shipibo cosmovision. The titular Shipibo *dueños* are often associated with a specific type of plant, relating ancestral belief to natural resources in Shipibo territories in Western Amazonia. Throughout her work, Canayo, whose Indigenous name Pecon Quena means "la que llama a los colores" ("she who calls the colors"), emphasizes how Shipibo commitments to their natural environment are a function of their ancestral beliefs, in turn offering a counternarrative of vegetal vitality to extractivist deforestation and destruction on Shipibo Amazonian lands. Canayo's images—paired with texts written in the Spanish language—invite viewer/readers, Indigenous or not, to come to know and learn from Shipibo knowledge in word and in color. Ancestrality and territoriality, concepts broached by Graça Graúna (2013) and Robert David Sack (1986), respectively, textually and visually unite in Canayo's work to underscore how cosmogonic knowledge embodied in the *dueños* sustains Shipibo communities, as much in daily life today in the twenty-first century as well as in imagining Amazonian futures. In presenting a multi-edged vegetal vitality as a force of sustenance in Shipibo communities, Canayo deploys ancestrality and territoriality to textually and visually demarcate Shipibo socioenvironmental relations in Amazonia. Canayo highlights the diverse plant life along the Ucayali river and its tributaries, cosmological beings that multinaturally bridge human and more-than-human Shipibo worlds, to engage with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2002/2020) understanding of multinaturalism, and to promote an imaginary of Amazonia that centralizes human and more-than-human socioenvironmental interactions rooted in ancestral knowledge.

Keywords: Ancestrality, Indigenous art, Indigenous literature, Shipibo, territoriality.

Resumen

La obra visual/textual *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo* de 2004 de la artista y escritora shipiba Lastenia Canayo presenta imágenes y descripciones de seres más que humanos de la cosmovisión shipiba. Los dueños shipibos que dan título a la obra suelen estar asociados con una especie particular de planta, relacionando la creencia ancestral con los recursos naturales en los territorios shipibos de la Amazonía occidental. A lo largo de su obra, Canayo, cuyo nombre indígena Pecon Quena significa "la que llama a los colores," enfatiza cómo los compromisos shipibos con su entorno natural son una función de sus creencias ancestrales, ofreciendo a su vez una contranarrativa de vitalidad vegetal a la deforestación y destrucción extractivistas en las tierras amazónicas shipibas. Las imágenes de Canayo, emparejadas con textos escritos en español, invitan a los espectadores/lectores, indígenas o no, a conocer y aprender del conocimiento shipibo en palabras y en color. La ancestralidad y la territorialidad, conceptos abordados por Graça Graúna (2013) y Robert David Sack (1986), respectivamente, se unen textual y visualmente en la obra de Canayo para subrayar cómo el conocimiento cosmogónico encarnado en los dueños sostiene a las comunidades shipibas, tanto en la vida cotidiana actual en el siglo XXI como en la imaginación de futuros amazónicos. Al presentar una vitalidad vegetal multifacética como una fuerza de sustento en las comunidades shipibas, Canayo despliega la ancestralidad y la territorialidad para demarcar textual y visualmente las relaciones

socioambientales shipibas en la Amazonía. Canayo destaca la diversa vida vegetal a lo largo del río Ucayali y sus afluentes, seres cosmológicos que unen de manera multinatural los mundos humanos y más que humanos shipibos, para interactuar con la comprensión del multinaturalismo de Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2002/2020), y para retratar un imaginario de la Amazonía que centraliza las interacciones socioambientales humanas y más que humanas arraigado en la sabiduría ancestral.

Palabras clave: Ancestralidad, arte indígena, literatura indígena, shipibo, territorialidad.

What could we learn from plants in the Ucayali region of Amazonia? What knowledge lies in Amazonian vegetation? Shipibo artist and writer Lastenia Canayo's 2004 visual/textual work *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo* (*The Guardian Spirits of the Shipibo World*) invites the viewer/reader into her community's Shipibo cosmovision, highlighting relationships between human and plant beings that undergird Shipibo cosmogonic knowledge in Amazonia. Canayo's Indigenous name is Pecon Quena, 'la que llama a los colores' ('she who calls the colors'); in her designs of the titular *dueños* and accompanying textual descriptions, she relates Shipibo beliefs to natural resources of Shipibo territories along the Ucayali River and its tributaries, south of Iquitos, in the Ucayali department of Peru (Espino Relucé 259). Notably, she highlights the roles of diverse plant life in her Shipibo community's ancestral knowledge and its impact on the community today. Canayo emphasizes a commitment to the natural environment as a function of Shipibo ancestral beliefs, offering a counternarrative of vegetal vitality to extractivist deforestation and destruction on their Amazonian lands. This vegetal vitality transforms into a plant pedagogy that narratively imagines Amazonia as a geocultural space of knowledge production and education between human and more-than-human beings.

The *dueños* of the Shipibo world that Canayo narrates in her visual/textual work are more-than-human beings most often associated with a specific type of plant, but sometimes an animal or other more-than-human being of the natural world. Also known as Ibo-Yoshin, the *dueños* are "powerful beings that protect elements of Nature (plants, animals, winds…) and regulate their utilization by man, who in reciprocity is obligated to take care of them" (Macera 5).[1] Each textual description of a *dueño* includes the specific utility of the plant (or other associated being), its location in the region, its preparation and application for human use, and the relationship between the Shipibo community at-large with the *dueño*, normally in the form of asking permission from the *dueño* or other form of delineated relationship with elements of the human Shipibo world (Espino Relucé 261). This textual flow gradually hooks the reader into a multinatural narration of Shipibo human and more-than-human worlds, moving between them just as the viewer/reader moves between the image of the *dueño* design and the accompanying written text.

[1] "seres poderosos que protegen los elementos de la Naturaleza (plantas, animales, vientos...) y regulan su utilización por el hombre que en reciprocidad está obligado a cuidarlos" (all translations are the author's).

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Indeed, Canayo's visual depictions of the *dueños* complement and augment her textual, literary narratives by offering an enhanced sensorial experience. Canayo's designs, alongside her narratives, engage the viewer/reader's sense of sight as part of the multinatural narration of Shipibo worlds and beings on view throughout *Los dueños*. Each *dueño* description and design occupies two pages of the text. The left page features the *dueño*'s name and the written description in Spanish, often in a paragraph, while the right page includes Canayo's visual drawing of the *dueño*.[2] In turn, these dual visual/textual narratives highlight their intertwining inextricability. For instance, Gonzalo Espino Relucé argues, "one cannot read the account without looking at the drawing, like one cannot visualize the drawing without reading the narration" (259–60).[3] While we critics cannot control a viewer/reader's approach to or engagement with the text or image, Espino Relucé's comments on this dual spectatorship as both viewer *and* reader of Canayo's designs and descriptions of Shipibo *dueños* highlight the invitation into the Shipibo world and cosmovision through both image and word.

These complementary forms of narration through image and text furnish an invitation into both cosmogonic (that is, relating to the Shipibo cosmovision) and physical (that is, relating to Shipibo territories in the Ucayali region) landscapes. For example, in the collection's first *dueño* description, Canayo's written text announces that the corresponding image portrays the Dueño de la Planta de Huasaco and describes the being's humanoid body. The narration guides the reader/viewer's eyes between text and image with written and visual details, offering two complementary, but not mutually exclusive, sensorial invitations into this world of Shipibo knowledge. Canayo explains how a spoonful of the plant's dried roots together with cotton in a person's nose serves as a "remedy to cure people who never know how to work for their own good and as well for their children" (10).[4]

Immediately, the viewer/reader is confronted with the cosmogonic knowledge of the *dueño* in tandem with Canayo's depiction of the more-than-human being. Territoriality in Canayo's work extends from the Ucayali region to the cosmogonic plane and back, a confrontation and subsequent negotiation of words and worlds at hand in the pages of her visual/textual work. For instance, Canayo explains how the Dueño de la Planta de Huasaco's name stems from the fish also known as huasaco that rarely swims still, uncovering additional relationships between more-than-human beings themselves alongside human and cosmogonic knowledges.

In this and other *dueño* descriptions and designs throughout *Los dueños*, Canayo deploys an ancestrally-informed territoriality rooted in Shipibo relations to plant beings in Amazonia. Ancestrality and territoriality serve to textually and visually demarcate Shipibo social-environmental relations in Amazonia, highlighting how

[2] Pablo Macera notes that Canayo utilized felt-tip markers on Canson cardboard for her designs in *Los dueños* (Macera 7).

[3] "no se puede leer el relato sin mirar el dibujo como no se puede visualizar el dibujo sin leer la narración."

[4] "remedio para curar a las personas que nunca saben trabajar para su bien y así también a los niños."

diverse plant beings along the Ucayali River and its tributaries, as cosmological substances, multinaturally bridge human and more-than human Shipibo worlds. Canayo depicts an imaginary of Amazonia that centers on human and more-than-human socioenvironmental interactions, inviting the viewer/reader into Shipibo worlds and her multinatural conception of territoriality.

Carmen Del Águila Rodríguez notes that for Shipibo communities like Canayo's the universe is both life and art, leading Shipibo culture to center on being full of life and art (García and Rodríguez 241). Canayo's textual and artistic work speaks to the universe's vitality, both in terms of the human Shipibo communities to which she belongs, and in terms of the plant beings, their practical uses, and the knowledge embodied within them that Canayo's designs and descriptions highlight. This vegetal vitality, as we shall see throughout this essay, carries forth a conception of Shipibo belonging to their territory that is cosmogonically informed; this is to say, cosmovision remains inextricable from understanding Canayo's visual/textual work, the relationship between image and text, and the plant pedagogy from which we outside Canayo's community can learn as a counterpoint to extractivist logics and imaginaries of Amazonia.

In the rest of this essay, I will first discuss concepts of ancestrality, territoriality, and multinaturalism as they relate to *Los dueños*. I will then offer a brief discussion of the Shipibo artistic practices of *kené* and *kené de la palabra* that serve as the foundation of Canayo's visual/textual work, alongside conceptions of ownership that inform the notion of *dueños*' guardianship in the Shipibo world. I will close the essay with additional examples from *Los dueños* to further explore Canayo's imaginary of Amazonia informed by the plant pedagogy developed throughout her visual/textual work.

Ancestrality, Territoriality, and Multinaturalism

In the context of Indigenous literary and artistic theory and practice from Latin America, definitions and conceptions of ancestrality hinge on the confluence of individual and collective experience, history, and knowledge of human and more-than-human worlds. Macuxi writer Trudruá Dorrico argues that ancestrality is an "Indigenous speaking place" and that "reading the works of these authors of different ethnicities contributes to the knowledge of different places of speech whose expression is announced from their own otherness" (230).[5][6] To read Indigenous writers from diverse communities spotlights Indigenous knowledges from across the

[5] "lugar de fala indígena;" "a leitura das obras desses autores de etnias diferentes coopera para o conhecimento de diferentes lugares de fala cuja expressão se anuncia a partir da própria alteridade."
[6] In an Instagram post dated July 14, 2022, Dorrico declared that she would go by the name Trudruá, meaning "formiga" ("ant") in the Macuxi language, positing that she is Macuxi and Indigenous above all, even before the name "Julie" corresponding with her Brazilian citizenship (@trudruadorrico). The Works Cited page in this essay includes the name Julie in brackets to correspond with the original publication information.

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world, to accept invitations to begin to know and to learn from Indigenous knowledges in tandem with Indigenous perspectives and experiences across history.

Potiguara writer Graça Graúna likewise describes Indigenous literature as writing that "pulses. Its force traverses borders" (172).[7] These borders traverse the words and worlds of texts like Canayo's, from the Ucayali region of Amazonia to the Shipibo cosmogonic plane and back. Graúna further explains that, "[a]ncestral voices suggest more and more challenges that emanate from contemporary Indigenous literature: a world mirrored by different worlds, dreams, and realities; a world of people who have been prevented from expressing their thoughts throughout more than 500 years of colonization" (172).[8] Now in the twenty-first century in literary and artistic works—like Canayo's *Los dueños*—ancestral knowledges can be seen, read, viewed, and engaged with outside of the communities to which they belong, offering invitations to different systems of knowledge and perspectives on the many human and more-than-human worlds that human and more-than-human beings, like plants, inhabit.

Ancestral knowledge from the Shipibo cosmovision serves as the foundation for the written texts and visual designs of Canayo's *Los dueños*. In particular, ancestrality relates to the activation of the senses in the text. For example, in the description of the Dueño de la Planta de Maraca, Canayo describes how the fruit of the maraca plant only makes noise when it matures: "That is why this fruit was very important in the past for making rattles and mothers used its sound to make babies sleep peacefully" (30).[9] The ancestral knowledge about the maraca plant that Canayo communicates in this description activates the sense of listening, both in the literal sense of imagining the maraca fruit's sound, and in the more metaphorical opening of the ears to this textual cosmogonic confrontation with the Shipibo cosmovision and its ramifications and impacts on the Amazonian landscape of the Ucayali. In (imaginatively) listening to the ancestral maraca sound soothing a Shipibo baby to sleep, the reader is offered an opportunity to learn from this cosmogonic Shipibo knowledge, specifically the significance of the maraca plant (and other plant life more broadly) for Canayo's Shipibo community.

Moreover, the activated sense of listening in the text, combined with the sense of sight activated in reading the text and examining the visual design, further underscores the relationships between *dueños* and plants as foundational substances for Canayo's community and their cosmovision. For instance, the accompanying visual depiction of the Dueño de la Planta de Maraca literally and metaphorically opens the viewer/reader's eyes and calls attention to the complementary narrative forms of text and image at work. In Canayo's design of the *dueño*, the ripened brown maraca fruit

[7] "pulsa. A sua força atravessa fronteiras."

[8] "As vozes ancestrais sugerem mais e mais desafios que emanam da literatura indígena contemporânea: um mundo espelhado de mundos, de sonhos e realidades distintas; um mundo de pessoas que foram impedidas de expressar o seu pensamento ao longo dos mais de 500 anos de colonização."

[9] "Por eso antes este fruto era muy importante para hacer sonajas y las mamás con su sonido hacían dormir tranquilos a los bebés."

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stands out amidst the less mature green fruits that populate the plant's vines. The *dueño*'s own darker orange-brown color calls attention to the fruit's similar color scheme, with both figures standing out against the rest of the green plant and the blue background; nonetheless, both the *dueño* and the ripened fruit share more of a color similarity with that of the brown ground. This color association between the ground and the two more-than-human beings underscores the ancestral link to not just the land but also Shipibo territory more broadly. While the maraca plant may be traditionally used to soothe babies to sleep, this ancestral vitality is likewise dependent on the vitality of the land itself, so that knowledge and human and more-than-human communities can all thrive in tandem. Otherwise, the green maraca plant that sprouts near the *dueño*'s feet is at risk of instability and unviability.

Canayo highlights her community's ancestral connections to land and resources on her community's lands, specifically the plant life and their relation to the *dueños*, and this cosmogonic knowledge sits at the foundation of her conception of territoriality, in turn proposing an imaginary of Amazonia that treats plants as pedagogical partners from which to learn in tandem with cosmogonic knowledge. Stuart Elden, who argues that territory encompasses dynamic historical, geographical, and political questions, underscores how specificity remains paramount to understanding territory and to making pertinent territorial claims, on micro- and macro-scales. This tripartite view of territory expands outward rather than reverting to static, determinist arguments that ignore context-specific, lived experiences and context-driven imaginaries of territory (Elden 802). Much as ancestral Shipibo artistic practices like *kené* (to be discussed in the next section) and knowledge like that of *dueños* demand, Canayo's view of territory extends to the specificity of the physical landscape of the Ucayali region and the corresponding cosmogonic landscapes of her community's cosmovision.

Territoriality thus serves as "the means by which space and society are interrelated. Territoriality's changing functions help us to understand the historical relationships between society, space, and time," according to Robert David Sack (5). Dynamism imbues Sack's understanding of territoriality, limited not to a singular moment in time but rather in motion alongside societal, spatial, and temporal contexts at micro- and macro-scales. The flux in these contexts and their interrelated changes lend themselves to changes in power through which Sack conceives of territoriality.

For example, in Canayo's description of the Dueño del Ishanga del Agua, she explains that the ishanga plant "grows on the banks and has quite a few thorns throughout the plant and is used as medicine to cure some body pains. A piece of its branch can be used to hit where someone is in pain," in addition to the fact that there is another ishanga plant not from the water but from the earth (38).[10] At the micro-scale, this description of the *dueño* gestures toward the ishanga plant's medicinal utility for the Shipibo community. The accompanying design of the *dueño* includes a

[10] "crece en las orillas y tiene bastante espinas toda la planta y es medicina para curar algunos dolores del cuerpo con un pedazo de su rama para golpear en donde tiene el dolor alguna persona."

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sprouting ishanga plant nearly two-thirds the size of the *dueño*, as if the riverbank were a fertile spot for not just the plant's growth but, by extension, the health of the Shipibo community at large, curing a range of ailments and pains.

At the macro-scale, however, Canayo's description and design of the Dueño del Ishanga del Agua signal a conversation of worlds, not restricting territoriality just to the Ucayali region of Amazonia but extending her conception of territoriality to the cosmogonic plane. This is to say that Canayo develops a territoriality rooted in the communication of ancestral knowledge. Her design of this and other *dueños* stem from her community's cosmovision and become inextricable from understanding the relationship between Shipibo spaces and society. The possibilities that the ishanga plant and the Dueño del Ishanga del Agua offer for human Shipibo communities, standing tall in the design yet covered in spines that the ishanga plant normally grows, are known for Canayo through her community's ancestral knowledge.

This and other humanoid *dueños* more acutely raise the question of the relationship between human and more-than-human worlds. A multinaturalist view of these beings may aid in more profoundly understanding the invitation to cosmogonic knowledge that Canayo's visual/textual work offers the viewer/reader. The notion of multinaturalism stems from Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's studies and formulations of *Amerindian perspectivism*, a way of seeing the world common among Indigenous communities in the Americas that emphasizes animal perspectives as akin to those of humans. Amerindian perspectivism is not a form of relativism, but rather a way of understanding different forms of interspecies relations (Viveiros de Castro 304–05). Multinaturalism thus presupposes a multiplicity of natures but similar minds across humans and animals, emphasizing different species' perspectives, in contrast to multiculturalism, which presupposes a singular nature against which subjects' perspectives are organized (Viveiros de Castro 329). A multinaturalist view of the world may result in Shipibo people conversing in the world with animals, plants, *dueños*, and other more-than-human beings, taking into account their perspectives of both human and more-than-human worlds. Indeed, perspectives are not representations as multiculturalism may want us to claim them, and Viveiros de Castro's idea of multinaturalism underscores the imaginings, not representations, of Amazonia (and the world more broadly) found in *Los dueños* (329).

For example, in her description of the Diablo del Maquisapa, Canayo writes that the *diablo* lives in the mountain trees and is exactly the same as the real maquisapas, white-bellied spider monkeys (52). The maquisapas may see and recognize each other as people, wearing the mask of the monkey. The Diablo del Maquisapa also might be recognized as a different species, since it is a *diablo* pretending to be a real maquisapa, although a species' ability to recognize these other types of perspectives is not guaranteed (Viveiros de Castro 306). This is to say that Canayo's multinaturalist narrations of *dueños* emphasize the human and more-than-human perspectives present in her community's cosmovision, populating both cosmogonic landscapes and physical landscapes in the Ucayali.

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Kené, *Kené de la palabra*, and Ownership in Shipibo Artistic Practice

Canayo's designs in *Los dueños* follow in the *kené* tradition of Shipibo art and material culture. *Kené* is a Shipibo word that means "diseños" ("designs") and is often practiced by Shipibo women in their communities (Belaunde 15). Kené designs are representations of the Shipibo cosmovision, "part of a complex system that covers the range of cosmology, medicine, music, and figurative arts" (García and Rodríguez 243).[11] Historically, kené designs have been present in every object of the Shipibo material universe, from homes and canoes to ceramics and human body paint, interdependently representing, ordering, and communicating the Shipibo cosmovision through material and artistic practices (Casaverde 54).

Kené designs traditionally entail fine, angular, and curved lines in the physical design, with the design's primary motivations relating to "form figures complemented by filling in blank spaces, reproducing the old principle of 'horror of emptiness' existing in pre-Hispanic cultures" (Casaverde 55).[12] Carolyn Heath notes that looking at a kené design is like looking through a window toward infinity, following an unending imaginative trajectory (18). Analyzing kené designs therefore requires both concentration and specificity. Since kené designs can be found on all sorts of everyday objects of material culture, attention to their presence can be fleeting; moreover, each kené is related to and communicates specific beings and aspects of the Shipibo cosmovision (Casaverde 57). Kené designs demand the same level of specificity as the ancestral knowledge expressed throughout Canayo's *Los dueños* and Canayo's own conception of territoriality,

In *Los dueños*, Canayo transforms more traditional kené designs found in Shipibo material culture and artistic practice into *kené de la palabra*, which "appeals to ancestral memory, uses design, its colors, focuses on the spoken word, and transmits it to other generations" (Espino Relucé 258).[13] This *kené de la palabra* style corresponds to Shipibo knowledge often communicated in traditional kené designs yet expands the artistic form to that of the written word. This interpretation of art and life, as García and Rodríguez remind us about the Shipibo cosmovision at large, relates to textual and visual invitations into Shipibo cosmogonic knowledge (243). This is to say that Canayo's written text serves as a vehicle to transmit Shipibo knowledge to readers of Spanish—in great part, to non-Indigenous communities—to come to know the Shipibo world in multinatural word and color.

The addition of the visual designs of the *dueños* as a complementary form to the *kené de la palabra* style in Canayo's text further emphasizes the role that plants play in their associations with the *dueños* and with the ancestral knowledge that forms the basis for *Los dueños* as a visual/textual work. In an interview for the

[11] "parte de un complejo sistema que abarca los ámbitos de la cosmología, la medicina, la música y las artes figurativas."
[12] "formar figuras complementadas por trazos de relleno sobre los espacios en blanco, reproduciendo el viejo principio de 'horror de vacío' existente en las culturas prehispánicas."
[13] "apela a la memoria ancestral, utiliza el diseño, sus colores, fija la palabra hablada y la trasmite a otras generaciones."

Amazonistas catalogue, Canayo explains the importance of maintaining knowledge from nature in Amazonia, in order to "improve and promote people's skills. We in the rainforest are sometimes very quiet and many of us cannot get ahead. […] It is important to know nature to develop imagination and to be able to work with it" (Vidarte and Bendayán 137).[14] Catalogue editor Christian Bendayán likewise describes how "the collective stories that explain the origin of men, animals, and artifacts but that also contemplate a hidden wisdom that draws the balance between the self and the world, and teaches how to live with nature" are central to art from the Peruvian Amazon (13).[15] Canayo's *kené de la palabra* texts and designs highlight how this Shipibo wisdom is ancestral in nature, informed by her community's Shipibo cosmovision.

Furthermore, the notion of the *dueños* as guardian spirits or "owners," in a crude translation of the word, further emphasizes the *kené de la palabra* form's relationship to conceptions of ownership in Shipibo and other Indigenous Amazonian communities. Jacques Tournon argues that private property related to land falls out of concept in Shipibo communities in the Ucayali region, but personal property is either individual or familiar, reduced to few objects (168). Canayo's designs and descriptions present conceptions of territory and territoriality, as well as land and landscape more broadly, as related to Shipibo cosmovision and her community's ancestral knowledge, involving human and more-than-human beings, rather than as private property in the Western sense. In this sense, in her visual/textual work Canayo narrates an alternative notion of territoriality that learns from a partnership with cosmogonic and earthly landscapes and beings, notably plants and their associated *dueños*.

Marc Brightman, Carlos Fausto, and Vanessa Grotti further relate questions of ownership and property as linked to processes of place-making broadly across Amazonia, involving human and non-human persons (11). In the case of Canayo, designs and descriptions of Shipibo *dueños* speak to human conceptions of ancestrality and territoriality informed by the non-human *dueño* beings. In other words, Canayo's conceptions of ancestrality and territoriality are part of the process of place-making in Shipibo lands, narrated in *Los dueños* in multinatural word and color. This is to say, the *dueños*' "ownership" (or, better, "guardianship") of the cosmogonic landscape and the knowledge therein is communicated through the multinatural narrations of Canayo's visual/textual narrations, centering on vegetal vitality and a plant pedagogy from which to learn about human and more-than-human Shipibo worlds.

[14] "mejorar y promover las habilidades de la gente. Nosotros en la selva a veces somos muy callados y muchos no podemos salir adelante. […] Es importante conocer la naturaleza para desarrollar la imaginación y que con ella puedan trabajar."

[15] "los relatos colectivos que explican el origen de hombres, animales y artefactos pero que también contemplan una sabiduría oculta que dibuja el equilibrio entre el yo y el mundo, y adiestra en la convivencia con la naturaleza."

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Los dueños of Canayo's Shipibo Worlds

Additional examples of a *dueño*, a *dueña*, and a *diablo* from Canayo's work stress the dynamic relationship between ancestrality, territoriality, and the expansive plant pedagogy developed in *Los dueños*.[16] Canayo offers an imaginary of Amazonia rooted in the vegetal vitality of her Shipibo community, emphasizing the possibilities from which vegetal life offers human beings to learn, through the lens of Shipibo customs and cosmogony. This imaginary allows us to begin to understand the power of vegetal life, disrupting an extractivist gaze upon Amazonia that looks toward resource exportation for profit. Indeed, plants are pedagogical partners with which to learn rather than from which to extract. Canayo's narration of the multinatural worlds across whose porous boundaries vegetal vitality sprouts sits at the intersection of ancestral knowledge and practical uses for her Shipibo community.

The first example to examine here is that of a *dueño*, the Dueño de Cetico. The *cetico* is a type of *Cecropia* tree typically found in tropical regions, especially in areas that flood, like the Ucayali river and its tributaries (Horna and Reig 28). The Dueño de Cetico has humanoid features: ashy-colored skin, a short tail, bow-leggedness, and a thin rope on its shoulders mark the *dueño*'s physical appearance. Additionally, the *dueño* is covered in thorns that are invisible to a human being when he enters a human body (Canayo 14). In the visual depiction of the Dueño de Cetico, the tiny thorns remain visible along the being's entire body, although relatively faint. The *cetico* tree also stands to the right of the *dueño*, with leaves branching out at the top of the tree covered in thorns similar in shape and size to those covering the *dueño* being's body. These parallel forms between that of the *dueño* and that of the *cetico* tree highlight the inextricable relationship between the Dueño de Cetico and the plant to which it belongs, as an "owner" or "guardian" being.

The Dueño de Cetico stands on what appears to be a blue-colored river or riverbank, emphasizing not only the cetico tree's flood environment but also the *dueño*'s ancestral relationship to rivers that Shipibo communities historically have traversed. For instance, Canayo explains that the Dueño de Cetico helped Shipibo ancestors travel more speedily along the Ucayali River and its tributaries. This *dueño*

> is not evil, nor a witch, and he helps us a lot. That is why our ancestors, when they went far away in a canoe and came back tired and wanted to get to their destination quickly, would cross a dry dock, dock and collect cetico to cut piece by piece to put in a line and thus they would beach the canoe and when several people pushed it, they would go very quickly. (Canayo 14)[17]

Here, Canayo deploys ancestrality in narrating a utilitarian yet nonetheless cosmogonically grounded perspective on the roles of the cetico tree and the Dueño de

[16] Macera notes the Christian influence on the Shipibo community in the naming of certain *dueños* as *diablos* (5).

[17] "no es malo, ni brujo y nos ayuda bastante por eso nuestros abuelos antepasados cuando iban lejos en canoa y venían cansados y querían llegar rápido a su destino surcaban un varadero, atracaban y recogían Cetico para cortar pedazo por pedazo para poner en fila y así varaban la canoa y cuando la empujaban entre varios se iban bien rápido."

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Cetico. These ancestral connections between the Shipibo people today, the tree, and the *dueño* highlight the vitality that the tree and the *dueño* provide for the Shipibo in their riverine navigational feats, stretching from the past of Shipibo oral history to the present moment of Canayo's visual/textual narration.

This confrontation with the riverine environment in the visual/textual narration raises the salience of ancestrality for Canayo's conception of territoriality in her visual/textual work. Here, ancestral knowledge traverses time much like the Shipibo have traversed the Ucayali waterways: across the past imbued with cosmogonic knowledge, and into the present moment of the narration. Shipibo ancestors' experiences with the same *dueños* that Canayo and her Shipibo community encounter in the present underscore the vitality of the cetico tree and its accompanying ancestral knowledge. The cetico tree's vitality for the Shipibo sprouts from this mediation across temporal, cosmogonic, and physical landscapes, allowing the Shipibo to literally and metaphorically navigate their ancestral territories in Amazonia more efficiently.

Territoriality emerges here as inextricable from ancestrality, emphasizing the multinatural narrations of local Shipibo environments vis-à-vis the *dueño*'s power and educational lessons. In narrating the ancestral history and knowledge embodied in the cetico tree, Canayo's conception of territoriality serves to emphasize the sustenance that her Shipibo community can achieve on their historic, ancestral lands, a guide of sorts for life in an ancestrally-strengthened present. Much as the Dueño de Cetico guided Canayo's Shipibo ancestors along the river, the cetico tree today in the Ucayali region stands as a physical reminder of this ancestral knowledge and of the *dueño*'s continued presence in Shipibo society, navigating not only rivers but also time and space more broadly. Indeed, the cosmogonic presence of the Dueño de Cetico inheres in the cetico tree a recognition of its cosmogonic significance as a substance for individual and collective travel, in tandem with its significance for territoriality's extension from the physical landscape of the Ucayali region to the cosmogonic landscape of Shipibo ancestral knowledge.

While the Dueño de Cetico propels the Shipibo in their navigation, the Dueña del Barbasco "is very bad" ("es muy mala") (Canayo 216). The term *barbasco* here refers to the "Poison extracted from the roots of some shrubs" of the short tree itself (Canayo 216n1).[18] In Canayo's image of the *dueña* and two barbasco trees, the poisonous yellow-green roots pushing down into the mounds of soil upon which the trees stand appear quite similar to the same long, thin, yellow-green materials found in the *dueña*'s two hands. Given Canayo's textual description and visual design, it appears at first glance that this *dueña* can be poisonous. In fact, the *dueña* hunts fish in the traditionally Amazonian *mitayo* fashion, recovering many fish from throwing barbasco into lagoons and other bodies of water (Canayo 216).[19] The *dueña* is poisonous to the fish she hunts, providing comestible sustenance for the human

[18] "Veneno extraído de la raíz de algunos arbustos."

[19] Canayo defines "mitayo" as "Actividad de caza o pesca selvática," ("jungle hunting or fishing activity") and "mitayero" as "Cazador o pescador de la selva" ("hunter or fisher from the jungle") (216n3, 216n2).

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Shipibo community despite the seemingly *mala* and poisonous physical appearance. Consumption of fish by the Shipibo is not a result of extractivist fish farming, but rather stems from ancestral knowledge and requires permission from the *dueña*.

The description of the *dueña* as "muy mala" stems from the perspective of the fish hunted as prey rather than that of the Shipibo community. For the Shipibo, the Dueña del Barbasco is not poisonous but rather provides sustenance; for the fish, however, the *dueña*'s hands themselves are poisonous, leading to her reputation as "muy mala." In taking the perspective of the fish in terms of how "mala" the Dueña del Barbasco can be, Canayo's text and image of the *dueña* acknowledge the porous boundaries between human and more-than-human worlds. This is to say that the fish's perspective of the *dueña* complements that of the human, neither perspective hierarchically superior to the other but rather existing alongside one another in the physical landscape of the Ucayali. The barbasco and the *dueña*'s dual roles as hunter and provider according to the Shipibo cosmovision highlight the distinct relationships among both human and more-than-human beings with the *dueños* at large.

At the same time, the vegetal vitality within the education that the barbasco and its *dueña* provide highlights how Canayo's plant pedagogy remains rooted in ancestral knowledge. The poisonous barbasco root carries an intimate relationship with the Shipibo community because of the dearth of fish often present in their ancestral rivers. Canayo writes, "now if you find them they [the fish] are very tricky and then people put barbasco in, and to do so they take out the root and crush it, and they also have to diet and not let pregnant women get close to them or the fish will get dizzy" (216).[20] Although the barbasco root may be poisonous, it nonetheless brings vitality to the Shipibo community because the community is able to feed itself off the fish hunted with the plant. While the fish die for consumption, Shipibo sustenance remains linked to their local riverine environments and the ancestral knowledge contained within.

In the earlier case of the Dueño de Cetico, Canayo's conception of territoriality emphasizes fluvial navigation and the power of the *dueño* to facilitate faster, more efficient travel throughout Shipibo territory. In the case of the Dueña del Barbasco, territoriality underscores the relationship of human imbrication with their local environments, here in relation to hunting and consuming fish from waterways. Canayo deploys territoriality as a way to sketch Shipibo customs in her community's local Amazonian environments, while highlighting the ancestral knowledge that undergirds these multinatural expressions of social power. The boundaries between the human landscape of fish consumption and the more-than-human landscape of fish hunting become porous, with ancestrality serving as a bridge between these worlds in Canayo's multinatural narration. Her textual/visual narrative of the Dueña del Barbasco propels this conception of territoriality as broaching physical and cosmogonic landscapes forward into the many Shipibo worlds of *Los dueños*.

[20] "ahora si los encuentras están bien mañosos y entonces la gente mete barbasco, y para hacerlo sacan la raíz y la machacan, y también tienen que dietar y no dejar acercarse a las mujeres embarazadas sino se marean los peces."

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The final example to explore in this essay is the Diablo del Rayo, which appears just like a human being, though its entire purple body appears electrified with orange rays pulsating from head to toe (Canayo 126). Ancestral knowledge associated with the Diablo del Rayo tells the Shipibo that lightning strikes constitute a clear and present danger for them, to be avoided at all cost: "When it rains we are afraid because it is dangerous, and our men can no longer work with machetes or axes because that calls lightning, and the same thing happens with light, that is why we do not get close because the electricity can fall" (Canayo 126).[21] This fear of lightning strikes makes the visual electric currents passing through the being's physical form even more impressive, since it appears in the image that the *diablo* is carrying lightning strikes in its two hands, as well as having a fully electrified body. Unlike the Dueña del Barbasco, who carries the poisonous barbasco roots in her hands in order to hunt fish, providing sustenance for the Shipibo community, here the parallel image of carrying charged lightning strikes within a human-like body highlights the clear and present danger for the Shipibo people from common natural phenomena in their local environments.

In fact, Canayo relates that once a man who never believed in the sayings of the community's ancestors died after going out to work during a rainstorm. She explains: "And so, while he was in the woods, he did not notice that his youngest son had followed him. After a while, while he was chopping wood, he was struck by lightning and let out a scream, and when his son ran to see him, he was already dead, all charred because the lightning had burned him, and that is how this man ended up" (Canayo 126).[22] Here, the example of the *diablo*'s power to take away life complements that of plant-associated *dueños*' powers to provide life and sustenance for the Shipibo community. In other words, Canayo's conception of territoriality broaches human and more-than-human relationships with their environments, with vegetal vitality at the base of an expansive plant pedagogy, viewing plants (and other natural beings and phenomena) as pedagogical partners with whom/which to learn.

As Patricia Oliart and Valeria Biffi argue in their study of Indigenous territorialities and environmental conservation in the Peruvian Amazon, for some of the Indigenous leaders they interviewed as part of their research,

> [t]he destruction of biodiversity is directly linked to the destruction of their cultures, as the world their children will grow up in will not be the same as the one they knew. Thus, the protection of their territories and the use they may make of them ends up also being associated with the protection of biodiversity/life. (60)[23]

[21] "Cuando llueve tenemos miedo porque es peligroso, y nuestros hombres ya no pueden trabajar con machete ni con hacha porque eso llama al rayo, y también pasa igual con la candela, por eso no nos acercamos porque puede caer la electricidad."

[22] "y así estando en el monte no sintió que su hijo menor lo había seguido. Después de un rato que estaba hacheando le cayó el rayo y dio un grito, y cuando su hijo fue corriendo a verlo ya estaba muerto todo carbonizado porque el rayo lo quemó, y así terminó este hombre."

[23] "la destrucción de la biodiversidad está directamente vinculada a la destrucción de sus culturas, pues el mundo en el que crecerán sus hijos no será el mismo que ellos conocieron. De tal modo, la protección de sus territorios y del uso que puedan hacer de él termina estando asociada también a la protección de la biodiversidad/vida."

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Canayo's narrations of *dueños* in the Shipibo world tackle the role that ancestrality plays in her text and in Shipibo society and communities at large. Ancestral knowledge may stem from oral traditions and relate to the *kené* and *kené de la palabra*-style images—with both text and image inextricable from one another—but it is in the present moment in which ancestrality additionally provides the Shipibo community strength and wisdom, grounding their relationships to territory.

Additionally, Canayo's visual/textual narratives invite those of us from outside the Shipibo community to begin to learn from said cosmogonic confrontations of words and worlds. The multinatural narrations of this cosmogonic knowledge traversing human and more-than-human worlds highlights the resonances of vegetal vitality not only for the Shipibo communities but for our understandings of Amazonia at large. The boundaries between human and more-than-human worlds begin to evaporate in the pages of *Los dueños*, as the Shipibo world, Amazonia, and other human and more-than-human worlds are illuminated in multinatural word and color.

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Rooted Resistance and Vegetal Life in the Poetry of Ana Varela Tafur

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Abstract

This article explores the vegetal imagery in Ana Varela Tafur's poetry and how it engages with the legacy of colonial violence left by the Rubber Boom—violence that persists in contemporary extractive activities in the Peruvian Amazon. Through an analysis of three recurring plants in her work—the rubber tree, the Ayahuasca vine, and the shihuahuaco tree—I examine how each offers a distinct perspective on human–nonhuman relationships, the enduring cycles of exploitation that shape the region, and the potential of plant life to resist, heal, and foster ecological and cultural regeneration.

Keywords: Ana Varela Tafur, Amazonian poetry, Peruvian poetry, Rubber Era, vegetal imagery, interconnectedness, extractivism.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación del mundo vegetal en la poesía de Ana Varela Tafur y su vinculación con el legado de violencia colonial heredado del boom del caucho, una forma de violencia que persiste en las actividades extractivas en la Amazonia peruana. A partir del análisis de tres plantas—el árbol del caucho, la ayahuasca y el árbol shihuahuaco—este ensayo estudia cómo cada planta propone una perspectiva distinta sobre las relaciones entre humanos y más que humanos, los ciclos extractivos que perduran en la región y el rol de las plantas para resistir, sanar y fomentar renovación ecológica y cultural.

Palabras clave: Ana Varela Tafur poesía amazónica, poesía peruana, era del caucho, mundo vegetal, interconectividad, extractivismo.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Ana Varela Tafur's Amazonian Poetics

Born in Iquitos—the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon, located in the northeastern Amazon Basin, Ana Varela Tafur is one of the most important voices in contemporary Peruvian poetry. She has authored several books, including *Lo que no veo en visiones* (What I do not see in visions, 1992) (winner of the Copé Poetry Award, 1991), *Voces desde la orilla* (Voices from the riverbanks, 2001), *Dama en el escenario* (Lady on the stage, 2001), *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* (Stanzas of Emilia Tangoa, 2022) (recipient of the 2023 National Literature Prize in Poetry), and, in collaboration with Leopoldo Bernucci, *Benjamín Saldaña Rocca: prensa y denuncia en la Amazonía cauchera* (Benjamín Saldaña Rocca: media and denunciation in the Rubber-Era

Amazon, 2020), a curated selection of articles by the journalist who exposed the atrocities committed in the Putumayo by Julio Arana's rubber enterprise. Her poetry has been widely translated and included in anthologies such as *Literary Amazonia* (2004) and *Allí donde canta el viento* (There where the wind sings, 2018), among others.

Varela Tafur's poetic trajectory has been influenced by the political and ecological conditions of her time.[1] In "*Urcututu*, olvido y memoria desde la amazonía. La poesía de Carlos Reyes" (Urcututu, oblivion and memory. The poetry of Carlos Reyes, 2010), a short essay that recounts the creation of the cultural collective *Urcututu* with fellow writers Percy Vilchez Vela and Carlos Reyes, she reflects on the group's origins in 1983—a decade marked by violence, economic stagnation, and internal conflict in Peru. Dissatisfied with literary representations that recycled worn-out tropes about the Amazon, the collective published a page-and-a-half manifesto calling for a renewed literature, one rooted in the territory itself and in the wisdom of its Indigenous communities:

> Our literary references and readings at the time reaffirmed the urgency of creating and recreating an inclusive literature rooted in our Indigenous identity, fused with other cultures, and reimagining the oral traditions of the peoples who inhabit that multicultural and diverse universe known as Amazonia. It remains an unfinished task to this day. The manifesto concluded with a powerful declaration in favor of creative freedom, for without it—we stated—no form of human expression can truly flourish or reach its full potential. (Varela Tafur, "Urcututu")[2]

Rooted in the social reality of Iquitos and informed by an Amazonian cosmovision and ecological discourse, Ana Molina characterizes Varela Tafur's poetry as "ecofeminismo mítico" (mythical ecofeminism)—an approach in which the feminine experience intersects with ecological and mythical-historical dimensions (76-79). For Molina, the gender difference distinguishes Varela Tafur's poetics from those of other Amazonian writers, including members of the *Urcututu* collective, while simultaneously setting her work apart from dominant themes typically associated

[1] Among the various frameworks scholars have used to classify the history of Amazonian literature, one of the most relevant is that of the region's economic cycles. This approach reflects the enduring perception of the Amazon as a site of extraction, which has repeatedly fueled promises of unparalleled wealth and prosperity. The rubber boom (1870–1920), a pivotal period that profoundly reshaped the Amazon's social, political, and ecological landscape, was subsequently followed by other extractive cycles. Cotton, coffee, rice, oil, timber, gold, and coca are among the commodities that have driven the jungle's extractive economy and culture. This pattern supports the argument advanced by historian Jesús San Román, who maintains that even as the productive economy diversified after the rubber era, extractivism remained its dominant tendency. Furthermore, unlike other literary traditions, literature in the Amazon has developed in proximity to its economic cycles, and these are present in Varela Tafur's poetry. For more information, see San Román 169-170; Torres 238-240.

[2] Nuestros referentes literarios y lecturas de entonces nos reafirmaban en la necesidad de crear y recrear una literatura incluyente de nuestra identidad indígena fusionada con otras culturas y reinventando la palabra oral de las gentes que habitan ese universo pluricultural y diverso llamado Amazonía. Una tarea sin duda pendiente hasta hoy. El manifiesto terminaba con una declaración contundente a favor de la libertad de creación porque sin su ejercicio—dijimos—ninguna expresión humana puede desarrollarse y fortalecerse plenamente (Unless otherwise indicated all translations are mine).

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with 1980s poetry (79-83).[3] As an example, Molina references poems from *Lo que no veo*, noting that the celebration of the female body ultimately becomes part of a broader project: the articulation of an Amazonian identity.[4]

While I concur with Molina that the feminine provides a critical lens through which to interpret Varela Tafur's work—exemplified in the gendered and sentient representation of the Amazon in "Madre" (Mother) as a critique of its commodification—, I argue that her poetry finds its most potent expression in its direct engagement with Amazonian landscapes, communities, and traditions. This is particularly evident in *Dama en el escenario*, composed between 1986 and 1988 but not published until 2001, a book Varela Tafur herself has since acknowledged she no longer fully identifies with.[5]

From her first book, *Lo que no veo*, Varela Tafur's poetry engages with the multiplicity of voices, temporalities, and traditions that compose Amazonia, portraying it as a pluricultural and multiethnic region. The vastness and interconnectedness of the forest mirror those of its people and their cultural relationships. In her search for an Amazonian identity, she consistently revisits the past to illuminate present challenges. Her second book, *Voces*, dedicated to her paternal grandmother Ana—a survivor of the rubber era, when export wealth was built on Indigenous exploitation and ecological destruction—weaves familial memory, ancestral knowledges, and stories gathered in rural villages to offer an alternative account of that period.[6] This is evident in "Y habito desde siempre" (And I have always dwelt) from her first book, where the poetic voice draws on personal

[3] This thematic and geographic distancing between Varela Tafur and her contemporaries highlights the persistent centralization of literary production and recognition in Lima, often at the expense of other regions and authors. A similar tendency appears in Luis Fernando Chueca's analysis of Peruvian poetry of the 1990s, where Varela Tafur is mentioned only in a footnote, with the observation that her work falls outside the scope of his study. Notably, by that time she had already received the prestigious Copé Prize in poetry, underscoring the limited visibility of regional literary voices even in the face of national recognition. See Chueca, *Consagración de lo diverso*, 2019.

[4] It is noteworthy that Molina engages with Roland Forgues's anthology *Plumas de Afrodita. Una mirada a la poeta peruana del siglo XX* (2004) in her analysis. In this work, Forgues classifies twentieth-century Peruvian women's poetry into three thematic categories: aesthetic, social, and erotic. The aesthetic addresses female experience in relation to patriarchal structures; the social encompasses politically engaged writing that critiques systems of exploitation; and the erotic explores the female body and sensuality. Forgues places *Lo que no veo en visiones* within the social category, emphasizing its commentary on social realities and affirmation of an Amazonian identity, while overlooking the erotic dimension—present in this work and more explicitly developed in her earlier collection, *Dama en el escenario*.

[5] Published in 2001, *Dama en el escenario* opens with a dedicatory note: "This late release is my first book and was written in Iquitos and Pucallpa between 1986 and 1988. In most of the poems I no longer recognize myself. However, I owe them a great deal of gratitude especially for allowing me to exercise my creativity along the winding paths of poetry" (Esta entrega tardía es mi primer libro y fue escrito en Iquitos y Pucallpa entre los años de 1986 y 1988. En la mayoría de los poemas no me reconozco más. Sin embargo, les debo una holgada gratitud sobre todo por mi ejercicio creador en los sinuosos caminos de la poesía).

[6] The rubber era (1870-1920) constituted a period of significant changes in the Amazon, as the vulcanization of rubber rendered it indispensable to Europe's expanding automotive industry. In Peru, extraction centered in Iquitos, bringing considerable prosperity but also denunciation of grave abuses, most notably the forced recruitment of Indigenous peoples as unpaid laborers.

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memories to question what is preserved or erased from the archive, in a Derridean sense, while affirming the value of subjective experiences. Similarly, in "De eso no más me acuerdo" (That is all I remember), from *Voces*, she links the violence of the rubber era to the continued displacement and marginalization of populations excluded from the profits of an export-driven economy.[7]

Two additional themes in Varela Tafur's poems are Amazonian landscapes and the ecological crisis caused by extractive industries, which threaten to transform the forest into a "zona de sacrificio" (sacrificial zone). *Estancias* stands as her most incisive work, addressing the disappearance of natural environments, riverine communities, situated knowledge systems, and relational ways of being that transcend anthropocentric frameworks. At the forefront of these stanzas is the river, an ecological and symbolic force that connects, regulates, and sustains life in the Amazon. In "Aguas intermitentes" (Intermittent waters), it emerges as an ecological artery, supporting habitats and transporting microcosmic life forms essential to human and non-human existence. The river is also imbued with personhood, home to *Sachamama*, the mythical mother of the forest, often depicted as a giant serpent. Embodying the liveliness and agency of the Amazon, she rewards those who uphold Amerindian principles of reciprocity, and punishes those who disturb ecological balance. In "Guardiana" (Guardian), villagers plead with *Sachamama* to unleash her fury on polluted waterways, absorb metallic waste, and rescue the fish whose backs are "manchadas en líquidos de negro aceite / lotizados Petrol X-Y-Z-Plus" ("stained in black oils, partitioned Petrol X-Y-Z-Plus"; 22)

Vegetal Life and Decolonial Ecologies

"De un bosque soy, de sus humedales" ("Of a forest I am, of its wetlands"; 13), writes Ana Varela Tafur in the opening verse of "Sabiduría" (Wisdom), from *Estancias*, revealing an intimate bond with the Amazonian landscape and its life forms, a connection that inspires and shapes her poetic voice. Although plants are a ubiquitous presence in her poetry—ranging from centennial trees to intricate lianas and vines, her vegetal imagery has seldom been considered a lens through which to explore the region's colonial legacies of extractivism and their ties to the ongoing ecological crisis. Nor have plants been recognized for their potential to reimagine relationships with other life forms beyond an instrumentalist framework. As Lesley Wylie argues, plants have long occupied a central role in Spanish American culture, contributing to the production of meaning, fostering counterhegemonic identities, shaping distinctive literary aesthetics, and expressing ecological concerns (3-10). By reorienting attention on the vegetal world, the reader is prompted to reconsider human-nature

[7] The poem reads: "Y como te repito, /he nacido aquí, /entre los azotes de la miseria y / las violentas tardes del saldo. / Todo a cambio de las mercaderías / traídas desde Iquitos" ("And as I said before, / I was born here, / among the scourges of misery and / the violent afternoons of debt / all in exchange for goods / brought from Iquitos"; 15-6).

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relations, recognizing plants as active beings with their own interiority and stories to tell.

In the Amazon basin—the most biodiverse forest on Earth and home to the greatest concentration of plant and animal species, plants not only sustain life in all its forms but also carry profound spiritual significance. In dialogue with Emanuele Coccia's view of plants as shaping forces of both ecosystems and the cosmos, Juan Duchesne Winter notes that Amerindian thought rests on a logic of mutual implication, where all existences are interrelated and plants occupy a central role as auxiliaries of knowledge (27). He explains: "Plants are certainly the universal source of most food and artifacts, but they are not valued in the Amerindian world just because they are 'resources,' nor even for their specific healing properties, but mainly because they are teachers, auxiliaries in connecting to the sensible and suprasensible world" (40). Among these teacher plants, the ayahuasca vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) is significant for its abilities to open new forms of consciousness and foster novel connections with the territory and with other species.

In this article, I analyze Varela Tafur's poetry through the lens of plants, or more precisely, plant-thinking—a mode of relational being that foregrounds interconnectedness and non-anthropocentric forms of intelligence. Michael Marder defines plant-thinking as "thinking without the head," an approach that recognizes the unique ways in which plants exist and "think."[8] Unlike animals, plants exhibit what Marder terms as "non-conscious intentionality," manifesting purposeful behaviors—such as growing toward light or seeking nutrients—without self-reflective awareness. In this view, plants possess the capacity to sense, remember, and communicate with their environments through non-cognitive modes, challenging traditional notions of intelligence. This approach to plants not only questions human exceptionalism by framing intelligence as an embodied response but also highlights plant-thinking's inherent interconnectedness and its "ceaseless striving toward the other and in becoming-other in growth and reproduction" (Marder 131). Like the rhizome, defined by alliance and conjunction, plant-thinking calls for a departure from dialectical thought in favor of alternative modes of perception, relation, and knowledge production.[9]

Similarly, in *The Life of Plants*, Emanuele Coccia argues that plants exemplify interconnectedness through their ability to sustain, adapt, and transform their surroundings, ultimately becoming one with their environment. Recentering

[8] "Plant-thinking" refers, in the same breath to (1) the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants (hence, what I call "thinking without the head"); (2) our thinking about plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants" (Marder, "What is Plant-Thinking" 124).

[9] Rhizome, a term originally from botany, was adopted by Deleuze and Guattari to conceptualize dynamic spaces of enunciation that transcend the binary logic of center and periphery. This binary is embodied in the metaphor of the tree, which represents the dominant ontological and epistemological order of the West—a structure around which all else is expected to align. In contrast, rhizomes multiply points of entry and connection, creating space for alternative forms of knowledge, such as those found in Amerindian Indigenous cosmovision.

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attention on plants, Coccia describes this merging as both physical and metaphysical, that is a *metaphysics of mixture* in which life itself emerges from continual mixtures and connections. This principle of interconnectedness lies at the center of Ana Varela Tafur's poetry, where the Amazon is envisioned as a shared, relational space, a natural assemblage that rejects hierarchical structures of power and the commodification of nature. In her work, the Amazon emerges not as a site of extraction but as a living, plural territory that has long resisted colonial and neocolonial practices of exploitation, dispossession, and cultural erasure. Rejecting universalist and extractive frameworks, her poetry reaffirms the legitimacy of Indigenous ontologies, which propose different ways of knowing and inhabiting the world (Viveiros; Descola). This expansion into new ontological references encourages a more ethical, empathetic, and responsible relationship with the environment—one urgently needed in light of the escalating ecological crisis in the Amazon basin. In an interview about *Estancias*, she reflects that it was both a renaco tree (*Ficus schultesii*) and a desire to decolonize dominant narratives about the region that inspired the writing of these poems (Escribano, "Ana Varela Tafur").

To examine how Varela Tafur's vegetal imagery engages with the legacy of colonial violence in the Amazon and offers new insights into the ecological crisis, I briefly discuss three plants that recur throughout her poetry: the rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*), the ayahuasca plant (*Banisteriopsis caapi)*, and the shihuahuaco tree (*Dipteryx micrantha)*. Each of these plants provides a distinctive perspective through which to consider the relationships between humans and other living beings, the cycles of exploitation that have marked the region's history, and the potential of plant life to resist, heal, and foster regeneration.

Rubber Trees as Sites of Memory

How do trees bear the historical trauma of the rubber era? What might the forest reveal if it could speak? These are some questions the author appears to consider in her depiction of the Amazonian forest as a living archive—a repository of collective memory in which forgotten stories, fragmented recollections, and the suffering experienced by Indigenous peoples during the rubber years converge to speak to the reader. These memories function as affective traces that elude full articulation or documentation yet persist in trees and decimated landscapes. Patricia Vieira has introduced the concept of plant inscription, or *phytographia,* to describe how plants leave tangible marks on their environment and how these traces can be represented in human cultural production. Vieira writes: "*Phytographia* is the appellation of an encounter between writings on plants and the writing *of* plants, which inscribe themselves in human texts" (215). Like Michael Marder, Vieira posits that plants can express themselves, specifically in ways that can shape both human perception and ecological experience. While these inscriptions do not equate to plant sentience, the material presence of trees and other enduring remnants of the rubber era act as sites of memory, communicating with and through the poetic word.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

In "Timareo (1950)," one of Varela Tafur's most frequently anthologized poems, the poetic voice foregrounds the significance of oral tradition in riverine cultures, positioning orality as a legitimate vehicle for asserting collective memory, in contrast to the authority ascribed to the written word.

> In Timareo we do not know the letters and their writing
> and no one registers us in the pages of government books.
> My grandfather lights up in the candor of his birth
> naming a chronology wrapped in punishments.
> (Many are the trees where inhabited torture and vast are the forests
> purchased among a thousand deaths).
> How far those days, how distant the escapes!
> The relatives sailed a sea of possibilities
> far from the ancestral fatigues.
> But we do not know the letters and their destinies and
> and we recognize ourselves in the arrival of a time of blissful Sundays.
> The city is far and from the port I call all the sons soldiers who never returned,
> girls dragged to movie theaters and bars of bad reputation
> (History does not record our exoduses, the final voyages from restless rivers).
>
> (*Lo que no veo* 8)[10]

Employing a direct tone and articulated through the first-person plural, the poetic voice highlights the marginalization of a rural community whose inhabitants, excluded from official archives and lacking formal literacy, nonetheless possess stories that demand to be told. These narratives, shaped by the enduring legacy of exploitation and precarity, are preserved and transmitted through lived experience, which serves to interrogate the human and environmental cost of the rubber era for the affected communities and their descendants. In this context, the trees emerge as silent yet evocative witnesses to this traumatic past ("Son muchos los árboles donde habitó /la tortura y vastos los bosques / comprados entre mil muertes").

Notably, the poem begins and ends with references to untold stories, accounts that resist erasure and endure through their resonance with other voices and temporalities. Interconnectivity appears in the poem's weaving of past and present, individual to collective memory, subjective experience and official history.[11] By recentering the marginal, the plural, and the forgotten the poem endeavors to recover silenced testimonies, enabling a critical rewriting of history ("La historia no registra

[10] "En Timareo no conocemos las letras y sus escritos / y nadie nos registra en las páginas de los libros oficiales. / Mi abuelo se enciende en el candor de su nacimiento / y nombra una cronología envuelta en los castigos. / (Son muchos los árboles donde habitó la tortura y vastos los bosques / comprados entre mil muertes). / ¡Qué lejos los días, qué distantes las huidas! / Los parientes navegaron un mar de posibilidades / lejos de las fatigas solariegas. / Pero no conocemos las letras y sus destinos y / nos reconocemos en la llegada de un tiempo de domingos dichosos. / Es lejos la ciudad y desde el puerto llamo a todos los hijos soldados que no regresan, / muchachas arrastradas a cines y bares de mala muerte / (La historia no registra nuestros éxodos, los últimos viajes aventados desde ríos intranquilos).

[11] This dynamic interplay recalls what Miluska Benavides describes as "history-memory," a process through which poetry "hace posible la confluencia entre el tiempo ancestral, el ciclo de la explotación cauchera y un presente múltiple" "makes possible the convergence between ancestral time, the cycle of rubber exploitation, and a manifold present" (102).

nuestros éxodos, los últimos viajes / aventados desde los ríos intranquilos"). The reference to new exoduses may allude to more recent forced migrations, driven by the destruction of habitable environments under extractive industries.

This effort to reclaim the stories of those whose suffering and forced labor sustained the rubber economy resurfaces in "Estación de trueque" (Bartering station), from *Voces*, where the poetic voice adopts a subtly ironic tone to critique the omissions of official records. Such documentation, the poem suggests, is inadequate to account for what was lost or, perhaps what can never be fully accounted for. Reflecting on Roger Casement's report to Sir Edward Grey, which denounced the death of 40,000 Indigenous people in the Putumayo, the poetic voice asserts: "I don't know of British sires and lords and consuls / And of transport steamers in unknown docks / Because in the official data my hands don't appear / Nor my route, ventured in the early hours of insomnia" (36).[12] [13] The poem closes with the image of the laboring hand wielding the machete to bleed the trees—a commodity deemed more valuable than the worker's own blood and lives. "[q]ue mi vida no valía nada. / ¿Nada? (That my life was worthless. Nothing?), the poetic voice asks, suspended between astonishment and desolation.

In "Iquitos," one of the longest poems in *Estancias*, Varela Tafur revisits the rubber period once again, this time centering her focus on the city of Iquitos—a once modest trading post that rapidly transformed into Peru's primary hub for rubber exportation. Described as "una urbe que creció sin pestañear" ("a city that grew without blinking"; 66), Iquitos emerges a symbol of an extractive system whose infrastructure and memory of past wealth lingers in the decaying remnants of "escaleras ruinosas" ("ruinous stairways"; 67), "memoria de azulejos" ("memory of tiles"; 64), and a "*Belle Époque*" (68) that has long since vanished. These images speak to a fragile development model built on dependency—to volatile markets and price fluctuation—that, with the collapse of the rubber trade, plunged the region into an economic crisis (San Román 170-1). In its aftermath, rubber workers and their offspring were left in poverty and vulnerable to new forms of exploitation. The poem concludes with the poetic voice gazing at the city's port, reflecting on stories of violence that are not only remembered but continually reenacted: "I rewrite stories in travel notes and botanical records of looting / I read books of official explorations, newspapers of the 20th century / that update the waves of blood in Putumayo" (68).[14] Here, Varela Tafur underscores the persistence of hollow narratives of progress and

[12] "Desconozco de sires y lores y cónsules británicos / y de vapores de transportes en muelles desconocidos. / Porque en los datos oficiales no figuran mis manos / ni mi ruta aventada en madrugadas de insomnia."

[13] In 1909, the British magazine *Truth* exposed the enslavement and killings of Indigenous peoples in Julio C. Arana's rubber stations, run by the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC), a firm registered in London with both Peruvian and British capital. In response, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey appointed Roger Casement—renowned human rights advocate and then Consul in Brazil—to investigate in 1910. Casement's diaries and report depict the Putumayo region as a lawless territory ruled by violence and terror, where Indigenous lives were treated as expendable.

[14] "Reescribo relatos en apuntes de viajes y botánicas del saqueo. / Leo libros de exploración oficial, periódicos del siglo XX / que actualizan las olas de sangre en el Putumayo."

national interest—discourses first used during the rubber period to legitimize Iquitos's rapid growth and that, today, continue to justify extractive practices that propel the Amazon toward irreversible ecocide.

Ayahuasca, the Wisdom of Plants and Market Commodity

Described as "una ciencia con aliento de vegetal" ("a science with the spirit of a plant"; *Estancias* 31), the ayahuasca plant appears in Varela Tafur's poetry as a "mother-root," a sacred entity endowed with agency, wisdom, and transformative force. Treated with reverence and deep affection, ayahuasca possesses the capacity to heal and offer guidance in times of ecological crisis. Commonly referred to as the "vine of the dead," ayahuasca is a natural brew of millennial origin in the Amazonian rainforest, whose psychotropic properties are believed to facilitate access to expanded states of consciousness. Consumed exclusively within ceremonial contexts and following rigorous bodily purification, shamans draw on its powers to heighten sensory engagement with the natural world and to mediate between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. More than a hallucinogen or symbolic motif, ayahuasca occupies a central place in Indigenous cosmologies, which attribute sentience and spiritual presence to the vegetal world, recognizing an interconnectedness and kinship with other entities, temporalities, and realities as part of a larger ecological system.[15]

En *Cauces y recorridos* (Watercourses and routes), the second section of *Estancias*, ayahuasca and other plants are prominently featured, highlighting their role in mediating communication with ancestral voices, through which they acquire knowledge and receive consolation amid the intensifying violence of extractivism. In "Persistencia del lenguaje" (Persistence of language), sips of *toé* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*) and the chanting of *icaros*, accompanied by tobacco smoke, awaken the powers of ayahuasca to conjure imagined cartographies and recover the language of the ancestors.[16] Later, in "Fibras de oralidad" (Fibers of orality), coca leaves (*Erythroxylum coca)* help medicine women retrieve extinct words and revive a language that expresses the voice and suffering of the forest: "The healers sing and their voices disseminate calm. / Their cadences are records of the forest that is emptying" (33).[17] Pedro Favaron highlights the role of this *planta maestra* (master plant) in guiding healers, or *maestros visionarios* (visionaries masters), as they safeguard ancestral knowledge and practices vital to the continuity of their communities.[18] These examples reaffirm the legitimacy of Indigenous worldviews

[15] In "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," Viveiros de Castro has also written on such fluid and interconnected relations within the framework of Amerindian perspectivism and the decentering of the human to allow engagement with other subjectivities, realities, and ontologies.
[16] Ícaros are sacred melodies that shamans learn from the spirits of plants while in a trance. These songs serve various purposes, including protection, healing, and guidance
[17] "Cantan las curanderas y sus voces diseminan la calma. / Sus cadencias son registros de la floresta que se agota."
[18] Pedro Favaron also notes that two other master plants widely used in the Amazon are tobacco (*Nicotina tabacum*) and floripondio or *toé* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*). For further discussion of on

and practices, long marginalized, whose teaching potential has fostered more effective ecological practices (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018).

Ayahuasca and other plants are also invoked in response to immediate and pressing dangers. In "Periferias" (Peripheries), the plant is administered to ease the suffering of a woman who has ingested contaminated water, likely poisoned with mercury, a toxic metal referenced in "Sonidos" (Sounds) and commonly employed in artisanal gold mining to separate the mineral from stone. In "Pasajeros" (Passengers), the smoke of burning tobacco leaves, compared to the pages of an open book, carries warnings of epidemics, illegal timber trafficking, and the invasive presence of dredgers along the riverbanks. The final image of "selvas asediadas por petroleras" ("jungles besieged by oil companies;" 45) captures the rupture of ecological balance, transforming forests, cultural practices, and local knowledge into extractable commodities. This commodification is most evident in "Incongruencias" (Incongruity).

> Incongruous lines of docks that are shacks
> announced cartographies of concrete constructions
> hammocks, huts, and advertisement of plant tourism
>
> Yajé,[19] you get lost in the chaos of urban retail
> so frequently reinvented for the living well.
> I see you fractured in geometries of psychedelic paintings.
>
> Yajé —thinking plant—who would have thought that in imagined tropics
> you make the weak, the powerful speak.
>
> (*Estancias* 36)[20]

As the title announces, ayahuasca in this context is stripped of its ceremonial framework and spiritual significance, becoming yet another commodity for export. Iquitos, once the epicenter of the rubber boom, reemerges as a site of extraction and external consumption, now repurposed for vegetal tourism. Amanda Smith has drawn parallels between the rubber boom and ayahuasca's rise in global markets, noting that this tourism economy disproportionately benefits outsiders while continuing to marginalize local Indigenous communities. These communities contribute "often unacknowledged and uncompensated Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous labor," which ultimately serves to the consumption by others (Smith 145). Moreover, efforts to make ayahuasca's teachings accessible to outsiders seeking self-discovery and spiritual healing replicate colonial logics of exploitation and extraction,

ayahuasca and shamanism, see Andrew Gray, *The Last Shaman* (1997), Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, *Ver, saber, poder: chamanismo de los yagua de la Amazonía peruana* (1998), and Stephen Beyer, *Singing to the Plants* (2009).

[19] *Yajé* is the term used for the ayahuasca plant in regions of Ecuador and Colombia.

[20] "Varaderos incongruentes de líneas que son caseríos / cartografías anunciadas de progresivos cementos / hamacas, malocas y propagandas de turismo vegetal. / Yajé, te pierdes en un caos de comercio urbano, / tantas veces reinventado para el buen vivir. / Te veo fragmentado en geometrías de pintas psicodélicas. / Yajé —planta pensante—quien diría que en trópicos imaginados / haces hablar a los débiles, a los poderosos."

now rebranded under the rhetoric of *buen vivir*.[21] In the poem, Varela Tafur interrogates this commercialization, exposing how an experience once sacred has been reduced to a consumable product.

Trees and Other Sacrifice Zones

The commodification of nature has been a persistent process in Latin America, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing today through large-scale extractive activities, often at significant social and ecological cost to local communities. In "Santa Cecilia," from her first book, images of raging fires and men weeping over their lost crops capture the struggles of riverine communities, confronted with limited opportunities, and the dramatic reshaping of forestlands to accommodate intensive extractive activities. The poem references the widespread cultivation of oil palm plantations and how it has led to the destruction of primary forests: "The clearing of the forest delayed / endless fires and / illusions were tossed / from the oil palms" (13).[22] The closing image of a photograph of "the gringa Marilyn" hanging on the wall of a dilapidated bar stands as the lone testament to the unfulfilled promises of development in the Peruvian Amazon.

While Varela Tafur has previously written about the extractivist tradition in the Amazon—one that has exploited natural resources and cheap labor for the benefit of others— the imagery in *Estancias* convey a heightened urgency not present in her earlier work. In "Cuerpos de madera" (Wooden bodies), the poem opens with neatly cut and organized tree trunks floating down the river and headed to a local sawmill, where they are transformed into furniture and trinkets to satisfy the demands of a consumerist society: "Men cut trees and manufacture necessities: / municipal armchairs, bedside tables, altars, / pictures, sideboards, souvenirs for tourists" (17).[23] The poem compares the once-living shihuahuacos trees (*Dipteryx micrantha*) to trunks resembling motionless alligators sunbathing downstream or caskets drifting with the current. It concludes with the poetic voice reminding the reader of what these trees once were and represented for their ecosystems before their commodification: "The millenary shihuahuacos were bird shelters. / Now laminated and in order as final links / of an extractive chain" (17).[24] Here, as in "Santa Cecilia,"

[21] Roughly translated as living well, the concept of *buen vivir* originates in the Ecuadorian Constitution, which envisions "a new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature, to reach el buen vivir, el *sumac kawsay*" (cited in Walsh 188). In principle, *el buen vivir* rejects the notion of progress or wellbeing based on consumption, advocating instead for a relational understanding of life grounded in harmony with nature. In her poem, Varela Tafur appears to question this concept by highlighting the commodification of an experience that has been detached from its original meaning and context.

[22] "El desbosque demoró / incendios interminables y / las ilusiones se aventaban / desde las palmas aceiteras."

[23] "Los hombres cortan árboles y fabrican necesidades: / sillones municipales, mesitas de noche, altares, /cuadros, aparadores, souvenirs para turistas."

[24] "Eran refugios de aves los milenarios shihuahuacos. / Ahora laminados y en orden son eslabones finales / de una cadena extractiva."

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the poem offers a pointed critique of the relentless exploitation of nature and its impact on the larger ecosystem.

"Nocturno sol" (Nocturnal sun) synthesizes Varela Tafur's alarm that the rampant deforestation of the Amazon may lead to irreparable ecological loss, a loss that, reaching a turning point, will leave only shadows.

> Early in the morning the chainsaws resound.
> Their dynamics work like a storm.
> In their constant high sound there are pieces of clouds.
> The ants build non-timber houses.
> Early the sun hurries the ritual of cutting.
> A flare of lights pierces the trunks as it passes.
> Radiant are the knives sharp in their certainty.
> Men adjust the cutting machines.
> A treeless forest is a nocturnal sun.
> It disappears into the night and we see only its shadow.
>
> (*Estancias* 26)[25]

Here, the early, repetitive noise of chainsaws announces another day of destruction—methodical in its task and rapidly advancing deforestation. In a kind of poetic onomatopoeia, the poem's acoustic effect evokes the electric buzz of the saws. In the opening line, the repeated *r* in "Temprano las motosierras suenan" mimics the mechanical drone of machinery, amplifying the sound of destruction. Later, the focus shifts to the blades, sophisticated engines of deforestation, highlighting the accelerated pace of extraction as part of a broader exploitative chain flowing through rivers and sawmills and ultimately reaching international markets. The poem concludes with a desolate image of the forest reduced to shadows, suggesting that what was once full of life and sound now lingers only as a memory.

Yet, amid this bleak landscape, a sense of hope emerges. In "Temporada de purmas" (Season of purmas), attention turns to abandoned farmlands and forested areas reduced to wood chips, discarded logs, and ashes following a major disruption in the extractive chain. Over time, these landscapes slowly regenerate as secondary forests, gradually restoring ecological balance and biodiversity. "'El suelo necesita tiempo'—recuerdo la lección" ("'The soil needs time'—I remember the lesson"; 16), notes the poetic voice, highlighting the quiet resilience of plants in restoring balance and life.[26] Varela Tafur's depiction of the purmas resonates with Emanuele Coccia's idea of mixture as the basis for ontological infinite regeneration, as well as with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's theory—exemplified in her study of the matsutake mushrooms — that life can reappear in new forms after environmental disturbance, symbolizing adaptability and coexistence forged out of unlikely collaborations.

[25] "Temprano las motosierras suenan. / Su dinámica funciona como una tormenta. / En su alto sonido constante hay pedazos de nubes. / Las hormigas construyen casas no maderables. / Temprano el sol apura el ritual del corte. / Una llamarada de luces atraviesa los troncos a su paso. / Radiantes están los cuchillos álgidos en su certeza. / Los hombres ajustan las máquinas cortadoras. / Un bosque sin árboles es un nocturno sol. / Desaparece hacia la noche y solo vemos su sombra."

[26] Purmas are unused agricultural lands that undergo a natural process of regeneration, forming secondary forests that help restore native vegetation. They support biodiversity and contribute to soil recovery.

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As a Way of Conclusion: Can Poetry Save the World?

In an essay on Brazilian poet Josely Vianna Baptista, Malcolm McNee revisits John Felstiner's question about the potential of poetic expression to respond to the escalating ecological crisis: "Can poetry save the Earth?" (quoted in McNee 76). While Felstiner's response is ambivalent, McNee considers this question within the broader context of Environmental Humanities to argue the potential of poetry to decolonize ontologies "that inhibit our environmental imagination" (77). In the specific case of Vianna Baptista, McNee contends that her poetry constructs a "pluriversed landscape"—"not as a rejection of a scientific way of environmental knowledge, but as a form of environmental discourse and representation that is resistant to reductive, universalizing notions of the world" (81). I find this idea particularly persuasive, as Varela Tafur engages in a similar endeavor through images and metaphors that reveal countless connections to the territory, extending beyond geographical reference to engage with the stories and experiences of its human and non-human inhabitants. Her work thus develops from an empathetic and experiential approach that expands on conventional views of nature and affirms the interconnectedness of all beings and their shared destiny.

Through a thoughtful interplay of conceptual and poetic language—at times direct and descriptive, at others evocative and sensorial, Varela Tafur's poems invite the reader to rethink dominant paradigms, consider alternative subjectivities and new forms of relationality, and recognize ways of knowing and thinking that elude scientific frameworks or resist reductive representations of the natural world. Her stanzas often return to the rubber period, revisiting the trauma and legacy of violence and dispossession that continue to affect communities, now reconfigured by new extractive industries. Within this entanglement, vegetal life offers a model for open and solidaristic relationships with the environment and with others. Her poems also foreground what is at stake, not only for ecosystems but for humanity itself, as result of these complex and infinite interconnections. "We depend on the life of others" (47), reminds Coccia, underscoring the fragile system that sustains our existence. While poetry may not have the power to save the world, Varela Tafur's work makes visible the magnitude of what is lost through deforestation and ecological degradation: relationships, forms of existence, spiritual practices, and lived experiences whose disappearance would be irretrievable. Her poetry compels us not only to acknowledge this loss but also to respond.

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Phytopoiesis: Plants in Amazonian Women's Poetry[1]

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Abstract

The ontological turn within anthropology postulates that there is a multiplicity of worlds and that taking Indigenous worlds, realities and thought seriously enriches Western philosophy and culture. Taking a cue from the ontological turn, I argue in this article that Amazonian Indigenous and non-Indigenous literatures offer readers an entry point into worlds where more than human beings take center stage. I analyze the *phtytopoiesis*, or the poetry on/with plants, by two Amazonian women authors from different countries and generations—Brazilian Astrid Cabral (1936-), and Peruvian Dina Ananco (1985-)—to show the centrality of vegetal life in Amazonia. I contend that these poets reflect upon traditional, communal ties to plants and resignify them to bolster women's empowerment.

Keywords: Ontological turn, contemporary Amazonian poetry, contemporary women's poetry, Astrid Cabral, Dina Ananco.

Resumen

El giro ontológico dentro de la antropología postula que existe una multiplicidad de mundos y que tomar en serio los mundos, las realidades y el pensamiento indígenas enriquece la filosofía y la cultura occidentales. Siguiendo el ejemplo del giro ontológico, sostengo en este artículo que las literaturas indígenas y no indígenas amazónicas ofrecen a los lectores un punto de entrada a mundos donde los seres más-que-humanos ocupan un lugar central. Analizo la fitopoiesis, o poesía sobre/con plantas, de dos autoras amazónicas de diferentes países y generaciones—la brasileña Astrid Cabral (1936-) y la peruana Dina Ananco (1985-)—para mostrar la centralidad de la vida vegetal en la Amazonía. Sostengo que estas poetas reflexionan sobre los vínculos comunitarios tradicionales con las plantas y los resignifican para defender el empoderamiento de las mujeres.

Keywords: Giro ontológico, poesía amazónica contemporánea, poesía contemporánea de mujeres, Astrid Cabral, Dina Ananco.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Turning to Amazonian Poetry

Amazonian Indigenous worldviews have been a crucial inspiration for the so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology and related fields.[2] The underlying premise

[1] This article is a result of the project ECO, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 101002359).
[2] Based on his extensive writings on Amazonian Amerindian societies, Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen consider Eduardo Viveiros de Castro to be the "father of anthropology's ontological turn" (157).

of the ontological turn is that differences in the way in which communities see reality are not only a matter of cultural disparity or the reflection of multiple interpretations of a pre-given natural world. Rather, the nature of the world and its constituents, i.e. their ontology, diverge from one community to the next. The epistemological issue of how a people relates to things becomes an ontological question of acknowledging that what is there to relate to can vary, that actuality changes depending on who is interacting with it (Holbraad and Pedersen 5). The core task of Western philosophical ontology, namely defining what each entity is, is thus challenged in this new paradigm that acknowledges not merely a variety of multicultural approaches to the world but a multiplicity of worlds.

As Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen point out, the ontological turn contributes to the emancipatory project of Indigenous peoples (157), often depicted from the outside as purportedly living in a situation of conceptual immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*), to quote Immanuel Kant's famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" It attributes the same significance to the discourse of Indigenous peoples and to that of anthropologists, abolishing, in the words of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the "strategic advantage of the anthropologist over the discourse of the native" (115).[3] The world(view) of an Indigenous community becomes as valid as that of the (usually Western-trained) anthropologists studying it.

Concomitantly, the ontological turn opens the path for engaging in reverse anthropology and for contemplating Western societies from an Indigenous perspective, thus relativizing Western values. The ontological turn thus challenges the pretense of universality of Western ontological and epistemological frameworks. It affords a glimpse into the reality created by these systems from an Indigenous perspective, thereby becoming, for Viveiros de Castro, a "powerful philosophical *instrument*, capable of enlarging a little bit the very ethnocentric horizons of our [Western] philosophy" (127). It draws attention to the ways in which Indigenous peoples conceptually reciprocate and respond to what has been written about them by highlighting the blind spots, incongruences and outright absurdities inherent in the Western mode of thinking.

In the field of Amazonian literature and literary studies, as in Amazonian ethnography, focusing on the discourse of Indigenous communities and, more broadly, of non-Indigenous Amazonian writers, also contributes to provincialize established themes, forms and genres. While Indigenous peoples have long been depicted as the subject of literary texts, the irruption of Indigenous literature—as opposed to Indianist and Indigenist literature written by non-Indigenous peoples about Indigenous characters or communities (Dorrico 229-37)[4]—by Indigenous

[3] This and all subsequent quotes in a language other than English are rendered in my translation. The page numbers refer to the original listed in the Works Cited.

[4] Dorrico differentiates between Indianist (*indianista*) writings by non-Indigenous writers who speak in the name of Indigenous communities, thus usurping their voice, Indigenist (*indigenista*) texts by non-Indigenous authors, often written with the help of Indigenous people, who strive to make Indigenous communities better known, and Indigenous (*indígena*) literature written by Indigenous peoples (Dorrico 229-37).

peoples themselves dates back only a few decades. Non-Indigenous Amazonian writers have been around for longer, but their texts were often regarded as regionalist literature that remained on the fringes of the literary canon in Amazonian nations. Even though several key texts of twentieth-century Latin American literature have been about the Amazon—Colombian José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924), Brazilians Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928) and Raul Bopp's *Cobra Norato* (1931), or Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), to name but a few—none of these works were penned by Amazonian authors.[5]

The silencing and/or marginalization of Amazonian Indigenous intellectuals and, though to a much lesser extent, of non-Indigenous writers from Amazonia, is slowly changing. A case in point is the attribution of the 2022 National Literary Prize of Peru in the category "Literature in Indigenous or Originary Languages" to Wampis and Awajun Amazonian poet Dina Ananco for her poetry collection *Sanchiu* (2021). The irruption of Amazonian authors into the literary limelight in Amazonian countries has broadened the still rather ethnocentric horizons of the literary traditions in those nations, to riff off on Viveiros de Castro, and brought new worlds into the fold of Spanish and Portuguese literary languages. Most Amazonian authors draw heavily on local Indigenous, riverine and other cultural traditions, usually disseminated orally. Miguel Rocha Vivas uses the term "oralitura" to describe recent literary texts influenced by Indigenous cultural practices, including shamanic or healing chants, mythical stories, dialogues with the elders, etc. (Rocha Vivas 12), that frequently incorporate Indigenous words and expressions or, in the case of poetry, are sometimes bilingual editions.[6] This is the case of Ananco's *Sanchiu*, a bilingual Wampis/Spanish collection, where the Wampis words used in the Spanish version of the poems are explained in a glossary at the end of the book.[7]

But Amazonian writings do more than simply integrate local literary forms and languages into poetry and prose. Following in the footsteps of the ontological turn, I would argue that these texts articulate not only different ways of interpreting reality, but also point to different realities. These works showcase a specifically Amazonian way of being in the world, attuned to more than human existence. This literature therefore translates the basic intuition at the heart of the ontological turn: ontology is pluriversal, rather than universal, and ontological divergences find expression in

[5] For a discussion of what consitutes Amazonian writing and Amazonian poetry, see Vieira 54.

[6] The term "oralitura" was coined by Yoro K. Fall to refer to ancestral narratives and poems of African peoples, so as to avoid the contradiction inherent in the expression "oral literature," given that "literature" goes back to the Latin word for "letter" (Favarón and Haya de la Torre 30). The term has since then been adopted by Latin American Indigenous writers including Elicura Chihuailaf Nahuelpan, Fredy Chikangana and Hugo Jamioy to describe their own texts and has come designate a body of writing that goes back not only to the oral tradition but also to non-verbal forms of expression (Favarón and Haya de la Torre 30).

[7] The poems in *Sanchiu* were written in Wampis and then translated into Spanish by the author herself, keeping some of the original rhythms and turns of phrase, together with some Wampis words and expressions.

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textualities, broadly understood as the modes of inscription of different beings in the world.[8]

Amazonian literary writing is thus eminently political. For one, contemporary Amazonian texts often denounce the destruction of the rainforest fueled by extractivist activities including legal and illegal mining, oil drilling, agribusiness, logging, hydroelectrical power dams and other industries that go hand in hand with human-induced forest fires. But the political reach of Amazonian writings goes beyond the condemnation of environmental devastation. These texts enunciate an ontology that defies traditional philosophical categories and places Indigenous modes of thought on the same footing as Western ones. Similar to the ethnographies written in the wake of the ontological turn, Amazonian literatures give voice and visibility to other worlds, often through the words of Indigenous peoples themselves, thereby contesting and overcoming a centuries-old process of suppressing these forms of knowledge and ways of being.

In this article, I analyze a selection of poetry by women writers as an instantiation of recent Amazonian literature. Close to oral modes of expression that often use poetic structures including rhyme, systems of repetition and meter and an expression of oralitura, poetry has emerged as a privileged means to articulate Amazonian ontologies. I focus on the work of women poets from two Amazonian countries and belonging to different generations: Brazilian author Astrid Cabral (1936-), and the above-mentioned Dina Ananco (1985-) from Peru. I foreground the authors' poetry on plants, which I call "phytopoiesis"—poetry written on/with plants—as an entry point into Amazonian world(views) where more than human beings take center stage. The selected body of work testifies to the significance of women authors as contemporary, innovative voices within Amazonian letters, who have carved a spaced for themselves by combining the articulation of local modes of existence with a female—and often feminist—perspective. These works emphasize the close ties binding women and plants, often used in activities traditionally performed by women such as cooking or caring for the sick, a connection that is both alluded to and frequently re-signified in the poems. While Cabral highlights the soul of plants and problematizes plant consumption by humans as food and raw materials, Ananco uses female identification with vegetal life as a means to challenge both patriarchy and environmental destruction. The poetry of both authors offers a glimpse into a world forged from the perspective of plants and puts forth a vegetal infused ontology of becoming that defies the neat ontological categories of mainstream Western thought.

[8] I have framed this form of more-than-human inscription in human cultural productions elsewhere as zoophytography. For more on this notion, see Vieira.

Astrid Cabral's Ensouled Plants

Astrid Cabral was the only woman to integrate the Clube da Madrugada,[9] a literary and artistic association founded in the Brazilian Amazon city of Manaus in 1954. One of the aims of the Clube was to reflect upon the depiction of Amazonian nature and on the persistent opposition between humans and the rainforest in cultural productions from the region (Cantarelli 86). Throughout her long literary career, Cabral carried the torch of bringing more-than-human beings into literature from a female perspective. In her early collection of short stories, *Alameda* (Lane, 1963), more than humans become familiar presences that are part of everyday human existence. As Ana Paula Cantarelli points out, the author's narratives make use of hybrid narrators that bridge human and vegetal points of view and plants are the protagonists of several texts (87-88).[10] In her subsequent poetry collections, Cabral continues to focus on more-than-human life, not as representative of an extraneous, foreign environment, but embedded in routine, domestic actions and therefore as part of hybrid human/more-than-human communities (see Lestel 93-98).

Cabral's poetry emphasizes the multiple plant transformation that make life and literary writing possible. In several texts she focuses on plant reification, i.e., its reduction to food and other commodities for humans. The poem "Metamorfose" (Metamorphosis) from the collection *Intra-Muros* (Within Walls, 1998), describes the path of a peach from being a piece of fruit to becoming human stool: "On the lap of a bowl / a very pink peach / is a small sun. / How can hungry teeth / resist the temptation? / Soon the star eclipses / through the tunnel of the body / and becomes a dull pomace / on the lap of another bowl" (17).[11] Describing the process of eating and digesting a peach as the fruit's transformation from a glowing sun into a dull pomace is indicative of the author's remorse for causing the death of plants for nourishment, a recurrent feeling in several other poems. I have addressed the topic of food ethics in Cabral's corpus elsewhere, so I will not offer a lengthy analysis of the theme here (see Vieira 164ff). I will just highlight the guilt that transpires in many poems about the transmutation of plants into food. In "Café da manhã" (Breakfast), the last poem from the collection *Ponto de cruz* (Cross Stitch, 1979), the author notes that "wheat, yesterday free in the wind / is captive bread in your belly. / The sugar that tastes so good to you / is the pain of crystalized sugar cane […] / And the coffee

[9] Before Cabral, few other women had published literary works in the Brazilian Amazon. Eneida de Moraes published *Terra verde* (*Green Land*, 1929) and Violeta Branca published the poetry collection *Ritmo de inquieta alegria* (Rhythm of Unquiet Joy, 1935).

[10] Cantarelli considers that Cabral's *Alameda* anticipates recent scientific research on plants by ascribing feelings, desires and volition to vegetal beings (88).

[11] "No regaço da louça / o pêssego tão corado / é um pequeno sol. / Como à tentação resistirem / os dentes famintos? / Logo o astro se eclipsa / pelo túnel do corpo / e se toma baço bagaço / no regaço de outra louça,"

 ISSN 2171-9594

in gulps is blood / that you, a vampire, swallow" (*Déu* 86).[12] [13] The vocabulary used in the poem, where plants are "captive," made to feel "pain" and whose blood in drank by "vampire" humans, presents plants as victims of violence and exploitation at the hands of gluttonous humans.[14] This personification of plants invites readers to consider them as intelligent beings with their own worldview and perspective on reality that clashes with the human drive to subjugate plant life.

The set of poems "Portal do dia" (Portal of the Day), "Natureza morta" (Still Life), "Feira" (Fair) and "Buffet miniatura" (Miniature Buffet), all from *Intra-Muros*, continues Cabral's reflection on the transmutation of plants into consumables. In the first poem, the author asks: "What are oranges doing here / emigrated from the trees? / They would be better on branches […] / instead of the aggressive plate / from which they look at me furtively" (1).[15] The use of the adjective "aggressive" signals the poetic voice's awareness that eating is a form of coercion exerted upon the fruit, depicted as being held hostage on a plate, fearfully looking at their human tormentor instead of hanging on their rightful place on a tree. "Natureza morta" describes oranges as "[p]ackaged liquid sun / for human thirst" (13),[16] which points to the injustice of reducing fruit to a means to quench human thirst. In "Feira," the poet portrays vegetables on display for sale as being "in exile" and "nostalgic for soil" ("exílio"; "saudosas da terra," 15), personifying vegetables and hinting at their resentment for being sold as commodities in a market. "Buffet minitatura" itemizes the vegetables available in a buffet in a language that becomes increasingly critical of their transformation into food items as the poem progresses. Towards the end, broccoli are portrayed as a "fallen forest," hearts of palm as "chopped columns" and tomatoes are "agonizing" ("Floresta tombada"; "colunas decepadas"; "agonizando," 16). The violent language employed is a sign of the poetic voice's condemnation of the careless way in which humans turn plants into nourishment.

While the obliteration of edible plants for human nourishment troubles Cabral, other forms of vegetal life are recognized as the substratum that makes human culture possible. In "No papel" (On paper), from the poetry collection *Palavra na berlinda* (Word in the Spotlight, 2011), the author writes that the "word in paper / brings the aroma of the woods. / And when a book opens / it brings the breath of

[12] "trigo, ontem livre ao vento / é pão cativo no teu ventre. / O açúcar que te sabe tão doce / é dor de cana cristalizada […] / E o café aos goles é sangue / que, vampiro, engoles."

[13] Cabral's poetry collection *Ponto de cruz*, together with four other poetry books, including *Lição de Alice,* was re-published in the anthology *De déu em déu: poemas reunidos 1979-1994* (From Door to Door: Collected Poems 1979-1994) in 1998. The quotes in this article are from the anthology.

[14] In the poem "Passeio a flores" (Tour to Flores) from *Visgo da Terra* (Birdlime of the Earth, 1986), later included in *De déu em déu: poemas reunidos 1979-1994,* Cabral returns to the idea of humans as vampires, when she recalls that, as a young child, she would eat fruit growing in a cemetery that she visited with her mother. She describes her childhood self as a "sacrilegious vampire / sucking the sap of the dead / in the living blood of the fruit" ("sacrílega vampira / chupando a seiva dos mortos / no sangue vivo das frutas," *Déu*, 174).

[15] "Que fazem aqui as laranjas / emigradas das árvores? / Bem estariam nos galhos […] / em vez do agressivo prato / de onde me encaram furtivas."

[16] "Sol líquido embalado / para a sede do homem."

eucalyptus / and pines from the hill" (40).[17] Written words evoke the smell of trees, but Cabral emphasizes that vegetal beings need to perish for the body of the plant to be transformed into paper: "In the skin of the former tree / that's where the word is housed" (40).[18] In the poem "Ritual" (Ritual), part of the collection *Lição de Alice* (Alice's Lesson, 1986), she writes: "I ask the trees for forgiveness / for the paper in which I plant / words of stone" (*Déu* 239).[19] The poetic voice evinces a strong environmental consciousness in asking trees to forgive her for the use of their trunk as raw material in the production of paper that allows her to exercise her poetic craft. The contrast between the living trees and the words "of stone" in the poem suggests that human culture thrives at the expense of plant existence, and the poet is uneasy about the sacrifice of vegetal life for the sake of mere words.

In "Jardim de palavras" (Garden of Words), also from *Palavra na berlinda*, Cabral returns to the transmutation of trees into paper and allegorically presents writing as a "garden of words / virid in any season" (19).[20] In her literary garden, "[t]rees are paper in pages / where I pluck rare flowers / that have not withered for centuries / and I even dare to sow a vegetable garden / of certain weeds and tubers" (19).[21] The poet underscores the materiality of literary works and juxtaposes the trees used to produce paper to the "rare flowers" of literary language that do not wither precisely because they are unliving. Cabral inscribes herself in this literary tradition not as another creator of lofty, flowery language, but as a sower of weeds and tubers, thus pointing to a more mundane approach to poetry that is nevertheless still beholden to plants. The author is keenly aware of the fact that literature involves the transformation of plants into the material where writing is etched and the transmutation of concrete vegetal life into metaphors for literary language.

In her writings, Cabral avoids broad stroke vistas of the rainforest and its flora and focuses instead on familiar plants and human dependence upon them for the basics of existence, which implies their transformation from living entities into consumable goods.[22] The poetic voice in her texts often puts itself in the shoes of vegetal beings, approaches the world from their perspective and imagines how they would react to their exploitation by humans. Beyond the assimilation of vegetal beings through digestion and the use-value of plants in human culture, Cabral emphasizes the plantness of humanity and the porous boundaries that separate species and even different biological kingdoms.

In the poem "Comunhão/excomunhão" (Communion/Excommunication), from *Lição de Alice*, she writes: "The world outside is not that much outside. / In the

[17] "A palavra no papel / arrasta o aroma dos bosques. / E o livro ao entreabrir-se / traz hálito de eucaliptos / e pinheiros da colina".
[18] "Na pele de extinta árvore / eis que a palavra se hospeda."
[19] "Peço perdão às arvores / pelo papel em que planto / palavras de pedra."
[20] "jardim de palavras / em viço qualquer estação."
[21] "Árvores são papel em páginas / onde colho flores raras / que não murcharam por séculos / e até ouso semear horta / de certas ervas e tubérculos."
[22] As Malcolm McNee points out, "Cabral largely avoids majestic vistas and wilderness landscapes in favor of more intimately figured scenes where the proximities and limits between nature and culture are both highlighted and destabilized" (55).

garden of nostrils there are jasmine petals," "in the retinas thrive jade green trees" and "[t]here is fruit flesh in our palate" (*Déu*, 275).[23] Humans integrate plant life in their sensorial organs through smelling, seeing and tasting. The poetic voice problematizes the existence of an autonomous human "I" and highlights that vegetal existence lies the core of human experience. In "Cenário arcaico" (Arcaic Scenery) despeciation goes further as we read about a mango tree that had animal features—"Once upon a time there was an enchanted / mango tree that had the hips / back and mane of a horse" (*Déu*, 162)[24]—in a process that evokes a primordial time of ceaseless metamorphosis described in many Indigenous cosmologies.

As Vera Coleman points out, Cabral's poetry "aligns itself with many [I]ndigenous philosophies of the Amazon that recognize the fundamental continuity and shared intersubjectivity of human and nonhuman individuals" (217). The poem "Sapato tem alma" (Shoes have a Soul), from *Lição de Alice* harks back to Indigenous animism[25] when it states that: "I always suspected that things have a soul. / The nostalgic vibration of roses / and the persistence of heliconias / whispered that subtle secret. / I always told myself: There is the anima / in the flowering tureen of Spring" (*Déu*, 285).[26] The poem underscores that ensoulment cuts across all forms of existence and undergirds beings' ability to experience their world from a specific perspective. Tellingly, plants were the ones that let the poet know about the soul of things, which she recognizes in the flowering of Spring. Acknowledging their exploitative transformation into food and raw materials and her own participation in that process, the poet nevertheless regards plants as guides that point to the anima of all forms of existence. Cabral's poetry articulates a vegetal ontology, predicated on ongoing metamorphoses, that contests the mainstream Western understanding of vegetal beings as subordinated to the needs of human life and as the substratum of human culture. Instead, it showcases the positionality of plants, critical of human depredation, as an instantiation of alternative world(views).

Plants and Women's Emancipation in Dina Ananco's Poetry

Part of a new generation of Indigenous women writers that straddle traditional knowledge and modes of cultural expression and contemporary poetic language, Dina Ananco stands out for embracing different layers of her identity as an

[23] "O mundo lá fora não é tão fora assim. / No jardim das narinas há pétalas de jasmim;" "vingam nas retinas árvores verde jade"; "Há polpa de frutas no céu de nossa boca."
[24] "Era uma vez a mangueira / encantada, tinha ancas / lombo e crinas de cavalo."
[25] Anthropologist Philippe Descola considers that, for Amazonian animist peoples, all forms of existence share the same culture or interiority and distinguish themselves only through their physical appearance (121-22). Viveiros de Castro's perpectivism is therefore a form of animism.
[26] "Sempre suspeitei da alma das coisas. / A nostálgica vibração das rosas / e a persistência das helicônias / me sussurravam esse sutil segredo. / Sempre me disse: Lá está a anima / na terrina florida da primavera."

Amazonian Wampis/Awajun author who now lives in the capital of Peru.[27] Her poetry collection *Sanchiu* is dedicated to her Wampis grandmother, the name of whom gives the book its title and who figures on the cover of the volume. As Ananco states in an interview: "[a]ll I know about the history of our ancestors and oral culture is thanks to my grandmother. My grandmother told me about the great myths of our ancestors and also her personal stories. […] All that vast oral culture […] served as my inspiration for creating my book" ("Entrevista").[28] The traces of the poet's Indigenous heritage impact the language, structure and topics addressed in *Sanchiu* and the treatment of plants in the author's work.

Ananco's poetry is written in an Indigenous language, Wampis, and then translated into Spanish by the author. The structure of the Spanish language bears traces of the translation, with the usual sentence structure often inverted. Beyond the clear influence of an Indigenous language in the collection, Gonzalo Espino highlights the text's indebtedness to the structure of Indigenous chants, such as the Wampis and Awajun *anen* songs performed in communal rituals ("Dina Ananco"). Indigenous deities such as the females Nunkui, connected to fertility, and Tskunki, a mermaid, and the male Tijai, who inhabits the hills, feature prominently in the poems, which also emphasize the Wampis and Awajun connection to vegetal beings.

In the poem "Guardianes del Bosque" (Guardians of the Forest) for instance, Ananco mentions her community's close ties to the forest: "We, the ones from the forest / like a snake […] / Respecting the forest / dialoguing with plants, we live" (95).[29] Through the use of a collective "we"—the line "We, the ones from the forest" is repeated twice in the short poem—Ananco identifies with her community of origin, characterized by its intimate ties to plant life. Indigenous peoples are not only guardians who take care of and respect their territory, but they are also "of the forest," which points to an indistinction between more than humans and humans, who do not see themselves as separate from the place where they live. The poem signals that existence in the rainforest depends upon dialogue with more than human beings, especially plants, which are also used for healing: "We take plants […] to heal ourselves" (95).[30] The poem goes on to state that "[w]e like to live in harmony" (95),[31] pointing both to a balanced link to other beings and, obliquely, to the tense relationship between Amazonian Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous peoples.[32]

[27] Ananco was born to a Wampis mother and a Awajun father but lived most of her life with her mother's side of the family. She moved to Lima, where she completed a BA and MA in Literature and where she works as a translator and interpreter.

[28] "Todo lo que conozco sobre la historia de nuestros ancestros y la cultura oral es gracias a mi abuela. Mi abuelita me contaba sobre los grandes mitos de nuestros ancestros y también sus historias personales. […] Toda esta vasta cultura oral […] me sirvió de inspiración para la construcción de mi libro."

[29] "Nosotros los del bosque, / como una serpiente, […] / Respectando el bosque / Dialogando con las plantas, vivimos."

[30] "A las plantas […] llevamos para curarnos."

[31] "Nos gusta vivir en armonía."

[32] The poem goes on to state that the perception of Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous society as aggressive is erroneous: "We of the forest / as if we waited for someone / with our spears in our hand

While many poems from *Sanchiu* are beholden to Wampis and Awajun tradition, Indigenous topics and forms coexist with elements from Western culture in shaping the singular voice of the author (Sánchez 6; Espino and Mamani 67). One of the most analyzed poems of the collection, "No sé ustedes" (I Don't Know about You), thematizes the contradictions of embodying a plurality of identities. The poetic voice wears traditional Wampis facial painting and adornments, which brings her recognition on social media: "I am Wampis / Oh my god! Arutmarua […] / I take pictures for my Facebook / In less than 1 hour I have 5 thousand likes" (29).[33] [34] The text alludes to the increasing acceptance of Indigenous peoples within mainstream Latin American circles, perhaps due to the growing visibility of Indigenous struggles over the past decades. Still, the praise of indigeneity is portrayed as shallow in the text, based only on appearance and translated into Facebook likes.

In another section of the same poem, we read: "I need the lens to exoticize me in the foreground" (31),[35] showing that Ananco is fully conscious of the exoticization that goes hand in hand with the praise of Indigenous culture. This leads the author to distance herself from Wampis roots—"Suddenly I am not myself / I feel distant from my ancestors" (29)[36]—and to a change to Western attire, including high heels, red dress and shiny earrings, which again proves popular in social media: "I take pictures and publish them in my Instagram / Everyone compliments me / I have 5 thousand likes" (31).[37] Within the superficiality of multiculturalism celebrated in social media, identities seem interchangeable. Still, rather than criticizing the insubstantiality of social media likes, the poet embraces her "multiple identity" ("identidad multiple," 33): "I don't know about you / But I don't know myself / And I prefer it that way / To be from everywhere" (33).[38] [39] The poem certainly celebrates Ananco's Indigenous roots, but it presents these as only a part of her being and asserts her right to navigate the various facets of her identity. While Ananco's texts on plants reflect her cultural heritage as an Indigenous woman, she emphasizes that she is also intimately conversant with contemporary Western culture.

The poet's refusal to essentialize her indigeneity led some critics to refer to her writing as an embodiment of a postindigenous condition that goes beyond

/ never keep watch of the path / the way we are usually seen" ("Nosotros del bosque / como si esperásemos a alguien / con la lanza en la mano / nunca vigilamos el camino / como nos suelen ver," 95).

[33] "Soy wampis / *¡Oh, my god!* Arutmarua […] / Me tomo fotos para mi Facebook / En menos de 1hora tengo 5 mil *likes*."

[34] Curiously, The English language is used in the Spanish translation, though not in the Wampis original.

[35] "Necesito que ese lente me exotice en primera plana."

[36] "De pronto no soy yo, / Me siento lejana a mis ancestros."

[37] "Me tomo fotos y publico en mi Instagram / Todos me piropean / Tengo 5 mil *likes.*"

[38] "No sé ustedes, / pero yo no me conozco / Y me prefiero así / Ser de todas partes."

[39] The poem "Transición" (Transition) also addresses the quandaries of identity. It stages a dialogue between the poet and a foreign woman who tells her that she should go back to her own, meaning her Indigenous community of origin. In response, the poet claims her multiple belongings as a Wampis and Awajun woman who lives in Peru's capital. She then challenges the foreign woman for pretending to know her, in a criticism of the essentialization of Indigenous subjects by non-Indigenous peoples, and shines the light on her interlocutor: "Do you by any chance ask yourself, playful foreign woman, / What I think about you?" ("Te preguntas acaso gringa vacilona / ¿Qué pienso yo de ti?" 87).

stereotypes of what an Indigenous person should be and how Indigenous communities and culture should be represented (Cabel, Lis and Arabaiza 126, 129). While I find the notion of postindigeneity problematic, in that it suggests an overcoming of Indigenous ways of being that threatens to erase Indigenous presence in Latin American cultural and political spheres, Ananco's poetry does point to an Indigenous subjectivity that includes urban and even globalized forms of belonging. The author's condemnation of the more patriarchal aspects of Wampis and Awajun tradition, which she comments upon by highlighting women's connection to plants, testifies to her ability to reflect critically upon some aspects of Indigenous culture, while praising her community's ties to more-than-human existence.

Ananco decries Indigenous precepts that bar women from having access to knowledge. In "Mujer" (Woman) she denounces ready-made notions about women held by some Indigenous and non-Indigenous men. The poetic voice addresses a man and states accusingly: "'A woman cannot study because she gets pregnant,' you usually say" (41).[40] The author claims her right to learn and to study, but she goes beyond that and deplores the belittlement of women's wisdom. In "Palabra del hombre wampis" (Word of a Wampis Man) she critically reproduces caricatures of women uttered by Wampis men: "Women are like lice / They talk baselessly / Don't be like a woman / […] Be a man, the Wampis usually say, also the Awajun" (97).[41] Such misrepresentations of womanhood can, in the worst cases, lead to violence against women, as depicted in "Mujer": "But you throw your wife on the floor and kick her / […] You hit her" (41-43).[42]

The poet challenges the patriarchal values prevalent in some quarters of Wampis and Awajun communities (Pau 380) and, at the same time, highlights the centrality of women in Indigenous culture. "Mujer" list several women deities, including the above-mentioned Nunkui and Tsunkui. About Nunkui, for instance, the poem states: "*Nunkui* is the mother earth / Remember, *Nunkui* is a woman / […] She has powerful ideas" (41).[43] The poet underlines the contradiction of worshipping women goddesses while debasing actual women and draws parallels between the goddess of the earth and Wampis and Awajun women, who are the ones responsible for tending plants in their communities. The poem "Soy mujer y puedo" (I am a Woman and I Can) enumerates the strengths of women: "I can walk, I can fly, / I can flow like water and pamper life, / yes, I can" (15).[44] The constant repetition of "I can" in the poem signals women's ability to overcome adversity and forge their own path.

In several of Ananco's texts, women are praised for their strong connection to the land and for their ability to cultivate and care for plants. Significantly, in Wampis and Awajun communities the *anen* about agriculture are sung exclusively by women (Espino and Mamani 64). In keeping with her "multiple identity," the writer both

[40] "'La mujer no puede estudiar porque se embaraza,' sueles decir."
[41] "Las mujeres son come [sic] piojos / Hablan sin fundamento / No seas como una mujer / […] Sé hombre, suelen decir los wampis, los awajun también."
[42] "Pero arrojas a tu esposa al suelo y la pateas / […] Le pegas."
[43] "*Nunkui* es la madre tierra […] / Recuerda, *Nunkui* es mujer / […] Posee ideas poderosas."
[44] "Puedo caminar, puedo volar, / puedo fluir como el agua y mimar la vida / sí, puedo."

acknowledges women's ties to plants and, engaging a feminist outlook, resignifies this traditional bond not as a mark of passivity, as it has often been cast in Western culture,[45] but as an argument for women's empowerment. The author underscores women's ability to cultivate plants and their intimate relationship with vegetal beings as an advantageous, distinctive trait, combining both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

"Supich" (Hard Yuca) addresses female identification with a specific plant, as the poetic voice beings by stating: "I feel *supich*" ("Me siento *supich*," 89). The reason for this feeling is possibly the fact that, as the glossary explains, *supich* is hard yuca, which cannot be cooked and eaten. A hard plant that is not easily turned into a commodity to be consumed is a fitting vegetal correlative to Ananco, who refuses to be pigeonholed into her identity as Indigenous, as a woman or as a city-dweller. "Why can we now not turn into *supich*?" ("¿Por qué ahora no podemos convertirnos en *supich*?" 89), the poem asks rhetorically, only to end with a renewed statement of allegiance to the mode of being of the plant: "Today I feel *supich*" ("En este día me siento *supich*," 89).

Beyond identification with a specific plant, we also find in Ananco's poetry the desire to blur the boundaries between plants and humans by speculating about vegetal life's behavior if it had human features. The poem "La caoba" (Mahogany) bemoans the rootedness of a mahogany tree that makes it vulnerable to violence: "Condemned to remain still, / […] They kick its trunk without misgivings / the ornate roots groan / sliding imperceptible tears. / Its body wiggles / dodging the blade of a machete" (65-67).[46] Tied to a place, the tree can only wiggle to avoid cuts and is exposed to blows that are a sign of humans' disregard for vegetal suffering. The tree is personified and imbued with feelings: it fears "[t]he casual blow of humans with a chainsaw" (67)[47] that would mindlessly cut it down. Its groans and cries of pain draw attention to the distress of vegetal life by making it perceptible for humans. In another section, the poetic voice wonders: "What would it do if it had feet and not roots? If it had hands and not branches?" (65).[48] The questions go unanswered but invite readers to see the world from the perspective of the plant and imagine what it might do if its body were more human-like.

In "Kion" (Ginger) Ananco describes ginger by comparing the body of the plant to human form, underlining the proximity between human and more-than-human corporeality (Pau 371). While ginger has no voice, tongue, hands and heart, it is able to perform many of the tasks humans accomplish using those organs: it offers advice, cures people and leaves them nostalgic (63). The poem states: "Even though it has nothing, it surprises us" (63)[49] precisely because humans do not always expect plants to display complex forms of behavior. The text evokes the fact, now widely recognized

[45] See Merchant and Plumwood passim.
[46] "Condenado a permanecer quieto, / […] Patean el tronco sin recelo, / las raíces ornamentadas gimen / deslizando lágrimas imperceptibles. / Su cuerpo se contonea / esquivando el filo del machete."
[47] "El golpe casual del hombre con una motosierra."
[48] "¿qué haría si tuviera pies y no raíces? ¿si tuviera manos y no ramas?"
[49] "Pese ano tener nada, nos espanta."

in biology, that plants are capable of communicating both with one another, with fungi and with human and non-human animals. In return for its curative properties, the poem advises humans to protect the plant: "Take good care of it / Defending it / dreaming of it, singing *anen* to it" (63).[50] Women, tasked with cultivating plants in Wampis/Awaju culture, tend them almost in the same way as they would take care of a child, which highlights the relations of kinship between human and more-than-human beings.

In her writings, Ananco claims her enduring ties to her Indigenous community of origin, at the same time as she asserts her urban, globalized, female identity. She underscores Indigenous women's close connection to plants as an emancipatory gesture, pushing against patriarchal views of femininity by showing that, through their knowledge of vegetal cultivation and of plants' medicinal properties, women provide the basis for communal life in Amazonia.

The ontological turn, inspired by Amazonian ethnology, calls for a relativization of Western scientific and philosophical precepts and acknowledges not merely a multiplicity of perspectives on the world, but the existence of different worlds. Contemporary Amazonian women's poetry on plants showcases these other worlds, where more-than-human beings take center-stage. Cabral's texts reflect upon human indebtedness to vegetal beings for nourishment and for providing the material basis for human culture, at the same time as she speculates about human/plant identification. While Cabral takes the Western tradition as a point of departure and then incorporates some aspects of Amazonian Indigenous and riverine thought into her texts, Ananco threads the inverse path. She grounds her writings on the teachings of her Indigenous community of origin, but claims her multiple identities as Indigenous, as city-dweller and as a woman. In her poetry, she leverages Indigenous women's special connection to plant cultivation as an argument for female empowerment. Both authors emphasize the ubiquitous presence of vegetal life in Amazonian existence and its significance for both Indigenous and non-indigenous Amazonian cultures.

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[50] "Cuídalo bien / Mezquinándolo, soñándolo, cantándole el *anen*."

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Four-Decade Studies of Ecocriticism and Beyond—Retrospect and Prospect: An Interview with Professor Scott Slovic

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Abstract

Scott Slovic, University Distinguished Professor of Environmental Humanities at the University of Idaho in the United States, was the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) from 1992 to 1995, and he edited *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, the major journal in the field of ecocriticism from 1995 to 2020. After nearly forty years of studying ecocriticism, he retired from his full-time faculty position at the end of 2023 and is now a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. In this interview, Slovic looks back at his ecocritical studies in the past four decades, summarizes his important contributions, expounds his future research plan clarifying his going back to ecocritical studies from empirical perspectives which he did as a young professor and focusing on the empirical ecocriticism, a newly emerging subfield of ecocriticism, on the new journey. He made incisive comments on empirical ecocriticism, illustrating the implication of empirical ecocriticism, the necessity and significance, the methodology and strategy of having empirical ecocritical studies.

Keywords: Scott Slovic, retrospect and prospect, empirical ecocriticism.

Resumen

Scott Slovic, profesor distinguido de Humanidades Ambientales en la Universidad de Idaho en los Estados Unidos, fue el primer presidente de la Asociación para el Estudio de la Literatura y el Medio Ambiente (ASLE) desde 1992 hasta 1995, y editó *ISLE: Estudios Interdisciplinarios en Literatura y Medio Ambiente*, la principal revista en el campo de la ecocrítica, desde 1995 hasta 2020. Tras casi cuarenta años estudiando la ecocrítica, se jubiló a finales de 2023 de su puesto como profesor universitario y ahora es investigador senior en el Oregon Research Institute. En esta entrevista, Slovic echa la vista atrás para explorar sus estudios de ecocrítica de las últimas cuatro décadas, resumiendo sus importantes aportaciones, y expone su plan de investigación futuro aclarando que vuelve a los estudios ecocríticos desde perspectivas empíricas que ya hizo en su juventud y centrándose, en este nuevo viaje, en la ecocrítica empírica, un nuevo campo emergente dentro de la ecocrítica. Hizo comentarios incisivos sobre la ecocrítica empírica, ilustrando las implicaciones de la misma, su necesidad e importancia, la metodolocía y la estrategia de contar con estudios ecocríticos empiricos.

Palabras clave: Scott Slovic, retrospectiva y perspectiva, ecocrítica empírica.

I: *Hi, Professor Slovic, you have been exploring the field of ecocriticism for nearly 40 years, and you always try to promote and trigger the development of ecocriticism. Can you summarize your decades of study as an ecocritic briefly and do you have any plans for your future research?*

Scott Slovic: With regard to your request that I "summarize" my nearly four decades of work in the field of ecocriticism, it's obviously impossible for me to briefly capture everything I've learned and experienced during this extremely transformative period in the field, the final decades of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first. When I began doing my research as an ecocritic, while I was still a doctoral student in the 1980s, we did not even have a name for this field—William Rueckert's term "ecocriticism," coined in 1978, was not widely known until Cheryll Glotfelty began using it in the late 1980s and then she and Harold Fromm reprinted Rueckert's essay in their 1996 book *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

I began my work in this field as a rather traditional "textual critic," selecting literary works that I found to be beautiful and interesting and not yet thoroughly studied by other scholars—and then interpreting the meaning of those works by myself, alluding to what other scholars had said about these works and certain literary traditions. Later, as I became more familiar with the trends and possibilities in environmental literary studies, I found myself writing more theoretical and historical articles and books, attempting to chart new directions and identify significant patterns.

Over the course of my decades of working in this field, I've seen numerous micro-disciplines emerge—from environmental justice ecocriticism to material ecocriticism—and I guess I've dabbled in many of these subfields myself while working on various lectures and articles and book chapters, but much of my own work has been in the role of providing a bird's-eye view of the field, describing the larger trends or "waves" as I've begun to recognize them and providing some theoretical language to try to support directions I've felt would be fruitful for colleagues and for my own work.

I've been especially gratified to see the interest in ecocriticism expand to many regions of the world—of course I recognize that there were already local versions of ecocriticism in particular areas, such as tinai-focused scholarship in southern India, but ecocriticism was still a rather "Western" school of thought in the 1980s. This is no longer the case. Although North America and Europe remain energetic places for ecocritical innovation, I can clearly see a lot of important work coming out of East and South Asia, Latin America, various regions of Africa, certain Mediterranean countries, and so forth. The fact that we have new variants (to use a pandemic-like term) of ecocriticism developing, such as empirical ecocriticism, is a sign to me that the field is vibrant and healthy and, in its own way, optimistic as it seeks to contribute to society's efforts to tackle very difficult challenges, such as effectively communicating about global climate change and the plight of many human and animal communities throughout the world.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

More recently I have been involved in trying to bring together ecocriticism with other significant disciplines—such as environmental aesthetics, environmental communication studies, and the medical humanities—in pursuit of new meta-disciplines (or what I sometimes call "meta-meta-disciplines") that aim to use the vocabularies and methodologies of multiple fields in order to address not only textual issues but actual cultural and psychological and environmental challenges we face in the twenty-first century. I often find that we need to work outside of our narrow academic fields, hand in hand with sister disciplines, if we genuinely wish to have a chance to come up with useful approaches to "real-world problems."

I have long had an interest in learning how environmental texts actually achieve their effects on audiences and what these effects really are. Like many humanities scholars, my earlier work has usually involved sitting by myself with a text, trying to determine how I felt about the text and what I was learning from that text. This kind of solitary research is what literary critics and other humanities scholars have traditionally done. But it has also been clear to me that I've been working with a strikingly small pool of research subjects—namely, myself! In the social sciences, in order to have a reliable number (N) of subjects, you need as large a group of respondents to an experiment as possible, certainly many more people than a single respondent. I actually began doing some early empirical research projects with large numbers of experimental subjects back in the early 1990s when I was a young professor, teaching lecture courses with around 200 students; I conducted a few studies in which I asked my students to respond to questionnaires about environmental attitudes before they read certain literary works and after they read these works and heard me lecture about them. I referred to these projects many years ago as "the efficacy of eco-teaching" because I wanted to understand whether my teaching of environmental texts was actually making a difference in how my students thought about the world. However, I felt that these early studies did not produce very useful data, so I never wrote up the projects and published my findings.

In the past ten years or so, a new subfield of ecocriticism known as "empirical ecocriticism" has been developed, using social science methodologies to determine how audiences are responding to various kinds of environmental texts. I have recently been appointed as a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon, where my father and some of his colleagues in the field of psychology are also working. In the coming years, I expect to do more and more empirical projects, collaborating with my father and other psychologists, to try to explain more authoritatively than we've been able to do in the past the ways that different kinds of texts—such as climate fiction, narratives of place-based environmental values, texts that present scientific warnings about environmental disaster, and pandemic-related stories—reach readers (and audiences for other kinds of media, including film and music) and help such audiences to think deeply about important issues.

So my future work is likely to be increasingly related to the field of interdisciplinary empirical ecocriticism, and I also expect to continue writing shorter essays (opinion essays or "op-eds" and blog essays for websites) about these

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

empirical studies, with the intention of reaching not only scholarly audiences but the general public and societal leaders who might take an interest in such work and find the academic discoveries useful, even if they don't want to read the full research papers in technical journals or scholarly books. This effort to reach new audiences and larger audiences is what I often call "going public," and I feel this is a very important trend in ecocriticism and the larger field of the environmental humanities, which includes ecocriticism.

I: *As we know, you have always been exploring and guiding the field of ecocriticism in the past four decades. What do you think are your important contributions to ecocriticism and the environmental humanities?*

SS: This is a difficult question and one that I actually don't think about very much—even as I approach my retirement from full-time teaching after thirty-eight years, I am looking ahead to my next projects, not really dwelling on what I've already done. However, I do think it could be interesting to reflect briefly on what I've tried to do over the course of the past several decades.

I've worked on so many different aspects of my field that it's not easy to summarize my primary contributions. The parable of the six blind men and the elephant comes to mind because of the way each man touched a different part of the elephant—the ears, the trunk, the tusks, the legs, the tail, and so forth, so they each claimed that the elephant was something very different than what the others perceived. My own career has included substantial efforts as an organizer and administrator within (and beyond) the field of ecocriticism, as a teacher, as a traveling scholar working to engage with new communities of colleagues and students in many parts of the world, as a researcher in various subfields of ecocriticism, as an editor of books and journals, and as a public intellectual working to communicate with audiences outside of academia. All of these have been important aspects of my work, it seems to me.

As you know, I spent a significant part of my early career helping to conceptualize and manage the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which was officially established in the United States in October 1992. I served as the founding president from 1992 to 1995, helping to create the advisory board, the organizational bylaws, and a functioning administrative structure (including a process of leadership succession) and also to grow the initial membership (which was 54) to well over a thousand members. Over the years I have also tried to support colleagues in many other parts of the world who were interested in creating their own ASLE branches. Often, I've traveled to these countries or regions to attend planning meetings and special events at which the new branches were presented to the members—I've done this in Japan, Malaysia, Latin America (Argentina and Brazil), Taiwan (China), India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

As a scholar, I started my career by publishing books and articles about environmental aspects of American literature and culture—the Thoreauvian tradition, you could say. I was especially interested in the psychological aspects of

 ISSN 2171-9594

American environmental literature, such as how such texts depict and examine human consciousness of the more-than-human world and how literary texts (and other kinds of cultural texts) might work to communicate environmental information and raise readers' awareness of environmental issues. This was the focus of my first book, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992), and in a sense this has been an ongoing theme in much of my research for the following decades—how literature and art communicate to audiences and raise awareness (or fail to raise awareness). I continue to study this kind of topic today, although at this point, I am planning to use more empirical approaches, drawing from the methodologies of the social sciences, to design studies that test audience responses to environmental texts through experiments of various kinds. I guess you could say that my interest in literature as literature has evolved into an interest in how literature and many other forms of cultural expression function as examples of environmental communication, not simply as art. My interest in bringing together ecocriticism and communication studies is reflected in the 2019 collection I edited with my Indian colleagues Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran—*The Routledge Handbook to Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*.

Over the years, up to now, I have written, edited, or coedited thirty-one books—and published more than 300 articles, interviews, forewords and afterwords, and reviews, among other miscellaneous things. It would be a big challenge to summarize all of this. But I can say that major categories of this work include environmental writing textbooks, collections devoted to regional literature (especially in the desert Southwest of the United States), regionally focused collection of international ecocriticism (Japan, Turkey, India), interdisciplinary projects (bringing ecocriticism into conversation with such fields as psychology, communication studies, and the medical humanities), historical and theoretical explanations of key phases and ideas in ecocriticism, and forays into environmental activism.

For most of my career, I have also been working as an editor of important publications in the field, beginning with *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* in the early 1990s (which later became *ASLE News*, the newsletter of the organization ASLE), and then for a twenty-five-year period from 1995 to 2020 I was the editor-in-chief of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (the central journal in the field of ecocriticism), for which I edited more than 70 issues, writing Editor's Notes for each issue, trying to describe the important new directions in the field. I also edited the book series *Environmental Arts and Humanities* for the University of Nevada Press and *The Credo Series for Milkweed Editions* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and from 2017 to the present I have co-edited *Routledge Studies in World Literatures* and the *Environment and Routledge Environmental Humanities* for the prominent British academic publisher Routledge. Through all of these years, I have served as a guest editor of fifteen special issues of journals in different parts of the world (on topics ranging from ecocritical theory to water literature, desert literature, international environmental literature, and trees in

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

literature) and on more than twenty editorial boards for various journals. In 2015, after my father and I published our book on the psychological and environmental humanities aspects of human sensitivity and insensitivity to information about humanitarian and environmental challenges, *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*, we created the website www.arithmeticofcompassion.org, and I have served as a contributing editor for that website, too, for nearly a decade now. So editorial work has been a key—and highly visible—aspect of my career.

I could go on and on about various specific aspects of my work, but that would be boring. Perhaps I should conclude this trip down memory lane by saying that throughout all of my other activities, I have always been working as a teacher, since my time as a graduate student at Brown University in the mid-1980s. Even during my research sabbaticals, I have often found myself doing some guest teaching at other universities—in addition to my primary affiliations with Texas State University, the University of Nevada-Reno, and the University of Idaho in the United States, I have been a guest professor for periods ranging from a week to a full year at nearly thirty universities in many different countries. Often, I have taught or offered extensive lecture series at Chinese universities, such as the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (where I was a Fulbright Visiting Professor in 2006 during my first visit to China), Central China Normal University, Shandong University, Tsinghua University, and most recently the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, as you know. In addition to my formal classroom teaching, I have spent a lot of time and energy mentoring individual students at my home and host universities and also random students who contact me via email or meet me at conferences and ask for guidance with their theses or other projects. I have often tried to mentor my colleagues from many different countries, too, offering them advice about their research and teaching and their efforts to create communities of ecocritics in their own countries.

Another aspect of this mentorship and work to help shape the development of ecocriticism and related fields has been my work as a reviewer of article and book manuscripts for journals and publishers in many different countries—I have reviewed hundreds of manuscripts throughout the years, writing reports (often anonymously) that I hope have helped my colleagues improve their own research projects before publishing new scholarship in the field. And I have frequently performed external evaluations of student theses, faculty promotion cases, and entire academic programs—usually 10-15 such evaluations per year—which I also consider to be an important way of contributing to the academic community, often (but not always) within my particular discipline. In the United States, I have often been a member of external review committees for environmental studies programs at colleges and universities, representing the humanities perspective in these review processes which also involve colleagues from the social and natural sciences. A lot of this work has been relatively invisible (indeed many of my reviews have been anonymous), but it takes quite a bit of time and it's a powerful way of contributing to the robustness of

 ISSN 2171-9594

my field. It is also, in many cases, a form of invisible teaching—not by standing in front of a class but by providing insights and suggestions to colleagues and students through the process of blind peer review.

This is probably much more detail than you wanted when you asked your question! I think you can see how a blind man encountering any aspect of my work—my administration, my editing, my teaching, my research—might think this one thing is who Scott Slovic is and what he's devoted his time to. But the reality is I've been quite active in a lot of different areas—and I expect to continue to do so for many years to come, though perhaps reducing the amount of classroom teaching (and grading of student papers) when I retire from the University of Idaho at the end of 2023 to become a full-time senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, where I'll join a team of scholars that will include my father, psychologist Paul Slovic, who is still fully engaged with his own research at age 85.

I: *Thank you so much, Professor Slovic. You are surely one of the most important participants, pioneers, and torchbearers in the field of ecocriticism. As for your future work, it is very interesting to know that you will be moving more and more in the empirical direction in the coming years. Empirical ecocriticism is an emerging field in recent years. How do you understand or define empirical ecocriticism?*

SS: Simply put, empirical ecocriticism is an approach to environmental texts that involves adapting research methodologies from the social sciences as a way of gathering data—"empirical data"—about how audiences respond to these texts and how texts function linguistically. Most current work in empirical ecocriticism focuses on audiences responses, and this information is gathered by way of experiments that use survey questionnaires (often presented to experimental subjects online through such devices as Amazon Turk).

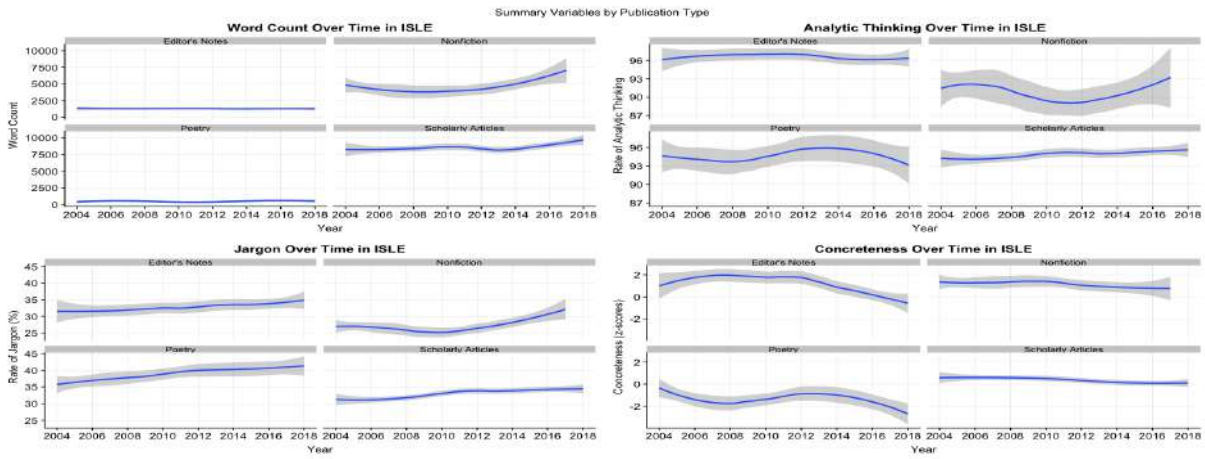
For the recent book titled *Empirical Ecocriticism* (2023), I worked with a colleague in communication studies named David Markowitz to conduct an automated text analysis of fifteen years' worth of journal issues in the field of ecocriticism in order to try to trace the development of ecocritical language. We used something called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (abbreviated as LIWC), which is a tool from the field of computational linguistics, in order to detect tendencies related to wordiness, analytic thinking, jargon (or highly technical language), and concreteness (the opposite of abstract theoretical thinking) in ecocritical articles that had appeared in the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* during the years 2004 to 2018 (I served as editor-in-chief of this journal, the central journal in the field, from 1995 to 2020). So, while most forms of current empirical ecocriticism seem to focus on studying audience responses to texts, there are also other approaches, such as the computational linguistics approach I've just described.

I: *You've just offered a short introduction to your paper "Tracing the Language of Ecocriticism Insights from an Automated Text Analysis of* ISLE: Interdisciplinary

Studies in Literature and Environment" *from the book* Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*, co-edited by Alex Weik von Mossner, W. P. Malecki and Frank Hakemulder, published in August 2023. Can you share something about what you discovered about the language of ecocriticism by using this computational linguistics methodology?*

SS: Although scholars have been analyzing environmental texts for many decades, the term "ecocriticism" was first used by American scholar William Rueckert in 1978 and the discipline became a formal and increasingly widespread trend in the humanities only in the 1990s, after the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was started. So, this is a relatively new field. During the time period emphasized in this article—2004 to 2018, a fifteen-year period—there were interesting "growing pains" in the field, especially in North America and Europe. One of the key aspects of this growing process was the question of whether or not ecocriticism should be "theoretical," whether scholars should be developing a new vocabulary and a new kind of philosophical thinking to explain environmental texts and human beings' interactions with the nonhuman world.

By simply paying attention to the kinds of books and articles that were being published in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we might have the vague sense that ecocriticism was becoming more "sophisticated" and was developing its identity as a discipline, but we might not have a lot of easily accessible proof of this, aside from examples of individual articles. But by taking many textual examples and running them through a linguistic analysis program, we can gather a lot of data quickly and actually "see" the developmental process in front of our eyes. For the article that we published in *Empirical Ecocriticism*, David Markowitz and I presented both statistical information about subtle linguistic changes that we observed from the 713 scholarly articles, poems, nonfiction essays, and Editor's Notes that we exampled from the journal *ISLE*, but we also produced graphs that displayed the changes. Below is an example of one of these graphs, summarizing linguistic changes over time by publication type (that is, by genre).



I am especially interested in what these graphs show regarding the scholarly articles because these are the most direct representations of ecocritical studies during this time period. You can see that these articles became slightly longer (more words),

showed a slight increase in analytic thinking (represented by the use of "function words" such as articles, prepositions, and pronouns), presented more technical language or jargon, and were less concrete (in other words, more abstract). All of these linguistic indicators tend to corroborate my own feeling as a scholar and as the editor-in-chief of the journal during this time period that the field was becoming more mature and more theoretically sophisticated than it was in the 1980s and '90s when it was just beginning to develop.

It's possible that we did not really need to do this kind of empirical textual analysis in order to confirm the feeling that ecocriticism was evolving into a mature discipline in the early 2000s, but it is interesting to note that such a computer analysis can help us detect subtle changes in ecocritical language during a time period when many scholars were debating about the pros and cons of ecocritical theory and when many people were actually trying to create new language or jargon—such as ecohorror, ecophobia, queer ecopoetics, slow violence, transcorporeality, liminality, migrant ecologies, and many other terms—that would help them capture important ideas relevant to environmental texts and contemporary ecological and cultural phenomena. In the case of this particular study, I think the empirical approach provided confirmation of what I already believed was happening in the field of ecocriticism, not necessarily entirely new ideas that had not occurred to me.

I: *You have been working on many subfields of ecocriticism in the past decades. Why do you choose or focus on empirical ecocriticism in your future work?*

SS: I have actually been interested in using empirical approaches to understand how environmental texts affect audiences for many years, dating all the way back to the 1990s, as I mentioned above. This is not an entirely new idea of mine. I guess it just seems important to me that we try to use every possible tool to understand more deeply and precisely how people react to various kinds of communication strategies. We can determine this to a certain extent by reading books, watching films, and experiencing other kinds of texts ourselves, but I think we can gather much more authoritative data if we try to adapt empirical techniques from the social sciences to our study of environmental communication.

After teaching in the environmental humanities since the mid-1980s when I was a postgraduate student, I will be retiring at the end of 2023 from my full-time faculty position at the University of Idaho and taking on a new position as "senior scientist" as a social science research institute called the Oregon Research Institute, where my father and his team of colleagues in the field of psychology also work. (My father is now 85 years old but is still very active with his research and eager to pursue new projects.) I will now devote myself to many new research projects and will continue to travel around the world to give lectures and teach short courses, but I will mostly be focused on conducting new research. This seems like an ideal time for me to turn energetically toward empirical ecocriticism, which is now gaining a lot of attention in the international scholarly community and which is something I have long wanted to do.

 ISSN 2171-9594

In recent years I have written traditional, non-empirical articles about the potential of pandemic fiction to help readers become more "vigilant" about their own vulnerability due to various kinds of risky situations (such as disease) and about the weaknesses of the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity (a co-authored series of articles by major natural scientists from around the world in response to global climate change), but I would like to try to do some of these studies again in a more empirical way. I want to test experimental subjects' responses to pandemic texts and see if they actually develop a kind of sensitivity to their own "precarity" (their potential exposure to dangerous diseases) that could help them also be more sensitive to the risk of environmental damage caused by climate change, etc. And I want to see what kinds of language function most effectively as warnings to people of existential risk, such as climate change and extinction. I think the World Scientists' warnings so far are rather boring, too full of data and information and not experiential/emotional enough—but I think I need to collect data on whether other readers also find these articles boring and what kinds of communication strategies might be more powerful. So, the desire to conduct these kinds of projects is what's drawing me in the empirical direction these days.

I will be applying for research grants from the U.S. government and from private foundations to support the work I hope to do in the future, as some money is often needed to pay research subjects and to pay for data analysis when one does empirical work.

I: *Empirical ecocriticism has renewed the paradigm of literary studies by adopting the methodologies of the social sciences. However, some argue that this trend implies the dissolution of the "humanities," and that its unique methodology leads it to be detached from literary studies. How do you see the relationship between empirical ecocriticism and traditional ecological literary studies?*

SS: I believe there will always continue to be people who are devoted to "traditional ecological literary studies," whatever that might mean. There will always be individual scholars who read texts with imagination and insight and then report their understanding of the "meaning" of these texts based on personal interpretation. I love this kind of scholarship, too, and I greatly enjoy and benefit from reading books and articles that demonstrate this kind of approach, from various theoretical perspectives.

However, I also believe we benefit a lot from being open to new theories and new methodologies, regardless of what academic discipline we're in. I think the social scientists and natural sciences could probably benefit from being more engaged with some of the aspects of the humanities, such as using narrative to understand how the scientists are personally involved in the subjects they're studying. Also, the linguistic aspects of understanding cognitive processes (how we think) and how we communicate scientific information are closely related to some aspects of what I want to understand as a humanities scholar. It simply makes sense that we find ways to collaborate across our disciplinary boundaries and expand the possibilities of our inter-related fields.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

When I started as an undergraduate, I actually thought I wanted to study psychology. Remember, I grew up with a father who was a very famous psychologist—Paul Slovic, one of the founders of modern decision-making science and the study of risk perception—so I was quite familiar with certain aspects of psychology from talking with my father about his research even when I was very young. I used to read (and help to edit) his research manuscripts when I was twelve or thirteen years old. But when I went to Stanford University as an undergraduate, I found that I was especially excited by my literature classes and was able to go immediately into the most advanced postgraduate classes without needing to take a lot of basic introductory classes, so that's why I ended up as a literature major, an English major. Still, I have always had a fascination with psychology and have often used psychological ideas in my ecocritical work, such as the focus on "awareness" in my Ph.D. dissertation, which became my first book, titled *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992). I have found that psychological ideas have been very helpful when I have tried to read environmental texts in innovative ways, and I don't think gathering data from empirical studies will somehow prevent me from continuing to interpret the patterns I notice in the texts themselves.

In fact, I plan to continue writing traditional literary studies that emphasize textual interpretation and historical and theoretical analysis in addition to doing new kinds of empirical projects. I expect that other empirical ecocritics will also continue doing the more traditional work even as they experiment with some new interdisciplinary methodologies.

I: *What do you think of the necessity and significance of conducting empirical ecocriticism studies in the epoch of the Anthropocene?*

SS: As I understand it, the Anthropocene is a time of environmental crisis. The idea that humans have fundamentally altered the physical nature of the planet—that we have become a kind of "geological force"—is not simply a neutral physical reality. This is a deeply worrisome phenomenon, one that threatens the potential of humans to continue safely and comfortably inhabiting the earth. In fact, I believe the Sixth Mega-Extinction, the process of losing thousands of species of plants and animals across the planet, is a project of human behavior—in other words, the rampant extinctions we are witnessing are an aspect of the Anthropocene. Human beings, too, are in a condition of precarity nowadays, even if we do not live our daily lives recognizing this—we, too, have the potential to go extinct someday or at least to live increasingly difficult lives.

If we happen to believe that it might be a good thing for us to change our individual lifestyles and our public policies in order to somehow mitigate the worst human impacts of the Anthropocene on ecological systems around the world, then it probably makes sense for us to understand better how to communicate the scientific and cultural aspects of the Anthropocene to the general public and to societal leaders, so that we can all make smarter decisions about how to live and how to organize our societies. I think empirical studies of environmental communication (which is

 ISSN 2171-9594

another way of saying "empirical ecocriticism") would be a helpful tool for helping us to share knowledge and inspire positive cultural change. Empirical ecocriticism, in a sense, is a product of the environmental conditions of the Anthropocene, and if we use such empirical approaches well, we might be able to eventually mitigate some of the worse conditions of the Anthropocene. It's possible that we have now reached a "tipping point" with regard to global climate change and other dire aspects of the Anthropocene, a point of no return to previous, more benign conditions. But we can still do our best to try to help humans and other species live good lives on the Earth. I am committed to helping with this process as much as possible, using whatever skills and knowledge I might have.

I: *What are the effective specific tools or methods which can be adopted in the studies of empirical ecocriticism?*

SS: It would be difficult to provide a thorough summary of all the social science methodologies that are available to empirical ecocritics. These are summarized quite well and demonstrated through examples in the new *Empirical Ecocriticism* book and in the Spring 2020 issue of the journal *ISLE* (the final issue for which I served as editor-in-chief), which also provides a general overview of empirical ecocriticism and several good examples of this kind of research. Basically, empirical ecocritics need to design "experiments" that, in many cases, involve selecting texts, selecting research participants ("experimental subjects"), figuring out what kinds of information ("data") they want to gather from the subjects, and creating "instruments" (questionnaires, tests, and other means of eliciting this information from subjects), finding funding to pay the research subjects and to pay for data analysis, and working with colleagues (probably from social science disciplines) to dream up the research projects, create the tools, and interpret the information gained from the studies. Perhaps finding colleagues in the social sciences to help with this kind of research in the most fundamental part of the process because most of us who do ecocriticism have not designed this kind of empirical study in the past. After we do a few of these projects as part of an interdisciplinary team, we might be in a better position to do this work on our own, although it is common for social scientists to work with co-authors, so in the future empirical ecocritics might also routinely find it useful to do this kind of work with research partners.

I: *What do you think is the main category of the text that empirical ecocriticism focuses upon? Is it more often than not related to the narratives of disasters, animals, and emotions?*

SS: Yes, so far empirical ecocritical projects seems to have focused on various kinds of disasters (especially climate change), attitudes toward animals, and on how texts influence readers and viewers emotions (feelings) with regard to various subjects. However, there is actually no limit to the kinds of topics empirical ecocritics can study, especially with regard to how texts impact audiences or how texts are constructed. The computational linguistics project that David Markowitz and I wrote for the

Empirical Ecocriticism book is an example of the latter—a study of the way ecocritical language has evolved over time. But most empirical work so far has focused on gathering information from readers of books and viewers of films and television series about their responses to these "texts." That said, the texts could emphasize a wide range of subjects, well beyond the themes that have been studied up to now.

As I mentioned above, I am particularly interested in developing some empirical projects pertaining to the sense of urgency/vulnerability in response to pandemic texts, wondering if the fear about personal vulnerability that might be inspired by such texts might be expanded to readers' feelings about other kinds of threats, such as environmental degradation. I have not yet designed an experiment to explore this topic, but I hope to do so in the near future.

Also, as mentioned above, I think it would be fascinating—and possibly important—to know more about the language of warning, as this is something our leading scientists are trying to articulate ("Watch out! Pay attention to what's happening to the planet before it's too late!"). The scientists think they know how to express warnings by simply presenting scary information in brief, non-technical ways. But I still find their warnings to be dull and ineffective—in fact, I think they're boring and not inspiring. I would like to prove this by gathering data about readers' reactions to the existing scientists' warnings and perhaps ask some of my literary colleagues to write new warnings using other styles of language (including narrative language) and then test how these new kinds of warnings affect readers.

Again, there is not particular limit to the kinds of topics one could study empirically, but you're correct that, so far, the projects have tended to focus on disasters, animals, and emotions.

I: *I note that some climate fiction is set in real places relevant to readers' daily lives. For example, The Water Knife takes place in real places such as Phoenix. Can we therefore apply the methods of empirical ecocriticism to investigate how narratives affect readers' perceptions or attitudes toward the particular country and their role in solving the ecological crisis in the Anthropocene?*

SS: Oh yes! One of the things that empirical ecocriticism is well suited to accomplish is to ascertain readers' attitudes toward various topics, including images of certain places or cultural groups. Psychologists have been doing this kind of research for many decades, though not necessarily focusing on how particular textual prompts have elicited readers' attitudes. Ecocritics and other specialists in cultural texts are in a good position to identify interesting texts—not only literary texts but possibly films, television series, blogs, and websites—that could be used as prompts before testing how readers (or viewers) respond to the prompts. I think it should be quite possible to test experimental subjects' attitudes toward national or cultural groups vis-à-vis ecological crises by way of empirical ecocritical studies. I'm not aware that people have been doing this kind of project so far, at least I don't think anything has been published about this type of research.

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I: *Empirical ecocriticism provides objective data to inform us about the impact that the Anthropocene narratives have on their readers. How do you think the results of empirical ecocriticism should be further utilized beyond just providing evidence for ecocritics? Or what do authors, readers, and society have to do based on these data in order for it to have a truly positive effect on the environment and society?*

SS: Yes—this is really the key question, isn't it? If we hope to help solve serious problems in the world today, then we need to know what to do with the results of our research.

Psychologists and other social scientists have long been serving as advisors to government officials and business leaders on various subjects involving policy development and communicating effectively with the public about technological risks and other subjects related to living good, healthy, safe lives. I think empirical ecocritics, in the coming years, will be developing a good understanding of how to communicate more effectively about environmental concerns, which will be extremely helpful to environmental scientists and even to literary authors and journalists who hope to be more successful in capturing the attention of readers and inspiring better government decision making and citizen action to work toward more sensible environmental policies.

Although we have long had writers and other communicators who have been very skilled in sharing ideas about major social and environmental challenges with the public—such as Rachel Carson in the United States and Ishimure Michiko in Japan, among many others—I believe the discoveries of empirical ecocriticism will confirm that particular communication strategies have the best chance of truly moving audiences to think in new pro-social, pro-environmental ways. I realize this might sound dangerously pragmatic and utilitarian, more so than many humanities scholars would be happy with—and I understand that such practical goals are not always the best use of humanities scholarship, which is actually a way to explore deep, unsolvable mysteries regarding the human imagination, the human soul. However, I also believe we live at a time of unprecedented social and ecological challenges, and we as a species need to do a better job of aligning our lifestyles and public policies with the realities of the planet or we might end up with a barely inhabitable earth. I don't want this to happen, so I'm willing to take the risk of participating in a more pragmatic kind of communication research than I've done in the past—by which I mean empirical ecocriticism.

I: *You have commented that empirical ecocriticism is a new trend in the environmental humanities. What do you think of the future of empirical ecocriticism?*

SS: Although ecocritics, including me, have been dreaming about various empirical approaches to our field for many years (my first attempts, which I described above, were in the early 1990s), the field is actually extremely new. Only within the past ten years have growing numbers of scholars been moving in this direction, participating in "the empirical turn." So many of us are actually just learning how to design

empirical experiments and analyze the data we're collecting. The new book *Empirical Ecocriticism* and the website on Empirical Ecocriticism that is managed by Alexa Weik von Mossner at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria are extremely recent, just beginning to reach colleagues in the environmental humanities, let alone beyond the environmental humanities. So, there is a lot of room for the field to grow.

As you mentioned above, much of the existing empirical ecocritical research focuses on such themes as disasters (including climate change), attitudes toward animals, and various approaches to human emotions. I can imagine that future empirical scholars will study not only artistic texts but more practical kinds of texts, such as the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity, which I mentioned in this interview. Or various kinds of journalistic texts or the speeches politicians and diplomats give at international conferences on the environment, such as the COP climate change summits.

I: *Thank you very much for your inspiring and thought-provoking retrospect and prospect of your studies.*
SS: Thank you for such great questions.

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Dammed Ecologies, "Hydro-irrealism," and Aesthetic Slowness in Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2015)

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Abstract

This article discusses Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (*Kings of Nowhere*, 2015), a Mexican documentary that tackles the community-scale experiences of socio-ecological degradation, land clearing and mass displacement produced by the damming of a regional river for neoliberal hydro-development. Although the documentary primarily adheres to the defining realist gestures and formal austerity of observational and "slow cinema" idioms to capture everyday life in a flood-stricken rural landscape, as this article explores, the use of a surreal and spectral visual grammar in certain sequences seems to mediate the radical estrangement that saturates social reality in the zones of sacrifice and submergence wrought by extractive capital. Building on Warwick Research Collective's world-ecological examination of how "irrealist aesthetics" correspond to the experience of extreme and abrupt restructuring of socio-ecological relations engendered by capitalism's extractive operations, this article suggests that the unearthly and ghostly atmosphere conveyed through the film's enigmatic *mise-en-scène* attends to the unfathomable changes to agrarian realities produced by the infrastructures of hydro-extraction, as well as to the brutal dynamics of dispossession and plunder that underpin them. Thus, reading García's documentary as a work that evinces what Sharae Deckard calls the "aesthetics of hydro-irrealism," this article argues that the film fosters a critical view of the bewildering yet not immediately perceptible extractive and terror-inflicting mechanisms that structure the region's socio-ecological rupture, attuning viewers not only to the protracted and concealed violences fostered by hydro-infrastructural development, but also to the oft-invisibilised forms in which local communities respond to the world-destroying schemes of neoliberal extractivism.

Keywords: Environmental documentary, extractive capitalism, hydro-irrealism, slow cinema.

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece una discusión de *Los reyes de pueblo que no existe* (2015) de Betzabé García, un documental mexicano que aborda las experiencias localizadas de degradación socio-ecológica, desterritorialización y desplazamiento forzado masivo producido por la implentación de un megaproyecto hidraúlico. Aunque el filme se adhiere predominantemente a los gestos característicos y austeridad formal del documental observacional y el "cine lento" para registrar la vida diaria en un territorio rural afectado por la construcción de una represa, como se explora en este artículo, el uso de una gramática visual surreal y espectral en ciertas secuencias parece mediar el radical extrañamiento que satura la realidad social de las zonas de sacrificio y afectación creadas por el capital extractivo. Basado en las discusiones del Warwick Research Collective sobre estéticas "irrealistas" y su correspondencia con las experiencias de extrema y abrupta reorganización de las relaciones socio-ecológicas impulsada por las operaciones extractivas del capitalismo, el artículo sugiere que la atmósfera espectral evocada a través de la enigmática puesta en escena del documental apunta a la incomprensible y drástica desintegración de las realidades agrarias producida por las infraestructuras del extractivismo hídrico, así como a las brutales dinámicas de desposesión y saqueo que las apuntalan. Por lo tanto, leyendo el documental como una obra que exhibe rasgos de lo que Sharae Deckard define como "estéticas hidro-irrealistas," el artículo argumenta que el filme promueve una visión crítica de los desconcertantes, no inmediatamente perceptibles mecanismos de terror y extracción que

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

estructuran la fragmentación socio-ecológica del territorio, guiando la mirada de los espectadores no sólo hacia las violencias lentas y ocultas del desarollo hidráulico, sino, además, a las formas usualmente invisibilizadas en las que las comunidades locales responden a la megaproyectos de destrucción del extractivismo neoliberal.

Palabras clave: Documental ambiental, capitalismo extractivo, hidro-irrealismo, cine lento.

At the opening of Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (*Kings of Nowhere*, 2015), a Mexican feature-length documentary that captures the localised harms produced by neoliberal hydro-development, the camera attentively follows a young man manoeuvring a small fishing skiff boat through the silvery waters of a river basin. A thick fog blankets the landscape, and an eerie stand of dying and decaying trees can be seen jutting out from the water, enhancing the forlorn condition of the place. The camera stays tightly on him for more than a minute, before gradually shifting the depth of field, rerouting our gaze toward the crosses of tombstones poking out from the water's murkiness that appear in the outer edge of the frame. From here, the frame opens to a wide shot of a lush mangrove dotted with rural houses now submerged by floodwaters. García's camera unhurriedly surveys the waterlogged roads of the drowned-out town, passing through long-abandoned buildings swamped by water, rotting walls covered in mildew, and muddy waterways that were once paths, impressing upon the viewer the ruin that befell this rural settlement. But then, as the camera takes us past the half-sunken dwellings and the tropical greenery that promises to overtake them, its lingering gaze alerts us to a somewhat off-kilter sight: a flood-stricken lamppost protruding from the stagnant water that, somehow, appears to be still on.

García's documentary, like other recent Latin American nonfiction films focused on the destructive impacts of large mining, energy, and logistics infrastructures, tackles the community-scale experiences of socio-ecological degradation, land clearings and mass displacement through a protracted and quiet contemplation of extractivism-impaired environments.[1] Shot almost entirely observationally and eschewing the "ecological information dump" (Morton 7) ubiquitous in media discourses of environmental destruction, the film relies on long takes that frame rural villagers (and animals) moving through a half-sunken, thinly populated town and nearby fields, chronicling their dusk-to-dawn routines against a background of environmental threat and decimation, revealed by the end to be linked

[1] There is a significant if scattered body of Latin American documentary films that employ a primarily observational approach to examine the devastating consequences of contemporary extractive infrastructures. Examples include: Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff's *Surire* (2015), an observational film featuring long, wide-angle shots of mega-mining operations in the Chilean Salars; Eugenio Polgovksy's *Resurrección* (2016), a documentary that combine**s** observational and poetic elements to address catastrophic watershed pollution in a Mexican industrial corridor; and Josefina Pérez García and Felipe Sigalas's *Nidal* (2021), a contemplative nonfiction film that uses static composition and uninterrupted shots to focus on the high-rise development projects encroaching upon the fragile coastal ecosystem of Concón.

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to the damming and diverting of a regional river. In this sense, the film's penchant for lingering, uninterrupted visual and sonorous shots of the dam-affected coastal landscape, not only resonates deeply with the socially-committed tradition of Latin American nonfiction cinema and its drive to film "raw reality" (Burton 6), but also with tendencies afoot in contemporary cinemas of observation, as the formal austerity of "slow cinema" works (de Luca and Barradas Jorge) is summoned in the film to bring to focus the processual and cumulative impacts of extractive violence, that, to follow Rob Nixon, often fall short of visual spectacle (2). Yet, while the documentary adheres to the defining realist gestures of observational and slow cinema idioms, the use of surreal and spectral visual grammar García in certain sequences, particularly as the film attempts to register the obscure coercions and socio-ecological disruptions visited on this development-ready site, seems to mediate the radical estrangement that saturates social reality in the zones of sacrifice wrought by extractive capital.

The acute figuration of environmental peril that *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (hereafter *Los reyes*) advances, therefore, rather than affixed to a pure realist mode of observational filmmaking, can be more productively interpreted through the prism of "irrealist" aesthetics. By the term "irrealism," I have specially in mind the way the concept has been elaborated in world-ecological cultural analyses, which have emphasised the pervasiveness of the form in cultural texts produced at moments of intense and abrupt socio-ecological rearrangement. As theorised by Warwick Research Collective (WReC), "the violent reorganisation of social relations" engendered by cyclical crises in peripheralised zones of resource extraction tend to be indexed through magical, uncanny, irrealist aesthetics that blend with realism, as the "relative facticity of realist form" proves inadequate to capture the volatile and disjunctive experience of capitalism's systematic ravages (72). More concretely, in the neoliberal context of "extreme extraction," the technical intensification of "high-risk" modes of hydro-extraction and the dynamics of attrition and dispossession it crystallises, as observed by Sharae Deckard, seem to imprint themselves in peripheral cultural forms through the "aesthetics of hydro-irrealism," as narration marked by the "spectral or absurd" and "macabre and gothic atmospheres of death-in-life" (113) operates to express these hydrological extremes.

In this article, I thus borrow from WReC's world-ecological conceptual framework to read García's documentary as a work that evinces the aesthetics of hydro-irrealism. As I suggest, the unearthly atmosphere conveyed through the film's enigmatic *mise-en-scène* functions to render apprehensible the unfathomable changes to agrarian existence wrought by hydro-infrastructure, as the contraction of life attached to it, from the flooded crops to the displaced and slaughtered rural peoples, is kept out of the field of vision, and suggested only via spectral tropes that point to the violent and abstruse operations of "extreme extraction" in rural Mexico and its deadly socioecological costs. In this manner, I explore, the disruption of the realist tenets of the observational documentary form in *Los reyes* works to foster a disquiet contemplation of the bewildering, lethal yet not immediately perceptible extractive

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

processes that structure the town's socio-ecological rupture, foregrounding hydro-infrastructure as an over-looming threat to the survival of rural communities and their land-based lifeways. However, as I proceed to examine, paired with a slow and intimate account of everyday agrarian life, the film's irrealist hauntological qualities also allow to capture the "submerged perspectives" (Gómez Barris 11) that exist hidden within sacrifice zones, as local forms of ecological care are summoned by García through long and repetitive frames that uplift the largely invisibilised practices that contest the material and symbolic destructive arrangements of extractive capital. By way of conclusion, I suggest the film's irreal and slow aesthetic approach to the communal effects of river damming functions not only to attune viewers to the concealed injustices fostered by hydro-infrastructural development, but also to the practical doings that, engaging with the preservation and repair of ecological life, spotlight the myriad ways in which local communities respond to the world-destroying schemes of neoliberal extractivism.

Documenting hydro-extraction

Los reyes del pueblo que no existe takes place in San Marcos, one of the six rural villages flooded by the construction of the much-opposed Picachos dam in the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa. The cataclysmic inundation in 2009 led to the forced displacement of more than 800 families who were resettled into temporary, shack-like dwellings on the opposite side of the reservoir, effectively cut off from the drowned communal lands.[2] The ongoing dam project, one of the largest investments in hydro-infrastructure in the country, was touted as essential to guarantee sustainable water supply for agricultural irrigation as well as to secure hydropower generation to boost the country's energy self-sufficiency. Pursued under the aegis of neoliberal "green" developmentalist narratives, the hydraulic mega-scheme has therefore been presented as a strategic investment to foster sustainable and clean development and heralded as a key tool to chart paths toward the achievement of the long-awaited socio-economic prosperity of the largely agricultural region.

However, like any other intensive technology of extraction, the infrastructures of riparian water management and hydropower, as Deckard warns, are certainly not sustainable, producing ruptures and impacts on the social metabolism of nature and deepening the asymmetries of consumption since water is essentially diverted to flow uphill "towards capitalist agribusiness, state-favoured development projects and urban centres" (11). Yet, marketed as a pathway for development and regional growth, the communities sacrificed for such technological and economic progress are often not only subjected to a physical displacement but also to what Nixon sees as an "imaginative expulsion" of populations from national memory that often comes prior to assaults of a region's environmental resources (151). Therefore, deemed

[2] See Cañedo Cázarez, Sibely and Mendoza-Guerrero, Juan Manuel. "Desplazamiento forzado y empoderamiento femenino: el caso de la presa Picachos en el sur de Sinaloa, Mexico." *Ágora USB,* vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 370-386.

superfluous to the idea of "sustainable" economic growth, the people of San Marcos were promptly evacuated from public awareness, and, with the creation of a new San Marcos, were made to witness the rhetorical and visual emptying out of the place they used to inhabit, figured now as a place without community, history or even use value. From the vantage point of those that continue to dwell in a submerged town that should no longer exist, García's documentary explores the unseen, ill-fated peripheral sites of neoliberal extraction.

The film focuses on seemingly small moments of everyday life in the near empty otherworldly town of San Marcos. García's subtle camera work immerses itself in the ghostly rural landscape now only inhabited by three remaining families, out of the more than three hundred that have lived in these lands for generations. Following the opening scene, the camera tracks the village's slow rustling to life in the bright morning light, against the aural backdrop of the mangrove jungle. In these early scenes—the only moment in which García and the crew members' voices are heard—the silent and still frames that capture the sheer size of the destruction wrought by the hydraulic project are suddenly disrupted by a voice that appears off-screen. As the camera abruptly pans to the out-of-focus figure standing in the muddy road, the cameraman asks permission to film him. Now in focus, the old man responds by inviting García to film his still standing home and the chickens that continue to roam the land instead. Not coincidentally, much of the praise that the film has garnered rests precisely on its formal conceits, foregrounding not only García's unobtrusive observation and verité style of filmmaking but also the surreal and "García Marquesque" echoes she brings into the frames. Devoid of people, the visually entrancing shots of animals roaming freely through the dilapidated buildings, donkeys licking up the dough from the still open *tortillería* and a couple dancing *tambora*/*banda sinaloense* in the middle of the ruins of their abandoned dwelling, convey the sense of being present in a dreamscape. Yet, as Adriana Pérez Limón notes, while "the cinematography courts a ghostly, magical, silent landscape" (95), *Los reyes* also captures the violence and menace that engulfs the region.

Although García eschews on-screen text to let the context slowly emerge through the film's long and still frames, a context-lending postscript reveals the violence that cuts through this location, which like the rising waters, brutally threatens to submerge it. Atilano Román Tirado, we are told, the forefront of the movement seeking justice for the hundreds of rural families displaced by the megaproject and denouncing the Sinaloan government's pro-dam efforts to circumvent communal land rights, was shot dead during a live radio broadcast a year prior to the documentary's release. This last revelation, as Michael Pattison observes in his review, gives retrospective weight to earlier scenes, contextualising the ruin and danger that always lingers in the outskirts of San Marcos, as unspecified figures that shoot and assault them are referenced in the townspeople's conversations without further comment or clarification. Even when a black SUV (a vehicle notably associated with the narco-paramilitary groups that plague the violence-ridden state of Sinaloa) is seen driving through the deserted town streets or the sounds of distant

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

gunshots makes the townspeople anxiously look over their shoulders, their fear is scarcely voiced and only momentarily glimpsed through their restless glances; "fireworks, they are only fireworks" one comments with a nervous chuckle. Like the shape-shifting forces of the flood, the difficulty of tracking, visualising or exposing the violence that rains down on the townspeople of San Marcos is thus approached in *Los reyes* by enhancing the sense of a suspended and surreal state of living, an existence that seems hard to visualise through the realist impulse of nonfiction.

In WReC's ecocritical-oriented approaches to cultural production from the Americas, irrealism is presented as a recurring feature in peripheral cultural aesthetics. As Michael Niblett argues, for instance, irrealism can be read as mediating the disjuncture and rifts attendant upon the violent environment-making in the capitalist world-ecology (9). In using the term "world-ecology," Niblett follows Jason Moore's critique of how, since the long sixteenth century, capitalism has created "external natures as objects to be mapped, quantified and regulated" (Moore 13) to fuel its accumulation regimes, which emphasises the systemic character of the production of nature under capitalism. As Niblett argues, with the "restructuring of ecological relations that took place with the transition to the neoliberal regime of accumulation" (82), "irrealist" modalities appear in peripheral cultural discourses to express certain facets of the catastrophic turbulence brought about by the expansionary project of global capital which would otherwise defy representation. Borrowing the term from Michael Löwy, for whom "irrealism" designates modes of representation in which realism is either absent, distorted or disrupted in some way through the incorporation of elements of the marvellous or dreamlike, Niblett suggests that irrealist forms such as surrealism and magic realism might be especially well suited to express "the feelings of strangeness and rupture engendered by the rapid reorganisations of human and extra human natures" (269). The irruption of irrealist elements into a text, even if otherwise broadly realist, not only signals the "disruption caused to local socio-ecologies" (Campbell and Niblett 10) whose ecological resources are leached away but also, through the juxtaposition of different narrative modalities, foregrounds the temporal dislocations and violent imposition of different modes of life by the forces of extractive capitalism.

The observational style conventions in *Los reyes*, from the peaceful and natural soundscape that serves to score the daily activities of the remaining dwellers, to the slow pacing and editing, are at moments "impurely" inflected with marvellous elements. Puncturing the realist overture, these brief moments could be said to respond to "the lived experience of capitalism's bewildering […] destructive creation" (WReC 51). In interviews, García herself has reflected on the need for such mixture, pointing to how she felt driven to highlight an atmosphere "bordering on magical realism" as she witnessed a still working *tortillería* in the middle of the submerged town (qtd. in Turner). In emphasising the disjointedness of a not readily apparent reality, the decision to approach this setting from a different gaze is almost rendered as a prerequisite. Thus, as she revealingly concedes, "I had to abandon the script I had written" (qtd. in Cutler). From this first impulse, García allows the audience to be

gradually enthralled by the strangeness of the situation and defers the use of the interview form to gather information, featuring only a handful of unhurried interviews as the townspeople go about their daily lives. Instead, García homes in on the observational mode of documentary that, following Bill Nichols' nomenclature, abjures commentary and illustrative images to "ced[e] control over the events that occur in front of the camera" (38). This emphasis on concrete experience, which allows for the impression of the camera to disappear into the frame, lends itself to what Navarro and Rodríguez see as "a general suspicion of conventional formulas and traditional documentary rhetoric" (7) in Latin American nonfiction cinema of recent decades, a weariness that has come coupled with a desire to adopt "ways of seeing" rooted in the local "life-worlds" in which the stories are set (Andermann 148). Letting the camera slowly wander through the waterlogged landscape and shunning a focus on the scientific accuracy and expertise exemplary of expository forms of the environmental documentary, García's contemplative perspective thus seeks to immerse viewers in the lived experience of individuals and communities subjected to ecological plunder and emphasize the dense materiality of the altered agrarian environment the film depicts. In this way, García decision to include the man's invitation to film his house in the opening scenes directly keys into the documentary's desire to establish a viewpoint aligned with the townspeople's understanding of what it means to inhabit a post-disaster environ.

Following the man's cue, the resulting scene hence positions the viewer in the porch of his house, as the man, Jaime, now joined by his wife proceeds to describe the life in the flooded town, half-jokingly contrasting the advantages of their over-abundance of water with the living conditions experienced by those coerced into resettlement with the promise of improvement, but who often experience long periods of water shortages. As his wife Yoya says with a chuckle, "Aquí no nos falta el agua, gracias a Dios" ["Here we are not short of water, thank God"].[3] The residents' account is subtly and unhurriedly registered by García, attentive to the complex ways in which they continue to dwell in a space legislated as a submergence zone. In subsequent scenes, her camera joins a former town resident making a slow course through the flooded roads, as he recounts the local stories harboured in each site he comes across, confiding to the camera his grief over the loss of "este ranchito de los recuerdos" ["this town so full of memories"] and his bewilderment over the sudden evacuation of the whole community. Beyond the visible ruins that fill the backdrop of the frame, the man's account tracks the way in which the imposed "official landscape" of the large-scale water infrastructure has likewise cast into shadow the affective, historically textured registers of the now fractured landscape, a land now written "in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner" (Nixon 17). As he continues to rove silently through the watery nocturnal locale, his shadowy image stands-in for the ghostly habitat, a world fissured, distorted, made barely visible by the official landscape. García's camera holds the viewer's gaze on these shadows,

[3] All English translations are quoted from the film's subtitles.

lingering on the local perspectives wiped out by the infrastructures of extractive developmentalism.

The mournful view over the impending decimation of the local ecology in the wake of large development schemes, therefore, concretises the ways in which many peasant, indigenous and afro-descendant communities have come to label these traumatic intrusions and enclosures as "proyectos de muerte" (projects of death). As the coinage implies, the term has been used to cast into doubt the narratives of frictionless transformation that project global growth, trade and development where dispossession, exodus and extinction occur (Govela Gutiérrez and Sevilla Zapata; Ontiveros et. al.), since the exposure to extraction's waste and burdens converts rural and peripheral spaces into ravaged habitats where a "slow death" threatens to unfold via the gradual wearing down of a commons that "however modestly or precariously, had proffered a diverse diet, a livelihood" (Nixon 152). With the reduction of viable lands in these environments and the exhaustion of resources, the human and nonhuman animal bodies of sacrificed locales are left with, in Nixon's words, a "diet of dead rivers and poisoned fields" (232), and are made to bear the physical weight of transnational capital's unfettered pursuit of economic growth. Still, large-scale infrastructural projects such as dams, continue to press up against fragile environments and life forms in an apparently "bloodless, technocratic, [and] deviously neutral" (Nixon 163) manner that undermines the violence involved. Yet, as slow and quiet as the rising tide, the out of sight despair that tinges the atmosphere in San Marcos gradually seeps into the arresting images of the disjointed everyday existence in this dammed environment.

As the camera tilts in Miro's direction, the viewer's gaze is routed to the oblique and incremental violence of the flood that impacts the community: "What you have here is a deserted, abandoned town. Rubble, that is all there is […] year after year, the water will rise, flooding everything, then it will slowly dry out and the town will be slowly buried in mud […] It is a staggering poverty, no jobs, no opportunities in these towns".[4] The dramatic vision of a town buried beneath deep mud and debris foreshadowed by Miro, is therefore juxtaposed with shallow-focus shots of the skeletal ruins overlooking the blurred landscape. Through these images, the film hauntingly underscores dam-building projects, to use Deckard's description, as "death-scheme[s] that violently remov[e] the basis for future socio-ecological reproduction" (114). With the deadening of local economies and modes of subsistence ("It was full of plums here, and now there is only water"),[5] the affected communities, usually peripheral and marginal in relation to centres of economic and political power, are transformed from places of "ecological complexity into hydrological zones and submergence zones that, in the violence of their euphemized effects, are second cousins to the so-called sacrifice zones of military strategy" (Nixon

[4] "Aquí está un pueblo deshabitado, abandonado ya. Escombros, eso es todo lo que tiene […] año con año pues llega el agua y se llena, se va secando y se va a ir enterrando de tierra […] es una pobrería, no hay trabajo, no hay empleo en estos pueblos."

[5] "[…] aquí antes era todo lleno de ciruelas […] ahora es sólo agua."

162). Rather than coincidental, the close proximity and continuity between submergence zones and sacrificial sites, often located in areas devasted by warfare, suggests a deep connection between the violence of militarisation and the destructive schemes of megadevelopment.

Macarena Gómez-Barris poignantly underscores this occluded nexus in her analysis of large-scale dams as landmarks of "dystopic developmentalism" (6). Grounding her discussion on the effects of hydroelectric construction upon riverine communities in the Americas, Goméz-Barris frames ravaged submergence areas as extractive zones where "military, corporate and state collusion over the destruction of life" literally "damns" social ecologies for extinction (97). As she signals, the extractivist logic of hydroelectric damming, always goes hand in hand with the militarisation of territories slated for extraction, foregrounding the obscure relations between damming and the longer arc of land dispossession and protracted history of military terror across the region. In the concrete case of Mexico, as Dawn Paley has prominently contended, the "combination of terror and policy making" by "drug war capitalism" has served as a "long-term fix for capitalism's woes" (32), as the increased paramilitarisation and its ability to displace territories through the widespread use of terror-inflicting methods has provided vast benefits for the energy, hydrocarbon and mining sectors, eliminating any potential opposition to extractive projects. In this manner, the synergistic interests among extractive initiatives and the quest to militarise rural areas, operates through what Saskia Sassen sees as the "predatory formations" of contemporary capitalism, that is, "assemblages of powerful actors, markets, technologies and governments" (221), that work to facilitate the expulsion of people from highly valued regions and allow neoliberal development to disguise its rapacious character.

The obscure inner-workings of extractive violence seem then to underline the importance of Nixon's injunction to shift our analysis from the instantaneous and immediately visible guises of violence to the "threats that never materialise in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene" (14). Therefore, while the insidious presence of paramilitary violence in San Marcos—which is only made evident through the ominous atmosphere created by its *mise-en-scène* (e.g. gunshots blasting afar)—is, for instance, cast as a "subtle undercurrent" that reveals "the political dilemma of a doubly-menaced people: flooded and faced by the constant threat of cartel violence" (Harris 56), what García carefully attends to instead is how the unseen and imperceptible terrorising forces that hover over the town are not decoupled from the menacing force of the dam. Rather, they stem from the same *proyecto de muerte* that works to safeguard the ceaseless plunder upon which capitalism depends.

Hence, rather than realism proper and its "faith on the evidentiary value of data afforded by appearances and testimonial accounts" (Aguilera Skvirsky 125), *Los reyes* gestures toward a critical irrealism that more readily registers the "landscapes where people experience the feeling of living in a territory, not just

 ISSN 2171-9594

'occupied'/'usurped,' but absolutely stranged" (Machado Araoz 62).[6] Instead of merely building meaning through interviews and testimonies, *Los reyes* appeals to an atmosphere of oddity and menace to apprehend the imperceptible violence and terror brought by the penetration of brutal capitalist modes of accumulation within these lands. Thus, in one of the few scenes in which the characters audibly voice their fears, the cinematography assumes an almost nightmarish quality to chart the lurking threat that roves through the countryside.

The sequence begins with an arresting wide-shot of a storm-threatened night sky with streaks of lightning flashing over the darkened landscape. An ominous crash of thunder punctures the cacophonous nocturnal noises of the tropical forest as the camera jump cuts to the eerie sight of an empty road just as the electricity feeding the streetlight is abruptly extinguished, plunging the town into darkness. In the following shots, as Yoya and Jaime roam through pitch-black rooms with a flashlight as their only light source, silhouetted by its scattered light, the camera lingers on the darkness that engulfs their emptied-out dwelling. García resorts to a static long shot—which effectively showcases the characters' smallness and vulnerability—while the piercing rumble of thunder and cicadas dominates the soundscape, amplifying the atmosphere of isolation and dread that encircles their dwelling space. With the candles now lit, the camera closes in on the scarcely illuminated couple's faces, which are obscured by the shadows cast on the blackened room walls, almost as if foretelling something terrible that awaits crouched outside the frame. In a half-whisper, the couple opaquely signal the source of their unease, speaking of unspecified figures that come at night and "atacan de repente" ["attack suddenly"] and which, without anyone noticing, have chopped up one of the townspeople into "pedazitos" ["little pieces"], dumping his body parts in the nearby fields. "People say they come here but we never see them" Jaime says,[7] expressing his bafflement, before being interrupted by Yoya, who anxiously asks him to stop disclosing more information.

While the quasi-gothic visual arrangement and soundscape already foreshadow the spectre of violence that haunts the townspeople, the elliptical and oblique testimony similarly summons up the threatening and phantasmagoric qualities of the capitalistic forces that operate in the besieged rural environment, as the couple resorts to spectral vocabulary and tonality to figure "a particular order of reality relatively inaccessible to 'realist' representation" (WReC 75). Fraught by bewilderment and anguish, the account of these spectral and malevolent intrusions upon these rural communities layers the proximity between these hidden macabre histories and the environmental insecurity that threatens the web of life—which is stressed by the aural backdrop of the raising floodwater heard throughout the testimony—a linkage that is nonetheless presented as outside the visual field.

This formal interplay between visibility and invisibility is correspondingly underscored in a later scene, as we see Jaime, standing in a parched open field while

[6] "[…] paisajes donde se vivencia y experimenta la sensación de vivir en un territorio, más que 'ocupado'/'usurpado', absolutamente extrañado."
[7] "Dicen que vienen para acá, pero nadie los ve."

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feeding his horse, suddenly point to a nearby location and start recounting his recent sighting of a young man being killed in that exact spot, before frightfully restraining himself from talking further, refencing his anxiety over attracting some unseen evil. In this moment, García's camera remains at medium distance, prompting us to observe Jaime's shallow-focused natural surroundings, yet never venturing enough to reveal the site of which he speaks—which appears to be located around the edges of the frame—leaving it outside our field of vision. In its absence, however, the off-screen space takes on a centrifugal role, persistently pulling at the edge of the frame and alerting the viewer to what is left unseen.

This aesthetic path detaches the film from the straightforward methods of envisaging violence and disaster, which is most starkly underscored by the conspicuous absence of the Picachos Dam from the filmic register. In withholding it from view—and only explicitly acknowledging it in the final credits—the dam is dislodged from the celebratory and teleological narratives of progress and modernity and the spectacular visibility bestowed upon it. Instead, the film tracks the violent tides of ruination that followed in its wake, and figures it, to borrow Gómez-Barris's description of the overbuilt condominiums in the Chilean coastline, as a "monstrosity looming over a delicate local ecology" (36). Hence, if as Nixon argues, "the production of ghosted communities who haunt the visible nation has been essential for maintaining the dominant narratives of national development" (151), García's documentary operates in an inverted scheme of visibility. Employing subtle visual and aural cues that sometimes evoke the disquiet rumbles of a gothic film, the documentary's language gestures instead toward the insidious workings of late capitalism (displacement, ecological depletion, paramilitary terror) that act as a haunting force in the zones of extraction and resource control. Thus, if we follow David McNally's argument that the elusive power of capital that grows and multiplies remains "unseen and un-comprehended," the estrangement-effects used in the film to materialise capitalism's life-threatening capacities can be said to work toward charting out the horrifying dislocations that, as he contends, are "at the heart of a commodified existence" (7).

The spectral surrealism attributed to García's feature therefore carries a disruptively political charge for it promotes a critical realism that mirrors the bewildering and jarring world of capitalist modernity better to expose it, operating to make "the everyday appear as it truly is: bizarre, shocking, monstrous" (McNally 7). Yet, beyond juxtaposing the mundane and uncanny to bring dam building into the domain of violence, García's film uses the affordances of defamiliarised aesthetics to foster a critical spectatorial disposition towards the oft-obscured efforts that work to destabilise extractive capitalism's logics and totalising spread.

Submerged viewpoints

In a significant moment in the film, viewers are stirred through the brownish waters via Miro's small boat, silently heading to dry land. Where the vegetation

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thickens and the sound of the mangrove mountains heightens, the boat's movement slowly ceases. Turning toward the verdant landscape, the still boat-bound camera tracks Miro as he jumps into the muddy waters carrying a sack over his shoulder. A wide-scale shot frames Miro as he moves deep into the green mass of rainforest, making a whistling sound that blends with the amplified hum of birds and cicadas. The camera abruptly cuts to show a white cow surrounded by dense green foliage. Miro lays out the hay and the *tortillas* he brought for her, gently caressing her as he explains to the camera how the cow was left stranded on this tract of land by the rising waters, as well as the frequent visits he makes to feed her with her much-loved *tortillas*. Key to the filmic register in *Los reyes*, the sequence poignantly underscores and mirrors the story of abandonment and insulation that characterises the catastrophic projects of modernity across peripheral sites of resource extraction. However, as the camera requires us to focus our attention on the quotidian and intimate interactions between humans and similarly vulnerable animals living within the mangrove forest, we can perceive anew the overlooked networks of living relations that run parallel to the alienating conditions that extractive capitalism produces.

One of the direct consequences of this sustained focus on the more-than-human living in *Los reyes* (indicated by lengthy shots of both built and natural environments devoid of human presence) is an elongated and attuned awareness to the intricate unfolding of the natural world, a slowed down form of perception where "the frenetic timescape of extraction is not the sole temporality" (Gómez-Barris 17). Aligned with the aesthetics of slow cinema and its durational quest to capture realities "at odds with or, at the margins off, dominant economic systems" (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 14), *Los reyes*, leveraging stasis, stillness and distended time, presents slowness as a "sensory perceptual prism" that aims to bring into view the rural rhythms and folds of life assaulted by the "accelerated tempo of late capitalism" (15). By focusing on unattended temporalities, this slow model of perception offers the potential to short-circuit the "capitalised sensorium of extractivism," which, as Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests, is rooted in neoliberalism's fear of unproductive wilderness, relentlessly transforming lands, people, and ecosystems into commodities. Thus, while state and extractivist corporations operate on the purely materialist cost-benefit logic on which the practice of expropriation is based, *Los reyes*' lingering investments into the affective and communal toll of the river's blockage and subsequent submergence not only seeks to attune us to the violent atmosphere but also to the layered land-based rhythms of life that exist in these terrains.

Like in the above-mentioned sequence, the complex relationship between animals, people and environments that forms the basis of the film's visual address functions to register, to borrow Gómez Barris's terminology, a "submerged viewpoint" within the murky waters that gives primacy to the "less perceivable worlds, life forms, and the organisation of relations within them" (xv). Furthermore, the prolonged view of the marooned cow and the caretaking practices Miro performs

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

to keep her alive, more than an allegory of the town's slow decimation, enacts what Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese identify as "practices of radical care," that is, "vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds" (2). In this way, the intricate collaborations within and across species that García visualises point toward the land-based relations that resist the commodity logic of extractivism. Yet, as Gómez-Barris contends, "to be able to see beyond the capitalist divide, renewed perception does not simply represent a structure of visibility;" rather, it needs to foreground "an enlivened sense of the relationships that inhabit […] the microspaces of interaction and encounter" (2) that exist alongside the developmental paradigm. Thus, by orienting our senses toward the sonic landscape and the spatial surroundings, the film's aural cues not only capture the menace emanating from the surrounding foothills but also register the "audacity to produce, apply, and effect care despite dark histories and futures" (Hobart and Kneese 3), practices that are based on the felt interdependence between the townspeople as well as with other forms of life.

A trenchant example of this is manifested mid-way through the film, as Miro's aging mother expresses how she copes with living in this perilous and desolate locale. Although the threat of being attacked in the middle of the night keeps her awake, she tenderly intimates how she and her son have devised a form of communicating—a howling sound— to combat the isolation, anxiety and fear and to care for each other. Although Pérez Limón reads these caring actions as "ordinary affects" performed within the family unit (101), the film, I argue, poignantly charts radical care practices that extend beyond these confines, signalled by the intimate encounters between humans and animals registered in almost every frame and the everyday activities that townspeople continuously perform to preserve communal lands and their local agricultural and food systems. For instance, we see two of the townspeople (Paula and Pani) maintaining the *tortillería*, cranking out fresh tortillas daily for the surrounding hinterlands—despite having once been ambushed and shot while driving their truck—as well as their continuous efforts to restore the now-ruined town's square. These repeating frames visualise the forms of communal rebuilding and collaborative resistance devised in the face of ongoing dispossession. If, as Deckard suggests, the infrastructures of water resource management and hydropower that rupture peripheral ecologies are made visible by courting hydro-irrealist aesthetics, in *Los reyes*, this optic also proves useful to visualise the precarious infrastructures crafted to sustain communal forms of living in the face of these *proyectos de muerte.*

As Gladys Tzul Tzul argues, the process of rebuilding communal life vis-à-vis the continual forms of dispossession, aggression, and capture fundamentally requires the "reconstruction of landbased communal systems" as well as of collective memory (404). Since, in Tzul Tzul's view, when a common good is stripped from a community the social relations created through the management of the good extracted also become undone, forms of communal work that manifest in "microscopic" ways through rebuilding pathways, tending to plots of land and sources of water, and the

organisation of communal celebrations help to re-establish the order of communal life (406). In a similar vein, reading the notion of the infrastructural through the prism of Indigenous thought, Anne Spice suggests that the category of "critical infrastructure" mobilised by governments "to transform oil and gas infrastructures from industry projects into crucial matters of national interest" (41) has been contested by communities resisting extractive constructions to point instead to the collectively constructed systems that build and sustain communal life. Appropriating the term "critical infrastructures," as she further argues, land defenders not only "expos[e] the lie that these projects are creative/productive" but also index infrastructures as interconnected systems of relations that "require caretaking" and "create the grounds" for a commonly-administered life (ibid.). Tzul Tzul's gloss on community building and Spice's alternative approach to infrastructure thus capture something useful about these forms of communal care and recovery that García's camera attentively registers. Through repetitive framing, these small daily acts performed by the townspeople acquire a critical and heightened importance that, as one critic has evocatively suggested, plays almost like the "*Myth of Sisyphus* filtered through Gabriel García Márquez" (Spector 9). While most of these forms of tending for the land might be characterised by a strict adherence to realism that has become the trademark of slow films, the oft-noted "absurd" and "magical realist" musical montages within the film prove particularly generative for seeing beyond the violent ruptures of social ways of life.

Immediately after the stranded cow sequence, the camera cuts to a wide shot of the half-sunken houses, framed by bare shapes of trees and the intermittent sound of the lapping water. A percussive sound begins to slowly engulf the ambient soundscape. As the soundscape beings to change to softly register this distant sound of the percussion, the image jump cuts to a medium-distance frame of dead a stump that sits in the middle of the ruins of the former *plaza* covered by forest vegetation. With percussion sounds now dominating the aural environment, the frame cuts to an open shot of the now distant *plaza* that reveals the source of the peculiar sound: a young boy appears walking amongst the ruins playing what appears to be a makeshift drum. This same motif repeats itself at different instances throughout the film. We see a second boy sitting in the ruins of a rundown brick wall as he plays the tuba surrounded by water and overgrown foliage; in another moment a boy appears on the upstairs window of a flooded building playing an instrument made from scrap materials. These "ethereal" moments, as one critic notes, add to the "stroke of magic realism" and other-worldliness that tinges the film (Turner). Whilst, following Deckard's reading of García Márquez's "hydro-irrealist" tropes, "hauntological qualities" appear in his fiction to "gesture to absolute exhaustion" and a "hydrological rupture in the social metabolism of nature that promulgates an irreversible collapse of the entire ecology" (155), the spectral qualities courted in these surreal sequences appear to figure instead what Anna Tsing calls, "the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present" (Tsing 1). As Tsing argues, "forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others" (6). Yet, as she

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

continues, "ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces" (6). The haunting quality of this troupe of children's solitary wanderings amidst the ruins disrupting the oppressive silence with traditional village brass-band music (*tambora/banda sinaloense*) resurrects memories of the local lifeways submerged with the arrival of the dam and pushes against the amnesiac removal of what was once there. This is further reinforced by the film's end credits as an old recording of a town's celebration shows the now displaced children, women and men —some of whom, as the end credits denounce, have died while protesting their unjust relocation—joyfully dancing to the sound of *tambora.*

In the face of looming degradations, the children's apparitions not only manifest as living traces, memories of the lost and missing, but also as forms of communal meaning that still reside within sacrifice zones. As the extreme climate of insecurity and growing threat of submergence is strongly manifested in the film's final sequences, as a storm tears through the already waterlogged settlement, García directs the attention to the sounds of the makeshift instruments played by the troupe of boys, drowning out the portentous sound of torrential downpours and gathering thunder. While the sequence moves between static shots of decaying buildings as they fill up with diluvial water, the last frame reveals the now complete junk-band playing in the middle of the derelict *plaza*. As we see them standing within the imperilled wooden structures erected by Paula and Pani and the verdant foliage that has grown out of the ruins, the sequence charts a visual trajectory from depletion and ecological disaster to the deep-seated communal life forms that resist neoliberal erasure. In the following sequences—which echo the film's introductory frames—Paula and Pani are framed tending to the *plaza* in the storm's wake, clearing out the debris and laying out bricks to secure the wooden structure, which underpins the laborious nature of their rebuilding task. Miro, again framed roving through the flooded mangrove, narrates the overwhelming anxiety over the devastating fate of the town exacerbated by the severe weather conditions: "I got hit in every direction. I'm trapped here."[8] Yet, amid the chaos, he descends from his boat and immerses himself within the vegetal environment, as his whistles (similar to the ones he uses to communicate and care for his mother) reverberate through the verdant mountains, calling for the cow and other stranded animals left in the storm's aftermath.

However, while these future-oriented endeavours performed by the townspeople signals the primacy the film gives to the sources of communal resistance in the face of environmental loss and protracted violence, García's concluding vision does not preclude her from showing the ongoing infrastructural collapse of the town, nor does it disavow the calamities to come. In the film's last scene, to offer one last example, the remaining families sit on Jaime and Yoya's porch now surrounded by the darkened landscape, teasingly suggesting the advantages of the storm, such as the clear skies and the lovely moon, which, as they say, money cannot buy. "No," Yoya

[8] "Todo se me juntó y aquí estoy amarrado."

 ISSN 2171-9594

responds, "When will it ever? Only nature can give you that," framing nature away from the instrumentalised logic that undergirds extractivism. As they continue to discuss the upsides of their situation and their plans to repair the *plaza* the next morning, Jaime teasingly proposes that they should proclaim themselves "los reyes de San Marcos" ["the kings of San Marcos"]—fleshing out the meaning behind the film's title. While this scene could be easily read through a tone of triumphalism against the apocalyptic and expulsive forces of extraction, this moment is soon upended by the sound of gunshots coming from the adjacent mountains. Although the townspeople follow up their conversation and continue to reminisce about the past before a second round of shots is heard, García's camera pans to capture the fear in their faces as they look deep into the darkness. Opening the shot to frame the isolated dwelling perilously standing against the treacherous night, the lingering image serves as a prelude to the film's closing titles, which call attention to the brutal consequences of confronting the interests of the state-corporate alliances that seek to uproot them. And yet, by continuing to rest its focus on the still-standing structures and the community-driven efforts to reclaim and maintain these lands, the ending also upends the apocalyptic forecasts angled almost entirely toward catastrophe and ecological depletion.

While *Los reyes* draws attention to the violent despoiling and brutal reshaping of peripheral environments that powers hydro-development, it likewise renders tangible alternative ways of perceiving nature that defy its endless commodification and enclosure. In deploying a contemplative documentary approach that forces us to look attentively at the current struggles over environmental futures, the film responds formally to the extractive calculus that devaluates rural territories and land-based lifeways, carefully registering the alternative forms of socioecological organisation that are currently mobilised to restore, cultivate and affirm life in the face of the behemoth schemes of death and dispossession that continue to proliferate across the Americas. *Los reyes*'s orientation to these neglected ecological entanglements thus highlights the potential of defamiliarised and durational cinematic forms to interrupt the accelerated and growth-driven extractive imaginings that shape our present, as the elongated nature of García's filmic gaze operates to elicit a critical attunement to different registers of existence that exceed capitalism's profit-driven confines. Ultimately, the disruption of the fixed social realities and temporal orderings of extraction in *Los reyes* endeavours to bring to focus the accretive and occluded socioecological harms inextricably bound up with capitalism's rapacious appropriation of environments, offering a window into the overlooked resistances arising from the world-destroying projects of neoliberal developmentalism and urging us to see beyond the extractive-oriented future that capitalist modernity prompts us to envision.

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Losing Miami: Imagining Post-Extractivist Futures in the "Magic City"

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Abstract

Against the principled ecological wisdom of economic degrowth in the face of planetary catastrophe, echoed throughout a capacious archive of work on the imperative to restrict the ceaseless extraction of the biosphere, the sunshine state has doubled down on relentless growth in its primary economic sectors. Investment in agrocapital, for example—most notably sugar and phosphate—moves forward relentlessly, despite the clear ecological consequences of continued investment in such extractive economies; so too, their deleterious impacts on the state's largely Afro-Caribbean and Latinx working class, many of whom work in either the state's agricultural corridor or in the rock quarries that flank Miami. As an example of uneven development, and what critics have lately termed uneven disaster, the city of Miami incisively illustrates the settler logics that have long drawn speculators to Florida's central and southeastern bioregions; and it is to Miami that I shall draw my attention when considering the disastrous impacts of agrocapitalism (and unchecked industrial development more broadly) in an era increasingly defined by cataclysmic shifts to global and local climate. Specifically, in this essay I examine Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué's book-length poem *Losing Miami* in order to explore the impacts of Florida's feckless development schemes on Miami's coastal precariat. Although, as I shall also argue, *Losing Miami* is not merely a critique; it is a provocation. What I term Ojeda-Sagué's "limestone lyricism" offers both a productive vehicle for thinking through the violent histories of Jim Crow, and the role of private property in the production of citizenship; and it likewise presents the possibility that Miami's sinking endoskeleton may be ripe for coalition-building in the face of imminent disaster.

Keywords: Climate, power, lyric, uneven disaster, development.

Resumen

Frente al conocimiento ecológico ejemplar del decrecimiento económico ante la catástrofe planetaria, que resuena a través de un gran número de obras sobre la imperativa de restringir la incesante extracción de la biosfera, Florida ha apostado a favor del implacable crecimiento de sus principales sectores económicos. La inversión en agrocapital, por ejemplo—notablemente azúcar y fosfato—, avanza incesantemente, a pesar de las claras consecuencias ecológicas de la continua inversión en tales economías extractivas; así como los impactos perjudiciales para las comunidades Afrocaribeñas y Latinx de clase trabajadora, muchas de las cuales trabajan en el corredor agrícola del estado o en las canteras que flanquean Miami. Como ejemplo del desarrollo desequilibrado, y a lo que los críticos se han referido como desastre desequilibrado, la ciudad de Miami ilustra de forma incisiva las lógicas de colonización que durante mucho tiempo han atraído a especuladores a las biorregiones del centro y sureste del estado. Y es en Miami en la que me centro al considerar los impactos desastrosos del agrocapitalismo (y, más ampliamente, del desarrollo industrial desenfrenado) en una era cada vez más definida por cambios cataclísmicos en el clima global y local. En concreto, en este ensayo examino el libro/poema *Losing Miami*, de Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, para explorar los impactos de los ineficaces esquemas de desarrollo en el precariado de la costa de Miami. Aunque, como también argumentaré, *Losing Miami* no es simplemente una crítica, es una provocación. Lo que denomino el "lirismo de calcita" de Ojeda-Sagué ofrece un vehículo productivo para reflexionar sobre las violentas

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

historias de Jim Crow y sobre el papel de la propiedad privada en la producción e la ciudadanía; y, asimismo, presenta la posibilidad de que el hundimiento del endoesqueleto de Miami pueda estar preparado para el desarrollo de coaliciones frente al desastre inminente.

Palabras clave: Clima, fuerza, lírica, desastre desigual, desarrollo.

> I want to wonder the following publicly. The ocean is a manifestation of the unknown and the changing, the imperceptibly far and deep, and it is also monstrous in both reality and text. Miami gains its unique cultural/language construction from a traversal of the surface of the ocean. What happens, then, when that which produces Miami, the ocean, covers it? Swallows it? Fills it?
> Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, *Losing Miami* (2019)

> Our imaginations failed us. Our models failed us
> Karen Russell, "The Gondoliers" (2019)

Against the principled ecological wisdom of economic degrowth in the face of planetary catastrophe, which has been echoed throughout a capacious archive of work on the imperative to restrict the ceaseless extraction of the biosphere, the sunshine state has doubled down on relentless growth in its primary economic sectors.[1] Investment in agrocapital, for example—most notably sugar and phosphate—moves forward relentlessly, despite the clear ecological consequences of continued investment in such extractive economies. Mirroring "green revolutions" across the Global South, over-investment in energy-intensive industrial agriculture has in fact proven disastrous for local ecosystems, not to mention an already beleaguered and dispossessed working-class majority now further suffering from the interlocking forces of environmental toxicity and cataclysmic shifts to local and global climate.[2]

[1] Anathema to the impulse of endless accumulation that is the central drive of capital, ecological economists since the 1970s have prioritized consideration of the biophysical limits of markets and have thus called for various forms of economic "degrowth." Regarding Florida specifically, the glaring consensus is that "one way or another, the very near future will force South Florida to contend with the biogeophysical reality of humanity's carbon dioxide problem" whether or not local legislators concede to privilege planetary health over profit for agrocapitalist elites (Ariza 251).

[2] For further discussion of the failures of agrocapitalism in the context of green revolution campaigns (as well as the long-term deleterious impacts of agrocapital globally) see also Ashley Dawson's *Environmentalism from Below: How Global People's Movements Are Leading The Fight For Our Planet* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2024). Among the impacts of overdevelopment and industrial agriculture for local communities are soaring asthma rates in cities like Belle Glade, a largely African-American community adjacent to the sugar fields of south-central Florida. "Big Sugar" is the third largest economic sector in the state, and its practice of burning cane has created an epidemic of asthma in the region. See Michael Adno's essay "A Fire in the River: Big Sugar and 'Black Snow' in the Everglades": https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/sugar-crop-pollutants-florida-1234924707/

 ISSN 2171-9594

The evident consequences of overdevelopment on the state's increasingly coastal precariat, however—whether daily deluges or soaring asthma rates—still don't seem to deter investment. While calls for social and environmental justice resound across the state, and energy justice workers carve out space to consider not merely economic degrowth—a strategy framed by the mandates of capital—but the cultivation of a just future for all of Florida's stakeholders, development continues apace.[3] Meanwhile, Florida also boasts the highest rate of population increase in the nation. Some are likely drawn by the promises of employment in the abovementioned industries; many more have cited the libertarian virtues enshrined in recent policy endeavors designed to insure the sorts of rogue freedoms long associated with a much-mythologized American frontier. The last gubernatorial election offers evidence of the latter.

Ever the inverse of more 'majestic' sites like Yosemite National Park or Henry David Thoreau's beloved Mount Katahdin, Florida had long suffered from an imaginative perception of its landscape as inhospitable to development, let alone worthy of conservation.[4] But this would change following nineteenth-century drainage campaigns that would allow for permanent settlement; the following century, Henry Flagler's railroad—running from Jacksonville to Key West—would then insure the edification of settler infrastructures and the further marginalization of the state's largely Indigenous and pan-Caribbean underclass. Indeed, only a decade or so after Frank Norris's notable literary indictment of corporate rail's enclosure of California's farmland, Flagler's railroad would be celebrated as an engineering marvel and one that would guarantee Florida's belated entry into a national imaginary that would hinge on "the promise of [such] infrastructure" (Anand).[5]

Within this quintessential site of American dreaming, the "magic" city of Miami would stand apart as a true marvel and one directly tethered to the industrial virtuosity of Mr. Flagler. But as "the promises of modernity [...] crumb[e]" in the face of overdevelopment and climate change, the city also offers a unique illustration of precarity in its cruel amplification of what critics term uneven disaster (Anand 30). Ashley Dawson, commenting on the fallout from Hurricane Sandy in 2012, appropriated Trotsky's familiar formulation of "combined and uneven development" to consider the sorts of "combined and uneven disaster" on display after such extreme weather events (2013). "Uneven disaster" shall figure centrally in the following pages in which I examine a literary critique of Miami's fragile infrastructure by Miami-born poet Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué. Their book-length poem *Losing Miami,* which they describe as an "experiment in grieving," is a bilingual indictment of the sorts of infrastructural

[3] Moratoria on development have been lifted; so too, any investment in climate-mitigating green technologies. Additionally, new bills have been passed to protect real estate interests against, most recently, 'squatters' in a landscape of unchecked increases to housing costs; thus, developers are further incentivized to invest their capital.

[4] William Cronon's foundational 1997 essay "The Trouble with Wilderness" recounts the coterminous aesthetic and economic ideologies that produced both the wilderness tradition in American literary production and its material analogue in the form of the National Park System.

[5] See Frank Norris's 1901 novel *The Octopus: The Story of California.*

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

"apartheid" that I outline throughout (Copy Cover, Connelly). Moving between images of urban ruin and reflections on the conditions of exile amongst Miami's Cuban community, the poet interweaves potent lyrical indictments of the imperial logic of private property with extensive commentary centering the unique forms of uneven development and dispossession that mark the drowning city. Among them are new means of gentrification, driven largely by sea-level rise, which plague historically Black and Latinx neighborhoods.

Such forms of "climate gentrification" have become commonplace. As an example, communities like the largely Black and Latinx Liberty City are being razed in the interest of new residential development; similarly, neighborhoods such as "Little Haiti" are threatened by initiatives like the mixed-use "Magic City Innovation District," which promises substantial returns on what amounts to the eviction of local residents (Chéry & Morales). Of course, there is also a less visible form of infrastructural apartheid, and one emboldened by soaring investment by the fossil-fuel industries: the porous limestone that constitutes the state's bedrock is being extracted ever more feverishly in the interest of cement – based highway construction. This causes increased flooding conditions and occasionally sinkholes in lower-rent districts.

Such realities, however, only recently appear in popular discourse concerning the "magic" city; and this includes the growing corpus of speculative fiction centered on a city that earned the moniker of "magical," because of the breakneck pace with which it moved from putative wilderness to coastal playground—a process that pivoted on the violent removal of the region's Indigenous communities and the indenture of tens of thousands of Caribbean laborers. Popular Florida fiction writer Karen Russell valiantly enfolds questions around class and social injustice into stories like those in the recent anthology *Orange World and Other Stories* (2019)*;* and Lily Brooks-Dalton centers questions of dispossession and uneven disaster in the disturbingly proleptic 2022 *The Light Pirate*—a novel that chronicles the sorts of era-defining storms that permanently alter otherwise pristine coastlines (and which is set in a sinking city explicitly sacrificed to keep Miami afloat).[6] Neither, however, attend to the century-old horrors of the state's racialized development patterns. Russell's alligator wrestlers in the 2011 *Swamplandia* don't quite drive the point home like the images contained in N.D.B. Connolly's *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* in which we see luxurious hotel swimming pools featuring dispossessed Seminole performers wrestling gators in full regalia as white patrons enjoy the services of a largely Caribbean waitstaff. The latter were also forced to perform a caricature of their Caribbean identities—one real estate developer boasting about "wonderful Bahama Negro[s]" who would be "stripped to the waist and wear big brass rings. And possibly necklaces of live crabs or crawfish" (Connolly 23).

[6] *The Light Pirate* was published one year after Hurricane Ian nearly destroyed historic areas of Fort Myers and Naples on the state's Gulf Coast.

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Such histories of the city remind readers of the interlaced waves of dispossession that suture the diasporic histories of Indigenous communities like the Seminole with those of Caribbean communities such as Miami's Bahamian workforce, and the Cuban exiles long tokenized as ideal immigrants despite the material realities of exurbs like Hialeah, or Riviera Beach in the northern county of Palm Beach. In the following pages, I follow regional historians in centering the racialized development history of the magic city; as an energy humanist interested in infrastructural relations and their mediating discourses, however, I ultimately turn to a literary work that endeavors to render precarity of the sort experienced by such diasporic communities in the face of unprecedented changes, both politically and climatically. If earlier campaigns of dispossession thrived on the imaginative triumphs of Romantic lyric, I shall argue that Ojeda-Sagué's work serves a similar end: against the morally impoverished imagination of settlers who see the region as ripe for speculation, Ojeda-Sagué renders a community whose past may be etched "in the surface of the ocean," but whose future will not recede with the ebbing tide (55). In what follows, I read *Losing Miami* as a critique of the violent legacies of Jim Crow and the correlative role of private property in the dispossession of local communities; but I also interpret the poem as a provocation to consider the possibility of revolution in Ojeda-Sagué's sinking city. Critically, revolution shall also be understood as a rejection of the sorts of infrastructural apartheid that Connolly observes, which is to say a "present-day [form of] apartheid [or] a variation on colonialism" (6).

Infrastructure, a term bandied about to refer merely to the brick-and-mortar foundations of the city (and a replacement for such naggingly socialist-seeming descriptors as "public works" or "public goods") has historically operated to conceal the matrix of white supremacy and private property that was (and continues to be) central to the city's formation. Miami was incorporated in 1896 when Flagler, who had amassed his fortune through Standard Oil, would lay railroad ties far south of what was once swampland, and the same year of the Plessy v Ferguson decision that would declare racial segregation constitutional. For some historians, the coincidence is quite notable. Miami's "magical" progress from wilderness was enabled by the material dispossession not only of its Indigenous communities, but a stillborn Black middle-class consistently terrorized by the white settler state. Riffing on Norris's abovementioned novel of rail expansion and its discontents—*The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901)—local journalist Mario Alejandro Ariza describes Flagler's project (and those of a band of similarly rapacious rubber barons) in terms of a "gilded age kraken…a mythical concentration of wealth, power […] noxious greed" and racism (202).[7] But a reckoning with conventional forms of power of the sort long framed by such "noxious greed" is in fact under way as I shall demonstrate below. In these pages,

[7] A rather different "kraken"—a common octopus, which was found swimming through a submerged Miami parking lot in 2017—has become a sort of bellwether in popular discussions around climate change, and the belated consensus regarding Miami's inevitable collapse. Rob Verchick's *The Octopus in the Parking Garage: A Call for Climate Resilience* (Columbia UP, 2023) centers the famous octopus as a harbinger of what's to come.

I begin with a consideration of the city's history—as developmentalist marvel and tribute to racial apartheid—before delving into the poem as both radical critique and revolutionary provocation.

"[B]lack Miami looked up at a concrete sky"; or, Building the Magic City

Miami's bioregion, inclusive of drained swamp ecologies and denuded mangrove systems, has been decimated by phosphate mines, industrial sugar plantations, a massive network of limestone quarries, and successive legislative measures designed to insure the security of area oligarchs (and their cronies in the halls of state) at the expense of ecological stability, labor equity and the survival of its largely Caribbean working-class. Much-mythologized for area beaches, and lately memorialized in scores of media campaigns around climate crisis and sea-level rise, this century-old tribute to one of the U.S.'s most visible "drain the swamp" campaigns has indeed inspired a fairly extensive corpus of speculative climate fiction in the last decade, if one that often excludes consideration of racial apartheid and settler-colonial terror.[8]

Miami, it should be noted, is adjacent to (or situated in, depending on one's grasp of the state's settler history) the Everglades—a massive swamp ecology, whose area has receded exponentially in recent decades as the city grows to the north and west.[9] The area was finally "cultivated" after a century of being described as a literal "hellscape" by prospectors who were increasingly discouraged by the subtropical terrain–behold "nature at its most uncultivated: an icon infested with frightening reptiles, botanical excess, swarms of mosquitoes, and unforgiving heat" (Ogden 1). Also speaking to the long settler history of the region, Devin Garofalo describes the "Everglades" in terms of its ability to "conjure visions of a vast, impenetrable, sublime expanse"—a perception responsible for everything from Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's initial calls to "drain the swamp and thus master it as Egyptians had the Nile" to the garden-variety Orientalist racism evinced in popular films like the 1956 B-horror film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (2017).[10] What Groff would describe in the 2018 story "Boca Raton" as the "black blank at the bottom of the state," Garofalo understands in terms of "the anthropocentric fantasy of a planet whose resources are infinite, endlessly ripe for the claiming, the taking, the exploiting" (2017). But the unceded lands of the Seminole, Apalachee, Miccosukee, Calusa and Tequesta tribes—the latter living alongside Lake Mayaimi, now Okeechobee—would

[8] Colson Whitehead and Tananarive Due are examples of writers who do in fact attend to the long history of Jim Crow Florida; Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Due's *The Reformatory* specifically take to task the notorious Dozier School for Boys. Due also reminds us that agricultural work in the state's phosphate mines was undertaken by young men of color long before migrant laborers from Central and South America would be brutalized by multinational corporations like The Mosaic Company (https://mosaicco.com/).

[9] The Everglades was so-named by settlers to refer to what appeared as a vast grassland; Indigenous communities referred to the area as a site of "grassy waters."

[10] The film, it ought to be noted, was shot in a northern region of the state similarly subject to European settlement—the Wakulla River littoral—but claims a nameless Amazonian setting as its backdrop.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

be "cultivated," and violently so, not only by prospectors, but the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the National Park System. In 1947, the region that was still viable swampland (and home to the amphibious infrastructures of the Miccosukee) would become a national park upon the near-exhaustion of the state's cypress forests—prized wood for building putatively permanent settlements, if ones that wouldn't endure hurricanes of the category that decimated the region in the late 1920s. The city's planners would only belatedly come to learn the virtue of cement.

Importantly, a century before the Cuban working class would be employed to mine the city's bedrock (about which more below), in the 1920s Miami's labor force was largely Bahamian; these were workers who hailed from another place where coral limestone would prove invaluable for construction in the face of cyclonic activity. The latter also demonstrates Chris Campbell's argument regarding "economies of quarry and extraction [which] form an important substrate of [the] imaginaries" of Caribbean writers, and which continue to inspire works that center the sorts of infrastructures that figure in Ojeda-Sagué's poem, and those of renowned Barbadian poet Kamau Braithewaite (66). So too, literary critic Anne Stewart's argument for an "angry planet" reading methodology that attends to such historical ironies as the situating of those same Bahamian laborers on a coastal ridge several feet above sea level. Consequently, while some global speculators continue to park their capital on the coasts and bank on a sufficient return before submersion, others are seeking higher ground in the area historically understood by the racist epithet "Colored Town."

Critical to this discussion of infrastructural apartheid, it also ought to be noted that when the city sought to expand Interstate-95 in 1968, as Flagler's unfinished railroad continued to crumble into the lower keys, the town (long termed "Overtown" by its residents) would now be shrouded by the I-95 Midtown Overpass, which was installed in 1968 to much fanfare for the well-heeled who could now easily navigate to local airports and beaches. Meanwhile, Black children "looked up to a concrete sky" in what might more aptly be termed "undertown" (Connolly 2). What a striking tribute to what energy humanist Jeffrey Insko has termed "infrastructural intimacy" to name the condition of infrastructural violence that finds socioeconomically precarious communities subject to such demeaning and toxic environments (2023). "Overtown" remains framed by a crumbling yellow six-foot cement partition that once insured against "'inharmonious racial groups' [considered] more of a hazard than flooding or hurricanes'" (Ariza 202); but it was also built on that prized ridge whose worth would come to be known well after NASA scientist James E. Hansen would popularize the concept of "global warming," and its relationship to sea-level rise, in 1988.

The Atlantic Coastal Ridge is actually twelve feet above sea level; Miami Beach is a mere four feet. Yes, in "Overtown" ancient coral interpolates the red lines of Jim Crow—a concise example of what Stewart describes as an "angry planet alliance" (2022). Such "angry planet" readings offer new frameworks for looking at a host of popular representations of the city, amongst them Barry Jenkins's exquisite 2016 film

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Moonlight. The film was shot on that same ridge, in "Liberty Square," which was built not only far from the affluence of Miami Beach, but far enough from the sandy horizon to evoke a sort of real marvelous for young "Chiron," Jenkins's protagonist. Viewers of the film may recall "Little," or Chiron, sitting on the beach in tears and imagining himself "turning to drops [...] [rolling] out into the water" (*Moonlight*). Viewers may also recall an exquisite moment of intimacy between Chiron and his friend Kevin, and one that makes palpable the communities who are often dismissed not only by predatory real estate speculators, but also by community activists guided by a market ideology that euphemizes racial violence with language intended to minimize "poverty density" through conventional means of "economic improvement"; the latter is illustrated in the recent documentary *Razing Liberty Square* (2024).

Of course, Miami's Afro-Caribbean communities have not only suffered the settler logics of development whereby their disposability is sanctioned by economic justifications for "improvement" in the imperial sense—a rubric that also erases long-standing relationships to and with the land that were systematically denied over the course of four centuries of American history.[11] The communities at stake in *Losing Miami* have also endured a political myopia that simultaneously pathologizes Miami's Haitian and Jamaican communities while holding up the city's Cuban residents as a quintessential model minority and one who seemingly occupies a homogenous political bloc. The approximately 400,000 Cuban exiles, amongst whom Kevin and Chiron's mentor Juan may be counted as descendants, and who cultivated a critical presence in the sinking city during the 1950s, continue to figure in the Republican imagination as an example of the potential for capitalist states to successfully *improve* the uncultivated communist masses in need of democratic reform. Sixty years hence, the grandchildren of the Castro generation tell a rather different story.

Ojeda-Sagué's speaker is one of them; and he offers biting and relentless lyrical prose that is unapologetic in its angry indictment of the state's Republican establishment and the continued investment in private real estate at the expense of local communities who are literally drowning. The speaker invokes Chiron's beach repeatedly, describing it as the "oxidized" inverse of area postcards (40). In lyrics that hauntingly conjure the slow deterioration of this coastal landscape, the speaker demands consideration of the relationship between lithified coral limestone and its sandy brethren into which the city crumbles daily; so too, of course, of the city's vast "undercommons," who find common ground on that second beach (Moten and Harney). It is for this reason that I am interested to trace the intersecting histories of settler violence and infrastructural breakdown, while also attending to radical worldbuilding in Miami where "transition" is absolutely being leveraged by the agents of corporate greed, but where communities are also building coalitions in the interest of redistributive justice.

It is also worth mentioning, in this critique of developmentalism as it operated (and continues to operate) in the region, that in the introduction to Min Hyoung

[11] For a discussion of Black commoning economies and anti-capitalist relationships with landscape, see also Jennifer James's "Dyspossession: Notes on the Black Commons." *Post45* 19 Sept 2023.

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Song's recent book *Climate Lyricism,* Song critiques the term 'undercommons' worrying that it might reinforce, imaginatively speaking, a perceived lack of agency amongst the working poor; but Song also acknowledges that the undercommons are figured as such because Fred Moten and Stefano Harney explicitly reject aspirations to agency as are framed by the ideologies of the settler state—what they describe as the "auto-interpellative torque that biopower's subjection requires and rewards" (Song 9).[12] This rejection resonates with Stewart's argument (in the context of an 'angry planet' methodology) that we ought to work toward an ontological withdrawal from the infrastructural imaginary of the settler state—that which is framed by the accumulation of capital in the form of property. Ojeda-Sagué's particular brand of "climate lyricism" models such a withdrawal in its critique of property and the associated ills of imperial liberalism; the poem accomplishes this, in part, through its emphasis on property as a vehicle for biopolitical belonging. *Losing Miami* offers a deft figuration of solastalgia whereby the loss of home for the diasporic subject is intimately linked to the loss of the city itself; the speaker's subjectivity is shot through with a "shrinking future and an expanded memory" (Ariza 245). The drowning city (as figured in the poem) "symbolize[s] the ruins of an anticipated future, and the debris of an anticipated or experienced liberal modernity" (Anand et al 27). The titular loss thus functions both symbolically and literally. Ultimately, the poem rejects the logic of land as property and its accumulation as a social good.

Beginning with this rejection of the logic of property, in the remaining pages I will organize my argument along three axes, each anchored in a close reading of *Losing Miami.* First, I consider property and, correlatively, infrastructure, both in terms of cement as well as the sociomaterial infrastructural formations that buttress a place like Miami Beach; second, poetic form, or what I am terming Ojeda-Sagué's "limestone lyricism" to name the relationship between the shared ecologies of Caribbean writers rooted in landscapes of limestone, whose lyrics draw attention to the intimate relationship between colonial dispossession, sublime imaginings of paradise, and industrial modernity; and finally, the possibility that every crack in the pavement poses an invitation for revolutionary infrastructural worldbuilding—a potential revolution for the "thousands" like the speaker who figure alongside limestone and salt water: "i do not wake up alone here, alone in thinking i am losing everything" (32). That this catastrophic loss is also communicated in a poem that is unapologetically bilingual—rendering the texture of this distinctly diasporic community in lines that move rapidly between Spanish and English—is also a critical

[12] In Jack Halberstam's introduction to Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study,* he remarks: "if you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, Indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the 'we' who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now,limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls" (6).

means of establishing what the author describes as the "language ecosystem" of their childhood community (9).

On "Concrete Mangroves," Limestone Lyricism and *Losing Miami*

Cristian Simonetti, in his contribution to the collection *Solarities: Elemental Encounters and Refractions,* addresses the porosity of limestone and attends to concrete in a way that resonates with the poem's intersectional critique of settler infrastructure—as a concealment of fragility and one enabled by the sacrifice of others:

> Cement results from the burning of limestone, a sedimentary rock made of petrified shells, the appearance of which relates closely to the emergence of bones in evolution [...] In burning the remaining exoskeletons of sea creatures that formerly constituted ancient, submerged reefs, urban dwellers have somewhat created their own reefs on land to protect their fragile bodies (120).

Interestingly, Simonetti's metaphorical reefs become palpable in the speculative worlds of Florida fiction writers like the aforementioned Russell, whose wonderful tale of echolocating gondoliers is set in a submerged, now amphibious, Miami. "The Gondoliers" offers a rather hopeful glimpse of what others might imagine as a watery tomb; the disintegrating limestone here creates little alcoves teeming with life. One of my undergraduate students (in coastal Florida), in their final project—a short story about post-submersion Miami—referred to the faded coastline in similar terms: "The monolithic condo complexes on the horizon stuck out of the water like concrete mangroves" (Lewis 1).

Simonetti also remarks that "concrete is arguably the material that has most significantly contributed to spread modernity's narrative of progress, [...] advancing forward on the road of civilization" (119). Aptly euphemizing the geological impacts of colonial-capitalist modernity as the "concretocene," riffing on the more popular (and rightfully embattled) term Anthropocene, Simonetti adds to the ongoing debates regarding how to narrate the impacts of uneven development; as well, the degree to which the putatively impermeable foundation of industrial modernity is but another means of concealment—its smooth lines paving over the geo-epistemological violence of settler infrastructures. It is also useful to recall Campbell's argument here regarding quarry economies and the Caribbean poetic imagination; not to mention, the sedimentation of liberal subjectivity within the appropriative logic of capital—that is, the development of the citizen-subject through the accumulation of property. I refer to those unceded lands whose rightful inhabitants lack the political agency to protest more legibly—whether the Miccosukee community, or the residents of Little Haiti whose homes are being threatened owing to a series of creative legal ordinances designed to abet the construction of sites like the "Magic City Innovation District."

The poem deploys a bit of levity in playing with such histories of colonial dispossession: "if I/find a mattress/in the middle/of the gulf/does that make/me Columbus?" (53) But then the tone shifts. After excoriating the new round of land

grabs at the hands of speculators looking for higher ground, the speaker mockingly remarks: "For the sake of going on, I build property. I make money as I build and so I build more" (31). Ojeda-Sagué cleverly interweaves the material and the symbolic in this damning tribute to the drowning city. The poet effectively documents the interlocking traumas of racialized violence, cultural loss, and (quite palpably) environmental disaster in a city "bursting… [with] the leaks in drains below. White noise of septic tanks bursting. Of limestone cut into" (30). Describing the slow decay of the city and its environs, the author coins the term "Permacrumble" (30) in reference to the persistent, if seemingly gradual, erosion of the city's central infrastructures. "Wading through limestone," the speaker offers up "vertebrae tercets" to describe this disintegrating infrastructure; in this sense, the poem becomes a lyrical expression of the city's backbone where, it should also be noted, only "*after* electricity, there is food" (20, 36). This, of course, is also a reference to the tenuous nature of power in lower Miami—both the regulated power of the city's crumbling grid and the unregulated power of communities agitating for justice. There is no clear break between the material erosion of the city and that of their community; there are also haunting figurations of the speaker's drowning body being literally, materially, interpolated with saltwater: the "blinking holes [...] stinging from salt coming in, going out" (32).

Perhaps even more haunting are the references to Key Largo, the northernmost key and home to numerous employees from the region's major mining companies. There's a moratorium on building there now, as in most of the Keys, but not yet on the mainland. In scenes also worthy of a climate fiction blockbuster, each massive bucket of limestone, which is wrenched from the Earth to accommodate a rapidly expanding population, is littered with shark teeth, various marine exoskeletons, and, occasionally, the desecrated bones of dispossessed Indigenous communities. Such scenes invite visitors to wonder how we will ourselves be ambered when our state finally becomes the first "aquatic museum to petroculture" (Boyer 2023). Perhaps Ojeda-Sagué's cynicism is appropriate—referencing, for example, the Pinecrest Bakery on Key Largo where locals "order pastries in a whisper"—"a cafecito [spiked] with a shot of sadness" (Ojeda-Sagué 9, Ariza 227). The speaker quips: "If the reference to Pinecrest Bakery is lost on you, no problem. It will be lost on everybody soon enough! I'm sorry, I don't mean to be flippant, but I also do" (9).

The poem takes Miami's submersion as a foregone conclusion, and it ought to: the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts its total submersion by 2100. Residents of neighboring counties often muse that they will survive, although in a rather more amphibious landscape; notably, *The Light Pirate* is set in a town that will be recognized by its coordinates as southern Palm Beach County. It is a town lacking any vital seaport and thus discarded long before Miami would suffer such a legislative fate. Such sentiments are commonplace, which is perhaps why the poet creates tercets that mimic the experience of uneven disaster; so too, of the disjointed, uneven grid that powers the crumbling city. The poem roars

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

like the winds of a category-4 hurricane, sweeping across the ephemeral plain of an "oxidized beach" where diminutive sanderlings no longer play and where sun-tanned bodies are replaced with the shrapnel of infrastructural collapse (20).

The poem, critically, moves between the more ephemeral sandscape and its sedimented cousin in the coral limestone edifices that are crumbling into the sea, and where the city of Miami becomes a "dangling modifier" without a stable referent (21). Incisively dramatizing Sonya Posmentier's argument for disruptive lyrical forms that reflect the precarity of their speakers—what the critic describes in terms of catastrophic breaks, or ruptures—Ojeda-Sagué offers a poem that roars like a hurricane and is as ephemeral as sand. Echoing Campbell, *Losing Miami* is a poem that is as much stone as wind, born of the "historical and social relations grounded in landscapes of coral limestone" (73). In this vein the "porousness of limestone becomes as significant as the revolutionary potential of the hurricane for better comprehending and articulating the complexities of Caribbean culture and history" (74)—what the poet also describes as the "murmurs of the exile" which stand in for the ineffable experience of return (20). A child and grandchild of Cuban exiles, the speaker wonders: "what it would be like to be exiles from Miami, to have the city be an effect only of memory and simulation as Havana is for the Cuban exile generation, to have any description of the city be a dangling modifier, to have to put my antennae at the bottom of the ocean" (21). It is hard not to recall the famous formulation by Stuart Hall regarding that "presence" which is just barely tangible to the exile (1990).[13]

Hall's figuration of diasporic identity, like Braithwaite's, assumes a particular shape—one whose contours are always shifting like the winds of Ojeda-Sagué's lyrical space. If, per Posmentier, "Braithwaite's call for poetry worthy of hurricanes is a future-oriented call for a circulatory poetics that acknowledges the geographic range and the violence of the hurricane's motion" (14), Ojeda-Sagué's response is to offer lyric that is similarly contoured. In the penultimate section entitled "Better Organized," which is actually a satirical tribute to preparedness in the face of unprecedented disaster, the poet begins by scoffing at a category-1 hurricane: "not enough to lift the ocean/ and pour it into my pants/ at least not here, but it/ can evacuate a coast, and set it/ aside, or it can destroy New/ York, but even I can destroy/ New York" (97). But the speaker is no match for a category-4. When they refer to Hurricane Matthew, which "organized […] into a category-4," the tempo picks up, gains wind and speed (101). Now the speaker is "going crazy with the news, gusts/ imagining my husband is the eye, where rooms [...] riding rain into my attic, my basement is/ a puzzle box of limestone and water…" (104). The category-4 organizes itself with the "remnants" of the lesser Antilles and the "heads of the keys"; and the

[13] In his foundational essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall speaks of the ineffable experience of return for the diasporic subject. He crafts a geopolitical matrix of "presences"—African, European and American—that frame the experience of forced movement and assimilation for enslaved persons across multiple continents.

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poet's family organizes along with it. Undeniably, here we see a play on organizing; here too, an indication of alliances.

Of course, it is in the texture of what Ojeda-Sagué terms their "experiment in grieving" that we find a more succinct homage to such a "circulatory poetics" (Cover Copy, Posmentier 14). In another entry, entitled "Fire Ants," we read of "the daily hurricane in the refrigerator/ not yet condensed/ the Ziploc of fire ants"; still further: "I made the tropics into a thin circular theorem" (35). This "theorem" is amply proven not only in explicit allusions to, for example, Hurricane Matthew; the poem's very structure is recursive, circulatory, and we move along with the winds of the storm, all the while experiencing not the spectacle of disaster but the enduring horrors of the mundane in a world of protracted disaster. "I wish a hurricane were more dramatic," the speaker sarcastically retorts (99).

Conclusion: Revolutionary Infrastructures

Disaster is cruel in its amplification of landscapes of precarity. Miami's ramparts are bursting at the seams; and those in low-lying communities will surely suffer first and most horrifically. But because this poetic experiment teems with rhetorical possibility—indulging the necessary impulse to grieve while resisting the sort of callous apocalypticism that often marks popular climate fictions—I'll close by addressing the title as an open signifier and one useful for imagining a just future for the unnamed "thousands" who inhabit Ojeda-Sagué's Miami. The titular "losing" operates on multiple registers, amongst them surely the loss of home for the diasporic subject, and of course the material loss of property. But perhaps "losing" can also function more transformatively; perhaps it can also function as a potential disarticulation of the colonial-capitalist transaction, the central terms of which rely on the building and accumulation of property. The speaker is explicitly unmoored; their home is but a signifier whose signified lies either in the "murmurs of the exile"—not the "aftertaste, but third taste–of Cuba"—or "at the bottom of the ocean" (21). Understood in this way, the poem resonates with discussions of "permacrumble" not merely in terms of infrastructural disruption, but as a moment potentially ripe for coalition building amongst historically dispossessed subjects.[14] Disaster, as we know, also engenders solidarity. Certainly, such readings risk erasure—the erasure of uneven histories and thus, potentially, the uneven impacts of disaster on communities long terrorized by the settler state. But what are we to make of the crumbling, sinking endoskeleton of fossil capitalism—those "ribcages of corporations" sinking into the sea (Ojeda-Sagúe 32)—if not an opportunity for radical infrastructural transformation, or the "revolutionary infrastructures" that Boyer also describes in his

[14] In the introduction to *The Promise of Infrastructure,* editors Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel remark: "As the promises of modernity are crumbling under neoliberal austerity and climate change, the ruins of liberalism are manifest in the sociomaterial remnants of oil wells and superhighways, water pipes and shipping channels, fiber-optic cable and an ever-growing pile of rubble" (30). They also, however, argue that the "ruins of Cartesian dualism" present opportunities for developing "new epistemological infrastructures" of the sort described by Boyer (29).

recent *No More Fossils* (2024)? I thus read the poem not only as an indictment of uneven development, cultural dispossession, and infrastructural violence, but as a provocation.

In the final section of the poem, a single line lingers alone. Occupying a full page, we read: "puts a nest on a higher branch" (114). Perhaps we might consider that "nest" in terms of the communities who are refusing to leave the higher grounds of the Atlantic Coastal Ridge. In *Razing Liberty Square* (2024) viewers are given a glimpse of such robust refusals in the face of liberal development campaigns whose promises are consistently empty—demonstrating, as they have for centuries, a kind of "cruel optimism" (Berlant).[15] Local community members are protesting the razing of their homes, just as that same community protested over half a century ago in the face of the abovementioned highway extension. Or perhaps that nest symbolizes those who are fortifying their low-lying homes because they have been left with little choice but to stay. Far from a lament, this one line seems to gesture toward radical forms of resistance and refusal—that is, refusal of the extractivist logics that understand Miami's undercommons as in fact disposable.

There is much mobilization in the ruins amongst communities who are refusing the forfeiture of their lives in the interest of capital, and thus refusing the libertarian virtues and settler-colonial logics that continue to draw scores of settlers to this sinking, crumbling state. Perhaps a provocation like *Losing Miami,* in its lyrical figuration of not only disaster but of such forms of refusal, is precisely the sort of 'climate fiction' that we need at a moment of incapacitating doom-scrolling; so too, as state and area legislators continue to erase histories of oppression from the public record, just as Brooks-Dalton illustrates the imminent erasure of Miami's suburbs from the state's power grid—a grotesque metaphor for the erasure of communities living in what is becoming a literal 'undercommons' with each passing tide.[16]

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[15] Lauren Berlant's oft-cited 2011 *Cruel Optimism* resonates in this discussion when we think of the degree to which the accumulation of property as an index of political enfranchisement and social flourishing is actually a direct contributor to the imminent demise of Florida's southeastern coast.

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Knowledge Production and Planetarity in the Latin American Essay: An Ecocritical Reading of *Nuestra América* by José Martí[1]

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Abstract

The quest for a genuinely Latin American identity was central to the continent's independence movements and led to one of the most striking entanglements of identitarian discourses and nature narratives in the history of the Americas, namely the seminal essay *Nuestra América* by José Martí. This article argues that *Nuestra América* should be understood as a vital example of decolonial, ecocritical knowledge production from the South, and examines how the essay conceptualises nature as a narrative that contests the anthropocentric, colonial exploitation of the environment and fosters a planetary vision of the human.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, planetarity, knowledge production, Latin American essay, José Martí.

Resumen

La búsqueda de una identidad genuinamente latinoamericana fue fundamental para los movimientos independentistas del continente y dio lugar a uno de los entrelazamientos más destacados entre discursos identitarios y narrativas sobre la naturaleza: el ensayo seminal *Nuestra América* de José Martí. El presente artículo sostiene que *Nuestra América* debe entenderse como un ejemplo central de producción de conocimiento ecocrítico decolonial desde el Sur, y examina cómo el ensayo conceptualiza la naturaleza como una narrativa que denuncia la explotación colonial antropocéntrica del medio ambiente y fomenta una visión planetaria de lo humano.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica, planetariedad, producción de conocimiento, ensayo latinoamericano, José Martí.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Knowledges of the South in the Context of the Anthropocene

Knowledge production and narratives about nature are among the central factors that configure and intervene in the pronounced social inequalities notoriously shaping the global environmental crisis and fuelling the conflicts it generates. And it is an essential aspect of this crisis of the Anthropocene that the far-reaching consequences of the lifestyles and consumption patterns of the Global North have their strongest impact in the Global South. Moreover, the concepts of nature underpinning these systems are traditionally thought of in terms from the Global

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North that are strongly tied to categories of colonial character. And these concepts are not only based on the dichotomies of culture-nature and centre-periphery but also on reified notions that still today consider the (former) colonies as territories waiting to be taken possession of in order to be 'governed' and 'developed'.

Discourses from the Global South critically question and confront these kinds of colonial regimes of knowledge on nature, and given that the current research landscape is dominated by contributions formulated from a Northern perspective (DeLoughrey et al. 2), it seems both worthwhile and necessary to turn toward perspectives and cultural knowledge productions from the South. With this in mind, the article examines Southern discourses of nature and explores how the Latin American essay, and concretely José Martí's *Nuestra América*, conceptualises the New World's nature as a narrative that grants agency to the South, empowers resistance to the exploitation of nature, and overcomes the colonial nature-culture divide by shaping a planetary understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

But to talk of the South is, inevitably, to talk of colonisation, and in consequence to remind its tight relationship with the global environmental crisis. Yet it was the colonisation processes that marked the beginning of global trade and made possible European industrialisation (Lewis and Maslin 17), which is commonly agreed to be the beginning of the great environmental decline. Furthermore, as postcolonial theorists such as B. Sousa de Santos (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 149), E. Said (*Orientalism*), H. Bhabha (*The Location*) and G. Spivak (*The Subaltern*) stress, colonisation processes are not restricted to land, goods, and people but include non-material dimensions, such as ideas, knowledge, and knowledge production. In the colonial context, these aspects are strongly linked to questions of territory, environment, and the New World's nature, which in turn leads to a management and validation of some knowledges alongside the exclusion and disapproval of others. B. Sousa de Santos warns us that this can result in what he calls epistemicide, this is to say "the murder of knowledge" (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 149):

> Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In the most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide. (149)

As a form of opposition and resistance to such historical conditions Sousa de Santos proposes the epistemologies of the South. Yet according to the author these epistemologies are defined as "ways of knowing born in the struggle against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy" (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 371) and aim

> to identify and valorise that which often does not even appear as knowledge in the light of the dominant epistemologies, that which emerges instead as part of the struggles of resistance against oppression and against the knowledge that legitimates such oppression. (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2)

These processes result in especially important forms of knowledge about the relationship between humans and nature, as B. de Sousa Santos notes, putting emphasis on experiential epistemologies:

> Many such ways of knowing are not thought knowledges but rather lived knowledges. The epistemologies of the South occupy the concept of epistemology in order to resignify it as an instrument for interrupting the dominant politics of knowledge. They are experiential epistemologies. (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2)

This framing resonates with Enrique Leff's idea, who approaches Latin American environmental rationality as a Southern knowledge and "on the basis of ecological potentialities and cultural knowledges that inhabit the regions of the South" (Leff 3). And it is my contention that the essay *Nuestra América* by José Martí is a key example of such a Southern knowledge that contests the colonial regimes' paradigm of nature as a resource to be exploited, and that it is linked to experiential ways of knowing, as well as to a planetary mode of thinking (Chakrabarty, "The Planet"). As I argue, Martí discursively re-appropriates the New World's nature by anchoring Latin American identity in nature, advocating lived knowledges and shaping a planetary understanding of the relationship between humans and nature that fosters a discourse of reinhabitation. Thus, the essay *Nuestra América* marks a milestone in Latin American environmental thought that is inevitably located at the crossroads of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.

Knowledge Production and the Entanglement of Colonialism and 'Nature'

With regard to the entanglement of colonialism, nature, and knowledge production, it has to be stressed that B. de Sousa Santos postulates nature as the third principal form of imperial Western discovery next to the Orient and "the savage" (Sousa, *Epistemología* 213). According to the author, the discovery of the New World's nature not only entails a power relation between the discoverer and the discovered but includes an empirical and conceptual dimension, being the second one governed by the first one, as "the idea of what is discovered commands the act of the discovery" (Sousa, *Epistemología* 214).

This mechanism of the discovery that is shaped by the idea of the discovery is masterfully exemplified through narratives about the New World's nature, which played an important role in the colonisation process by providing a unique opportunity to impose a European perspective. Yet, representations of the peripheries did not only emerge from the centres themselves (Pratt 4) but aimed "to reinvent America as backwards and neglected […], as manifestly in need of the rationalised exploitation the Europeans bring" (Pratt 163). For centuries, representations of Latin America's nature portrayed the colonisation process as a successful endeavour (Donavan 42), allowing the region and its inhabitants to be recreated according to wishful imaginings, as a territory in need of civilisation by Europeans, as a land full of exotic dangers and adventures, or as a picturesque landscape full of undiscovered species (Waliszewski n.p.). In consequence, we are dealing with a form of domination over foreign territories (Said 3) in which the conceptual dimension commands the empirical dimension, and thus configures a way to think of the New World's nature as pristine one, whose purpose is to be exploited

until exhaustion (Sousa, *Milenio* 149). Accordingly, this colonial regime of knowledge does not allow for reciprocity but segregates the human from the non-human and shores up the nature-culture divide, which preaches the "ecological superiority of humans and the cultural superiority of men" (Mallory 309). Yet the colonial imaginary of the New World's nature is based on the premise of "man as the alleged nature of all things" (Braidotti 2) and promotes a model of rationality that, since the Enlightenment, has prevailed in European and Western culture, providing "the basic unit of reference for what counts as human" (Braidotti 22). Nature, however, is postulated "as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason" (Plumwood 19), which therefore corresponds to "the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness" (Plumwood 19). Conceived in opposition to the human, as well as to culture and rationality, "'nature' has been a very broad and shifting category and has encompassed many different sorts of colonization" (Plumwood 1), which among others has led to its nexus with the Anthropocene, the Androcene, colonialism and racism. Val Plumwood pinpoints it when she says:

> The category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic differences as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture [...]. (4)

This linkage is illustrated by Santos de Sousa's thoughts on the discursive construction of 'the savage' as that which dwells between the human, the animal, the demon and the monster (Sousa, *Epistemología* 219). Along the same line of thought, Donna Haraway states that those excluded from the master category of reason encompass "the colonized and the enslaved, the marginalized and the non-citizen, the woman and the animal—which all of them are made into Other than rational man" (18). And Rosi Braidotti observes that:

> Such rational self-assurance has historically played a major role in the construction of a civilizational model that equated Europe with the universalizing powers of reason and progress. This hegemonic cultural model was instrumental to the colonial ideology of European expansion [...]. Europe as universal consciousness points the power of reason as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity. (23)

Promoting the discrimination of the colonised, the natural, and the feminine as non-rational (and in consequence as non-human), this model links postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and feminism, showing how the colonial regime of knowledge represents a position that "tended to view the natural order as servitude, violence, and brutality: nature as the naturalization of inequalities" (Braidotti 23).

Despite the persistence of colonial epistemologies, which still today promote this naturalisation of inequalities, the New World's nature remains a primary signifier for a genuinely Latin American identity and its meaning has been subjected to

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

ongoing changes. Depending on the historical moment, narratives about Latin American nature have served different purposes and so it comes that some reproduce colonial power relations, while others have to be considered counter-narratives and contestations to the model of nature propagated by the metropolitan regime. From Columbus' diaries to La Condamine's catalogue, the New World's nature was related to exoticism and celebrated as the discovery of a lost paradise that, in the name of the civilisational mission, had to be explored, measured, tamed, developed and exploited. The paradisiacal and adventurous depictions of European narratives masked the colonial violence and environmental exploitation, and in the centuries that followed, they aimed to shore up colonial power relations. When nation-building processes took over in the nineteenth century, nature became intrinsically related to the nation-state (and later to a Pan-Americanism), turning into one of the main reference points for Latin American identity, which served as a central pillar for the fragile political independence of the Spanish-American nations that needed to consolidated as an autochthonous, genuine culture (Martí, *Claves del pensamiento* XI). This historical moment is of particular importance because it created the foundations for a process of self-determination, in the course of which Latin American identity could be reconceptualised by means of non-European ideas and imaginaries in relation to its natural environment. Guided by the goal of distinguishing themselves from Europe and North America, these identity debates of the nineteenth century coincided with the birth of the Latin American essay (Mansilla 60), which resulted an especially fitting literary genre for reflecting critically on the political and social tasks of the new nations (de Onís 444), assigning central importance to the discourse of nature. *Nuestra América*, by José Martí, was written in the context of the outlined historical circumstances that constitute the essay's backdrop. I consider here how the essay discursively re-appropriates the New World's nature and empowers the resistance against the colonial regimes of knowledge and its exploitation of nature by shaping a planetary understanding of the environment that responds to the colonial territorial paradigm of nature as a resource to be conquered and tamed.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Nuestra América

Written in 1891, *Nuestra América* has become a milestone of Latin American literature and an obligatory reference in postcolonial studies. As a call to arms against North American economic and cultural policies in Latin America this seminal essay lays the foundations for what the following century would call Latin American ecocritical thought. However, as E. Beckman points out, "today, Martí's Latin Americanism is rather consistently associated with anti-economist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist positions [...]" (19), and his writing has primarily been studied in the context of the resistance to the modernization of Latin America, being only rarely read through the lens of ecocriticism. An example for this phenomenon is J. Ramos' notorious *Nuestra América. Arte del buen gobierno* (2003), where he frames Martí's knowledge related to nature as a return to the most basic and elementary, and as a

stabilising function that opposes to the state discourses of modernisation and progress (Ramos 294). This is due to the fact that *Nuestra América* was published in the midst of the *profiriato* period, in the official newspaper of that developmentalist state, which opened to foreign capital like no other at that time in history (see Ramos 295). Nevertheless, as Nugent argues, Martí stands out as an ecocritical Latinx thinker and "in the era of the environmental humanities, Martí's symbols are taking on new meaning as we enter the 2020s, all too-human crises (of colonialism or of capitalism) are more clearly intertwined with their more-than-human counterparts (deforestation, desertification, and so on)" (Nugent 8). In fact, *Nuestra América* is conditioned by José Martí's exile during the 1880s in the United States, where he "fostered a relationship with several of the seminal thinkers now associated with the ecological movement" (De Vries 167). Thus, like Martí's other writings (for example the prologue to *Poema de Niágara*, by Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde [1882]), it strongly echoes North American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. It is therefore unsurprising that nature is not only centre stage in the essay, but that Martí draws on the language of nature (trees, stones, mountains, octopus, jaguar, condor, seeds, etc.) in order to grapple with the then highly topical question of Latin American cultural identity and to foster opposition to foreign intervention. And it results coherent once understood that for Martí, the exploitation of nature is intrinsically related to economic and cultural colonisation processes. Yet, as he explicitly argues, both the just way to govern Latin American territories and resistance against colonisation are rooted in the knowledge of the inhabited land and nature, and in the way that humans relate to their specific environment:

> And the able governor in America is not the one who knows how to govern the Germans or the French; he must know the elements that make up his own country, and how to bring them together, using methods and institutions originating within the country, to reach that desirable state where each man can attain self-realization and all may enjoy the abundance that Nature has bestowed in everyone in the nation to enrich with their toil and defend with their lives. Government must originate in the country. The spirit of government must be that of the country. Its structure must conform to rules appropriate to the country. Good government is nothing more than the balance of the country's natural elements. (Martí, "Our America" n.p.)[2]

From this perspective, the abundant references to animals and plants[3] in Martí's writings is entirely consistent, even though at first glance this vocabulary may seem strangely juxtaposed to the essay's central topic—the resistance to North American politics in Latin America. This discursive entanglement of nature and colonisation is not only a result of Martí's understanding of good governance but a

[2] El buen gobernante en América no es el que sabe cómo se gobierna el alemán o el francés, sino el que sabe con qué elementos está hecho su país, y cómo puede ir guiándolos en junto, para llegar, por métodos e instituciones nacidas del país mismo, a aquel estado apetecible donde cada hombre se conoce y ejerce, y disfrutan todos de la abundancia que la Naturaleza puso para todos en el pueblo que fecundan con su trabajo y defienden con sus vidas. El gobierno ha de nacer del país. El espíritu del gobierno ha de ser el del país. La forma de gobierno ha de avenirse a la constitución propia del país. El gobierno no es más que el equilibrio de los elementos naturales del país. (Martí, *Obras 6* 17)

[3] According to Josefina Toledo (2007), there are more than 300 references to different plants in Martí's work.

historically motivated one, as we have seen through the thoughts of de Sousa, Haraway, Plumwood, and Braidotti at the beginning of this article. Nature is one of the central sites of colonisation and, in consequence, "plants are imbued with a political edge in Spanish American culture and have been fundamental to the formulation of countercultural forms and expression" (Wylie 7). The trees and the condor in Martí's *Nuestra América,* which respectively open and close the essay, thus play a pivotal role as central points of reference to Latin American nature and colonial resistance:

> We can no longer be a people of leaves, living in the air, our foliage heavy with blooms and crackling or humming at the whim of the sun's caress, or buffeted and tossed by the storms. The trees must form ranks to keep the giant with seven-league boots from passing! [. ...]
>
> With a single voice the hymn is already being sung; the present generation is carrying industrious America along the road enriched by their sublime fathers; from Rio Grande to the strains of Magellan, the Great Semi, astride its condor, spread the seed of the new America over the romantic nations of the continent and the sorrowful islands of the sea! (Martí, "Our America" n.p.)[4]

As the quote shows, natural elements are put in service of a political language and mindset of resistance. While the condor symbolises freedom and is related to the air, connoting independence, the trees form a metaphorical defensive wall rooted in the earth. Interestingly, we are dealing with elements that play an important role in Indigenous cultures, given that the Great Cemi is a revered spirit of the Taino people, and, as K. Wylie explains, "the redefinition of the relationship between humans and plants in Latin American literature is predicated largely on indigenous American modes of perception, in which the identities of humans and nonhumans are fluid and plants are considered sentient beings that we should respect and nurture" (2020). In this sense, *Nuestra América* reflects how, in the Latin American context, nature is a site of resistance that finds its roots in pre-Columbian cultures. This idea strongly marks Martí's writings (as will also see in relation with his idea of the 'natural man'), and references to nature are ubiquitous in his essay. This omnipresence not only characterises the text as an environmental one, according to L. Buell's definition (51), but turns into a key aspect for defining Latin American cultural identity:

> Martí's reference to the Rio Bravo in the North and the Strait of Magellan in the South constitute landmarks that delineate Latin America's natural and cultural sphere. These borders are natural formations that run horizontally from east to west, whereas the Andes with their silver veins ("the silver in the depth of the Andes") [...] run vertically from North to South. Thus, Martí marks the geographic contours of a bioregion or natural space with its distinct culture and inhabitants formed by Latin American nature. (Schwarzman 69)

[4] Ya no podemos ser el pueblo de hojas, que vive en el aire, con la copa cargada de flor, restallando o zumbando, según la acaricie el capricho de la luz, o la tundan y talen las tempestades; ¡los árboles se han de poner en fila para que no pase el gigante de las siete leguas! [. …] ¡Porque ya suena el himno unánime; la generación actual lleva a cuestas, por el camino abonado por los padres sublimes, la América trabajadora; del Bravo a Magallanes, sentado en el lomo del cóndor, regó el Gran Semí, por las naciones románticas del continente y por las islas dolorosas del mar, la semilla de la América nueva! (Martí, *Obras 6* 15 and 23)

For Martí, culture goes hand in hand with the natural surroundings and, more interestingly, with bioregions. This is as much of importance as the term 'bioregion' not only refers to a geographical terrain but also to "a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place" (Berg and Dasmann 399). Schwarzman pinpoints it when he argues:

> Martí's ideas expressed in Nuestra América bear semblance to the discourse of bioregionalism because they foreground natural factors as a way to envision place. Like the bioregional discourse, Martí proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural elements, our local bioregion, rather than by national or ethnic bases of identity. For Martí, Latin American national identity is based in being born and raised in the natural environment of Latin America. It is nature that defines human identity. (72)

Although the term bioregion captures Martí's idea of the entanglement of cultural identity and nature, I would go a step further and argue that in light of this concept Martí's thinking can be interpreted as a terrain of consciousness that contains a planetary conception of the human-nature relation. The association with a planetary consciousness and planetarity (Chakrabarty, "The Planet") seems logical, given that bioregionalism is linked to habitat, which in turn is one of the central aspects of planetarity. Thus "bioregionalism holds that the planetary future hinges on strengthened allegiance to the ecological unit [...] an allegiance that entails commitment to bioregion as personal habitat [...]" (Buell 420). And simultaneously Dipesh Chakrabarty's conception of planetarity[5] touches not only on the Earth system (Chakrabarty, "The Planet" 22) and is linked to a sense of being earthbound (Arendt 264) but primarily refers to habitability: "The planetary mode of thinking asks questions of habitability, and habitability refers to some of the key conditions enabling the existence for various life-forms including Homo sapiens" (Chakrabarty, "The Planet" 25). As a central term of a planetary mode of thinking (Chakrabarty, "The Planet" 20), habitability contrasts with sustainability, which is a political, human-centric term that in its version of an anthropocentric idea "puts human concerns first" (Chakrabarty, "The Planet" 19). Habitability, in change, "does not reference humans. Its central concern is life, complex, multicellular life, in general, and what makes that, not humans alone, sustainable" (Chakrabarty, "The Planet" 20). Thus, D. Chakrabarty argues, "the question at the centre of the habitability problem is not what life is or how it is managed in the interest of power but rather what makes a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life" ("The Planet" 21). In this sense, Martí does not only depict America in terms of a bioregion but, as I argue, lets shine through a planetary mode of thinking, yet his idea of good governance as well as his comprehension of cultural identity (which, like man himself, is rooted in his natural environment) are congruent with the planetary consciousness of nature as a habitat and the idea of "being of the planet" (Chakrabarty, "On Earth"). In his writings, Martí expresses this understanding that comprehends the human as related to land and

[5] D. Chakrabarty derives planetarity from the term 'planet,' which he nonetheless distinguishes from that "planet" that "emerges as a category of humanist thought" ("The Planet" 2) and human mastery ("The Planet" 3).

environment as a central one, as also this example from 1882 in *La Opinión Nacional* shows: "Nature inspires, heals, comforts, strengthens and prepares man for virtue. And man is not complete, nor does he reveal himself, nor see the invisible, except in his intimate relationship with nature."[6] In this regard, M. Serra asserts that Martí does not separate men from the integral and complex system that nature means to him (13), while J. Toledo observes that "Martí considers man as an integral part of nature" (8). Also, J. Marcone highlights that we are dealing with a model of progress that is in harmony with nature (299), and it can be added that Martí literally locates human identity in nature when he writes of: "[...] the justice of Nature where man's universal identity springs forth from triumphant love and the turbulent hunger for life" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.).[7] Martí's conception of nature traverses everything, as this excerpt from his loose manuscripts on philosophy reveals:

> What is nature? The wild pine, the old oak, the rough sea, the rivers that flow to the sea as to Eternity we men go: nature is the ray of light that penetrates the clouds and becomes a rainbow; the human spirit that approaches and rises with the clouds of the soul and becomes blessed. Nature is all that exists, in every form, spirits and bodies; streams enslaved in their channels, roots enslaved in the earth; feet, enslaved like roots; souls less enslaved than feet. The mysterious intimate world, the external sea, all that is, deformed or luminous or dark, near or distant, vast or stunted, liquefied or earthy, everything regular, everything measured except the sky and the soul of men, is nature. (Martí, "Our America" n.p.)[8]

We see that in Martí's thought nature not only occupies a central place but embraces human, as well as non-human, spirits and bodies. Moreover, the quote shows how Martí tackles the nature-culture divide through his understanding of humans as being part of nature, as being related to the environment, as being of the planet—as Chakrabarty would put it. In *Nuestra América*, this is also reflected in the 'natural man,' whose role is that of the good governor who overcomes the European legacy and the growing North American influence in order to rule in accordance to place and nature (González 107).

Rather a concept than a person, the 'natural man' is not an individual subject but postulated as a collective, an 'us' that refers to the Native Latin American population (Pampín 113). This does not exclude mestizos, yet Martí writes that "Natural men have conquered learned and artificial men. The native half-breed has

[6] "La naturaleza inspira, cura, consuela, fortalece y prepara para la virtud al hombre. Y el hombre no se halla completo, ni se revela a sí mismo, ni ve lo invisible, sino en su íntima relación con la naturaleza." (Martí, *Obras 13* 25-26)

[7] "[...] la justicia de la Naturaleza, donde resalta en el amor victorioso y el apetito turbulento, la identidad universal del hombre." (Martí, *Obras 6* 22)

[8] "Qué es la naturaleza? El pino agreste, el viejo roble, el bravo mar, los ríos que van al mar como a la Eternidad vamos los hombres: la naturaleza es el rayo de luz que penetra las nubes y se hace arco iris; el espíritu humano que se acerca y se eleva con las nubes del alma y se hace bienaventurado. Naturaleza es todo lo que existe, en toda forma, espíritus y cuerpos; corrientes esclavas en su cauce, raíces esclavas en la tierra; pies, esclavos como las raíces; almas menos esclavas que los pies. El misterioso mundo íntimo, el mar externo, cuanto es, deforme o luminoso u obscuro, cercano o lejano, vasto o raquítico, licuoso o terroso, regular todo, medido todo menos el cielo y el alma de los hombres, es naturaleza." (Martí, *Obras 19*, 364)

conquered the exotic Creole" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.).[9] Paradoxically, the natural man is "a 'we,' of which Martí can be understood as an example in order to reflect on the future and desirable society for the Cuban people" (Pampín 113).[10] This is contradictory because, being a criollo himself, Martí holds Darwinist and racist viewpoints about the native population, and in *Nuestra América* he differentiates between criollos the uncivilised indigenous people. But despite perceiving them as an obstacle to economic progress, he advocated for their assimilation believing in the advancement of human civilisation, and assessed their racial condition in cultural rather than in strictly biological terms (Camacho 29).

At the same time, Martí not only recognised the urge to save "our America by its Indians" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.), that is, to include Indigenous cultures in the nation-building process, but defended that "it would have been the mark of genius to couple the headband and the professors' gown with the founding fathers' generosity and courage, to rescue the Indian," and that "[…] governors, in the Indian republics, learn Indian" (n.p.).[11] Above all, however, Martí emphasises their importance and even superiority in regard to traditional methods for working the land (vid. Schwarzman 73). Yet, in contrast to the natural man, the criollos of Spanish descent show an "[…] inability to recognise the true elements[12] of their countries, to derive from them the right kind of government, and to govern accordingly" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.).[13] In this perspective, Martí stresses once again that Latin America's natural environment uniquely shapes the identity of its inhabitants, and that the natural man stands in a relation of interdependence and complementarity with the other elements of creation (González 103). To be precise, he considered that "man is not a superb central being, an individual of a unique species, around whom revolve the beings of sky and earth, animals and stars; but the known head of a great zoological order."[14] And with this quote Martí decisively prints a planetary consciousness of a multi-species conviviality.

In addition to his ideas of the 'natural man,' with his concept of 'natural education,' he openly opposed the paradigm of a clash between civilisation and barbarism. With regard to this then highly topical debate Martí holds the view that

[9] "Los hombres naturales han vencido a los letrados artificiales. El mestizo autóctono ha vencido al criollo exótico." (Martí, *Obras* 6, 17)

[10] "El hombre natural no es un sujeto individual sino que se postula como colectivo, un 'nosotros', del que Martí puede plantearse como ejemplo para poder reflexionar sobre la sociedad futura y deseable para el pueblo cubano." (Pampín 113, my translation)

[11] "El genio hubiera estado en hermanar, con la caridad del corazón y con el atrevimiento de los fundadores, la vincha y la toga; en desestancar al indio [. …] Los gobernadores, en las repúblicas de indios, aprenden indio." (Martí, *Obras* 6, 20 & 21; my translation)

[12] The elements refer to the natural conditions of the country, such as the consistency of the soil, the weather patterns, the relationship between flora and fauna, the efficient use of water, the natural resources, the knowledge of the best plants with the highest yield, etc. (see Schwarzman 72).

[13] "[…] la incapacidad para conocer los elementos verdaderos del país, derivar de ellos la forma de gobierno y gobernar con ellos." (Martí, *Obras 6* 17)

[14] "El hombre no es un soberbio ser central, individuo de especie única, a cuyo alrededor giran los seres del cielo y de la tierra, animales y astros; sino la cabeza conocida de un gran orden zoológico." (Martí, *Obras 5* 194)

"The struggle is not between civilization and barbarity, but between false erudition and Nature" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.).[15] And, in contrast to the prominent vision of a threatening, destructive, untamed, and violent nature depicted by F. Sarmiento's Facundo (1846), he did not share the view of nature as barbarism and civilisation as virtue but thought that the natural man should have a natural education, learning from nature instead from books: "It is urgent to replace the indirect and sterile knowledge of books with the direct and fruitful knowledge of nature" (Martí, "Our America" n.p.).[16] As De Vries explains, it is by re-imagining "the conflict as a pair of opposites that set bad education against the dictates of nature" that Martí "issues a resounding repudiation of the nineteenth century's entrenched Sarmentine dialectic" (De Vries 102). This repudiation of nature as barbarism, which links the natural to otherness and means the naturalisation of inequalities, crystallises how Martí contests a conception of nature that promotes a colonial regime of knowledge, by shaping a planetary vision that sees nature as part and source of human life and culture. Besides, the idea that humans should learn from nature instead of books exemplifies how Martí advocates "lived knowledges" (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2) and derives from men being part of nature, from belonging to nature. This kind of belonging roots human identity in the earth we inhabit, and means a way to re-appropriate Latin American nature. In consequence, Martí's ecological awareness is tightly entangled with decolonisation and his theorisation of the cultural autonomy of Latin America inevitably turns into a discourse of resistance and re-inhabitation. But above all, this entanglement marks Martí's thinking as one anchored in the colonial South and hence can be considered an example of what Sousa de Santos calls epistemologies from the South. In J. Ramos, we can see additional implications of this idea, when he mentions that Martí postulates the need for an archive of tradition, an alternative and American knowledge (Ramos 293). From today's perspective, however, we can go a step further by emphasising that Martí's way of knowing is a planetary one that, as the epistemologies of the South, relays experiential knowledges, and was born in the struggle against colonialism and capitalism. In fact, as F. González explains, it's already in 1876 that Martí denounced North American colonialism in Mexico (106), and one of his main points of criticism was the establishment of enclave economies linked to extractive activities. And one year earlier, during his stay in Mexico in July 1875, Martí published an article stating, "nothing puts the extractive industry in the place of what it tears out."[17] This example not only showcases how, in Martí's thinking, ecological awareness and resistance to colonisation work hand-in-hand, but also emphasises how, as a knowledge from the South, his thinking returns repeatedly to the margins. As we saw in the context of the 'natural man,' Martí draws on traditional indigenous practices to recover

[15] "No hay batalla entre la civilización y la barbarie, sino entre la falsa erudición y la naturaleza." (Martí, *Obras 6* 17)
[16] "[...] urge sustituir al conocimiento indirecto y estéril de los libros por el conocimiento directo y fecundo de la naturaleza." (Martí, *Obras 8* 291)
[17] "Nada pone la industria extractiva en el lugar de lo que arranca." (Martí, *Obras 6* 268).

marginalised knowledge and highlights that the European-educated governors lack of an understanding of the natural environment. As he argues, they therefore should tap into the wisdom of the indigenous cultures, who had cultivated the land for centuries and possessed valuable knowledge about the utilization of its agricultural potential. In the same way, Martí fought monoculture and deforestation (Marinello 236), reasoning that it is suicidal to entrust one's livelihood to a single fruit.[18] Similarly, in this line of thought, he also recommends that fertilising the earth and preserving the forests can be understood as an act of re-inhabitation. On this matter, his essay on deforestation from 1883 shows that trees play a pivotal role not only in agriculture but also in establishing a wholesome habitat for humans:

> The vital issue we are talking about is this: the preservation of forests, where they exist; their improvement, where they exist poorly; their creation, where they do not exist. A region without trees is poor. A city without trees is unhealthy. Land without trees demands little rain and bears toxic fruit. (Martí, *Our América* n.p.)[19]

Relating these words to the opening of *Nuestra América*, we may see how in Martí marginalised ecological knowledge and resistance to a colonial regime converge into a political metaphor of resistance. The trees that signify a defensive wall against North American politics in *Nuestra América* represent not only the physical trees and natural resources but also the marginalised ecological knowledge in which the resistance of Latin American autonomy resides. As both S. Herzog (1995) and G. Castro (2018) argue, we are facing a new discourse "in which the natural and the political, nature and culture, fuse into one concept that can't be taken apart" (Herzog 177), and "nature itself is reformulated as a political category, directly associated with the vindication of the non-capitalist sectors as legitimate actors in the political process (Castro 4). Yet as de Vries explains: "Development theory hinges upon the notion that regions should, can, and will experience economic growth through a series of stages usually culminating in globalised trade, but […] he [Martí] proposes geographies that reject globalized economies in favor of localized and individuated alternatives" (12). In this matter Martí's writings have preserved their vigor until nowadays turning into highly relevant to debates on globalised markets, planetarity, reinhabitation, and decolonial ecocritical knowledge production.

Conclusion

If nature can be understood as the third principal form of imperial Western discovery and representations of Latin America's nature have shaped a perspective that lives by colonial parameters, J. Martí's *Nuestra América* contests this form of domination through a discourse that roots Latin American identity in nature and intertwines it with an attempt to decolonise. As shown, his foundational essay

[18] "[...] comete suicidio un pueblo que fía su subsistencia a un solo fruto." (Martí, *Obras 7* 21)

[19] "La cuestión vital de que hablamos es esta: la conservación de los bosques, donde existen; el mejoramiento de ellos, donde existen mal; su creación, donde no existen. Comarca sin árboles es pobre. Ciudad sin árboles es malsana. Terrenos sin árboles llama poca lluvia y da frutos violentos." (Martí, *Obras 18* 162)

denounces the exploitation of foreign territories, fosters a conception of nature that fuses nature and culture in the context of the quest for a genuinely Latin American identity, and promotes a planetary vision that anchors this identity in the continent's nature. By doing so, Martí opposes the colonial paradigm of a pristine nature that has to be conquered, tamed, and developed, and he discursively re-appropriates the Latin American nature. Against the conceptual dimension of the discovery that configures the way to think of the New World's nature as one full of resources to be exploited, he holds the planetary idea of belonging and re-inhabitation. Thus, in Martí, nature becomes humanity's origin and a space of identitarian and cultural creation that treasures lived knowledges and experiential epistemologies. His writing must therefore be understood as an ecology of knowledges from the South that marries the question of Latin American identity with a decolonial and ecocritical regime of knowledge. And against his own racist viewpoints, it is the planetary consciousness of his writings, as well as his conception of nature as a site of resistance that link his work to a recovery and vindication of indigenous knowledges.

Martí can be considered a pioneer of ecocritical thought in the Americas and *Nuestra América* is a key example of how, in the Latin American context, the literary genre of the essay would shape the question of nature as linked to identitarian discourses. Furthermore, it allows us to

> [...] observe how (...) a formative reflection of a conscious discourse of resistance toward 'the other' was being established, before the expansion of industrial capitalism that threatened to change nature and man—that is, we see in Martí's writing our American culture produced the adaptation process of the 'natural man' to his (or her) consubstantial ecological habitat. (Martínez 49)

Finally, it should be put on record that besides drawing on important sources like the writers of the North American ecological movement, Martí's writings are reminiscent of Latin American authors. As G. Horowitz points out: "José Martí, for the thinking of Cuban independence at the end of the nineteenth century, synthesised the various concepts of nature developed by the Latin American independence thinkers before him, once again returning to nature in order to posit Latin American autonomy" (79). In this sense, in what refers to the essay, Martí stands in the tradition of authors such as Andrés Bello and José Victorino Lastarria. Over and above that, he would strongly influence José Enrique Rodó, José Lezama Lima, Édouard Glissant, and forecast the importance of indigenous authors such as A. Krenak, Moira Millán or Antônio Bispo dos Santos, all of them essayists who stress the continuities between people and the natural world, thus tackling the colonial nature-culture divide.

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The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the way in which the ocean is depicted in several contemporary Norwegian literary works. The analysed volumes are *Mandø* (2009), by Kjersti Vik, the so-called *Barrøy Chronicles*, by Roy Jacobsen (2013-2020), *Shark Drunk* (2015), by Morten Strøksnes, and *The End of the Ocean* (2017), by Maja Lunde. This research is situated at the intersection between ecocriticism and new materialist theories. In this sense, it draws extensively on approaches such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's material ecocriticism, as well as on more recent scholarship that integrates literary theory with new materialist thought. Building on Juha Raipola's critique of material ecocriticism, this article argues that if the behavior of the more-than-human world remains inaccessible to humans, it can only be approached through speculation. Speculation becomes particularly relevant when it comes to literature, as, according to Kerstin Howaldt and Kai Merten, it celebrates human finiteness. The human characters in the selected volumes seek connection with the more-than-human world by projecting human stories onto places where they are clearly absent: some read whales as planets, other interpret the movement of waves as a sea chantey. Most of the times, these characters are fully aware of the insurmountable rift between them and the nonhuman environment they inhabit, and this is what engenders the speculation in the first place.

Keyworks: Contemporary Norwegian literature, blue humanities, blue ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, new materialism.

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende analizar cómo se retrata el océano en varias obras literarias noruegas contemporáneas. Los volúmenes que se analizan son *Mandø* (2009), de Kjersti Vik, las llamadas *Barrøy Chronicles*, de Roy Jacobsen (2013-2020), *Shark Drunk* (2015), de Morten Strøksnes, y *The End of the Ocean* (2017), de Maja Lunde. Esta investigación se sitúa en la intersección entre la ecocrítica y las teorías del nuevo materialismo. En este sentido, recurre ampliamente a enfoques como la ecocrítica material de Serenella Iovino y Serpil Opperman, pero también a aproximaciones más recientes que unen la teoría literaria a las teorías del nuevo materialismo. Partiendo de la crítica que Juha Raipola hace de la ecocrítica material, este artículo sugiere que, si el comportamiento del mundo más que humano es inalcanzable para el ser humano, la única forma de aproximarnos a él es a través de la especulación. La especulación se vuelve especialmente relevante en lo que respecta a la literatura, ya que, según Kerstin Howaldt y Kai Merten, celebra lo finito del ser humano. Los personajes humanos en los volúmenes escogidos buscan conexiones con el mundo más que humano localizando historias humanas donde están claramente ausentes: algunos interpretan las ballenas como planetas, otros, el movimiento de las olas como una saloma. La mayoría de las veces, estos personajes son plenamente conscientes de la grieta infranqueable entre ellos y el entorno no humano que habitan, y esto es lo que engendra la especulación desde el principio.

Palabras clave: Literatura noriega contemporánea, humanidades azules, ecocrítica azul, ecocrítica material, nuevo materialismo.

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ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Introduction

The End of the Ocean (2017) is Maja Lunde's second novel in her "climate quartet" and was published after the worldwide success of *The History of Bees*. At the beginning of this novel, Signe—one of the central characters in the story—describes her relationship with water as follows: "My whole world was water. The ground, the mountains, the pastures were just teeny tiny islands in that which actually was the world and I called my world Earth, but thought that it should actually be named Water" (Lunde 11). In Morten Strøksnes's *Shark Drunk* (2015), a nonfiction account of the author's journey on the icy waters of Northern Norway, we encounter a similar perspective:

> On the plane to Bodø I fixed my gaze on the land below. Through the oval window I could see mountains, forests, and plains, which I imagined as a raised seabed. A couple of billion years ago the entire earth was covered with water, except maybe for a few small islands here and there. Even today, the ocean still makes up more than 70 percent of the earth's surface. It has been said that our planet's name shouldn't be Earth. Instead, it would be more appropriate to call it Ocean. (11)

While they propose two different appellatives for our planet, both Lunde and Strøksnes challenge our land-centred perspective on the world, rethinking existence itself in terms of fluidity. The past few years have witnessed a compelling urge for ecocritical studies and environmental humanities to turn their attention to "the aqueous turn in ecocritical studies" (Why 10), the *blue humanities*, or *blue ecocriticism*, a field which explores the role waterscapes play in our human lives and in our human-made stories. As Steven Mentz suggests, "the ocean may be the next frontier for environmental historians" (Mentz 5). The blue humanities explore how humans engage with and relate to diverse bodies of water and waterscapes. In the context of the Anthropocene, the sea has become an indicator of our vulnerability: melting glaciers and the shrinking of the ice sheet create a ripple effect and affect humanity on a global scale, "connecting the activity of the earth's poles with the rest of the terrestrial world and producing a new sense of planetary scale and interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean" (DeLoughrey 34). This 'blue turn' engenders the emergence of new modes of thinking about the Earth and its sensibilities, depths, and boundaries and invites us to grant more attention to the fluid, aqueous dimensions of our lives.

In her article "Nordic Contemporary Fiction Grieving the Loss of Snow" from 2022, Sissel Furuseth mentions that "ice and snow are […] important components of the Nordic winter and significant in our cultural memory" (Furuseth 5). I would add that water—and the ocean in particular—constitutes a significant element of Norwegian identity. Due to its rugged shores, its fjords, islands and islets, Norway possesses the world's longest coastline after Canada.[3] Even prior to the global climate crisis and the emergence of Anthropocene consciousness, the ocean appeared to be a central theme in Norwegian literature. Examples of an *avant-la-lettre* blue ecological thinking in the Norwegian literary tradition include Alexander Kielland's beautiful rendering of the sea in the beginning chapter of his novel *Garman & Worse* (1880),

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Jonas Lie's encounters with the icy waters of Northern Norway in *The Visionary* (1870), or more recent novels such as Jens Bjørneboe's *Haiene* (1974), which reflects on the life at sea of the Norwegian sailor. In the light of climate change and the Anthropocene, one can now pinpoint a new tendency in contemporary Norwegian literature. *Cli-fi*, or climate-fiction, has become an important movement in more recent works from Norway. In this context, one can also identify a certain revival of 'ocean narratives.' With the cryosphere shrinking and glaciers melting at an accelerating pace, it seems mandatory to contemplate water, in its numerous forms, shapes, and states, and to recognise our dependence on water systems and bodies. This article's main scope is therefore to investigate how the ocean is represented in contemporary Norwegian literature and the role it plays inside the narrative. The ocean becomes an engaged actor in the development of the characters' lives, especially since most of the action in these stories takes place on coasts or islands (and even on boats) surrounded by the constant presence of salt waters: "We come to identify with, or are touched and moved in different ways, by the waters that we experience" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 23). Water narratives flow into our storymaking processes and help us to find meaning in the world.

Before turning to the analysis of the volumes, I will briefly summarise and introduce them. *Mandø* (2009), by Kjersti Vik, tells the story of a group of friends that spend a holiday on Mandø (an island in the Wadden Sea, an intertidal zone in the southeastern part of the North Sea). The group of young friends are frustrated with the island and its landscape, as it does not meet their expectations of a pleasant beach holiday. The water is not clear blue, the sand is not smooth and soft. The only one who recognizes the beauty and the wonder in this environment is Claus, a young resident of the island, who is constantly mesmerised by Mandø's capacity to exist beyond human-centred systems. Roy Jacobsen's *The Barrøy Chronicles* revolve around the Barrøy family's and especially Ingrid Barrøy's life. *The Unseen* (2013) is the first volume of the series, a coming-of-age story which follows Ingrid from early childhood into early adulthood. The other three volumes are *White Shadow* (2015), *Eyes of the Rigel* (2017) and *Just a Mother* (2020). The series brings forward the life of islanders in Northern Norway, on Helgelandskysten, and the way they interact with the surrounding salt waters. The ocean accompanies and supports Ingrid in her quest for finding her long-lost lover Magnus, for raising her child, and later in her duty as the matriarch of the island. As Katie Ritson observes, Jacobsen's novels are "calls to look back, and look closely" (126) to these coastal communities which had long been ignored and, therefore, deemed invisible. *Shark Drunk* (2015), by Morten Strøksnes, a work of non-fiction, brings forward the story of the author himself, who goes on a daring and risky journey on the waters of Northern Norway. The purpose of his journey is to catch a Greenland shark. The ocean seems, however, to deconstruct the "man over nature" narrative, which the two men take for granted, at least in the beginning. The book is "a genre-resistant form that blends elements of masculine conquest narratives with essayistic nature writing" (Jákupsstovu 193). *The End of the Ocean* (2017), by Maja Lunde, presents a scenario in which water becomes scarce for

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Europe's population, gradually turning the continent into a desert. The story follows two different timelines: the present in which Signe, a former environmental activist tells us her story about how she tried to save Norway's glaciers, and a speculative future in which Europe becomes overwhelmed by climate refugees who seek water, food, and shelter. Using two different narrative planes, Lunde "rises to the challenge of depicting climate change as a phenomenon unfolding on a large temporal and spatial scale" (Bozîntan 55).

Methodology

My analysis is positioned at the intersection of ecocriticism and new materialist theory. In this sense, I heavily rely on approaches such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's material ecocriticism, which claims that matter, "in all its forms, becomes a site of narrativity, a storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces" (Iovino and Oppermann 83). Throughout the years, this approach has received its fair share of criticism; a notable mention here is Juha Raipola's article "Unnarratable Matter: Emergence, Narrative, and Material Ecocriticism" from 2020. Here, Raipola states that "when we interpret the more-than-human world through a narrative lens, we must also remain wary of our own tendency to narrativize complex, emergent behavior into simplified and anthropocentric stories" and that "[n]o matter how hard we try to fit this world into our cultural landscape of narrative sense-making, a major part of its behavior always remains unreachable" (276). This is both accurate and relevant. However, what if there is nothing to reach? What if finding narratives where they are evidently absent is our human way of meeting matter halfway? What if the goal is not to fathom the unreachable behaviour of the more-than-human world, but to *try*? What if, just as matter cannot perform narratives, humans cannot comprehend the world without them and therefore perceive them even where they are missing? What if this is not an issue, a flaw or a weakness on our part, but a willingness to get closer? What is of utmost importance is not escaping anthropocentrism, for it cannot be escaped, but trying, attempting, be willing to grasp what is ultimately fully ungraspable. In my view, material ecocriticism seeks to do precisely that. It is not a process of getting to a destination, but the process of getting closer to that destination, being fully aware that the destination cannot ever be reached. This will be the starting point of my analysis as well. While the narratives that will be investigated in the present thesis are indeed anthropocentric (can they be considered otherwise since they are written by humans about humans and for humans?), their strength lies in the *attempt* of dissolving certain biases that ultimately are impossible to be completely erased, in the attempt of getting closer. This attempt is, I argue, worth researching. If, as Juha Raipola claims in the passage quoted above, a major part of the behaviour displayed by the more-than-human world will always remain unreachable, what is left is to *speculate*. Accordingly, this article also relies on newer scholarship such as Kerstin Howaldt and Kai Merten's volume *New Materialist*

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Literary Theory. Critical Conceptions of Literature for the Anthropocene (2024) or Kai Merten's *Diffractive Reading: New Materialism, Theory, Critique* (2021). In *New Materialist Literary Theory*, Howaldt and Merten explain speculation in the following way:

> Since objects have a life outside human thought which cannot be fully reached or exhausted by human cognition or any other relation, our knowledge of the world (of objects) is radically finite. All we can do is speculate about it. Speculation, however, is more than just an impoverished, ultimately futile human-world relation; at least, it holds the promise that there is a rich and deep world outside human thought that we can reach, as it were, a *little*. (6)

Speculation becomes particularly relevant when it comes to literature, as it provides "accurate experiences both of the inaccuracy of the human grasp of the world and of the unexpectable, unheard-of or even imperceptible qualities we must therefore expect it to have" (6). Speculation is, I argue, the way in which the human characters in the selected volumes engage with the ocean, even though this process keeps emerging from a human-centered viewpoint. When attempting to grasp the more-than-human world, the human characters will often read (human-made and human-centred) stories where they are clearly absent. These stories will, however, create bridges, as the "inaccuracy of the human grasp" (6) is here not something to run away from, but something to explore, be curious about, and even celebrate.

Diffractive reading is another method which turns out to be especially useful in the analysis of the selected volumes; it implies reading texts through one another, avoiding pre-labelling them and thus withstanding possible biases. Just like Baradian elements that emerge through their intra-action, texts, when read through a diffractive lens, create one another through their entanglement. The selected books share several themes and topics that reverberate throughout the narratives and complement one another. One example to be discussed in more detail later is the encounter between humans and nonhuman animals, a recurring theme; the episodes in which these encounters are depicted are, as the reader will get to discover, strangely similar. Reading these (often disruptive, but still soft) encounters through one another means recoding their meaning and tuning it to a larger context; in this sense, the texts communicate with one another unintentionally, and become a mesh, an assemblage.

The article is divided into three sections, namely: (1) global assemblages, (2) movement and flow, and (3) disruptive encounters; each of these sections takes up a theme or a motif that echoes through all the selected texts when a diffractive reading is employed.

Global Assemblages

The first section focuses on the inter- and intra-action that is formed between the world's oceans, which create a planetary, interconnected and interdependent system: "Waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary circulation system that challenges pretensions to discrete

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

individuality" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 27). Fluids tend to "breach borders and invite the confluence and collaboration of things; they challenge an ordering of the world according to a logic of separation and self-sufficiency" (Neimanis 186). Sidney Dobrin claims that the bodies of saltwater that cover the planet "are a singular aquatic body divided only by human cartography and discourse for the sake of conveniences" and that thus "we must now think not of the world's oceans, but of the world's ocean—singular—[…]" (Dobrin 1). In this sense, water creates a planetary system or network that works like an assemblage. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jane Bennett describes assemblages as "living, throbbing confederations" which have "uneven topographies" and are not governed by any central power (29) but exist as rhizomatic entities where agency and force are equally distributed. The assemblage "has no essence, and its trajectory is not linear. [...] Key to an assemblage is that the parts that compose it are heterogeneous and independent, and it is from the relations between the parts that the temporary, contingent whole emerges" (Steinberg and Peters 17). Especially relevant in this context turns out to be Cord-Christian Casper's article "How to Get Outside: Assemblages in Speculative Nature Writing" from the previously discussed volume *New Materialist Literary Theory* (2024). The article aims to connect and bridge Karen Barad's entanglement and Graham Harman' speculative realism. While Barad's entanglement assumes that objects do not preexist their interactions, but are created through and by them, Harman's speculation implies a flat ontology, where objects are deeply and ultimately self-contained, completely inaccessible to other objects. Cord-Christian Casper reads multi-object, cross-time assemblages (whose elements are deeply interconnected and entangled, to use Barad's terminology) as spaces from where human components tend to withdraw and recede, spaces that seem, in Harman's words, inaccessible and unavailable to humans. This approach deeply resonates with the global water assemblage depicted in the selected volumes, which are multi-object, cross-time congregations that often seem ungraspable to the human characters who try to approach them. In this sense, these assemblages are both created by their intra-actions (currents that meet in the depths or waves which collapse into each other), but they are also objects of speculation, self-contained and unobtainable. In Maja Lunde's *Signe*, this assemblage is depicted in terms of contact between different bodies, whether human or nonhuman:

> Nothing stopped the water. You could follow it from the mountain to the fjord, from the snow that fell from the clouds and settled on the peaks, to the mist that rose above the ocean and again became clouds. […] The River Breio continued all the way to Ringfjorden, and there, in the village at sea level, the river met with salt water. There the water from the glacier became one with the ocean. Ringfjorden, my village. And then they were together, the water from the glacier and the water from the ocean, until the sun absorbed the drops once more, drew them up into the air as mist, to the clouds where they escaped the force of gravity. (Lunde 6)

The keyword of this scene seems to be the "merging" of different bodies into one another. Water droplets that pour down from the melting glacier become one with the ocean. The ocean is a mosaic of different liquid identities, all flowing and merging in a space of cooperation and confluence. It engenders a "generative interconnectivity

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

of human and nonhuman forces, thereby displacing human agency from its central position within the world" (Why 20). In this sense, humans have little influence over the flow of ocean currents, the formation of waves, or the cyclic movement of the tide; human agency is set aside and no longer needed in a space-system like the ocean, where the flow of everything precedes human intention or even human existence for that matter. The human element withdraws from the whole process.

In *The Unseen*, after a dangerous storm, the islanders observe a large tree on the beach. The tree is not familiar to them, since it is a Russian larch, a species of tree that does not grow on the coastal areas of Northern Norway. The currents, the waves, the storm (hence, the assemblage) have carried it here: "[...] one autumn morning Hans Barrøy finds a whole tree that the storm has torn up and deposited on the southern tip of the island. An enormous tree" (Jacobsen *The Unseen* 18). However, human agency plays no role in this: the whole episode questions the role humans play inside this assemblage, since human presence is not registered at all. As Marte Viken claims, attention is here directed to the tree's journey throughout the world: the tree receives a background and a history and is thus given a meaning that goes beyond what seems useful and relevant to humans (50). The episode is narrated in the following way:

> It is a Russian larch which through the centuries has grown strong and mighty on the banks of the Yenisei in the wilds south of Krasnoyarsk, where the winds that rage across the taiga have left their mark like a comb in greasy hair, until the time when a spring flood with teeth of ice toppled the tree into the river and transported it three or four thousand kilometres north to the Kara Sea and left it in the clutches of its briny currents, which carried it north to the edge of the ice and then west past Novaya Zemlya and Spitsbergen and all the way up to the coasts of Greenland and Iceland, where warmer currents wrested it from their grip and drove it north-west again, in a mighty arc halfway around the earth, taking in all a decade or two, until a final storm swept it onto an island on the Norwegian coast. (Jacobsen, *The Unseen* 18)

All the water particles that have travelled the globe across its northern hemisphere, all the currents, the waves, and the processes that have taken place, so that the tree could end up on Barrøy—find their final destination here, in the waters of the Norwegian Sea. At the same time, all these particles will rise again, in the form of mist and vapour, and all the waves and currents will shortly be travelling back, to the very same place them came from, or to other, faraway places, they have not experienced before. Just like any other element of the assemblage, the sea is, therefore, neither end nor beginning. The tree's journey started in Russia, on the banks of the river Yenisei; it has then travelled along the Northern borders of Russia until it reached the North-Western part of Norway. The assemblage creates this planetary network of nonhuman actants that put everything into motion, connecting water bodies all over the planet. This confederation of forces is blind and indifferent when it comes to boundaries and man-made frontiers; human contribution is barely present, let alone registered. Strøksnes seems to share the same perspective. While sailing on the stormy sea, a few drops from the salty waters meet his face. The encounter between the liquid body of the sea and the solid body of the human engenders a sort of revelatory experience:

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

> The drops that strike my face have been in the Gulf of Mexico, in the Bay of Biscay, through the Bering Strait, and around the Cape of Good Hope many times. Maybe over the eons they've actually been in all the oceans, both big and small. In the form of rain they have washed over dry land; there they have been lapped up thousands of times by animals, people, and plants, only to evaporate, transpire, or run back out to sea, again and again. Over billions of years the water molecules have been everywhere on earth. (118)

Just like in the case of Lunde's and Jacobsen's novels, the sea helps Strøksnes connect with the rest of the world. Here, human presence is revealed only as a means of provoking and inciting this connection, which further leads to speculation.

Movement and Flow

This next part of the article aims to take a closer look at the local, regional, specific movement of the sea waters. In *Shark Drunk*, Strøksnes describes the ocean as a "giant organism" (68): not only its waters flow around the world, connecting disjointed places and spaces, but they also flow inside and throughout the ocean itself. The sea becomes this intricate network of moving forces that flow in an incessant flux, as it changes consistency, shape and colour. It is in a process of constant becoming, never reaching a final and conclusive stage, just like its waters never reach a final destination inside the assemblage-network. It is continually moving and pouring in, through and between bodies, but it is also continually flowing within itself. The sea "is indisputably voluminous, stubbornly material, and unmistakably undergoing continual re-formation" (Steinberg and Peters 5). The vectors that create this type of movement and vibrancy inside the ocean are waves, currents, or the tide that creates courses and trajectories within the ocean itself, deeming it an intricate system of nerves and forces. In *Shark Drunk*, the tide is described as a 'pulse': "Yesterday the sea glittered and crackled with light. Today it has a steady, calm glow. The ocean has found its lowest resting pulse, as it does only after many days of good weather in the summertime" (Strøksnes 72). If the ocean can be thought of as this 'giant organism,' then the tide is its pulse, its breathing. There is a certain rhythm of the tide, a throb that manifests itself through consistent and systematic ebbs and falls, through rhythmical pulsations (Moldovan 206). In *The Unseen*, the tide is compared to the breathing of human beings:

> A silence like this is rare. What is special about it is that it occurs on an island. […]. It is mystical, it borders on the thrilling, it is a faceless stranger in a black cloak wandering across the island with inaudible footsteps. The duration depends on the time of year, silence can last longer in the winter, with ice on the ground, while in summer there is always a slight pause between one wind and the next, between high and low tide or the miracle that takes place in humans as they change from breathing in to breathing out. (73)

The breathing of humans is here compared to several more-than-human processes, as for instance the blowing of the wind, the succession of seasons, and, finally, the breathing of the sea (the tide). All these processes imply movement and fluidity, and even cyclicity: "[t]here is a certain synchronicity between the rhythm of the island,

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

the rhythm of the sea, and that of the human. They all follow the same pattern. Islanders are deeply connected to the cycles of nature, which they appropriate and adopt" (Moldovan 207). All the metaphors used to describe these complex nonhuman processes (like the tide characterised as a pulse or a breath, or the whole ocean defined as a 'giant organism') are indeed anthropocentric and, to some extent, anthropomorphic or biomorphic. However, this does not seem to work as an obstacle, but as an attempt to get closer to these nonhuman mechanisms and to better understand them—making kin with the tide is no easy task. On Mandø, Maja (a young girl who is part of the group visiting the island), describes the tide as something 'ungraspable' by humans. It precedes human intention and human needs and seems to be completely indifferent and unaware of them: "The conditions on the island are simply incompatible with communication, and consequently with modern life. They have *submitted* themselves to the tide on Mandø, the tide's logic, which is more or less incomprehensible for the human species" (Vik 13).[2] The inhabitants of Mandø have somehow 'submitted themselves' to the natural rhythm of the tide. Human agency has therefore been displaced from its central role in the ecosystem, it is no longer the dominant, the superior force, but just another element in the mesh (Morton, *The Ecological* 15), an element which operates in a certain collaboration with the nonhuman world. Nevertheless, Maja acknowledges that the tide remains 'incomprehensible' for humans, inaccessible and unreachable.

The continual churning of the ocean is not only a process of planetary (or even cosmic) proportions or global interactions, but also as fragmentary, granular, atomic system of synergies and reciprocities. Morten Strøksnes calls this "the dance of molecules:"

> Hydrogen bonds hold multiple water molecules together in a loose arrangement in which each molecule is constantly joining with the others, in a sort of dance, with the partners changing several billion times a second. The molecules combine at a dizzying speed in ever-new variations, like letters joining together to form new words, which then become sentences and maybe even whole books. If you think of water molecules as letters, you could say that the sea contains all the books ever written in both known and unknown languages. In the oceans other languages and alphabets also arose, such as RNA and DNA, molecules in which genes connect and disconnect in the waves that wash through the helical structures and determine whether the result will be a flower, fish, starfish, firefly, or human being. (Strøksnes 100)

Strøksnes implies that humans are the result of just another molecular permutation, like every other (human or nonhuman) body that exists in the world. If molecules are letters, the world is just an immense canvas on which everything is 'written' or imprinted, and every little thing that exists, be it human or nonhuman, is just another permutation, another re-arrangement of particles. Cleverly illustrating the premise of material ecocriticism, Strøksnes sees letters and books where there are waves and

[2] "Da finnes det ingen forbindelse til fastlandet. Båt går heller ikke an å bruke, siden tidevannsstrømmene er så 'lumske,' som det heter på hjemmesidene deres. Forholdene rundt øya er rett og slett uforenlige med kommunikasjon, og følgelig med moderne liv. De har underlagt seg tidevannet på Mandø, tidevannets logikk, som er mer eller mindre ubegripelig for menneskearten" (my translation).

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water particles. To grasp what is ultimately ungraspable for humans, he uses an anthropocentric lens through which he 'reads' complex nonhuman processes, which he playfully calls a 'dance.' This 'dance' of molecules is nothing but constant movement and continual rearrangement. Movement, therefore, possess the ability to—even life—because movement ultimately means liveliness. Timothy Morton compares "particles [which] fold back into the implicate order" with "ocean waves [which] subside" (*Hyperobjects* 43). These processes create our reality "in which everything is enfolded in everything else" (*Hyperobjects* 43), everything is inter-connected and inter-dependent. Each becoming is dependent on other becomings, each molecule is following its path among other molecules, like ocean waves that are collapsing into each other, merging together in space and time. It is not only molecules that dance, but the ocean as well; using another (anthropocentric) metaphor, Strøksnes compares the sea with an old sea chantey. Just like music is a rhythmical succession of tones, the sea is a rhythmical succession of waves: "I'm going out to the sea, which is free and endless, rhythmic and swaying like the old sea chanteys sung across the oceans of the world" (Strøksnes 12).

Key for all the processes that emerge in the ocean is movement. When two waves meet, they cancel each other and fuse. However, movement does not stop even when the two opposing forces seem to clash, because "movement never stops. It [only] suspends itself in its own furtherance" (Manning and Massumi 51). Even though there is no visible movement in that precise moment when two waves cancel each other, movement did never actually stop, it only waited in suspense for an "uncountable beat:"

> Movement doesn't actually stop. It subsides into itself. It relaxes back into its field, for the reoccurring. It collapses back into the nonlocality of its any-point, the unlocalized interval of no perceptible movement. [...] Waves collect. Overbalance. And fall. The form of movement, in and of itself, is not a straight line. It is a pulse. It is a waveform. (51)

When waves collapse into one another, they cancel each other out and create a 'nonlocality:' space is dissolved. However, this is not just a suspension of space, but also of time. The 'uncountable' beat in which two waves meet, that fraction of a second, does not really exist. Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters write that territory is formed precisely through movement, that the sea and the ocean are constant "emergences," in the sense that they are continually created and re-created, formed and re-formed, with no permanent or fixed boundaries (Steinberg and Peters 17). Space and territory are "formed and reformed by the elements that add to the assemblage (reterritorialising it) and leave the assemblage (deterritorialising it)" (Steinberg and Peters 17). This adding and leaving is nothing but just another type of movement, a rhythmic sway that not only creates, but also expands (the already created) space: "Each wave, shaped by the wind, marks the water's surface and gives the sea not only (ever shifting) depth but also form—calm or angry, placid or brooding" (Steinberg and Peters 8). Steinberg and Peters themselves seem to

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

anthropomorphise the ocean, to ascribe feelings and emotions to it. They conclude that, if we could understand waves in all their complexity

> as forces, as vectors, as assemblages of molecules and meanings, as spaces of periodicity, randomness, instability and transformation, and as volumes (depths) and areas (surfaces)—then waves, and the wet ontology they exemplify, may be exceptionally well suited for understanding the politics of our watery planet. (Steinberg and Peters 27)

Except for their perpetual dance, nothing is ever steady when it comes to waves. That is why the spaces they create through their movement are nothing "but a tumbling of continuous variations with fuzzy borders" (Bennett 84). This unsteadiness renders oceanic spaces especially difficult to grasp. If the more-than-human world is already out of reach for humans, watery environments and particularly saltwater bodies become even more evasive because of their constant movement and their continual emergence.

Disruptive encounters

This third and last section is dedicated to the encounters between human and nonhuman animals, *in* or *on* the sea. Both Lunde and Strøksnes emphasize the richness of the unreachable world that lies under the ocean surface. This realm is not only unavailable and distant, but it seems completely inaccessible (and *un*accessible) to humans. Humanness acts as a barrier: "[b]ut for all we know there are more species in the depths, and almost all life down there possesses astonishing characteristics, as if belonging to a different planet or created in a distant past when other rules applied and any fantasy could be realized. Down in the deep, life is like a dream from which it takes a long time to awaken" (Strøksnes 47). For Strøksnes, as for many others who have actively sailed the sea and lived in the proximity of the ocean, these spaces seem to possess such complex features, that the thought of human dominion or human superiority looks almost like a foolish naiveté, sustained by a species that thinks of itself as being the centre of everything. What remains, then, but to speculate—try to approach the unapproachable through stories? While describing the deep seas, Strøksnes uses the following words:

> the deep, salty black sea rolls toward us, cold and indifferent, lacking all empathy. Detached, merely itself. This is what the ocean does every day. It doesn't need us for anything, it doesn't care about our hopes and fears—nor does it give a damn about our descriptions. The dark weight of the sea is a superior power. (Strøksnes 154)

The author paints the deep, salty waters as something alien and strange, even mystical or transcendent. This obscure entity is unapproachable because it is superior and out of reach for humans. The sea receives a backstory as an unconcerned, apathetic villain who does not mind human beings. Apart from this encounter with the sea itself understood as a sort of mythical being, the selected volumes feature several confrontations between human and nonhuman animals. While sailing, Signe meets a whale, and experiences something which is close to an epiphany:

> This whale can't be alone either, it is bound to have a partner or a child nearby. And anyway, it has the entire ocean beneath it, with all the life it contains, the unimaginable number of species. Only I'm alone up here on the surface, only me and the huge surface of the ocean and an infinite emptiness above me. I am a cross on a map, a dot on a surface, insignificant, almost invisible, as we all are, because from a distance, from above, each and every one of us disappears. From outer space it is water one sees, the ocean, the clouds, the drops that give the earth life. The blue globe, different from all the other planets we know about, just as alone in the universe as each and every one of us down here. (Lunde 195)

Her encounter with the whale triggers a deep loneliness; she loses herself, as she is confronted with her humanness and vulnerability. Strikingly, it is a meeting with a nonhuman animal that triggers this revelation. Nevertheless, even though what she witnesses outside is exceptional, Signe quickly forgets the spectacle in front of her and turns inwards to own struggles and problems. Signe has been criticised by Julianne Egerer as being too individualistic (74), proud (70), and patronizing (56), unable to surpass anthropocentric biases. According to Egerer, Signe is unable to connect to the more-than-human world because of her rational, cold, bitter attitude towards everything: "Signe shrugs off intimate, caring, identifying, and spiritual relationships with humans, more-than-humans, and Earth itself as weak and sentimental" (74). While all this is certainly true in many episodes in the novel (most episodes, I would say), when the whale disappears, Signe concedes: "You have to stay, dear whale, you have to stay here with me, just stay" (Lunde 195). Here, the woman surrenders to the *possibility* of vulnerability and welcomes the prospect of kinship and solidarity between species. Throughout the narrative, Signe is depicted as someone who "is not a caring ally of nature and does not perceive nature as an equal partner, but as a threatened and hierarchically subordinated protégé who needs her patronizing help" (Egerer 56). Here, however, it seems that the one needing help is Signe herself, who asks the whales to stay and keep her company; she becomes the threatened animal that needs care. The unexpected meeting between her and the whale is not the only episode where Signe displays this kind of vulnerability. Earlier in the story, when the woman visits Blåfonna, a glacier near her village that has profoundly affected her as a child and a teenager, she experiences another emotionally charged moment: "I take off one mitten and place my hand against the ice—it is alive beneath my fingers, my glacier [...]. Too old to cry, too old for these tears, but nonetheless my cheeks are damp" (Lunde 14). Signe addresses the glacier as "dear, dear Blåfonna" (13), in the same manner as she addressed the whale. The connection, albeit short and, if not superficial, at least hurried, is created here through touch, as Signe needs direct contact between her fingers and the body of the glacier.

In *Just a Mother*, the fourth volume of the Roy Jacobsens's Barrøy-series, while out at sea on the Salthammer (the whaling ship the family has bought), Ingrid witnesses something extraordinary: she sees six finback whales swimming in the ocean, and she experiences the same feelings and has the same reaction as Signe.

> [Ingrid] sees three gigantic finback whales frolicking around the boat, all bigger than the Salthammer, […] blue planets twisting and turning, as smoothly and soundlessly as birds in the air. […] Ingrid's gaze caresses these wonderful creatures, six of them

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

> now, she feels the boat rise and hover, the chilling sensation and the tears, for she will never see this again, life is too short, she knows this, as she also knows that she won't be able to keep anything for ever, nothing. She sees the disaster before it strikes, she sees the end of all things, life's fragility. (136)

The awe-inspiring animals create a feeling of both fondness and fear inside Ingrid, as she begins to cry at their sight. They are compared with "blue planets twisting and turning" (136), an image which distorts rather than illustrate; finback whales are depicted therefore as self-sufficient, autonomous individuals, who carry a whole universe, a whole cosmos within them, a cosmos that seems rather slippery and elusive to humans. Not only do they move Ingrid emotionally, but also physically: their sway in the water moves the boat, and so the woman moves together with them, becoming connected with them materially. Their bodies communicate through this movement and become immersed in one another. Moreover, Ingrid draws a parallel between the whales and the "birds in the sky," while Signe also compares the "outer space" with the depths of the ocean. They are associating two different (and maybe even opposed) planes: the ocean and the sky. This interlacing of aquatic and aerial is challenging a linear understanding of the world. Both Ingrid and Signe realise that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that human life is way too fragile and short, and rather insignificant when one sees the grand scheme of things. This epiphany further underlines their enmeshment within the natural world, and the fact that human destinies and aspirations fade away when compared to the fate and the cycles of our planet, of everything that is unfathomably non- or more-than-human. The revelation seems to be all too overwhelming for the two women: confronted with the shock and the confusion these unsettling experiences create within them, they become dazed and baffled, unable to fully comprehend what is happening to them. Strøksnes himself lives through a similar puzzling event, when he meets a sperm whale in his journey. The animal leaves a strong impression on him, way stronger than usual: "After traveling in Africa, India, and Indonesia, I've become rather blasé when it comes to experiencing nature and wildlife. But right now I'm simply sitting here and staring, dumbstruck by the size and power of this creature" (57). He compares the whale's breathing with "the whoosh from the open window of a speeding car" and describes its head as having "the same shape as the Kola Peninsula" (57), "reading" and approaching the nonhuman creature through his own human experiences.

In Kjersti Vik's *Mandø*, Claus describes the relationship between humans, nonhuman beings, and the nonhuman environment in a similar way:

> After the service, I go over the dunes and down to the beach, even though I'm not dressed for it. For me, Vaden is the best place to meet God. The church is nice and safe and good, it's not that, but it is down there on the beach that I stand face to face with God and his creation, not only in the endlessness of the landscape before me and in the cosmic movements that govern our lives out here, not only in all the mighty and colossal, but also in the small, in how the birds and animals and people have adapted

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> to this landscape in eternal alternation between the elements, the wet, the dry, the wind, the sand.[3] (Vik 25)

Just like Signe and Ingrid, Claus's experience is personal and rather spiritual. He is also comparing the cosmic rhythm of the Earth with small, local, earthly experiences, and this observation is triggered by the beach as a space where different human and more-than-human identities converge. This motif seems to echo through all these different stories, to be an underlying pattern that defines these characters who experience and live on coasts and shores. Such landscapes that evoke the sublime are "virtually always beyond the pale, in the original sense of the phrase: it is outside the sphere of man's control, literally as well as figuratively, and it is usually not subjected to private ownership" (Fjågesund 26).

Concluding remarks

Dwelling on the connection between humans, nature and the cosmos seems to be a recurring theme across the volumes investigated in this article—a rather bizarre conclusion for a paper that thematizes the ocean. But Strøksnes may have a good explanation to why this juxtaposition is so attractive: "[i]n general, we were made to interact with things close at hand. Not with the universe, not even with the ocean" (102). He himself compares the ocean with outer space: "The stars up there, the sea down here. The stars rippling, the sea gleaming and glinting. From outer space the Gulf Stream looks like the Milky Way. From earth the Milky Way looks like the Gulf Stream. Both contain spiraling maelstroms of movement" (Strøksnes 96). The ocean, just like outer space, is strange and beyond human reach. This article has sought to yield to the overwhelming aspects and confusion engendered by the awareness that the complexity of the more-than-human world is ultimately elusive to humans. It attempted to bridge material ecocriticism's premise that matter can be *storied* with Juha Raipola's critique that the behaviour of the more-than-human world remains unreachable despite our efforts to interpret narratively; in this sense, if the non-human world is not accessible to us, our only prospect is to *speculate*. This speculation fuels the narrative. The human characters from the selected volumes seek connections with the nonhuman by seeing human stories and anthropocentric interpretations where they are clearly absent: some read whales as planets, some the movement of waves as a sea chantey. Most often, these characters are fully aware of the insurmountable rift between them and the nonhuman environment they inhabit; this is what engenders the speculation in the first place. Signe, Ingrid, Maja or Claus, even Strøksnes himself in his nonfiction volume use speculation to approach what

[3] "Etter gudstjenesten går jeg over klittene og ned på stranden, selv om jeg ikke er kledd for det. Vaden er for meg det beste stedet å mote Gud. Kirken er fin og trygg og god, det er ikke det, men det er nede på stranden jeg står ansikt til ansikt med Gud og hans skaperverk, ikke bare i endeligheten foran meg og i de kosmiske bevegelser som styrer livene våre her ute, ikke bare i alt det mektige og kolossale, men også i det små, i hvordan fuglene og dyrene og menneskene har tilpasset seg dette landskapet i evig veksling mellom elementene, det våte, det tørre, vinden, sanden" (my translation).

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they ultimately experience and envision as unapproachable. The human tendency to narrativise and anthropomorphise is not a flawed process, but the only way in which these characters can connect with their more-than-human environment, as this kind of speculation "acknowledges and therefore celebrates, and makes creative use of, its own finiteness" (Howaldt and Merten 6).

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Nature, and a Social Revolution in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta*

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Abstract

This essay is about the agency of nonhumans and its use to achieve a social revolution in Wole Soyinka's play *Alápatà Àpáta*. In Soyinka's dramatic aesthetics, anthropocentrism is undermined to reflect an African natural world where nature and culture are not dichotomous but entangled. Using ideas from African indigenous knowledge system (particularly of the Yoruba ethnic nation) and material ecocriticism, we argue that the play presents nonhuman beings as the protagonist in the revolution against political oppression. The shift from the human to the nonhuman, in the context of social revolution, suggests that such ecocentric readings can give us an alternative dimension of African literature that foregrounds the roles of African nature in societal progress—roles that have been hitherto marginalized in reading practices that have privileged humans over nonhumans. This study will extend the focus of African literary studies from one that is human centred to one that discusses the complexities of human-nonhuman relations.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka*, Alápatà Àpáta,* nature, agency, African ecocriticism, social revolution.

Resumen

Este ensayo trata la agencia de los no-humanos y su uso para conseguir una revolución social en la obra teatral *Alápatà Àpáta* de Wole Soyinka. En la estética drámatica de Soyinka se socava el antropocentrismo para reflejar un mundo natural africano en el que la naturaleza y la cultura no son una dicotomía, sino que están entrelazadas. Usando ideas del sistema de conocimiento de los indígenas africanos (en particular de la nació étnica yoruba) y de la ecocrítica material, sostenemos que la obra presenta a los seres no humanos como los protagonistas de la revolución frente a la opresión política. El cambio de lo humano a lo no-humano, en el contexto de una revolución social, sugiere que tales lecturas ecocéntricas pueden ofrecernos una dimensión alternativa de la literatura africana que destaca los roles de la naturaleza africana en el progreso social—roles que hasta la fecha han sido marginalizados en las lecturas que han privilegiado a los humanos sobre a los no-humanos. Este estudio extenderá el foco de los estudios literarios africanos, pasando de la atención hacia lo humano a debatir las complejidades de las relaciones entre humanos y no-humanos.

Palabras clave: Wole Soyinka, *Alápatà Àpáta,* naturaleza, agencia, ecocrítica africana, revolución social.

Introduction

Nigerian literature is rich in presentations of nature as a nonhuman world populated by a diversity of natural biotic and abiotic components that together form parts of the ecosystems. Nature, in most cultures of Africa especially among the Nigerian peoples, comprises all living and non-living, physical and spiritual nonhuman beings such as trees, rocks, waters, animals, ancestors, gods and goddesses, among many others. Authors like Harry Garuba, Cajetan Iheka, F. Fiona Moolla, and Sule E. Egya have brought into view the representations of human-nonhuman relationality in the context of the natural world in Nigerian and African literary works. This human-nonhuman interconnectivity is a way of living for many indigenous societies in Nigeria. Traditionally, most people believe that they are organically linked with nonhuman beings, which might be spiritual or nonspiritual. For instance, in the Yoruba cosmology, a child is a reincarnated ancestor (see Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*). As dramatised in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, a human is spiritually and materially linked with natural beings such as trees, rocks, and water. Egya in *Nature, Environment and Activism in Nigerian Literature* makes the point that "[w]e hear people [in Nigeria] say I come from a water, from a tree, from a rock, and as such I have to act in a particular way that may appear strange or illogical to another person" (25). This goes beyond a consciousness towards an object; it is rather a submission and concession to the order of nature—the way humans see themselves as parts of the natural world. Moolla notes that these natural beings have been considered active agents in African cultural forms for as long as these forms have existed (9). She makes this point to draw attention to these material bodies and to shift attention from the rubric of environmental justice which has been hitherto driving ecocritical research in Africa. For the authors mentioned above, and in most African belief systems, nature is not only material but ontological. For example, before the onset of modernity, spiritual presences and material bodies or objects were considered as shaping and sometimes subverting the forces that operate in indigenous societies.

The deployment of these natural beings and animals in African proverbs and wise sayings are not only for linguistic and stylistic wordplay, but a communicative strategy to emphasise their roles in the promotion and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. For example, the African proverb "Whoever will eat the honey in a rock does not worry about the edge of the axe" suggests that when people are focused on the benefits of a situation, they may disregard the potential risks or dangers associated with it. In this case, "eating the honey in a rock" metaphorises enjoying the sweet rewards, while "not worrying about the edge of the axe" implies ignoring the potential damage that may come with it. Importantly, the proverb explores the relationship between humans and the environment, particularly in the context of resource extraction and environmental consequences. Honey is a valuable resource obtained from beehives, often found in trees or natural rock formations. Traditionally, in Nigerian Yoruba society, extraction of honey from the rock or trees

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

can be challenging, so humans employ the use of tools like axes and cutlasses to get the natural resources at all costs. This suggests that people who aim at obtaining honey are neither concerned about the potential injury to the edge of the axe, nor the harm the edge leaves on the natural environment—the rock. This proverb highlights a theme common in ecocriticism—the examination of ecological or environmental consequences of human capitalists' exploitation of natural resources. Just as observed in the above proverb, the human capitalists in Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta* aim at excavating the natural resources in Alaba's boulder without showing any concern about the potential injury to Alaba or the boulder itself which will be stripped of the characteristics that make it inhabitable.

The example of the proverb above makes Moolla conclude that "the proverbs that constitute the philosophy of Africa cannot be conceived without the natural world and animals" (9). On this philosophical ground, Africans think of themselves as inhabitants of nature and cannot sever themselves from it. From their proverbs, myths, literatures, and spiritualities, nature is conceived as a material being with agency that the human life is inextricably linked with. This view is fundamental to our reading of *Alápatà Àpáta*; we present the interconnection of humans and nonhumans, the natural and the social, from the perspective that the natural world is inseparable from the social world. We argue that the obvious dialectical materialism of this play is built upon the agency of nature and its aestheticisation, which readers are likely to ignore if they fail to look at nature beyond the conception of it as a mere setting of action in the play. Nature in the context of *Alápatà Àpáta* is not just a setting or a supporting platform for the actions and reactions of the people or for the discourse of socio-political and cultural emancipation. Humans, in their anthropocentric dualism, claim to be the centre of the natural, supernatural, and physical environment but cannot explain how spiritual forces strip a political villain and his team of their senses, or how valuable mineral resources are consigned in a boulder. We argue that nature is a character, and it is the main protagonist of the struggle to set the society free from oppression, and until humans realise its agency and recuperate the co-agency of traditional philosophy, humans' progress will be limited. Humans therefore need to begin to imagine that nonhumans possess a future in which humans are co-implicated. Soyinka presents several dramatizations of human-nonhuman entanglements in his work, including *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Interpreters*, and *The Road*. Whilst the focus of this article is *Alápatà Àpáta,* since the text best represents the way in which nonhuman beings are active in the achievement of a social revolution, other texts from Soyinka are drawn on as relevant.

African Indigenous Ways and the Agency of Nature

Long before the birth of ecocriticism as a field of study, African writers like Bessie Head, Chinua Achebe, Okot p'Bitek, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have depicted human-nonhuman entanglements that promotes the agency of nature.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Harry Garuba describes this as an animist unconscious which is "the practice of continually 're-enchanting' the [natural] world" (45). This human-nonhuman interactions or re-enchantments are far beyond the realm of religion and constitute a way of living that demonstrates African rootedness in the natural world, incorporated as a part of nature instead of above it. Though these human-nonhuman entanglements have been viewed as "primitive" by colonialists, most Africans, especially Nigerians, see themselves as part of nature and the human forms they take now as impermanent. Life is viewed as a circle, whereby humans die, go to the ancestral land, and then return to the world through the process of incarnation. Soyinka consistently depicts this human mystical and cyclical interrelationship with nature. For example, in his poem "Abiku," he refers to the condition of children caught up in an unending cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths in a widely accepted belief among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of Nigeria. In Igbo community, the phenomenon is referred to as 'Ogbanje,' and both terms (Abiku and Ogbanje) literally translate as 'one who is born, dies.' Abiku children share bonds with their fellow spirit companions as regards their return date before being born to the world, and they already possess the will of premature death. In some Yoruba and Igbo communities, Abiku children are stigmatized, probably because of their perceived cruelty to their mothers and other members of their earthly families, who spend their earnings to make sure the link between them and death is severed.

In *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka asserts that present life is filled with "manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn [...] beyond mere abstract conceptualisation" (144). He explains that humans must not fail to recognise the connectivity between themselves and the realms of ancestors, the deities, the unborn and the reality, and must recognise that any gulf (arising from the magnification of any differences) between these realms of existence must be closed by acts of sacrifice. In his words, "this gulf is what must be constantly diminished by sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf" (144). This position is reaffirmed in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), another one of Soyinka's works that depicts human cyclical interrelationship with nature. In the play, Elesin, the King's horseman, is, according to tradition, required to commit a ritual suicide a month after the death of Alafin, the king. Elesin's ritual death, primordial in Yoruba mythology, is an act of sacrifice that marks the cohesive cosmic interrelationship between the living, the dead and the unborn as found in the poem by Soyinka discussed earlier. This intercessory act is for the good health of the human community and its failure can set the world adrift.

Perhaps this ecocentric dimension of the indigenous way of living and its forms of knowledge contribute to Africans' high sense of conservation and sustainability. For instance, in his study of the Abaluyia people of Kenya, Maurice Amutabi makes the point that the people seen as "uneducated" or "uncivilized" in colonial western attitudes, have been able to preserve the environment through their reliance on their ancient folkways (220). Amutabi argues that the practice of conservation, as seen in taboo relationships with natural objects, works much better than the scientific or

modern ways. That is, the social custom proscribing human abuse of some nonhuman beings continues to shape the modern-day Abaluyia's response to the environment. He continues that conservation is "not only a matter of the transaction of space, food, shelters and security and sustainability but of distance, not just a matter of style, but it has profound epistemological value in its critical and reflexive role in the constitution of the modern Abaluyia environment" (220). Senayon Olaoluwa concurs with this view in his ecocritical reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by saying that colonialism subverts African indigenous societies' ecocentric practices: "while the African construal of sacred spaces [in *Things Fall Apart*] enhances biodiversity conservation through forestation, Christian sacralisation of space in Mbata translates into deforestation and biodiversity depletion" (207). In a methodological analysis on on-site ethnographic observation of thirty events at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties held in Paris, France in 2015, Foyer and Kervran conclude that the introduction of traditional knowledge in the climate regime has contributed to renew and re-enchant the struggle against climate change. And the re-enchantment is the result of different convergent effects: new story telling with new "exotic" figures such as the resilient "victim-hero," and new practical and grounded options that counterbalance and complement scientific abstraction (13). Other scholars like James Ford, Will Vanderbilt and Laura Cameron have called for a repolitization and reterritorialization of the governance of climate change, which will incorporate traditional and local knowledge in the assessment of climate change. In this context, traditional knowledge will be in direct contrast to the mainstream definition of global, top-down sound science and governance. In some cases, like in the supernatural ecology narrative, it even introduces magical dimensions and other ontologies in dominant representations of climate change. Although this re-enchantment may be weak as traditional knowledge is still a very marginal topic in climate talks, its emergence appears to be a golden opportunity in the projects of biodiversity conservation.

In order to acknowledge and emphasise the agency of nature, Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* expounds a radical notion of agency which emphasises the effect of action, irrespective of the intentionality. Using "aesthetic proximity"—the term he uses for human-nonhuman entanglements in African environments—he asserts that it is not common to see a complete human action that is not complemented by nonhumans (21). If this is true, then agency, previously claimed to be tied to the intentions of human, is distributed. Iheka laments that African literary scholarship has hitherto neglected the nonhuman roles, and he follows Jane Bennet's idea of agency to propose what he calls "distributed agency"—the idea that humans possess and share agency with the landscape and animals. This idea is premised on the biological and geographical commonalities of humans and nonhumans. That is, "a spatial sense of nearness as well as a form of proximity brought about by similarities and shared characteristics" (Iheka 22). The idea of distributed agency, one of the tenets of material ecocriticism, is driven by a rethinking of the nature-culture dualism. Egya

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

suggests that material ecocriticism is "perhaps what one might see as a western post-discursive response to its own regime of dualism and discursivity that had earlier regarded human dependency on nature, especially in 'less civilised' society, such as African societies, as primitive" (24). The point to extrapolate from the foregoing is that in African indigenous systems, humans, despite their agential capabilities, are not necessarily superior to, or more powerful than, natural beings. While intentionality is not totally jettisoned in this concept of agency, the focus is on effect so that natural beings can receive credit for their roles in the production of agency. As a matter of fact, humans might be rendered helpless by material forces like floods, earthquakes, volcanos, droughts, wildfire, among others. While some modern humans may assume that this human-nonhuman entanglements are in the past, we suggest that this form of co-existence is present even in this age as suggested by Garuba in his notion of the animist unconscious. We deploy the agency of nature to make sense of Soyinka's ideological vision premised on human-nonhuman entanglements to challenge postcolonial excesses in Nigeria exemplified by, amongst others, corruption, political ineptitude, and abuse of power.

Alápatà Àpáta and the Agency of Nature in a Social Revolution

Alápatà Àpáta centres on Alaba's rise from obscurity to heroism, but in the process much attention is directed to other nonhuman beings. At the end of a distinguished profession as the best butcher in his community, Alaba decides to have a peaceful retirement by choosing a boulder beside his family house as a place of abode. It turns out the boulder on which he chooses to enjoy his retirement contains valuable mineral resources. From his interaction with animals as a butcher to his reliance on a boulder, Alaba is inextricably entangled with the nonhuman and maintains a rather complicated relations with the nonhuman that do not require us seeing him as the only protagonist of this play. Alaba, with the help of Teacher, designs his butcher's signpost so it reads "butcher of the rock," his new title, suggesting that he is also inducted into the power game that surrounds him as both Alaba and the boulder become the points of attraction not only for the passers-by, but also for the corrupt political leaders and religious fanatics who want to excavate the mineral resources for personal gains. To further satirise this power game, the artist who paints the signboard misplaces the accent on the title of Alapata. The Nigerian Yoruba word "Alapata" has three meanings, depending on where the accent is placed: Al*á*pat*à* means "a butcher," *À*lap*á*ta means an 'owner of the rock' and, thirdly, Alápata means "a ruler or chief of the boulder." The artist, though a native speaker of Yoruba, does not know the correct accent to place on Alapata Apata to signify "butcher of the rock" on Alaba's signboard. The wrong accent he finally settles for changes the meaning of the words from Alápatà Àpáta (butcher of the rock) to Alápata Àpáta, which means "Alápata of Àpáta"—the paramount chief of the boulder. In other words, the signboard presents Alaba as one of the chiefs of the community. For running afoul of

the customary law of the land, ascribing a title to himself, and forming a parallel government in the community, the council of elders convicts him of insurrection.

Although the play is a comedy with an intentional ploy to focus on the connection between tone and meaning in Yoruba language, it also stages the absolute awareness of a sense of place that provides a vision for a total redemption from hegemonic control. In African thought, lands, trees, waters, and rocks are categorised as life forms even when their actions are unaccounted for because they lack intentionality. These nonhuman forces are regarded as life forces in various African cultures. Working within this indigenous understanding in *Alápatà Àpáta*, Soyinka dramatizes the vitality of a boulder—its agency, and effects in holding the natural resources that the community needs—and the roles and agencies of Ifa in setting Alaba's community free from political oppression. Confirming the agency of the boulder in holding rich mineral resources, Prospector, one of the foreign agents employed to mine it confesses: "This is going to be a gargantuan operation. After this, we can tell those Delta trouble-makers to go drink their petroleum" (10). This establishes the fact that Alaba sits on natural resources that is much bigger than the amount of crude oil from the Niger Delta which, according to the World Bank (2004), accounts for 40% of Nigeria's GDP, 70% of budget revenues, and 95% foreign exchange earnings. "Trouble-makers" refers to Niger Delta youths, who organise themselves into militant groups demanding for local control over oil resources and development of the region. Besides acknowledging the presence of the boulder, it is equally important to attend to its involvement in the actions of the protagonist. Alaba becomes the centre of conflict and a hero because of his presence on the highly valued boulder. As Prospector confirms, "it's all about Resource Control. Typical of what is happening in our country. Everyone wants to sit on natural resources" (9). The natural resources in the boulder have fortunate and unfortunate effects on Alaba as it turns him to a heroic figure, and also brings him in confrontations with politically, religiously, and morally corrupt individuals. However, Alaba's heroism is questionable in the context of his exploitation of the boulder, which is really the hero here.

Alaba's antecedents show that he is not destined to become a hero by the community's standards. In the eyes of his people, he fails in some endeavours that would have given him a good start. As a primary school student, Alaba accidentally breaks the globe in the school because he thinks the world and the globe representing it need to be straightened and not bent. To attempt to straighten the world by using the globe, a nonhuman object, reflects the kind of deviance or dissidence Soyinka invests in the character of Alaba. He tries his hand at Ifa—the study of Yoruba divination—but he also "dropped the divination bowl, spilt the flour, broke an iroke, an ivory one" (160). As a result of this sacrilegious offence, Ifa concludes that Alaba is not a chosen one. Though Alaba fails at Ifa and primary school, his encounter with the globe and Ifa, two nonhumans, in his formative years have a profound influence in the way he views the world. It is the same Ifa that instructs him to take up butchering profession which later shoots him into the limelight.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

In "A Skewed Universe: Tragic Vision of Satire in Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta*," Nurayn Fola Alimi connects Soyinka's use of the nonhuman boulder to humanistic geography, the field of geography that is primarily interested in the aspects of human physical and ecological world. According to Alimi, Soyinka's motif intersects geography to "raise issues about man as the centre of the natural, supernatural, and physical environment" (1). Taking a different view of Soyinka's dramaturgy in *Alápatà Àpáta*, this article develops Alimi's argument by asserting that Soyinka's characters in *Alápatà Àpáta* include both human and nonhuman characters and the play does not subscribe to the dualisms that forms the basis of anthropocentricism. For instance, Alaba does not understand the nonhuman boulder in a subjugated light, but sees it as an actor, an agent and co-participant within active biospheric systems. This demonstrates the boulder's alignment to him, and a symbolic way of reverencing the communion between the biotic and abiotic elements and humans. The connection between the boulder and Alaba which is personal, communal and humanistic, explains why he sees it as a phenomenological being with a deep affection for himself and his ancestors who at different points rely on it occupationally, spiritually having their lives bond up with it. Alaba clarifies,

> My fathers, please wait. That rock, I met it there. Nobody wanted it. Nobody quarrelled with it. My father built his house nearby. As a child, I used to sharpen his butcher's knives against its face—look, you can see the smooth portion over there. We rested in the shadow of the rock, or the house—that space in between, always cool. Sometimes we ate there. Nobody bothered with the rock. The women never thought it worth their while—they prefer to dry their cassava mash, for garri, on flat surface, not a steep slope where the rain can wash it away. Well, we made it our home. We dried our cloths on its surface, and we fired our catapults at the lizards sunning themselves on it. At night we even told stories, lying around the bottom of the rock, over there, hanging from the slopes. (165 – 66)

Alaba takes himself as part of the natural environment and not the centre around which the natural, supernatural, and physical environment revolves. He simply connects himself to the boulder as a natural being and shields it from abusers having understood its status as one of those beings that contribute to the progress of the community. This connection could also be seen as "an individual awareness of the spirit or identity of place" (Kanhaiya 2017, 124) which explains the spiritual and organic connection between Alaba and the boulder and other natural elements of the environment that he inherits from his father.

As the events in the play unfold, the inhabitants of the community are continuously worried and suspicious of Alaba, who suddenly chooses the top of a boulder as his new abode. While some think he stays there to perpetrate diabolical plans against the villagers, other characters seek to dispossess him of the boulder to exploit the environment. They actually know that he sits there to conceal the natural resources in the boulder. They know that, as a human, Alaba will eventually exploit the boulder for his gains, and that is what they want to deny him by taking it away from him. First to physically challenge him is Pastor, who wants to take over the resources from Alaba in the name of converting it to a house of God. Pastor moves

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

round the rock, places his ear against it to confirm the presence of the natural resources, taps his rod gently on it and reads from his Bible "On this rock shall I found my church (shakes his rod [at Alaba], teeth clenched) obviously this is it. So, you think the revelation is yours" (9). As Alaba remains unperturbed by Pastor's religious vituperation, Pastor walks away with his prayer warriors. Pastor symbolises religious figures that use their professed faith to rob people of their hard-earned income. But also, the religious figures that connive with capitalists to dispossess the earth of its resources.

As Alaba successfully repels the foreign Investor and the Prospector—the duo sent to mine the resources— Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ, the governor, decides to force him out from the boulder using military and juju (supernatural) power. Knowing that Alaba might have also fortified himself on the boulder with juju because of his knowledge of Ifa, Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ invades the scene with higher fortifications, namely *bante*, an amulet skirt, made of fresh leaves, worn underneath his cloth. He is also accompanied by, an armed policeman, and a Figure in Red (a nonhuman being with a headgear like a perched parrot, all in red). Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ's charms, and a Figure in Red, which are spiritual nonhumans are to be used to conjure violence on Alaba. On getting to Alaba's compound, Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ mouths silent incantations and the Figure in Red echoes after him: "What is hidden in the farm belongs to the farmer, what is hidden in the home belongs to the homeowner, let what is hidden in this rock sweep off usurpers…" (144). Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ's plan here resonates with what Rob Nixon describes as "environmentalism of the poor": a condition that arises when technologically advanced nations exploit material and characteristic natural resources of underdeveloped nations for the benefit of the former, systematically creating a pattern of annihilation. This theory considers the conflict between exploiters of natural resources, driven by greed for immediate wealth and those local inhabitants, whose environmental rights are abused. It therefore centres on local peoples' susceptibility to ecological degradation, because it is the poor people who are at the receiving end of slow violence, as "their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of slow violence that permeates so many of their lives" (4). In *Alápatà Àpáta*, natural forces contend with Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ, the human capitalist who deploys incantation and other nonhuman forces against Alaba. The forces of his incantation and those of the Figure in Red turn against him as The Figure in Red stumbles into Policeman and they both crash to the ground before taking off at full speed. Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ follows suit: "Dives headlong over the rear of the rock" (145) and ran naked through the village. Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ's use of different charms, which are spiritual nonhumans, reflects the dependence of humans on nature and, in this case, they work against him because he is a corrupt political villain.

It has to be recognised that both Alaba and those who want to exploit the highly valued boulder are aware of the agency of nature in Ifa which liberates the environment from abusers. Though Alaba does not graduate in the institution of Ifa divination, the little knowledge he acquires as a dropout makes the community to revere him with awe. The usurpers, while confronting Alaba, encountered *Anjonu*—a

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

spiritual being with mystical power—who demonstrates its nonhuman power over humanity. Being Yoruba, Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ, Alaba, and other characters are fully aware that Ifa has a great many Orishas (spirits) operating in the universe that can easily destroy humans. They are nonhuman agents that serve as the intermediary between the gods and humans. Among them are Orisha Esu—the force or energy of opportunity, Orisha Ogun—the force or energy of the forest, Orisha Sango—the force or energy of Thunder among others (Judith Gleason). It is these nonhuman spirits that work against Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ and his team, and make them lose their minds. This rapid, fundamental change of economic and political institutions and the upheaval of powers are characteristic of social revolution and they are all brought about by the agentic powers of spirit forces of Ifa. The metaphor of the skewed globe becomes more meaningful in the play in the way Soyinka aestheticizes the political landscape represented in the characters of a military officer simply called The General, and a politician called Dàaníẹ́lẹ́bọ who is the governor of the state. The world they represent is skewed, bent and needs to be straightened. In most revolutions, the elite usually suffer the brunt of the common people's anger and that of *Alápatà Àpáta* is not an exception. The General and the governor of the state, the two major political figures that oppress the citizenry, are ridiculed by Teacher, Farmer, the three Okada (bike riders) and Mechanics. These are common men who feel that they deserve better conditions of leadership.

Alaba's boulder and spiritual nonhumans are agentic; while the former safely keeps valuable natural resources which are important elements of the natural environment, the latter contend with the human forces that want to exploit the environment. These agencies of nature echo Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's words in his forward to *Material Ecocriticism*. Cohen exemplifies storied matter by narrating a story about a catalytic toad, written by historian William of Newburgh before the year 1200. Cohen's parabolic narration is on an attractive stone that some unknown artists seem to have fashioned by conjoining two lithic pieces. Workers in a quarry were excavating building materials when they discovered this perplexing object—the conjoining stones—which they cracked open to reveal the living creature within. The story fully reads:

> There was found a beautiful double stone, that is, a stone composed of two stones, joined with some very adhesive matter. Being shown by the wondering workmen to the bishop, who was at hand, it was ordered to be split, that its mystery (if any) might be developed. In the cavity, a little animal called a toad, having a small gold chain around its neck, was discovered. When the bystanders were lost in amazement at such an unusual occurrence, the bishop ordered the stone to be closed again, thrown into the quarry, and covered up with rubbish forever. (*The History of English Affairs* 28, qtd from Cohen, 2014, xi)

This enmeshment of stone-toad-chain seems to exist beyond the dualisms that rule human thoughts and actions, and it undeniably has materiality beyond human explanation. It makes the bishop and his workmen to become lost in bewilderment, "lost in the realization that the world is wider than they had imagined, enliven by stories that are fragments seeking greater connection" (xii). Perhaps the

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

bewilderment that explains why the bishop ordered that the stones to be reassembled and thrown back into the quarry also explains the reason Alaba decides to spend his retirement days on the boulder watching the miraculous agencies of nature which conceal and protect vital resources in nonhuman boulder. In the public perception, Alaba becomes an enigma that cannot be explained in the way he survives the onslaught and the hegemonic invasion of the corrupt political invaders. Oluwo, the chief priest immediately confers a chieftaincy title on him. His "domain is now official—Alápata of Àpáta [the paramount chief of the boulder]" (182). The villagers troop out in their numbers to pay homage to the new chief who is also the incarnate of spirit beings and an intermediary between the latter and his people. At this point, Alaba has used the boulder to gain some reverence and wealth in his society. But the boulder will fight back spiritually, though the people will mistake the bounder's agency for Alaba's agency.

The dynamism of nature, as discussed above is not to be contrasted with "culture" which has been severely criticised in the emergence of ecocriticism. The dynamism of nature as found in *Alápatà Àpáta* collaborates with culture. The nonhuman spirits' attack against the human capitalists arises because human beings fail to comprehend the ways of nature, thereby undermining the powers the nonhumans wield. It can now be concluded that the conflict in the play stems from the fact that humans neglect the materiality of nature by engaging in activities that unwittingly destroy the earth. The play also advises against tagging the spiritual harmless and pristine, and questions the presumed supremacy of humans' thoughts, deeds, and intentionality, while showing the power that nonhumans have, even to the point of disarming humans, not only through disaster but through spirituality. The above therefore forms the premise on which the point is made that *Alápatà Àpáta* is a metaphor of humans' neglect for the power that the nonhumans wield—their ignorance of the consequential effects of the disregard of nature—which often result in ecological disorder, with humans bearing the devastating losses.

The first dispute that Alaba, in his office as Alápata of Àpáta, adjudicates comes from the three persons from Lagos, a neighbouring city. Having heard of Alaba's repute as a highly respected Ifa priest and warlord that battles and prevails over tyrannical political figures, Mother brings her daughter and her son-in-law from Lagos to pay homage to Alaba. They also seek Alaba's intervention on how to resolve the prolonged infidelity case between the couple. After paying their homage with the parcel they bring from Lagos, they sit to tender their case to Alaba, whom Mother sees as a decent personality that should be able to settle the problems between her daughter and her husband:

> MOTHER: I told you. We were right to come here. This is not a matter to tackle in a place like Lagos. That city no longer understands the world decency.
> ALABA: Ah, Lagos. Anyone who says the world is not bent should just spend one hour in Lagos. If he wasn't bent himself before he went in, he would come out bent like smoked crayfish. (118)

Before Alaba hears the details of the dispute, he emphasises the ability of the nature depleted environment (i.e. the city) to destroy human lives. That is, the agency of the depleted cityscape does not only denaturalise humans, but it also has the ability to either eat up or have human lives 'bent.' The discussion is not just about the description of Lagos' physical environment but, more importantly, of what one might call the metaphysics of Lagos largely expressed in its human geography. In his ecological reading of Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City*, a novel about Lagos, Egya asserts that "the city's shortcomings, hinged on its enigmatic nature, is one of the things that makes it consume human in the manner that a carnivore eats up flesh" (*Nature* 76). The nature of the city typified in its uneven developments, the urban population leading to high rate of crime, as well as the improper disposal of wastes resulting in dangerous pollution, are all agencies of the city that can negatively influence the youths and eventually 'bend' their lives. Human beings, most of whom are all frauds in their own ways, and who in their fraudulent ways harm not only themselves but also the Lagos physical and cultural environment are thus the real pollution the city suffers from (Egya 80). Alaba's description of Lagos, as it recaps this discussion, is symptomatic of the lives of many city dwellers, who are fraudulent and corrupt, galvanised by the get-rich-quick philosophy that underlines human interactions. Further, it signifies the bent world created by political leaders in Africa, as dramatized in the text. It is also symptomatic of the ways in which Africans embrace modern life, live in modern landscapes, and forget that African nature remains a crucial consciousness in contemporary life, in that human-nonhuman entanglements cannot just disappear in African societies. In sum, nonhuman agencies impact humans in diverse ways—negatively and positively. This approach of the reciprocity of energy and matter exchanges in which manifold types of agencies engage themselves is rooted in both African indigenous knowledge systems and new materialism.

Conclusion

This article uses Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta* to demonstrate the ways Nigerian writers emphasise human imbrication with the natural world in promoting social revolution in their society. In this play, the boulder is not a mere setting. It is a being that towers above other beings, human and nonhuman, and that is why all human activities in the play are influenced by its agency. If the boulder does not exist, Alaba would have had an uneventful retirement life. The spirituality, through which the boulder's agency manifests, shapes the outcome of the crisis among the human characters in the play. By foregrounding the agency of the boulder in this reading, we make the point that actors of revolutionary actions in most African societies are not usually only humans; they can also be nonhumans whose agency is entangled with that of humans. Non-ecocentric reading practices are likely to undermine the agency of the nonhuman, which has always been the case. This study therefore draws attention to the ecological dimension, the marginalised natural participants, in

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Africa's project of resistance. If anthropocentric thinking entrenched in enlightenment principles place humans as subjects and nonhumans as objects, inert and passive, attempts to foreground the agentic power of natural elements, such as we have done in this study, have shown points of convergence between human and nonhuman. Literary discourse can make things more comprehensible, and the discussion here illuminates nonhuman agency as a cause/effect, and as a factor of futurity that confronts human exceptionalism.

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With or Without Oil
Nordsjøen and the Persistence of Norwegian Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Films provide fertile ground for examining how arguments about the Anthropocene are produced. In *Nordsjøen* (*The Burning Sea*, 2021), an oil spill is an opportunity to lay out a perspective of Norway and its relationship with fossil fuels. This article shows how, through an exercise of effacing and erasures, the film bends three basic rules of the catastrophe genre to conceive a society that parallels central notions of Norwegian exceptionalism. The disappearance of a struggle between 'good' and 'evil,' the elimination of economic or political greed, and the respect for scientific knowledge allow for the display of a society without struggles, guaranteeing well-being and nurturing a relation with more-than-human nature. In this context, oil extraction is presented as an encapsulated episode that, while having provided economic affluence for the country, has not affected an otherwise romanticized idea of the relation with the tenets of national exceptionality: economic equality, consensual politics and harmony with nature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, oil, Norwegian Exceptionalism, climate fiction movies, extractivism.

Resumen

Las películas son un campo fértil para explorar la producción de argumentos sobre el Antropoceno. En *Nordsjøen* (*Mar del Norte*, 2021), un derrame petrolero es la oportunidad para exponer una perspectiva sobre Noruega y su relación con los combustibles fósiles. Este artículo muestra cómo, mediante un ejercicio de borrados y recortes, la película manipula tres reglas básicas del género de catástrofe para presentar una sociedad en línea con las nociones centrales del excepcionalismo noruego. La desaparición del conflicto entre el bien y el mal, la eliminación de la avaricia política o económica y el respeto por el conocimiento científico ayudan a mostrar una sociedad sin conflictos, que garantiza el bienestar y el cuidado de la naturaleza más que humana. En este contexto, la extracción de petróleo es presentada como un episodio encapsulado que, además de haber provisto beneficios económicos para el país, no ha afectado la idea romantizada de la relación entre Noruega y las ideas fundantes de la excepcionalidad nacional: igualdad económica, consenso político y armonía con la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, petróleo, excepcionalismo noruego, películas de ficción climática, extractivismo.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Introduction

Since the discovery of the Ekofisk oil fields in 1969, fossil fuels permeated most aspects of the public conversation in Norway, from politics to visual arts and from economics to literature, sciences and education. There are obvious reasons for this centrality: for the last two decades, the Norwegian population ranks as one of the happiest and wealthiest in the world (Oxfeldt) and fossil fuels are a vital part of this wonder. As of 2022, oil and gas represented almost three quarters of the country's exports, while the state's overall income from petroleum made up a quarter of the country's GDP and 42 percent of the government's total revenues (Sandal). Per capita income in Norway is among the highest in the world today. Whereas the other Nordic countries have also risen high in these rankings, none of them have become so economically affluent, and none of them have seen their fate so closely tied to the development of a single industry that permeates most aspects of society. Significant aspects of what is widely recognized as 'Norwegian identity' have been affected or determined by fossil fuels: from the strength of the welfare state to the country's relation with nature, and from the vision of an egalitarian society at home to a benign influence abroad (Eriksen 20). Norway's relationship with oil thus develops both in the country's material existence as well as in the ways this materiality is experienced and (self-) defined.

In today's context, Norway stands as a vibrant representation of modern petrocultures: not only through the material conditions attached to the extraction of the energies of fossil fuels, but also through the ways they permeate social practices, imaginaries and visions. Reflections on "Norwegian Petroculture," particularly during this century, encompass a wide range of perspectives and genres, from novels to poems and essays exploring a critical perspective of Norwegian self-perceived exceptional relation with nature (Mrozewicz 86). Audiovisual approaches to petroculture arrived particularly late. The international success of the TV-series *Okkupert* [*Occupied,* 2015-2019], a futuristic political thriller in which Norwegian decision to halt the oil industry leads to a Russian occupation, is a prominent example of TV productions with an international outreach. Locally in Norway, *Likkeland* (*State of Happiness,* 2018) was a success among audience and critics. The two seasons focused on the southwestern city of Stavanger, 'the oil capital of Norway,' and the individual lives and social structures upended by the discovery of oil in 1969.

Interestingly, cinema is one of the few spaces in which 'the Norwegian Oil Adventure' [det norske oljeeventyret] has not been an important source of inspiration. In 2013, Nordisk Film released Pionér (*Pioneer,* dir. Erik Skolbjærg), a corporate coverup thriller dealing with a diver who suffers an accident while installing pipes in the first offshore platforms. The narrative engine, based on a real case, is not particularly focused on oil or on the accident, but on the labor disputes and the reactions of the company and colleagues in the aftermaths of the accident. Apart from that, no major movie production focused on oil and Norwegian petroculture. If "cultural representations of the fossil fuel industry appear rather late

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

in Norwegian" culture, as Furuseth and her co-authors point out, then movies in particular are the most recent to emerge (Furuseth et al. 14).

This fact alone justifies our attention to *Nordsjøen* (*The Burning Sea*, dir. John Andreas Andersen), released in 2021. But the movie's treatment of Norway's relation with fossil fuels also turns *Nordsjøen* into a fertile ground for examining Norwegian petroculture. The catastrophe at the center of the plot forcefully confronts (and emerges from) a current era in which "the chances of a happy ending to this fossil-fuel fairy tale are increasingly slim" (Sandal 2023). But it does so in a particular way. As this article shows, the narrative stresses the risks associated with oil extraction while at the same time preserving the national culture in which oil extraction is embedded. And it does so by bending three fundamental narrative strategies of catastrophe and climate fiction (Cli-fi) genres: it does not present any confrontation between good and evil; it does not portray economic or political power as a corrupting influence; and it does not present a clash between scientific truth and immediate interests. What emerges from this distinctive take on climate fiction is an after-oil form of Norwegian exceptionalism. The affluence resulting from fossil fuels has been historically conceived of as deriving from a way of managing prosperity that was supposedly unique to a Norwegian *modern* relation to nature, society and wealth, setting the country apart not only from other European welfare states but from other oil nations. Yet, at the same time, the movie offers a window into how the removal of oil from the equation would usher in an era of *romantic* rescue of Norwegian exceptionalism, grounded in the self-perception of a society that is economically egalitarian, politically consensual and respectful of more-than-human nature, as basic tenets that would explain the prosperity of the country's population (Rees 45; Strang et al. 11).

Nordsjøen

Nordsjøen tells the story of three main characters involved in an incident at the offshore rigs of Ekofisk, the oil field found in 1969, 320 kilometers off the coast of Norway. Sofia works with Artur controlling Eelume, an underwater robot commonly used in offshore platforms for inspections and repairs. She is also involved with Stian, a worker at one of these platforms with a child from a previous relationship, with whom she is beginning to establish a relationship. While training with Eelume, Sofia and Artur received an emergency call from William Lie, head of security at the oil company SAGA that resembles the state-owned oil company Equinor: one of the platforms have partly collapsed for reasons they will have to determine. Once in the open sea, the robot feeds them with images suggesting them that the platform can explode, which it does moments later, sinking it entirely amidst a massive explosion. The following day, after Stian has gone to work on another platform, Sofia revisits the footage provided by the robot. She immediately realized that the explosion was not caused by a leak but by gas coming from under the seabed along a line of several kilometers, compromising more than thirty oil rigs, including the one where Stian is

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

working. While SAGA monitors an urgent evacuation from all platforms, Stian goes deep down the ocean to manually close off a pipe that could not be reached remotely. The massive explosion of several platforms occurs at that moment, while he is more than one hundred meters underwater.

The movie then unfolds along two parallel narrative strands of tensions. One strand follows SAGA's attempts to contain the damage from the oil spill, threatening not only Norway but Northern Europe as a whole. The efforts to figure out a solution involve the advice of technicians and experts from the company and the active engagement of the national government, consultation with the military, the presence of the oil minister at the emergency room in the company's headquarters, communication with the Prime Minister, and parliamentary support. The other, intersecting narrative, follows Sofia and Arthur in their efforts to find out if Stian is alive. They discuss with the company the chances of Stian's survival after the explosion and, if so, how to do everything within their reach to bring him back home.

Arriving in the theaters in 2021, *Nordsjøen* was the third installation within the burgeoning field of Norwegian big-budget disaster films, preceded by *Bølgen* (*The Wave,* dir. Roar Uthaug, 2015) and its sequel *Skjelvet* (*The Quake,* Dir. John Andreas Andersen, 2018). Produced all by Fantefilm, these Norwegian disaster films incorporate advanced visual effects and technologies to a narrative arsenal supported by budgets well above the country's historical average. In *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, the catastrophes originate in nature: a tsunami triggered by the collapse of a crevice in the first one, and a quake in Oslo in the second one. *Nordsjøen* is the first big-budget catastrophe movie about oil. Unlike *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, it presents the catastrophe as related to (and to some extent as the consequence of) oil extraction. At a crosspoint between disaster films and climate fiction, the movie inaugurates a reckoning by the Norwegian film industry with the country's reliance on fossil fuels and the environmental consequences of such entanglement characterizing the Anthropocene.

This engagement with the Anthropocene is compressed within a historical perspective in which past and future are not only temporal references but points of a moral arch. The movie starts with Lie's voiceover from a recent future describing images of a recent past evoking the early years of the Norwegian oil boom. "I was 18 in 1971" (30), he remembers, while the screen shows the grainy footage and desaturated color palettes that Furuseth and her co-authors associate with "Nordic melancholy" (Furuseth et al. 14): workers on a platform, heavy equipment, oil. "Yeah, it was such a high salary," Lie continues, reinforcing the innocence of the early days: "Zero training. We were just following the Americans" (1). Moving forward one hundred minutes later to the end of the film, Lie's voice resurfaces again, but the screen now is filled with a dark ocean under a gray sky and toxic clouds. "We thought we were a nation of oil," he reflects, now remorseful after the catastrophe. "But we're

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

essentially an ocean nation" (94).[1] What happens in between, the disaster itself, is the sinful era of oil extraction.[2]

The Narrative Axis of Disaster Movies

Disaster movies grew out of Hollywood big-budget productions during the last half of the twentieth century. In general, plots inscribed personal stories of love and survival within more cinematically powerful frameworks of enormous collapses. An effective composite of these two narratives required dramatic scripts and the latest available technology to simulate the fall of ships, planes, buildings, cities. The genre reached a production momentum in the 1970s, with 56 disaster movies released throughout the decade in the United States, including some iconic movies, such as *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (dir. Ronald Neame, 1972), *Towering Inferno* (dir. John Guillermine, 1974), *Earthquake* (dir. Mark Robson, 1974). In 1975, Steven Spielberg released *Jaws*, a movie that overtook *The Godfather* as the highest-grossing film at U.S. movie theaters. Disaster movies reached a peak with *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997), in which the basic features of the genre coalesced, from the technology involved to the basic narrative tensions. In 1998, *Titanic* became the worldwide highest-grossing film of all times and received 14 Oscar nominations.

While the destruction of massive infrastructure is a distinctive theme, authors make a case for a wider and "enduring, cross-generic appeal of cinematic representations of disaster" (Keane, 3). Plots, filming styles and technology changed over those decades, but three basic narrative tropes remained a fixture of the genre. One was the moral arch of a confrontation between good and evil, setting these movies apart from contemporary films, from science fiction to thrillers, in which ambivalence prevailed. Protagonists of disaster movies are portrayed in a stark moral contrast that usually overlaps with forms of class warfare. With the background of the golden age of American industrial society and the beginning of its decline, this clash evolved over time. The hardships of the American working class are crucial for *Airport*, in which demolition expert Guerrero plans to blow himself up on an airplane so that his struggling wife can collect the insurance money. The optimistic resolution portrays the behavior of the company as a social harmonizer. At the other end stands *Titanic,* where the social clash between working class lover Jack Dowson and abusive tycoon Caledon Hockley is irreconcilable, lending deeper significance to the ship's wreckage. Main characters usually came from the working class, the scientific community or oppressed groups. Maurice Yacowar's description of the U.S. 1970s largely applies more globally, as movies that "tend to take place in contemporary

[1] This and all the following translations from Norwegian into English are mine.

[2] I consider 'extractivism' beyond the specific economic action of extracting minerals and natural resources for the purpose of its commodification and more as a vision and a cultural logic, a moment "when the act of resource extraction becomes a policy, an ideology or a logic of extractivism," as Szeman and Wenzel propose. Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, "What do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?" *Textual Practice*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2021, pp. 505-523.

 ISSN 2171-9594

settings and the characters represent a cross-section of American society" in which "class conflict is a major resulting factor" (Keane 13).

A second feature of the genre is the corrupting influence of economic and political power and the causal relation between that influence and the disaster or the attempts to confront it. Economic pressures prevent bureaucrats from acting responsibly, like the Mayor of Amity Island in *Jaws,* who downplays the shark attacks for fears that people will stay away during the summer peak. Passengers enjoying the luxurious Poseidon remain unaware of the owner's demand to load more cargo and push the ship to greater speed than it can safely endure. *The Towering Inferno* convenes political and economic avarice: the fire starts when the company decides to turn on all the tower's lights against technicians' advice, and the developer James Duncan refuses to order the evacuation of the tower while ingratiating a senator in order to get an urban renewal contract. As Keane suggests, "the ideological reading" of the genre is "such that we go to see these films to watch the rich and greedy get their comeuppance" (Keane 75). At the height of American industrial expansion, disaster movies brought the role of workers in society to the screen and presented the uncertainties about the corporate culture that would flourish after the 1970s.

Finally, as a byproduct of the previous two features, a common piece in disaster movies is the role of induced human error in catastrophe. Such error is usually portrayed as the counterpart to an individual's struggle against the odds: the newly arrived scientist whose advice to close the beach is ignored by the small-town mayor in *Jaws*; the engineer whose suggestion to evacuate the building in *Towering Inferno* is flouted by the developer; Captain Smith being bullied by the ship's managing director into pushing the *Titanic* speed faster. Mistakes forced by economic interest or political negligence allow for the emergence of another ideal type: the scientist or professional whose advice is disregarded by the authority. Overall, the triad of good versus evil, political and economic greed, and induced human error, reflected the ambivalences about the transformations in American society during the 1970s, but remarkably, it has had an enduring power in structuring disaster movies up to these days.

Cli-fi

As a subgroup of disaster movies, climate fiction films (often referred as cli-fi) are those in which the events leading to the disaster are explicitly or implicitly related to climate change. Though they have their own specific dynamics, the genre remains solidly based on the three principles mentioned in the previous section. An early and pivotal reference of the cli-fi is *The Day After Tomorrow* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2004), presenting humanity at the mercy of a freezing storm that threats to end life on earth (Feil 157). Since then, cli-fi movies have expanded their repertoire and narrative strategies, they have innovated in terms of gender dynamics and portrays of society and in the relation with more-than-human nature during the Anthropocene. We can see the evolution of the genre during this century in three films: *The Day After*

 ISSN 2171-9594

Tomorrow, *Geostorm* (dir. Dean Devlin, 2017) and *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021).

The Day After Tomorrow follows the actions of Jack Hall, a paleoclimatologist who detects sudden temperature drops at several weather stations and warns the U.S. authorities about an imminent brief but deadly ice age in the Northern Hemisphere. His advice is initially dismissed by the U.S. vice president, wasting precious time in ordering a massive North-South evacuation. Hall, at the head of a team of researchers, confronts scientific knowledge of an impending catastrophe with the realities of raw political power. Ultimately the government orders the evacuation of the Southern states to México, and recommends inhabitants of the Northern ones, now too late to leave, to take shelter. A more explicit tale of a lone wolf crusade against deaf power is *Geostorm*, where satellite designer Jake Lawson is moved aside from the direction of an international system of climate-controlling satellites by the U.S. Secretary of State, Leonard Dekkom. The plot confronts the two characters. Lawson tries to fix a malfunctioning satellite that is unleashing life threatening changes in climate. Dekkom hides from everyone the true cause of the faulty system: a virus introduced by his own people to strike enemies abroad while removing obstacles at home, thereby clearing his path to controlling American and global power. Lawson, like Hall in *The Day After Tomorrow,* is a male professional with a complicated affective life and broken heterosexual relationships. They focus on their work. Both, however, find in their bonds with their children an ulterior value to their actions—particularly Hall, who crosses the gelid Northern states to rescue his son, taking shelter in the New York Public Library.

Unlike these two films, *Don't Look Up* is a dark comedy. Here, the threat manifests as a comet that is about to destroy planet earth. When astronomy student Kate Dibiasky and her professor Randall Mindy go public with the news of the impending extinction, their words are reabsorbed as just one more cog in the news cycle, never taken at face value for the magnitude of the event. In the White House, the President meets them with indifference. NASA director, a political appointee, downplays the danger. By the time the comet is visible, Dibiasky and Mindy launch a campaign on social media under the tag "Just Look Up" only to be confronted by the NASA's director anti-campaign, "Don't Look Up." As the comet gets closer, we see the secret deals between NASA director and billionaire Peter Isherwell for the mining rights on the incoming comet.

The movies' ends differ: in the first two films, the world restores some form of idealized American power, divested of the arrogance that led to the catastrophes. In *Don't Look Up*, life on earth disappears and the wealthy insist on their same toxic behaviors, but on a different planet. But their narrative tensions remain unchanged.

The Nordic Way

Starting early in this century, the cli-fi movie industry in the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland) navigate the tensions between the

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

place of more than-human nature in what Pietari Kääpä defines as "the ideological framework of nationhood" on the one hand, and the environmental impact of their economic prosperity on the other (71). It's a conflict located at the center of the public conversation. Nordic national identities are for the most part self-perceived as embedded in an enjoyment of nature and landscape by individuals and a social commitment to the preservation of regional ecosystems. This is particularly prevalent in Norway, where the notion that its citizens are closer to nature than people in other nations is widespread, and the concept of *friluftsliv* (outdoor life) is a constitutive part of the image of Norway as "the nation of nature" (Furuseth et al. 15). Based on these beliefs, Nordic countries forged during the last decades of the twentieth century a leading role in environmental policies and activism, considering themselves global leaders in sustainable practices. In the case of Norway, unsurprisingly, this domestic and foreign role is in tension with the reality of the *oljefinansierte velferdsstaten* or "petro-welfare-state" in which good salaries, extensive benefits, and social services are determined by the Norwegian engagement with extractivism (Furuseth 130). With the advent of the twenty-first century, a very different picture emerged for the Nordic countries as a whole: these nations are now judged, domestically and abroad, under accusations of 'greenwashing' and in terms of the impact of their affluence, consumption patterns and reliance on extractivism. Nordic cultural production grapples with these tensions in a myriad of ways.

Cinema in particular, as a "politicized form of cultural argumentation" (Kääpä 74), engages with, and produces, narratives about these conflicts that circulate throughout different social spheres. Cli-fi movies not only focus on purely environmental disasters, as in the case of *Bølgen*. Sometimes the catastrophe is associated with the extractivist practices that contribute to climate change but trigger also other incidents, as *The Abyss* (dir. Richard Holm, 2023), a Swedish movie about a town that sinks and collapses due to the nearby mining activity. The plot in thrillers like the Danish *The Shooter* (dir. Annette K. Olesen, 2013) grows around the image of a scientist who decides to shoot policymakers in protest against the government drilling in the Artic. Here, tensions are explained through, but not created by, climate change. Others, like Norwegian *Cold Prey* (dir. Roar Uthaug, 2006) or Finish *Rare Exports* (dir. Jalmari Helander, 2010) explore national folklore tales against the backdrop of a critical revision of the separation between human and non-human nature. Others are embedded in an ideological reflection about the current vision of Nordic presence abroad. In *Force Majeure* (2014), for example, Swedish director Ruben Östlund describes a family's reaction to an accident in a ski resort in the Alps, exploring the tensions of a Nordic exceptionality ethos in tension with neoliberal values and patterns of consumption.

Bending the Rules

As the last installment of the trilogy started with *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, *Nordsjøen* populates the story with the recognizable features of Nordic identity. Here the

characters embody Norway as a nation of *friluftsliv* lovers who embrace the tradition of the cabin (*hytta*) outside the city. They enjoy a night at the beach around a fire, laughing, playing, embracing, and running naked towards the water, in a scene in which the erotic elements of the country's relationship with nature become apparent (Iversen). As in other Nordic films, gender roles here reflect an egalitarian society in which women hold power. The head of the oil company is a woman, as it is the unseen prime minister. More important, the female character, Sofia, is not only the leading actor, but she is also the one with the attributes of bravery, knowledge and decisiveness that moves the plot forward.[3] As in most Nordic disaster movies, finally, class differences are not at the center of the plot, or they are mostly erased.

Building on this basic premise, the movie faces the dilemma of how to make intelligible the disruption caused by oil-triggered explosions within an idyllic social and environmental landscape. One possible option would have been to introduce into the story a critical perspective on these national and regional narratives, in line with the ways in which ecocriticism reflects on "the representation of non-human elements as part of the ideological framework of nationhood" (Kääpä 71). In those perspectives, "ecocinema provides a particular 'ecocritical' take on the logic of national cultural industries" (Kääpä 71), bringing cli-fi closer to a vantage point in which reflections on the Anthropocene engage with a critical reflection about ideas of Nordic nationhood—namely, economic affluence, mutually beneficial relation with more-than-human nature, egalitarian societies and consensual political systems.

A central argument of this article is that, while fossil fuel extraction generally exposes the contradictions underlying Norwegian prosperity, *Nordsjøen* presents dependency on oil not as a *symbol* of broader conflicts over wealth, affluence and consumerism, but as an *encapsulated* episode in an otherwise unaffected sense of national exceptionality. It does so by fundamentally bending the three rules of catastrophe movies presented above, effectively enacting an erasure of conflict.

In the movie, explosions spectacularly destroy offshore platforms. Nature responds to excessive drilling. First, the platform breaks, setting in motion the movie's plot. Then, the seabed gives in, and massive blasts sink a string of oil rigs. As if nature's forces were not enough, humans take over the task, with the Airforce firing on the collapsing platforms to prevent further damage. The "petroleumscape of the North Sea," a vast combination of raw nature and massive infrastructure that emerged in the 1970s, collapses (Couling 109). Images ingrained in Norwegian consciousness through museums, school programs, advertisement and sponsorship of international athletes as the backbone of national affluence are swallowed in a few scenes by the ocean. Yet the nation, as imagined by its domestic narratives, remains intact.

[3] In the same direction, *The Abyss* went even further in this Nordic approach to gender: the female character not only is the head of security at a mine: it is her husband, while trying to leave the collapsing mine, who represents all the traits frequently attributed to women. He panicked while trying to move through a hole, becomes hysterical and unable to move, causing one female colleague to die and forcing his wife to hit him with a pipe in his head in order to move him up and away from the area.

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Erasure 1: Conflict. First, the plot presents no confrontation between good and evil, turning the kind of society that audiences can infer from the screen as a community of only good doers, with problems but no conflicts, thus isolating the disaster from a criticism to the culture in which it takes place. Oil extraction, in this context, is a practice that has brought prosperity and environmental degradation, but it has not wreaked havoc upon the culture to which this practice belongs: the tenets of Norwegian exceptionalism remain intact. As in most catastrophe movies, Sofia, Stian and Artur are the flawless heroic protagonists. But the film also deploys a gallery of characters from different origins and with different interest, yet none of them act out of self-interest, selfishness, ignorance or greed, nor they confront the heroes in irreconcilable ways. Throughout the film, the head of SAGA is shown with a concerned expression but fully focused on both containing the accident and saving Stian's life. Her assistant seeks to comfort Sofia and is eager to pass along crucial information about Stian that she brings to the headquarters. Ronny, Stian's immediate boss, waits until the very last minute on the crumbling platform, engines on, for him to return from underwater, risking his own life and taking off a fraction of a second before the rig collapses. The minister of oil does not interfere in the technical conversation with any immediate political self-interest; even more, he guarantees the prime minister and congress' swift approval for the Airforce's involvement. Good prevails against no evil other than the accident itself.

The closest the movie comes to presenting a villain is Lie, the company's head of security, yet at every turn that the plot could have confirmed his darker side, he acts according to the common good. Right after reviewing the information provided by the robot, Sonia shows him the images suggesting that the accident was not a leak in the pipe but a much more dangerous movement underneath. Lie is struck by the information, becomes distant, and reminds her that she's under a non-disclosure agreement. The interests and image of the company might be a priority of the SAGA's men. Yet, he takes the footage with him and uses it to speed up the evacuation. He later explains in clear terms the causes of the disaster and comes up with the best possible solution to contain the spreading of oil throughout Norway and Northern Europe. His meditative and remorseful voiceover at the end of the movie confirms that the catastrophe has had a redeeming effect on him.

Creating a meaningful tension between good and bad would have steered the story toward connecting the conflict to broader collective struggles—yet the society depicted in *Nordsjøen* displays none. In fact, society almost does not materialize in the movie, as the director discards resources that are abundant in other catastrophe movies: from digitally generated crowds fleeing chaos to the simple use of TV screens that reveal to the audience a social fabric shattered by disaster. Here, as Franklin Ginn has analyzed in cultural productions during the Anthropocene, oil extraction and its tragic consequences are "fetishized to stand as 'the problem', masking the underline causes [of it]: the unequal socioeconomic and geopolitical networks" that enable them (Ginn 353).

 ISSN 2171-9594

Two elements come to aid to the erasure of social confrontations. One is the sense of a tightly knit community built around SAGA. Labor relations, family ties and friendship seem to be all harmoniously intertwined. Sofia manages to fly to the burning platform to rescue Stian thanks to Stian's sister, who is a pilot at SAGA. Stian's boss on the platform is also his weekend companion. Berit, the assistant to the company's head, knows Sofia and everybody else by first name. Lie, despite his hierarchical position, eats at the company's cafeteria, and when he feels the need to remove Sofia from the headquarters, security guards escort her silently, politely and with no violence. The environment around the company resonates with the early twentieth century paternalistic image of companies in small towns, of which Henry Ford came to epitomize in the U.S. SAGA is the authority that uses its power responsibly. Trust is tested across lines, but never broken.

The other element is the purifying role of fire. At the dramatic peak of the movie, Sonia, Stian and Artur are on the sinking platform and a sea of fire from the bombs launched by the Airforce advances towards them. Their only chance of survival is to quickly submerge in one of the submarine-like lifeboats. Yet, when they are all inside it, the cord that attaches the lifeboat to the platform is stuck. The only way to free the lifeboat is from the outside: one needs to make the final sacrifice, go back to the platform, cut the cord and release the boat with the other two characters inside. Artur does so, sealing the submersible from the outside with his two friends inside and releasing it to ensure their survival as the fire advances. With his only means of salvation departing without him, Artur is shown literally melting in the flames. There is something curious in his face: he does not look panicked or sad, but rather thrilled, ecstatic after having done the right thing. He is not engulfed by the flames of the Inferno, where sinners are punished; it is the fire of the Purgatory, where souls arrive eager to suffer and to be purified (Morgan 146). Artur ceases to exist, yet he is fully realized.

Erasure 2: Greed. The second bending of the genre's rules is the removal of any kind of economic or political interests from any form of corrupting influence in the decision-making process. None of the decisions that keep the narrative tension alive are distorted by economic greed or sectorial interests, which is even more remarkable in a plot built around oil extraction and its consequences. In fact, one of the few explicit references to the economy is when officials and member of the SAGA emergency team discuss the potential impact that the oil spill would have for the tourism and fishing industries in the Norwegian west coast and Northern Europe. Contrary to other examples such as *Bølgen*, in which the protagonist's boss doesn't activate the evacuation alarm so not to scare tourists during high season (in a reminder of what the major had done in *Jaws)*, in *Nordsjøen* this information is immediately considered, processed and used to help speed up the process of bombing the leaked oil as to limit the spill and reduce the damage.

With no political or economic obstacles, decisions are swift. Nature asserts itself as it typically does in catastrophe movies: sudden and mighty, with active disregard for the small, evolving matter that would make it intelligible. These

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

aesthetic decisions are particularly relevant for visual descriptions of the relation between humans and nature in which, as Castro and Selgas argue, the "spectacular" and "instantaneous" replace "long shots and subtle details reminiscent of the extractive violence" (Castro and Selgas 9). Human solutions mirror nature in its expediency: the company suggests the best option is to bomb the oil so the flames consume it, the minister makes a call and gets the support from the Prime Minister and Congress. Minutes later, two F35 from the Air Force launch a few missiles over the leaked oil with millimetric precision. The fictionalized version effectively expunged from the process the entanglement of interests that would complicate the outcome. Oil spills are messy, but the ulterior efforts to contain their effects are just usually as chaotic.

A real case close to the one created in *Nordsjøen*, the Torrey Canyon of 1967, shows what the movie erased. The tanker ran aground on rocks, leaving more than 100 million liters of crude oil in coasts of Britain. Efforts to contain the spill lasted more than 20 days, officials delayed action for days waiting for the ship's owners to declare total loss of the property so to avoid litigation. The crisis involved confrontations between the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and his cabinet, and between them and Parliament, civil society and local authorities. Before the decision to bomb was taken, the authorities tried to salvage the ship—breaking it in two in the process—then tried washing the sea with detergent and even bombing the water, yet failed to keep the fire under control. Anything but swift, the bombing itself lasted three days, during which RAF dropped 160,000 pounds of explosives, 10,000 gallons of aviation kerosene and 3,000 gallons of napalm (Sheail). Power struggles, inequalities, clashing interests and opposing views of society became immediately apparent, casting doubts about the very "natural" connotation of ecological disasters. As historian Mark Healey notes, "If these social structures are often invisible or taken for granted a major disaster can bring them into view, and open them to challenge" (Healey 12).

Erasure 3: Anti-science. Associated with this dimension is the third bent rule of the genre: throughout the movie, scientific advice is smoothly incorporated into the decision-making process, and it never clashes with other knowledge or interests. As in most catastrophe and cli-fi movies, scientists have a prominent and heroic place in the plot. Sofia and Artur work with Eelume, the underwater robot, feeding imagines and other information to SAGA officials working on the platform or from the company's headquarters. It is not only the cutting-edge technology of Eelume that gives them a leading role in dealing with the explosions, but also the training, knowledge and principles that they bring to their job and that, taken together, form a defining work ethics for the scientific community. The movie introduces the two characters and the robot during a training session in which they seek to improve their performance. Later, when Eelume provides them with images of the explosions, they do not simply accept the raw footage as transparent information. Instead, Sofia returns to work, reviews the recording and realizes that there is a fault in the seabed.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Scientific knowledge and technology thus form the platform on which they decide on their heroic mission to rescue Stian.

While none of this is new to the genre, *Nordsjøen* introduces the innovation of valuing scientific advice. Scientists also provide the long-term data suggesting that the collapse of the seabed is linked to human's undeterred efforts to extract oil. Yet this point is only admitted in passing, and in the mildest possible terms, during the first emergency meeting at SAGA's headquarters. After the minister of Oil and Energy inquires about the cause, scientists use visual simulations on large screens to illustrate geological shifts occurring over millions of years. The cause? "Several reasons," a scientific advisor suggests. Among them, there is the chance that too much drilling has softened the seabed. "We've turned the sea bottom into a Swiss cheese," the scientist said, fleetingly, before being cut short by the head of the company: "Please, let's focus on what's important now" (36). Meaning: avoiding a cataclysm.[4]

The opportunity to frame scientific advice as the as the starting point for two competing narratives—one focused on the company's responsibility in the accident and one running forward towards the consequences of the company's actions—is carefully avoided. Rather, both stories blend into a partnership between science, business and officials. This is clearer than ever in the role of Lie. After analyzing the information provided by Sofia, Lie explains in clear terms the causes of the disaster and comes up with the best possible solution to contain the spreading of oil throughout Norway and Northern Europe. His meditative and remorseful voiceover at the end of the movie confirms that the catastrophe has had a redeeming effect on him. Science has helped to prevent the worst possible scenario; yet, unlike most movies in this genre, it did so without having to confront denialism, sabotage, shortsighted political ambitions or economic interests.

Conclusions

The first time Sofia and Artur are sent to investigate the situation at the rings, they load Eeluma along with other vital equipment and board one of SAGA's helicopters. As the chopper lifts off, the horizon expands, visually and otherwise. As the perspective widens, the image encompasses not only what Couling defined as the "petroleumscape of the North Sea" (109), its infrastructure and the vast ocean below: the wind turbines in the skyline announce also the end of an era. In the emergence of renewables and the remorseful final remarks about being an 'ocean nation,' we picture a future without oil, but more importantly, without further conflicts with nature. As it becomes clear, the problem has been oil as a material, and not the practices and discourses attached to its extraction, the exchange value and the social

[4] This harmonic relation between science and power seems limited to *Nordsjøen* and its main object, oil. Other Norwegian disaster films remain attentive to the conflict. More recently, the Netflix Norwegian blockbuster *La Palma* (dir. Martin Sundland, 2024) portrays officials in Spain and in Norway as stubbornly rejecting warnings from both scientists, expanding the consequences of the volcanic eruption.

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costs attached to oil once it is imagined as a resource. This narrative becomes more transparent when contrasted with *Birk & Magna: Gruvens mørke hemmelighet* (dir. Christer Steffensen, 2023), a Norwegian children's movie released two years later. The movie portrays the attempts of an energy company to expand its wind turbine operations in a small Norwegian town. Everything occluded in *Nordsjøen* is apparent here: evil characters threaten nature and human lives through extortion and violence against good-will characters tied to the community. Malevolent forces do so in seeking economic profit through the exploitation of nature. But even more interesting, evil and greed are represented not by the oil industry but by economic interests associated with wind energy, making clear that is not oil but *resourcism*, a radical and all-encompassing reading of the entire nature as a space for profit, which brings us to the brink of extinction.

Nordsjøen is certainly not a happy movie, yet it offers the comforting feeling of a way out of the fossil-fuel era that leaves unscathed the basic tenets of Norwegian identity—portrayed as something exceptionally different and superior to other national identities (Rees 45). Facing an oil spill of titanic magnitude, all members of society unite for a common solution: technology cleans up the mess, and new energies replace the polluting ones. Removed from the various systems of extraction in which oil is enmeshed, both the love for nature and the nihilistic anxieties about the Anthropocene hovering the movie become simply a means to escape from more intractable human problems—those of economic exploitation and political domination—that allow for the destruction of nature, human and otherwise.

As such, the sense of Norwegian exceptionalism looming over the movie is suspended in *petromelancholia*, as "a story about 'unsustainable attachment', about destructive love," as Stephanie LeMenager elaborated (11). LeMenager presents *petromelancholia* as a literary genre different from *petrofiction*. Whereas the latter refers to "novels that make explicit the oil problem under debate," the former discusses how "the petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the sole of one's feet are incorporating practices" (LeMenager 26). *Nordsjøen* navigates the edge of both waters. The inhabitants of this town are removed from the experience of oil consumption and the habitus it entails, yet every centimeter of the fabric of this community is infused with oil. In this *petromelancholic state of mind*, the "painful detachment process" associated with *petromelancholia* is hovering on the horizon, imbuing characters with a sober realization of their poisonous wellbeing.

Present tensions around this "unsustainable attachment" reify a past portrayed as a combination of domestic social equality, national innocence and benevolent global impact. As the movie makes clear, the period between 1969 and today is an era in itself, defined by the discovery of oil. While the country became awfully prosperous, equality receded. Current estimates consider that in 2018 the wealthiest 10 percent owned 60 of the national wealth, in line with the U.K. and other European countries, while the richest one percent is also the sector paying the least

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

taxes in relation to their income (Aaberge). Scholars have also suggested that containment of the domestic inequality gap and of the environmental footprint of consumption and extractivism locates Norway as a late case of uneven and combined development, in which national class compromise and a conscious environmental policy are made at the expenses of workers and nature elsewhere (Bieler 240).

In this context, 'exceptionalism' operates a chronological transposition in which a nostalgic vindication of a distant past enables the obliteration of the immediate one. Oil is the source of prosperity and the cause of the loss of an idealized, innocent, and simpler social and natural landscape. The past is projected onto the ocean, a privileged medium for romanticized realities different from those human societies created on land. 'Ocean,' the last word in the movie, is the medium for longing for a perceived lost past, a reminder of what we really were before oil, and of what we can be again, as historian Helen M. Rozwadowski puts it, "a playground and retreat in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nostalgia for a lost maritime past [that] fixed the ocean in a perpetually pre-industrial moment" (Rozwadowski 160).

Since the 1940s, the majority of offshore platforms have been built "out of sight of land," an invisibility that was "a function of where oil and gas deposits are located but also of political, economic and aesthetic considerations" (Polack and Farquharson 253). Yet, over the last decades, offshore rigs, still removed from the immediate encounter with ordinary citizens, have been incorporated into the Norwegian ecology of culture, labor, economics and ideology, not as a hurdle in the country's relation with nature but as part of a modern reconfiguration of it. This spirit was particularly in situating Norwegian recent history and impending future, as the oil state company Equinor and other Norwegian corporations involved in a myriad of economic activities in the ocean—from water and wind energy to salmon farming and deep-sea mining—face backlashes abroad and at home for their social and environmental impact (The Royal House 2021; McBride, 2023; Eidse-Frænkel, 2025). In *Nordsjøen,* the ocean is the space for reckoning with that legacy, while retaining the values that would warrant not only an exceptionalist national character but also future extractivist practices.

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Editorial
Creative Writing and Arts

Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon

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"forest my dictionary / words alive and gnawed / rough with paths already traveled / Açanà, Tapajurà, Igarapé / each word a being, ringing sharp."[1] With these words, Amazonian poet Márcia Theóphilo describes the Amazon forest as a pulsating body resonant with history and survival, a living archive filled with raw physicality and sensorial memory. The Forest is not merely a landscape but a synesthetic web of lexicons emerging from it. If, on one hand, the weaving of Indigenous and Western language exposes the ongoing impact of colonial erasure attempting to overwrite ancestral memory, their intertwined coexistence on the other stands as a cultural testament to the refusal to forget. Indigenous words sprout between verses like they do from the Forest as living vessels of tradition and resistance.

The visceral livelihood of Theóphilo's poetry, stands in stark opposition to how the vegetal world has been represented in dominant Western traditions. Too often, in fact, Western art and philosophy have cast plants as static props or silent ornaments, once again imposing a gaze that strips away the vitality of vegetal wor(l)ds. The tradition of still life painting, for example, depicts flora removed from their ecologies and frozen in time, most often to stand as symbolic reminders of relentless decay. Even when interrogating the sense of "things," this genre tends to establish an ontology of inanimacy, further reinforced by pairing vegetation with dead animals or so-called inanimate objects, leaving no space for dialogue or active listening.[2] This aesthetic logic parallels early botanical cataloguing practices during the Renaissance, when plant specimens were severed from their relational ecologies, studied in isolation, and renamed, a process that prefigured the rise of natural history museums,

[1] "La foresta è il mio dizionario / parole vive e masticate / Açanà, Tapajurà, Igarapé / ogni parola un essere, risuona affilata" (Theóphilo; translation is mine).

[2] It is important to note that still life was historically ranked as an inferior art form and was often the only avenue available for women painters to express their creativity. While this restriction was imposed by patriarchal social norms, still life became a means for women to assert agency and challenge traditional gender roles. As Rebecca Birrell (2020) observes, these artists created a new moral universe in dialogue with plants, transforming their botanical art into acts of resistance against objectification and seclusion of both women and nature.

where taxonomic classification was institutionalized and the semiotic rupture it enacted was consolidated.

And so, as Giovanni Aloi observes, "for centuries we have posed as sole protagonists on the historical stage and when through art we have turned to plants, all we could ever see was ourselves" (10). This anthropocentric orientation underpins extractive epistemologies that continue to shape western thought, an approach that is more and more uncapable to reckon with current socioecological urgencies. The artists featured in this special issue do not passively depict the Amazon; their work emerges from it, just like the words in Theóphilo's poem emerge from the Forest's living textures. Through their creative practices, the vegetal speaks, listens, and we, as readers and viewers, are invited into relational and multispecies modes of thinking. The epistemic shift they propose goes beyond introducing a phytocentric perspective. It recognizes the inextricable, reciprocal links that entangle humans within a larger web of living relations.

The cover image, *Preparing the Diet with Medicinal Plants*, is a generous offering by Elena Valera Bawan Jisbe, a Shipibo-Konibo artist whose work honors the healing knowledge of her ancestral lineage. Her depiction illustrates a sacred *dieta*, a dietary ritual that involves the ingestion of plants who are acknowledged as guides of transformation, transmitters of knowledge, and agents of purification. Her visual language transcends representational art by acting as a repository of cosmopoetic memory interlacing the body with the land and the vegetal world of the Amazon. Stylized medicinal plants, flowing rivers, and geometric patterns are not decorative elements but encode spiritual knowledge. The plants encircle the central figure like guardians and interlocutors, reminding us that to engage with Amazonian cosmology means to enter a dense semiotic web where vision, sound, breath, and vegetal life intertwine. The cover thus stands as a vibrant testament to Indigenous vegetal epistemology rooted in reciprocity, attunement, and ongoing dialogue with plant life.

The first contribution of the creative writing and arts section reiterates and expands on these ideas. Pedro Favaron and Chonon Bensho, descendants of a Shipibo-Konibo family, engage in a relational, co-written dialogue on their lived cosmopoetic philosophy. As they share in their text, in the native community of Santa Clara de Yarinacocha (Ucayali, Perù), they run a family cooperative with their relatives dedicated to artistic practices, ancestral medicine, Indigenous research, food sovereignty and reforestation projects, and the care of an ethnobotanical garden. Their immersive way of knowing draws from embodied Amazonian wisdom, materially expressed in Chonon Bensho's embroidery, described as a meditative practice through which the artist synchronizes with ancestral rhythms of complementarity. Eight of Bensho's works are interspersed in the essay, each accompanied by careful interpretations that guide the viewer toward a decolonial gaze. Through geometric designs such as *koros kene* and *maya kene*, Favaron and Bensho articulate the ethical principles embedded in Shipibo-Konibo visual thought.

Moving away from the term "animism" which they argue "carries the epistemic bias of hegemonic modernity," the authors propose to embrace the concept of

 ISSN 2171-9594

Amerindian cosmopoetics: a relational ontology in which plants, rivers, stars, humans, all participate as communicative and expressive beings in a living cosmos. Their essay also engages in a critical yet hopeful dialogue with contemporary plant science. Yet the authors stress that Indigenous understandings of vegetal vibrancy do not derive their legitimacy from scientific validation; they precede it, offering an ethical and spiritual vision that Western science is only beginning to grasp. In the midst of ecological devastation and extractive violence, the authors call for a reweaving of scientific and ancestral knowledge, grounded in the regeneration of bonds and a reorientation of knowledge itself that prioritizes a wondrous celebration of belonging.

The second contribution is an exclusive selection of eight illustrations by Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe, an Indigenous Yanomami artist from Sheroana, a community along the Upper Orinoco River in the Venezuelan Amazon. Working primarily with drawing, Hakihiiwe draws on the signs and symbols of his culture to create artworks deeply rooted in ancestral knowledge. Since the 1990s, he has been crafting handmade paper from natural fibers and used vegetable inks to bring the vibrant color of his surroundings to his pieces. His art-making is itself an ecological practice, a process of co-creation with the vegetal world that invites a tactile awareness. Rather than mimetic imagery, his style embraces synthetic abstraction characterized by linear pen or brushstrokes and geometric motifs learned from basketry and body painting for ritual ceremonies. Luis Romero notes in the curatorial premise that Hakihiiwe's visual language aims to "document his profound connection to his community, the jungle (*urihi*), and the collective Yanomami imagery."

Through his works, the Amazon not only escapes the "dichotomous depiction of vegetation either as reminiscent of Earthly Paradise or as a green hell" (Vieira 217), but also challenges the ocularcentric construction of plant-experience that dominates Western visual culture. As Hakihiiwe explained to writer Lauren Moya Ford, "I don't invent anything, everything I do is my jungle and what is there" (n.p.), anchoring his practice in place-based, experiential knowledge, immersed in the land and in intimate dialogue with it. This embodied approach allows his art to move beyond passive seeing toward active sensing, where the vegetal becomes the storyteller of its own stories.

Following Hakihiiwe's evocative selection are two works by the multiversed artist Maria Thereza Alves: five paintings from her series *This is Not an Apricot* and a reprint of her poem *The Umbragiade*. For the first time available in open access, the poem features hyperlinked numbered references connecting directly to the endnotes, making the reading experience more dynamic and immediate. Alves's oeuvre spans from political texts, mixed media installations, and drawings, to photographs, performances, and in situ works. As one of the most significant voices to emerge in recent years from Brazil, her work bears witness to silenced voices and addresses both the devastating effects of Portuguese imperialism on the Indigenous peoples of her native Brazil and the broader impacts of Spanish conquest across the Americas.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

In *This is Not an Apricot*, a title that intertextually nods to René Magritte's *This is Not a Pipe*, Alves undertakes a powerful act of semiotic resistance and botanical decolonization. The series was inspired by a real encounter in a market in Manaus where she asked a vendor the names of various unfamiliar fruits. To each, he simply replied, "an apricot." In reality, these were not apricots but fruits whose original Indigenous names had been erased through colonial assimilation, which forbade Indigenous languages and, with them, both the breadth and specificity of the ecological knowledge those languages encoded. Losing words, especially to imperialist subjugation, is not just a linguistic loss, it is the collapse of entire ecologies (Kimmerer 258). In response, Alves painted these fruits accompanied by their scientific names with the phrase *this is not an apricot* displayed beneath each image. Through this repetitive gesture, she challenges the colonial homogenization of signs and exposes how both language and biodiversity are deliberately erased under systems of domination. At the same time, she rescripts the visual language of Western art through an Indigenous cultural imaginary, using painting as a site of epistemic reparation.

The Umbragiade is more than a poetic composition; it is a collective act of witnessing. Composed from interviews with agroforestry agents from AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of Acre), all belonging to various Indigenous communities who, in Alves's words from the prologue, "have survived genocide campaigns," the poem foregrounds a chorus of voices that rise from within the forest to assert ecological sovereignty. Its cumulative rhythm bears testimony to the ongoing devastation caused by ranching, soy farming, and logging ("as they get more cattle, the clearings get larger"), while also affirming the unwavering resilience of the forest's protectors: "When I am in the middle of the forest / I am fine, / I am at home, I am with the elements." By interweaving oral testimony, song, and political critique, Alves turns this epic poem into a polyphonic defense of the forest's right to stand as a living entity entitled to sovereignty. This ethos is further stressed by recurring declarations of territorial belonging and kinship: "the forest is our home," "our shelter," "This is ours… ours. / It is ours." The poem, then, in articulating a cosmogony fundamentally at odds with extractive logics, leaves us with a vital warning: "If it were not for the forests, there is no 'us'."

The fourth contribution to the art section features four illustrations by Afro-Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino. Her recent exhibitions include *Diálogos do Dia e da Noite* at Mendes Wood DM, New York (2025), *Novas Raízes* at Casa Museu Eva Klabin, Rio de Janeiro (2024) and group shows such as *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica* at the Art Institute of Chicago (2024) and *The Milk of Dreams* at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022). Paulino's work speaks directly to what Vincent Brown has called "the political life of slavery," in which "ancestry, mourning, and commemoration" were fundamental to the struggle of the unfree to remake their social condition (1247). Her artistic practice confronts dominant historical narratives and opens space for reflection, resistance, and reimagining. Deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian cosmologies, Paulino offers a vital voice attuned to the experiences of Black

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

women navigating the enduring consequences of racism and enslavement in Brazil. Working across sewing, collage, drawing, video, and installation, Paulino deconstructs colonial visual regimes and reconstructs genealogies of identity and belonging. In the selected artworks, she reconfigures mythological archetypes to center Black and Indigenous women within a vegetal cosmology. Human figures merge with roots, vines, and tree trunks transforming into hybrid forms that speak to shared histories of survival and regeneration carried in the land. Through these interspecies entanglements, Paulino articulates a vision of the vegetal as a site of both trauma and healing, through a methodology "self-described as employing processes of *refazimento* (remaking)" that "upends the notion of racial democracy and equality within Brazilian society" (Das 63).

The two reproductions from her *Jatobá* series expands the scope of vegetal humanities beyond territorial ecologies into shared embodiment that affirms interspecies spiritual presence and processes of re-rooting. Drawing on plants significant to Afro-Brazilian culture and found across diverse Brazilian biomes, including the Amazon, Paulino grounds her vegetal iconography in geoecological realities. In these works, plants grow out of limbs, mouths, and hair, rendering an interspecies metamorphosis that is more than just metaphor. Plant tendrils flourish as they envelop the human body, which, in reciprocity, receives strength from their embrace, a process that, as Liv Cuniberti observes, signals the body's release from imposed boundaries: "The skin becomes the relic of an earlier time and the shedding of constraints" (n.p.). This exchange is further expressed in the selected pieces from *Senhora das plantas* (Woman of the Plants), where Paulino depicts the *Espada de Iansã*, a plant named after a deity in the Yoruba tradition. The hybridized figure lifts her forearms and extends open palms, which evokes feelings of nurturing care and protection. Here, plants act as threshold beings, as agents of connection, and as symbols of cultural resurgence, marking a movement from diasporic fracture to collective rootedness.

As the final contribution to this special issue, we present an interview with artist Thijs Biersteker, whose practice brings together science, art, and technology in service of environmental communication. Through immersive installations, Biersteker seeks to engage the public imagination and catalyze awareness around pressing ecological issues. He describes his role as a translator of data into emotion and of environmental science into multisensory experience. Yes, plants are constantly communicating; we can measure their neurological reactions. But without the affective labor of poets and artists who turn those signals into laughter, visual animacy, and musical vitality, plant sentience remains cognitively unthinkable. In works directly concerned with the Amazon, such as *Wither* and *Amazonium*, developed in collaboration with UNESCO, Biersteker uses real-time ecological data to create living sculptures that make the scale of deforestation and reforestation tangible to distant audiences. These installations exemplify what Ryan John has defined as "plant-art," "with a conjoining hyphen signifying the inseparability of the two terms" (41), which refers to artistic works that mediate plant and forest systems

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

through digital technologies and data-driven aesthetics. In the example of the cacao tree in Indonesia, discussed in the interview, live sensing reveals the plant's responses to environmental stress, transforming the tree into a co-narrator of systemic crises, among which Biersteker mentions "slavery in supply chains, deforestation, soil depletion, food insecurity, corporate monopolies, and of course climate change." Through such works, Biersteker bridges multiple distances—geographical, linguistic, cultural, and epistemic—crafting a space in which art, science, and multispecies communication converge into a new language system made possible through technological mediation.

What stands out in the conversation is Biersteker's ethical awareness, which is evident not only in his engagement with the Amazon and its local communities, but also in the sustainable ethos that underpins his practice. At his studio, Woven, Biersteker adopts environmentally responsible production methods, using recycled materials, material passports, and considering the full life cycle of each installation. Equally, he acknowledges that the Amazon is not his story to tell. Instead, he situates his work as part of a collective chain of translation between scientists and artists, forests and viewers, always conscious of his position as a European artist working within histories of extractivism and colonial legacies. "The Amazon," he notes, "has become an ecological icon for biodiversity and interconnection." Yet this iconic status is not romanticized in his installations but rendered into affective materialities where viewers can experience loss, urgency, and the possibility of regeneration. Biersteker's art enacts, in practice, the kind of transdisciplinary and cross-cultural entanglement that this issue seeks to explore, one where multiple knowledges, affect, and care converge through shared concern and co-creation with the Amazon and the communities sovereign to that land.

Plants teach us resilience, the mesmerizing beauty of both growth and decay, and their intricate dance. To be in a place without plants, is to be "in a strange, loveless, unhealthy place" (Di Paola 1). If that is true, the Amazon must be one of the most vibrant and love-filled places in the world. As ecocides unfold in real time and ancient, wise trees are uprooted in acts of imperial and military violence, let us rise in care and solidarity with our plant kin and amplify Indigenous and other historically silenced voices in the struggle for ecological and artistic freedom. Protecting the Amazon and other vital ecosystems is not only an environmental imperative, but a matter of planetary balance, cultural memory, and justice.

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The Cosmopoetics of Plants: A Dialogue Between Shipibo-Konibo Botanical Knowledge, Ecology, and Science[1]

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We, the authors of this article, have been married for almost fifteen years. We belong to a Shipibo-Konibo family that has practiced ancestral medicine for many generations. Through our artistic and academic work, we have undertaken a research journey among the elders of our family. Our goal has been to reconnect with the knowledge of our grandparents and to learn how to feel the life of our territory with the heart. From the beginning, our research methodologies have been grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and rationalities. We have approached the elders with deep respect, without haste, and in a state of full attention, so that they may share their teachings little by little.

As man and woman, we have learned to respect and complement each other, following ancient teachings, so that we may present an updated version of our ancestors' thought. Through both philosophy and art, we strive to foster a dialogue between ancestral knowledge and modernity—one that can reveal the power Indigenous reflections hold to offer the global civilization possible pathways out of its intellectual, spiritual, moral, and ecological crisis. In the midst of the antinomies of modernity (such as the exaltation of progress alongside the devastation of territories, the cult of individual freedom alongside systemic inequality, or the celebration of reason alongside the proliferation of destructive technologies), we strive to embody the wisdom of our ancestors in each breath and in the way we inhabit Mother Earth. In the native community of Santa Clara de Yarinacocha (Ucayali, Peru), together with our relatives, we run a family cooperative dedicated to artistic creation, an ancestral medicine clinic, a center for Indigenous studies and research, a reforestation and food sovereignty project, as well as the care of an ethnobotanical garden.

Modern ecological science affirms that living organisms must be studied in relation to the totality of existence. What distinguishes ecology from other biological

[1] Text by Pedro Martin Favaron Peyon and Chonon Bensho. Art by Chonon Bensho.

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disciplines—typically focused on individual organisms or smaller scales of analysis—is its central principle of interconnection: all living beings form part of a complex web of relationships. However, the idea that everything is interconnected is far from being new. It has been present since immemorial times in diverse societies, and may even represent a fundamental intuition of the human condition—an archetypal image born from our ancestral imagination.

According to Indigenous scholar Dan Longboat and Sheridan (2006), what is often called 'animism'—the view that all living beings are conscious—actually proposes a relational worldview that predates modern ecological thought. From this perspective, ecology's merit lies in its ability to recover and formalize this ancestral and nearly universal conception within the framework of modern science. Through empirical observation and systematic modeling, ecology legitimizes these insights in ways that institutions of political power recognize as valid. Yet, one may go further still and reimagine ecology not only as a scientific field, but also as a bridge between ancient wisdoms and our contemporary need to understand and care for the intricate web of life.

The forces of economical and technological globalization accelerate time and collapse spatial distances. The pace of cybernetics, technical productivity, and efficiency disrupts our alignment with cosmic rhythms. The human being, deprived of stillness and caught in the vertigo of crowded schedules and constant demands, becomes unable to feel the affective life of the Earth or to attune to the cosmic animating flow. The dominance of financial elites over the wellbeing of the living world has depended, to a large extent, on a naturalistic ontological paradigm. Only when territory is conceived as lacking soul, consciousness, and sensitivity can human beings imagine themselves entitled to seize and destroy vast ecosystems, motivated purely by profit and insatiable desire. This unrestrained exploitation of the planet parallels the imposition of technical and financial elites upon the rest of humanity. Modern imperialism entails both ecological devastation and the subjugation of Indigenous societies. The term 'animism' still carries the epistemic bias of hegemonic modernity. It presumes that Indigenous peoples project life and agency onto so-called 'inanimate' entities. As native scholar Gregory Cajete (2000) argues, this view usually stems from a superficial and ethnocentric misunderstanding of Indigenous ways of knowing the life of the land. It remains rooted in a representational logic, where human subjects are believed to attribute soul to other beings, rather than recognizing that they already participate in networks of language, consciousness, and agency.

Beyond the mischaracterization implied by the term 'animism,' Indigenous knowledge is grounded in a vision of relational balance, where all beings participate in a dynamic web of reciprocity that is also expressed through symbolic forms such as the *koros kene* design. We designed the *koros kene* below (Figure 1) to symbolize the complementarity of left and right, of above and below, and of the spiritual world with our own. The *koros kene* design does not merely embellish cloth; the act of embroidering it is itself a meditative practice through which the artist synchronizes with ancestral rhythms of balance. The geometry embodies the teaching of

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

complementarity—left and right, above and below—as an ethical principle that sustains life and is enacted in the very process of stitching. As with other designs, the *koros kene* carries the ancient teaching that calls us to complement one another: our two eyes complement each other, our two hands complement each other, man and woman complement each other. Complementarity and balance are always an aspiration; this does not mean fixing things into an artificial stability, but rather following an ethical impulse that invites us to respond to life's challenges and constant transformations guided by the ancestral principle of complementarity, which gives meaning to our steps and our thoughts. While asymmetries may be tolerated for a time, they should not persist; if one side imposes itself abusively over the other, the relationship produces unease and disharmony. Our ancestors taught us that to live well (*jakonash jati*), we must live in complementarity with all living beings. The human being is part of the sacred circle of life.

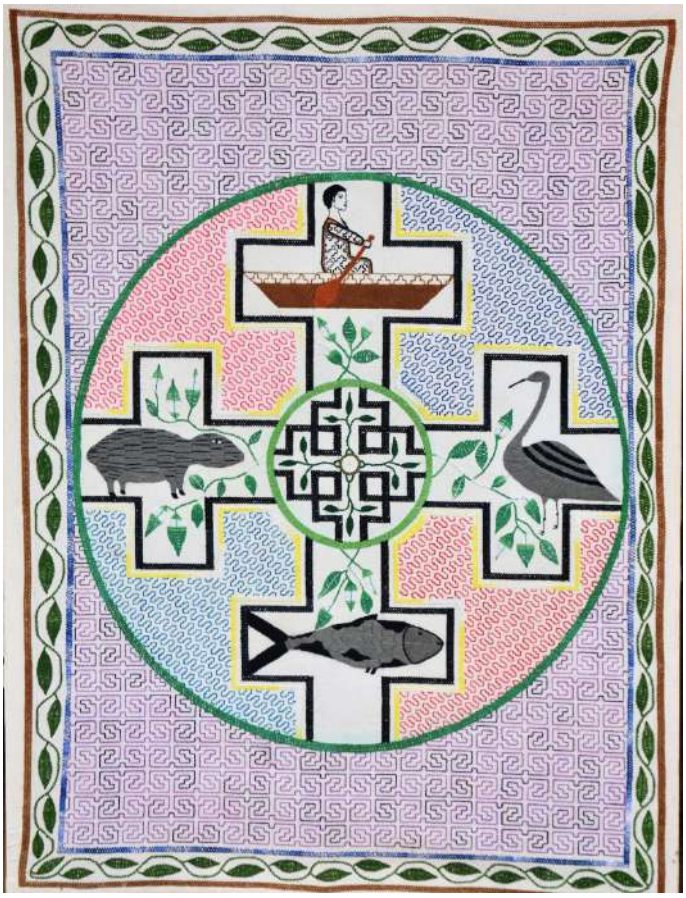

Figure 1: *Koros Kene*, colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (150 ctms x 120 ctms), 2020.

From our Indigenous perspective, it is not that we are 'animists,' but rather that hegemonic modernity—through the dulling of its sensitivity and the impoverishment of its perceptual capacities—has lost the ability to feel the agency and affect inherent to the cosmos. For this reason, we propose replacing the term 'animism' with the notion of Amerindian *cosmopoetics*: a way of dwelling, feeling, and knowing that arises from an immersive experience within the relational web of life.

 ISSN 2171-9594

By *cosmopoetics* we mean the poetic, symbolic, and experiential articulation of the living cosmos, in which every being participates in networks of reciprocity, language, and agency. Unlike the representational logic that assumes humans merely 'attribute' life to inert matter, a cosmopoetic vision recognizes the world as already alive, expressive, and communicative. It names not a projection of subjectivity onto the nonhuman, but a shared mode of existence in which perception, imagination, and affect are inseparable from the ethical responsibility of living in balance with the community of beings.

Cosmopoetic reflection arises from specific modes of inhabiting territory and from states of consciousness in which humans participate in the ongoing creativity of the cosmos. Through song, dance, storytelling, art, and ritual, humans celebrate their place in the sacred web of life. The notion of Amerindian cosmopoetics offers a conceptual alternative to the concept of animism because it affirms that humans dwell within a living cosmos, immersed affectively, sensorially, and relationally. To assert that the cosmos is alive and conscious—though in ways we may never fully understand—is not a primitive remnant, but rather a fundamental intuition pointing to a relational ontology.

Cosmopoetics can also be expressed through embroidery. Our *maya kene* design (Figure 2), a circular pattern, embodies a symbolic geometry inspired by lakes, the winding meanders of Amazonian rivers, and mountain streams. Its circular form represents not only territory and memory but also the slow, attentive practice of embroidery as a cosmopoetic exercise, aligning breath, hand, and thought with the rhythms of rivers and celestial cycles. In this process, the embroiderer interweaves land, memory, and self, tracing the sacred bond between community and cosmos. Through *maya kene*, we bring our ancestral territory to life—inseparable from our memories, our thoughts, our love, and our heartbeat. Ultimately, we are embroidering ourselves: our soul, our sensitivity, and the intimate dialogue that our heart maintains with both community and land. The territory lives within us, and *maya kene* expresses this affective bond, a sacred circle embracing humans and all other living beings.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Figure 2: *Maya Kene*, colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (150 ctms x 120 ctms), 2020.

In this context, the term cosmos refers to an ordered, living whole animated by an intelligent breath that enlivens both stars and cells. It is not a neutral or mechanical universe, but a dense web of relationships among multiple forms of existence—physical and spiritual—each element with its own agency, language, and way of life. The cosmic dimension of this perspective reminds us that while the Earth is our mother and our shared home, she is also a spinning sphere embedded within a solar system and a moving galaxy. The Amerindian commitment to land is not a parochial chauvinism, but a planetary consciousness. Indigenous wisdom knows that we participate in something far greater, which includes the Sun, the stars, and the comets. Thus, cosmopoetics sinks its roots into specific land (in our case, the Amazon basin), but also drinks from rain, sunlight, moonlight, and the atmosphere. In this way, the rooted movement toward the fertile depths of the local is not opposed to the upward opening toward universal light; they are complementary movements.

The upper part of the embroidered diptych *Jenen Ewa* (Figure 3) shows how the ancient sages of the Shipibo nation, as told in our ancestral stories, possessed the spiritual and physical strength to rise up to the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. They also knew how to converse with eagles so they could be lifted in their flight, or how to wear the tunic of the hummingbirds. These stories teach us that, in order to reach our full potential, human beings must learn to converse with all living beings, to learn

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

from them, and to receive their knowledge. To do so, we must learn to be humble and to recover the cosmic semiotics that connect us to the universe. To render eagles and the ancestral sages is to invite their presence into the canvas, enacting an ontological linking between human creation and cosmic vitality.

Figure 3: *Jenen Ewa* (upper part), colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (120 ctms x 170 ctms), 2024.

Our philosophical and artistic proposal is inseparable from poetics, because purely technical or conceptual language falls short in conveying the affective bond between being and territory. Therefore, it is essential to weave philosophy and poetics together when reflecting on the relationship between humans and other living beings. One cannot dwell on Mother Earth with true relational awareness unless one also speaks a language that resonates with cosmic life.

To express human belonging in the fabric of life requires embracing affectivity and the sacred as integral to reason. Only the contemplative gaze of poetry can perceive spirit in a stone, in a tree, in a mountain, in the sand, in the Sun, or in the pupil of another being. Through affective cognition, we come to understand that we are all relatives, our destinies entangled.

In this sense, poetry is better suited to welcome with respect, empathy, and true hospitality the ecological contributions of Amerindian wisdom. It stands against the grain of the technical language of positivism. It is no longer acceptable for hegemonic modernity to persist in its arrogance, labeling Indigenous nations as societies trapped in a supposed 'night of times,' plagued by superstition and devoid of value. We propose, therefore, to recognize the poetic as a condition of possibility for an ecology of the spirit, an ethics of reciprocity, and a relational ontology.

Cosmopoetic reflection draws from Indigenous knowledge systems, but it is not an ethnographic description. It is a philosophical meditation rooted in our belonging to Shipibo-Konibo, that has been practiced as ancestral medicine for generations. It is also a call to give new life to our ancestors' teachings in dialogue

 ISSN 2171-9594

with modern science and philosophy. Cosmopoetics regards ancestral knowledge as living forms of thought from which it is possible to articulate a rigorous, sensitive, and profoundly relational understanding of the world. It is a philosophical proposal that does not separate reason from emotion, thought from life, or concept from poetic image. Instead, it weaves them together so that knowledge emerges from relationship, reciprocity, and wonder before existence.

Plants are the beings most deeply rooted in Mother Earth. Therefore, to relate to them is to understand what it means to 'be-in-the-world.' The way plants inhabit territories is inherently cosmogonic. Plants are not only rooted in the soil; they also feed on sunlight, rain, and the atmosphere. If we deepen our relationship with plant wisdom, we may realize that thinking about Earth necessarily implies thinking about our celestial connections as well. The artwork *Non Axebo* (Figure 4) shows how the ancestors learned to dialogue with the trees in order to receive their healing knowledge. The medicinal strength of our wise healers comes from the roots and the earth, but also from the atmosphere, from the light of the Moon and the Sun, and from the cosmos as a whole. *Axe Ati* embodies the teaching that trees are healers and teachers. The careful embroidery of vegetal forms is a way of listening with the hands, receiving the rhythm of the forest through thread and color. Artistic cosmopoetic creation is not representation but participation in the communicative wisdom of plants.

Figure 4: *Axe Ati*, colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (175 ctms x 100 ctms), 2024.

This is something the ancient Shipibo sages understood profoundly. During their initiation processes (called *sama* in our language), they would ingest tree bark or bathe in plant infusions, allowing vegetal wisdom to permeate their bodies, infuse their blood, and illuminate their thoughts. All of their knowledge and healing power

came from this immersion in plant life. They taught that plant wisdom springs not only from the breath that fertilizes the Earth but also from the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. They affirmed that plants possess intelligence, form communities, and participate in linguistic networks. In dreams and visions, they saw that plants were governed by spiritual guardians (*rao ibo*) with whom one could communicate and form kinship bonds. Therefore, plants not only connected the sages to the entire sensible cosmos, but also gave them access to suprasensible realms. The plant medicine world is not a passive backdrop—it is an intelligent, affective, and communicative presence through which the entire cosmos can be known and inhabited.

Figure 5: *Koshi Joni* (detail), colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo*, 2023.

Is it possible to find a connection between this ancestral knowledge and contemporary science? The Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard, in her memoir *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021), argues that trees are not isolated organisms but members of highly interconnected, cooperative, and intelligent communities. According to Simard, plants communicate through a subterranean network of mycorrhizal fungi. These fungi form symbiotic relationships with tree roots, enabling the exchange of nutrients, water, and chemical signals.

Simard introduces the concept of the mother tree (the oldest and largest in a forest) as a nurturing, interconnected presence. These mother trees are deeply connected to others and are even capable of recognizing trees that have grown from their own seeds. Through these connections, they nourish younger trees, warn them of dangers (like pests or drought), and strategically distribute resources. Simard also claims that trees exhibit behaviors we might describe as ecological intelligence: they learn from their environment, adapt, and change their responses based on past experiences.

That mother trees recognize and support their descendants seems to reflect the kin-based community values of Indigenous cultures. These relationships may be

 ISSN 2171-9594

interpreted as a form of ecological empathy or care. Although Simard communicates scientific findings, her claims echo deeply held knowledge of Amerindian sages: that trees are conscious beings participating in cosmic semiotics (Favaron 2025). That is why, in our art (Figure 6) and in our philosophical thought, we often draw inspiration from the respectful dialogues our grandparents taught us to establish with the trees. *Merayanin Incanto* reflects the conversations our grandparents taught us to sustain with trees and rocks.

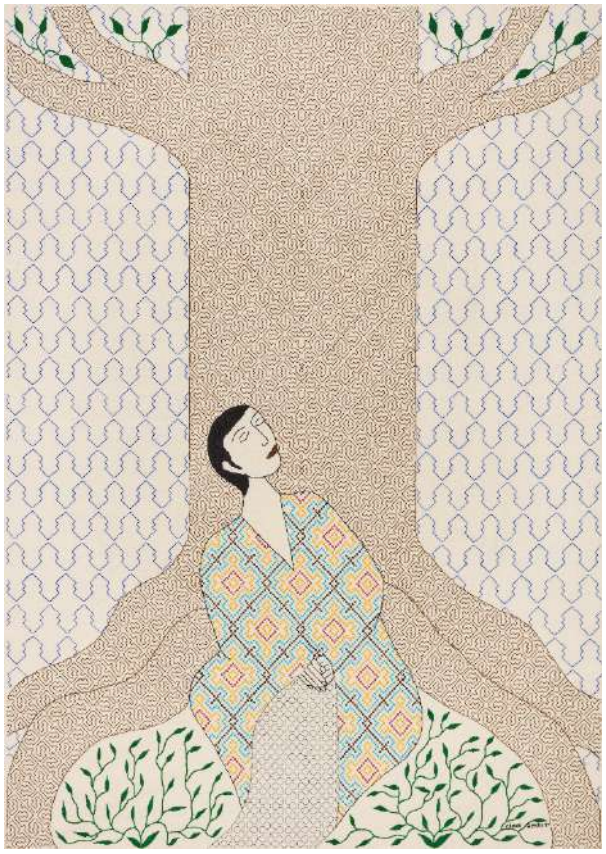

Figure 6: *Merayanin Incanto*, colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (175 ctms x 100 ctms), 2025.

Simard is not alone in suggesting a convergence between botanical science and Indigenous knowledge, which, until recently, seemed unimaginable under the monopoly of the mechanistic paradigm. Stefano Mancuso (2021), a pioneer in plant neurobiology, argues that while plants lack brains or nervous systems, they possess their own modes of communication and sensitivity. Mancuso explains that plants actively communicate through several channels: chemical signals from roots and leaves, volatile compounds warning of pest attacks, and underground networks of fungi. This sensitivity allows them to interact with their surroundings—not merely reacting passively, but solving problems, such as locating water or light. Plants make decentralized decisions and adapt their behavior flexibly and efficiently. Mancuso describes this as "distributed intelligence" (2021), akin to a neural network or swarm.

Although he avoids anthropomorphism, Mancuso suggests that plants exhibit forms of ecological affectivity: forming cooperative relationships, supporting species

survival, recognizing kin, and adjusting growth accordingly. Mancuso even proposes the possibility of collective plant intelligence, especially within cooperative ecosystems, where the behavior of one plant influences the entire system. This notion resonates with Indigenous teachings that plant species are governed by guardian spirits who manifest more completely than any individual plant the intelligence and semiotic potential of their kind (Favaron 2025).

We are not surprised by these scientific affirmations. For those of us who live in the digital age but have not forgotten the teachings of Indigenous sages, it is evident that tree branches act like antennas, sensing the conscious life of the atmosphere. Likewise, the roots of forests form neural networks that communicate and hold knowledge from Earth's deepest geological eras.

The possibility of dialogue with modern science does not imply a convergence free of tension. While fields like quantum physics, systems biology, chaos theory, and ecology have begun to destabilize traditional mechanistic assumptions, these newer approaches have yet to provoke a broad transformation within the institutional structures of scientific knowledge. Strongholds of positivist resistance persist within academia. Many scholars continue to assert that only knowledge expressed in technical terms and validated through empirical experimentation is legitimate. For such perspectives, Indigenous cosmopoetics remains a manifestation of primitive cognitive stages—something to be surpassed. Most scientific disciplines continue to struggle with moving beyond the mechanistic paradigm and with embracing the ontological implications of scientific discoveries that challenge the Cartesian model.

Worse still, the vast majority of technological advances that shape the modes of production—and even consciousness—of cybernetic civilization have been conceived within the mechanistic worldview, which sees the cosmos as devoid of volition and intelligence. Unsurprisingly, this produces a society that diminishes our emotional life, weakens language, and erodes our ability to engage in dialogue. The hypnotic influence of screens fosters the loss of affective bonds, not only between human beings, but also between humans and the cosmos.

This reinforces an instrumental vision that sustains a logic of domination over the broader web of life. While these dissonances do not amount to an insurmountable contradiction, they do reveal that any dialogue between science and Indigenous sages cannot occur symmetrically as long as one party is delegitimized for not conforming to hegemonic standards of knowledge. Despite these frictions, the epistemological vision of cosmopoetics—understood as a form of knowing rooted in immersion, affective rationality, and empathy toward shared life—has the power to transform dominant cognitive premises. It can nourish the paradigm shift that we so urgently need in order to escape the harmful consequences of mechanistic reductionism.

The cordial episteme of cosmopoetics does not reject reason; rather, it expands it into a more comprehensive and humane whole, recognizing that intelligence cannot be reduced to mere calculation. In doing so, it challenges the reductive frameworks that have prevailed since Cartesian modernity, and instead celebrates the dignity and richness of human intelligence, which also includes its

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

affective, imaginative, intuitive, and empathetic dimensions. This vision is particularly valuable for ecology, since this scientific field deals with living, complex, interdependent, and sensitive systems. Cosmopoetic perception allows us to see the existential community as composed of living subjects with whom we share a common fate and a profound responsibility.

The separation of reason from affectivity has not only limited our understanding of intelligence, but it has also caused devastating consequences for our relationship with the living world. It has fostered a worldview in which the cosmos is reduced to a set of soulless objects, ready to be extracted, used, and discarded. Therefore, we are not facing an abstract philosophical problem, but rather a need to critically address a mode of thought that has shaped how modern societies perceive human beings, knowledge, and the living cosmos. Recovering the cordial episteme seeks to reintegrate reason into a fuller and more nuanced vision of intelligence. By *cordial*, we mean an epistemic orientation grounded in the heart (from *cor, cordis*), one that joins affectivity, sensitivity, and ethical responsiveness to rational thought. Rather than opposing emotion and reason, the cordial episteme recognizes their inseparability within a broader ecology of knowing, in which thinking is at once intellectual, affective, and relational. In the work *Ani Isa Ibo* (Figure 7), we seek to convey the teaching of our ancestors, for whom the human being could only reach their fullest potential by recognizing themselves as part of the circular flow of existence and vital energy. This attunement to the rhythms of life emerges through the meditative state cultivated in embroidery: the attentive, embodied practice aligns breath, hand, and thought, transforming each stitch into a reflection of the self in relation to land, memory, and cosmos. The artwork itself becomes a testimony to the cordial episteme: reason woven with feeling, geometry infused with heartbeat.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Figure 7: *Ani Isa Ibo*, colored threads embroidered on *tocuyo* (160 ctms x 110 ctms), 2022.

These reflections do not suggest that modern science should abandon its methodologies or adopt only the epistemological proposals of cosmopoetics. It would be misguided to dismiss the achievements of empirical verification in specific domains. However, it is equally unacceptable to claim that all vital experience can or should be explained using those reductive methods and technical formulations. Scientific methods are designed to study observable, measurable, and replicable phenomena. Yet, life encompasses experiences that are not reducible to quantitative data—such as love, art, spirituality, or subjective consciousness. Attempting to explain these dimensions purely through technical parameters impoverishes their meaning, often to an intolerable degree. As a tool of control and efficiency, technique tends to exclude the sacred, the imaginative, the emotional, and the relational.

Cosmopoetic reflection advocates for multiple modes of cognition, whereby existence is approached through an epistemic plurality that honors the sacred and the affective ties that weave together all life. What is required is the recognition of different ways of knowing—ways that can coexist in complementarity rather than being subordinated to the technical-scientific paradigm. From a cosmopoetic perspective, existence cannot be reduced to discrete entities or mechanical functions; it must be understood as a fabric of meaningful relationships.

True dialogue between knowledge systems does not ask interlocutors to abandon their specificity, but to engage with mutual respect. What obstructs this exchange is not the scientific method itself—which remains a valuable tool—but its ideological use as the only valid path to truth. Positivism, especially in its rigid forms,

 ISSN 2171-9594

creates a hierarchy of knowledge and prevents the enrichment that emerges from reciprocal learning. Science can engage fruitfully with Indigenous wisdom only if it abandons its claim to epistemic supremacy.

Cosmopoetics does not seek to replace science, but to complement it with other horizons of meaning. Without asking science to renounce its strengths, we can pursue a cosmopoetic expansion of its ontological and ethical foundations, recognizing that human beings are always embedded in the web of life. Forgetting this embodied interdependence has impoverished human sensitivity and justified ecological devastation.

The influence of cosmopoetics on science could inspire a new mode of knowledge and application—one that serves the common good, redefined to include the entire community of life. Knowledge must not function merely as an instrument of control; it must also be an act of reverence, listening, and care, harmonizing with the creative flow of the cosmos. This is not a call for nostalgia, but for a transformation in how we know, intervene, and coexist. By cultivating wonder, deep listening, and recognition of every being's intrinsic dignity, cosmopoetics fosters a knowledge that connects rather than separates. As our ancestors taught, medicinal plants are cared for by invisible beings (*jone jonibo*), reminding us of the responsibility to respect all living beings and to safeguard the flourishing of diversity.

Jone Jonibo (Figure 8) summons the invisible guardians of medicinal plants. The very act of painting these figures opens a space where the luminosity and beauty of the spirit world can be brought into matter. Artistic creation thus generates an ontological linkage: a visible reminder that respect and reciprocity with nonhuman beings is the condition for the flourishing of diversity.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Figure 8: *Jone Jonibo*, oil on canvas (140 ctms x 110 ctms), 2022.

In a time marked by ecological crisis, civilizational collapse, and the intensification of extractivist and technocratic logics, it is urgent that we reconfigure our cognitive and ethical frameworks. A science sensitive to this reconfiguration will cease to be driven solely by efficiency. It will help regenerate the bonds between human beings and the more-than-human worlds. It will understand that knowledge is not just a tool—it is also an act of belonging, and a celebration of that belonging.

Thus, science and cosmopoetics can coexist: not as incompatible realms, but as complementary ways of inhabiting the Great Mystery.

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Urihi (The Jungle) – The World That Inspires Yanomami Artist Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe

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Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe (born 1971 in Sheroana, Venezuela) is a Yanomami artist who lives and works in the village of Mahekoto-Theri (Platanal, Alto Orinoco, Venezuela). His artistic practice began in the 1990s when he learned to make handmade paper with native fibers like Shiki and Abaca. Since then, his work has focused on transmitting the knowledge, symbols, and memories of his community. He does this with a visual language characterized by shapes, patterns, and compositions that draw from body paintings, basketry, and daily life in the jungle, which he has expressed through drawings, paintings, artist books, and video animations.

Hakihiiwe's works develop a synthetic, concrete, and minimal language to document his profound connection to his community, the jungle (*urihi*), and the collective Yanomami imagery. His practice is fundamentally based on observing his surroundings and aims to offer a contemporary reinterpretation of the cosmogony and holistic perspective the Yanomami people have with the great living being that is the jungle.

His art is conceived as a bridge between the ancient and the contemporary, within a fragmented time where the conscious and unconscious, the visible and the intangible, coexist. His perspective emerges as an alternative to the dominant cultural canon within the international artistic landscape.

Luis Romero

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Kumato hi kaiwe (Arbol de Kumatohi que da fruto para comer), 2023
Acrylic on canvas, 186 x 140 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery / María Teresa Hamon

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

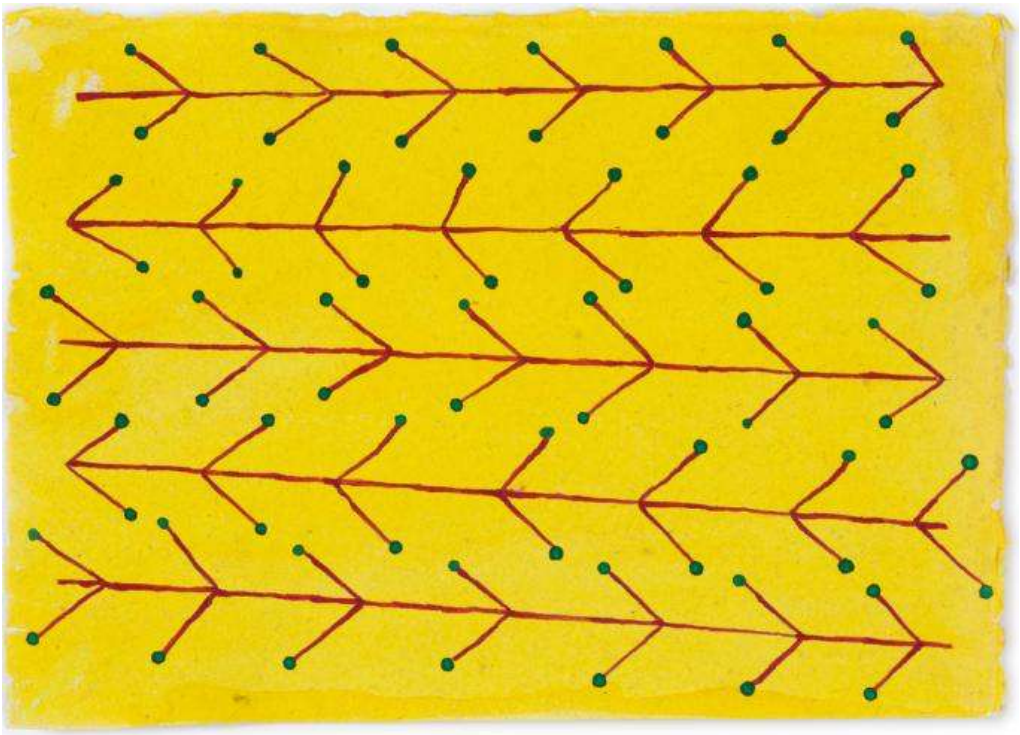
ISSN 2171-9594

Hoja de komishi hena (Hoja para techar), 2024
Natural kashipinañoma ink on paper, 42 x 29.5 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery

Yaa henahami himohimo pekua (Hoja grande con frutas), 2023
Acrylic on cotton paper, 29.5 x 39.5 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery / María Teresa Hamon

ISSN 2171-9594

Hii lire lire wino uhute (Palo del espíritu verde), 2024
Acrylic on cotton paper, 35 x 50 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery / María Teresa Hamon



Hisirikima (*Rama sin hojas*), 2022
Acrylic on cotton paper, 17.5 x 24.5 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

ISSN 2171-9594

Thora (Bambú), 2021
Acrylic on cotton paper, 42 x 59.4 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery

Thoo thope hii wake hihami (Árboles rojos con bejuco), 2023
Acrylic on cotton paper, 29.5 x 39.5 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery / María Teresa Hamon

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Hoja de komishi hena (Hoja para techar), 2024
Natual kashipinañoma ink on paper, 42 x 29.5 cm
Courtesy of ABRA Gallery

ISSN 2171-9594

Selection of "This is Not an Apricot" and the Poem "The Umbragiade"

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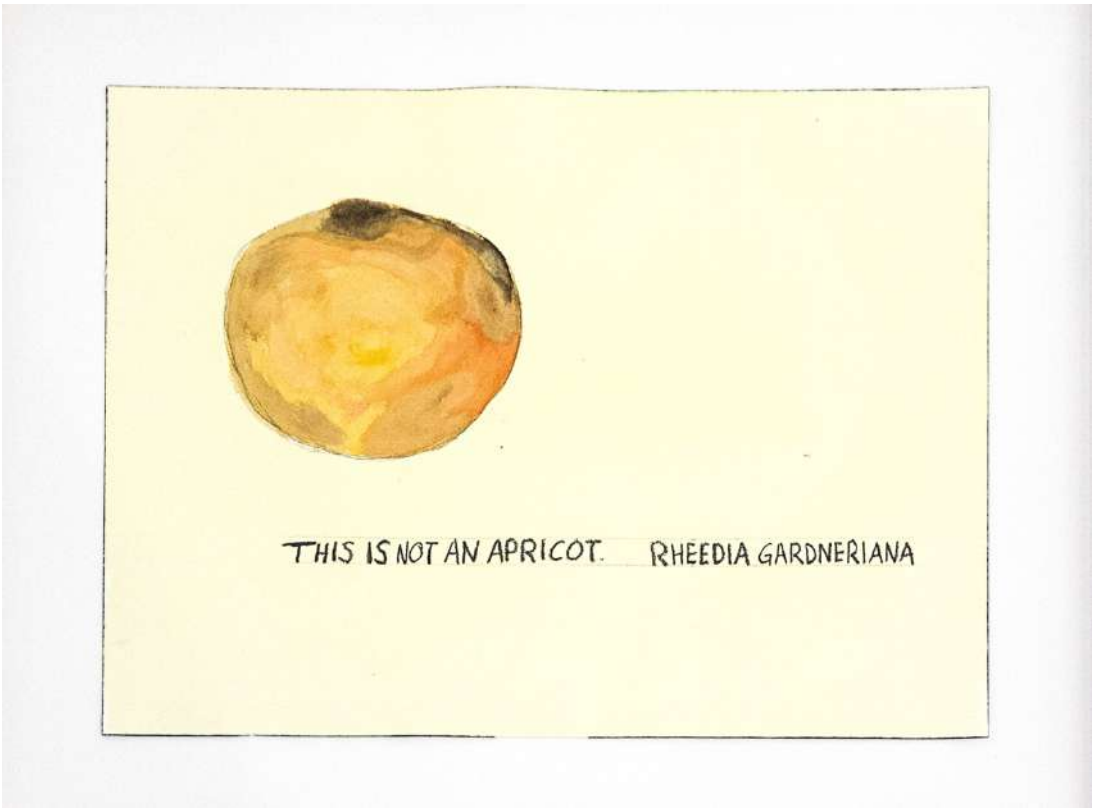
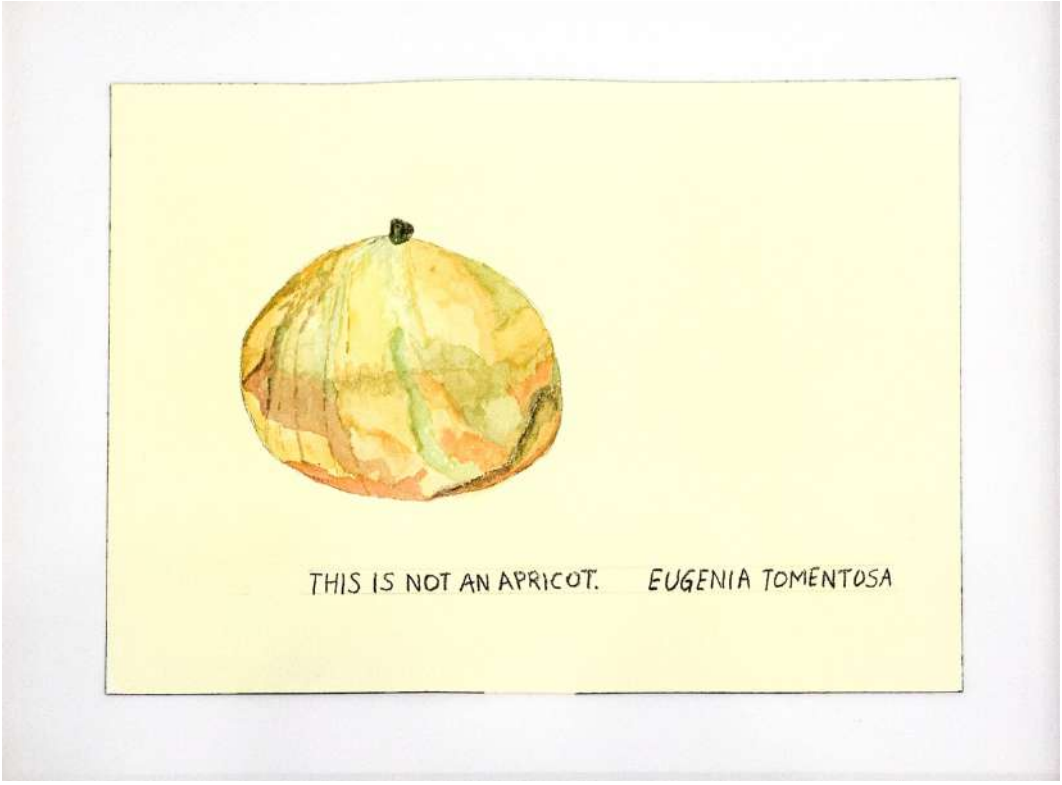
Selection of "This is Not an Apricot"[1]

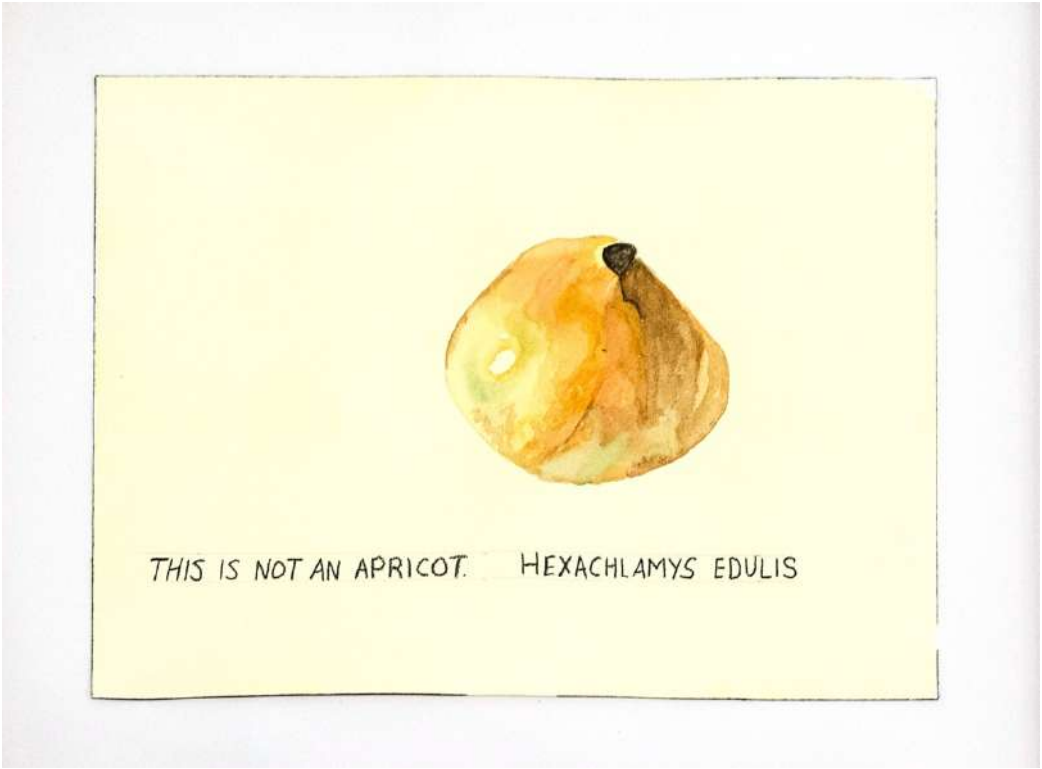
In a market in Manaus in the Amazon, Alves asked a fruit marker seller the names of the fruits in his stand. They were round—all very different and each time he said they were apricots. And none of them were. They were all Indigenous fruits, and he had no idea what they might be called.

[1] 20 watercolor paintings on paper; 26 x 36 cm (each), 2009.



ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*





ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

The Umbragiade

Prologue

I live in Europe and read the stories, histories, myths, and traditional poems belonging to here. I am particularly fond of the epics and read some of these back in school while living in New York. In contrast to this, there are hardly any epic poems that survived the colonial invasion of the Americas. This has negatively affected the dissemination of Indigenous voices.

In 2017, I went to the Amazonian city of Rio Branco in the state of Acre in Brazil and interviewed thirty-three forest agents and one organizer from the AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of the State of Acre). "The Umbragiade" is an epic poem based on these interviews, which were originally made for the 19-channel video installation To See the Forest Standing, commissioned for the exhibition Disappearing Legacies: The World as Forest, curated by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin. In 2020, I invited my friend Xanupa Apurinã of the Apurinã people to contribute to this epic poem and she conducted an interview with Lina Apurinã, a student of agroecology at the Federal Institute of Brasília.

The forest agents come from various reservations throughout the state of Acre and belong to different Indigenous peoples, such as the Huni Kuin, the Shanenawa, the Asháninka, the Shãwãdawa, the Yawanawá, the Katukina, the Nupiquin, the Poyanawá, and the Nawa, among others. All have survived genocide campaigns, first by the Portuguese and then by Brazilians.

The AMAAIAC's mandate is to preserve forested areas on Indigenous lands. It is also a place for experimentation and for the exchange of ideas and techniques for more efficient agroforestry methods, particularly for areas that have been heavily deforested and destroyed by non-Indigenous settlers. Many of the peoples of these reservations, particularly those where major highways were built to deliberately divide up land, have continuous confrontations and problems with gold miners, ranchers, loggers, monocrop plantation owners, and hunters, as well as with the ongoing colonization program by the INCRA (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform). Forest agents are elected by their communities and are responsible, through community consensus, for managing reforestation, overseeing animal life, sustainable farming; for the protection of water sources, promoting the biodiversity of fauna and flora, and caring for archaeological sites, as well as for organizing environmental education programs for settlers in order to protect the land from further destruction.

The AMAAIAC has more than 200 forest agents on 204 reservations who are protectors and custodians of 2,439,982 hectares of forest (a land area almost the size of Belgium). Forest agents are not recognized by the Brazilian government and receive no regular income for their labor. Yet they are at the front line for maintaining the possibility that Brazil, and indeed the wider world, might have a future. Some are even killed for their efforts, as Paulo Paulino Guajajara from the state of Maranhão was in 2019. Poá Katukina, previous president of the AMAAIAC, reminds us: "We have dedicated ourselves to seeing that the forest stands."

 ISSN 2171-9594

The Umbragiade

The night is the grandmother.
Because at night she comes and enriches the carbon dioxide,
and the trees are glad as well.
The grandmother drinks the morning dew
that comes from the tree, not those close to the creek.
The grandmothers drink the water from the morning dew.
That is how they sustain themselves.
And the grandfather, he is our food,
what we reap, eat, and kill.
They are the animals that give their lives to the ones who are still living.
We kill so that their life can give life to the living.
If you harvest the cassava root,
it was once alive, but we reap it from the earth, cook it,
and eat it, so the cassava gives its life to the human beings. (17)

Before, we thought that the forest would go on forever,
that we would never run out of fish,
and the rivers would never dry up.
It never crossed our minds that the river could become dirty. (16)

When the whites came the Age of Correrias [runnings] —
of the many correrias began,
where the Indians were massacred.
These correrias I am talking about —
what were called correria in the past —
were when the white people came to Indigenous areas
and would start to massacre the Indians.
To kill…
They killed the men and took the women away.
This was part of the correria. (12)

Then came the Age of Captivity.
It was when the rubber barons arrived.
They brought too many problems for my relatives.
The rubber barons did not want my relatives to do things the way they did,
or to live the way they did.
The rubber barons simply arrived and started bossing around.
You either worked or hit the road,
or else they would try to kill you. (33)

During the Age of Captivity, my grandfather,
he was a leader during that time.
Now, I am of the fourth generation,
my role is to protect and plant on our land,
and to protect our nature and medicine…
so we can make ourselves stronger and learn more and more. (24)

 ISSN 2171-9594

There was great suffering in the Age of Captivity
because Indigenous people were expelled
many times from their localities
to somewhere else.
So much so that nowadays there are many people on other territories,
So much so that they were decimated,
they were…
Yes, they started running away, because of the pressure,
because of the massacre. (19)

And we were forced to speak Portuguese
because they would not let us speak
our language. (21)

And then after the Captivity, they…
they cleared much of the forest
for cattle,
for large plantations,
and they did not use the land more than once.
Just once, and then it was over. (21)

In that past, there were no more plants.
Now we have our plants, the Cupuaçu trees. (23)

Without the forest, we are nothing.
The forest is our life, you see?
The forest… (29)

When my grandfather's generation arrived on Indigenous land —
my grandfather is 107 years old —
he arrived here with 70 people.
Seventy people…
Today we have more than 900 people.
But it was a struggle…
There were only 70 Shanenawa people left.
Our elders fought
to take this piece of land.
In the past,
the ranchers lived here,
and there were many hurdles we had to overcome.
Our Indigenous land was poor, because of these ranchers.
But that is a long story.
My grandfather is a great warrior.
I am his grandson. And today we reforest. (12)

I was born and raised in the forest
and I live in the forest to this day.
I really like the forest,
I love it, a lot.

 ISSN 2171-9594

To me, the forest…
is my spirit.
And Indigenous people,
we consider the forest to be our home
because the forest protects us.
The forest is our shelter,
it shades us from the sun,
and allows us to live, drink, and breathe well.
The air is good and it was God who gave it to us.
So, for me, the forest comes first. (33)

We consider the forest to be our home,
the land, our father,
the water, our mother.
And…
the others as well, as I have said —
fish,
the animals we hunt —
they are our family too,
because they live here
alongside us.
We need them,
we use them as well,
but we use them carefully.
As I said,
we have to take them into consideration.
We cannot think only about ourselves,
we have to think about ourselves, our children and grandchildren.
We, Indigenous persons, that is how we think,
that is how we work.
Thinking about all of our families
is the best thing we can do for ourselves. (33)

After the demarcation of Indigenous lands
came the delimitation of the territories,
meaning we could no longer move from one place to the other
even though our land is small.
The entire land is already delimited,
everything is already owned by someone. (16)

Before that, we used to migrate from river to river.
Whenever game or fish became scarce,
we would simply go to a different river, a different place. (27)

We are currently living in a small space,
and so there was a need to plan the use of the forest resources.
We had to think about how to maintain
and how to use
the little land we have,

 ISSN 2171-9594

how to do it wisely,
and, by doing so, how to keep the forests,
the game animals, and the rivers. (16)

We plant
Palm trees, Cashew trees, Orange trees… everything.
We do it
because we want to draw the animals closer.
And if we don't do it,
our children will never know these animals. (32)

Today our biggest problem are the ranches.
People deforest
the land around them. (4)

People come to hunt our game…
come onto our land,
taking our game out, taking our animals from inside,
taking our fish from inside. (15)

In the Indigenous territories…
there is Indigenous land confronted
on the upper side by one ranch
and on the lower side by another ranch.
Our land is right in the middle.
We have been suffering from these environmental impacts. (4)

Particularly around where the riverside peasant farmers live.
Where you need to leave a riparian area for the animals to feed —
turtles, fishes, caimans —
that is where you can find many of the animals of our region.
We are very concerned about this,
because as soon as the farmers receive welfare money,
they buy some cattle.
As they get more cattle, the clearings get larger,
and they are getting bigger all the time. (18)

This also causes the silting of our river,
which for us is our road. (14)

You reap and you sow,
and you will reap,
what you have sown.
Nature is already there, planted.
We just need to know how to take care of it.
But it will make no difference if you take care of it,
if a random person—the white people, the *nawás*—
then illegally extracts timber
to build houses.

 ISSN 2171-9594

So, it makes no difference. (10)

If it were not for the forests, there is no "us," there is no life.
Without the forests, there is no water. (34)

Although the BR-364, the federal road, has invaded our land,
anyone leaving the city will see
that forests only stand within demarcated Indigenous lands.
Before arriving on Indigenous land, all you see is cattle and pasture.
And then you arrive on Indigenous land and you can see the forest,
preserved. (27)

When I am in the middle of the forest
I am fine,
I am at home, I am with the elements
that are living beings.
There is so much life here;
I am working for life now.
It's not a life like "us,"
but a life
that gives life too,
that enriches life.
So, all of these are life.
They came from life.
It is not different from any other life.
It needs to be cared for
in order to maintain this
temperature…
which feels so good… doesn't it?
I feel it. (1)

The women are making things with the seeds from various Palm trees,
such as Cocão-da-mata, Murumuru, Urucuri, Jarina, Pupunha.
All we think about
is what we see around us. (17)

So, this is a Cacao tree.
It gives us food,
you can make a juice out of it
and you can make chocolate with the seeds.
And right beside it, I will plant
a Cupuaçu tree
and a Ceiba tree, (28)
which we can use to make roofs for our houses.
But it will be useful for the animals too,
because they will feed there and come closer to
Indigenous land. (10)

 ISSN 2171-9594

I will plant a Starfruit tree
and what else…
close to the Açaí palm. (28)

We also have a land-use plan, in our Asháninka community.
We are eighty families and each family can use three plots —
one for cassava, another for bananas, and the other one for vegetables —
to plant these kinds of things.
So each family can use three plots,
planting on two at a time, leaving one fallow.
You use the plots for one year and after the harvest,
you let the forest grow back again.
After three years, you can plant in the same plot again,
without having to clear another area. (3)

Our land, Katukina land, is surrounded by land projects,
by INCRA (the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform),
by the people from RESEX (Extractive Reserve),
and by the BR-364 federal highway, which cuts
through our land, with
branch roads that encircle our land. (15)

Come, come warrior,
with your enchantment of the ayahuasca power.

Come, come warrior.
Bring your enchantment.
Come teach us.
She is a warrior
and mother of the forest.

She is a warrior and mother of the forest,
and brings the enchantment of the Nexie and the Kawa.

I am calling the
warrior of the forest.
Her enchantment will cure us.

Vou chamar a Índia Guerriera [I Will Call the Indian Warrior]

The land is forever and the people are forever.
It can't be changed, it can't be exchanged for another land.
This is ours… ours.
It is ours. (15)

There is, however, a large portion of society
that still sees the Amazon forest as an opportunity for making money.

 ISSN 2171-9594

They are greedy for iron ore,
for timber
for cattle
for soy
for crude oil
and for hydroelectric dams.
It is really bad for us.
That is really bad for us,
very bad for humanity. (16)

There is a vine called Pytxuni.
The plant, the Rainha [the Queen], remains far away,
and we are bringing her closer.
We are doing all this…
planting more.
Because there are many things in our village
that are becoming extinct
and we are recovering them. (2)

There are also some health issues
such as malnutrition and others.
Health agents talk to us a lot about malnutrition,
which is a problem of many Puru Indigenous peoples:
Huni Kuin, Kulina, Madija…
And this critical situation is a result of the lack of food.
And the health agents say this is the main reason
for the deaths of children in my area.
When it comes to health issues, many have died because
of this. (30)

The government, it is not even trying
to help the Indigenous population.
It wants to destroy Indigenous lands.
Because we are nature's refuge,
because we plant.
And we don't demand anything from nature.
But nature will demand what is due
if we destroy it. (10)

My grandmother, she wants to teach.
She told us she wants to teach the world
about what her ancestors used to do,
so that we, Yawanawá, don't lose our customs.
So, in order for us to be here today,
our language, our customs,
they are our records.
If I only speak the language of the whites,
I will not be considered an Indian anymore.
I might be enslaved, or hurt,

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

because I no longer speak my language,
because I lost my tradition. (26)

The demarcation of Huni Kuin land, the Caucho, was a difficult process;
it was really hard to get our own land.
It was by no means easy to secure the Igarapé do Caucho Indigenous territory.
We began with reforestation, replanting some areas.
We did that so that we could attract birds,
bringing some parakeets and other small animals closer to us. (9)

Beyond keeping the plants standing, we need to understand how they function in their environment. How do we work with them in this environment? Our commitment is to study them. I do not mean study them by writing several texts, or making scientific studies, or researching their molecules. No, I mean, to observe how they function. Are the fruits growing? If not, is there a bird that is disappearing due to lack of food? Is something in excess? Our principal commitment beyond maintaining the plants is to study and understand them. How do their cycles work and the interactions around them? So as not to cause any disequilibrium, which would also affect us and our future autonomy. (35)

All this care for the plants comes from popular knowledge. It comes from traditional knowledge that is a science. All this management is a science. It is a science that dates back hundreds of years. It has always been improved by our grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, cousins, aunts, granduncles. All of this knowledge is there. Based on the observations of the elders we come to conclusions and build other conclusions, but some things you cannot change. You need to observe not only your necessities, but also the surroundings of vegetation of that environment to find out the necessities of their future. You extract without destroying the relationship with the future. (35)

Today… a document comes,
the Brazilian government makes a law, a decree…
making changes
for Indigenous peoples and their lands.
They want to bring an end to our lands, to take our lands,
to get rid of Indigenous people.
Indigenous people belong here… the Brazilians only came here…
Brazilians are not the owners of the land.
We belong to this land.
In that time, the time of Pedro Álvares Cabral,
they found Indigenous people living here already. (15)

But, if we destroy our land, if we destroy the woods, the forests,
we will no longer have native game animals, or native birds like
the macaw.

 ISSN 2171-9594

And we need them… So we are really trying to help, and helping
them to survive.
The smell coming from the forests is clear, we breathe it in.
But where forests have been cut down, the air is too hot –
we cannot handle it, we cannot live well in these conditions.
Nowadays, human beings try to destroy the Earth, to destroy
the forests.
But the Indians, well, the Indians, we… well, we don't even
have land. (34)

So, with the new law, they can come in,
come inside with roads… railroads.
And with this comes the hindering of children's social life,
of women's lives,
abuse,
even the rape of Indigenous women, quite often… (19)

If we follow this path, all of us will be…
the whole of humanity will be lost.
So, this is the time for us to learn from the experience
of Indigenous peoples.
We will only be able to live better side by side
if we help one another.
The forest helps us and we help the forest.
I notice that the big cities
in the big countries, they have lost this.
They only see the forest as an opportunity,
not as an exchange. (16)

But this is the fight!
We cannot stand still…
We have to
get ready to fight, to discuss
how we are going to be…
the Brazilian population…
about getting together, in unity, to prevent…
The Indigenous, we Indigenous people… we are human beings.
Indigenous people and the *nawás*
have only one blood. (15)

How can it be?
Why did these politicians make this law
to destroy Indigenous people?
Their land…
to bring an end to their land?
Taking the woods from Indigenous people.
Killing Indigenous people. (15)

I feel sad…

 ISSN 2171-9594

How are we going to be?
How are we going to live?
Are we going to live that time we have already lived?
The Age of Captivity?
Are we going to live like that?
Suffering as in the Age of Captivity.
We have been through that time.
Today… we live in peace. (15)

Many men and women
and children
are joining in,
so we can organize ourselves,
improve ourselves,
survive and stay,
look after, plant, create.
And valorize our culture, our language,
our painting, our dance, our rituals,
our shamanism,
our traditional medicine,
our forest.
Because
we know where we want to live —
inside the forest,
with fresh air, with clean water.
On the good land for planting,
with so many seeds, so much forest,
lots of energy, lots of spirituality.
And we *are* living.
We cannot survive without it,
we cannot live. (6)

That is why we agroforestry agents,
we want to be acknowledged.
We are environmental educators,
we are teachers,
we are tough,
we are a young leadership, prepared
to confront this bigger political culture:
the businessmen, the farmers, the fishermen,
the gold miners. (6)

I believe
that the future we have in mind
involves respect from our government
and from those who support us.
That they would actually consider and begin to respect us,
allow us to have control over the area,
so that we could prevent people

 ISSN 2171-9594

from committing these kinds of mistakes —
of cattle ranching and taking
our timber and animals away. (29)

The land for us is…
the land is like a mother.
A mother is someone you take care of.
A mother is someone you do not trade for anything.
So the land is like this, for us. (19)

And we want to keep our forest standing and to make it larger.
We care because the world is getting more worried about the climate,
there is much concern about climate change.
The people, the white people, they began to worry not so long ago,
while we have been thinking about it for thousands of years.
Until this day, we take care of the forest,
to keep the forest standing—so that we can breathe and
live healthily. (27)

Well, the future I see is these Açaí palms,
these nuts, this Bacaba,
all loaded with fruits,
so as to bring over our bees, and our own food too,
our kids,
and so that whoever comes to our land will see
how we are doing forest recovery work. (21)

Sources

The poem's lines are composed from interviews with agroforestry agents from AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of Acre) conducted by Maria Thereza Alves in Rio Branco, Acre, in 2017 (numbered 1–34). Interview 35 was conducted by Xanupa Apurinã in Rio Branco in 2020. The song extract "Vou chamar a Índia Guerreira" [I Will Call the Indian Warrior] is by Yube Huni Kuin of Terra Indígena (TI) Rio Humaitá.

1. Busã
Huni Kuin people
Terra Indígena (TI) Katukina/Kaxinawá

2. Pupua
Nukini people
TI Nukini

3. Pyãko
Asháninka people
TI Asháninka do Rio Amônea

 ISSN 2171-9594

4. Isaka
Huni Kuin people
TI Igarapé do Caucho

5. Ibatsai
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

6. Maná
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

7. Muru Inu Bake
Huni Kuin people
TI Alto Purus

8. Siã
Huni Kuin people
TI Colônia 27

9. Ninawá Huru Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Igarapé do Caucho

10. Siã
Shanenawa people
TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

11. Dasu Hurá Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Alto Rio Purus

12. Busã
Shanenawa people
TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

13. Mashã
Huni Kuin people
TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

14. Yuvãna Shãwã
Shãwãdawa people
TI Arara

15. Kaku
Katukina people
TI Campinas/Katukina

16. Yube

 ISSN 2171-9594

Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

17. Kakã Kashu Bané
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá de Nova Olinda

18. Yaki Hurá Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

19. Yaká
Shãwãdawa people
TI Arara

20. Yura
Shawanawá people
TI Arara

21. Yawa Kushu
Yawanawá people
TI Yawanawá do Rio Gregório

22. Shawã Katê
Shawanawá people
TI Arara

23. Tene
Huni Kuin people
TI Alto Jordão

24. Shamya
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá do Seringal
Independência

25. Paka
Katukina people
TI Rio Gregório

26. Tmaii
Yawanawá people
TI Rio Gregório

27. Poá Katukina and Nawá Sharu
Nupikuin people
TI Campina/Katukina

28. Xidu

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Poyanawá people
TI Poyanawá

29. Siã
Huni Kuin people
TI Curralinho

30. Naximar
Huni Kuin people
TI Alto Rio Purus

31. Shawã Dxuyda
Shawanawá people
TI Arara

32. Keã Hura Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

33. Bané Hurá Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

34. Yube
Huni Kuin people
TI Rio Humaitá

35. Lina Apurinã
Apurinã people
TI Camicuã

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Untitled from Jatobá Series and Senhora das Plantas

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.2.5994

Untitled, from Jatobá series | Sem título, da série Jatobá, 2019
watercolor and graphite on paper
aquarela e grafite sobre papel
65 x 50 cm
Credit photo: Bruno Leão

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Untitled, from Jatobá series | Sem título, da série Jatobá, 2019
watercolor and graphite on paper
aquarela e grafite sobre papel
65 x 50 cm
Credit photo: Bruno Leão

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Senhora das plantas, Espada de Iansã, 2022
watercolor and graphite on paper
57,5 x 38 cm
Credit photo: Bruno Leão

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Senhora das plantas, Espada de Iansã, 2022
watercolor and graphite on paper
57,5 x 38 cm
Credit photo: Bruno Leão

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Translating Data into Art: A Conversation with Thijs Biersteker on Ecology and the Amazon

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ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Wither (2022) by Thijs Biersteker in collaboration with Unesco.
On view at Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Image by the artist. © All rights reserved

Introduction

Ecological artist Thijs Biersteker is renowned for his data-driven installations bringing attention to pressing environmental issues such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecosystem fragility. Biersteker's work engages audiences through immersive, sensor-based sculptures that visualize real-time

scientific data. In this conversation, Biersteker shares insights into his practice, the ethical dimensions of working with data, particularly concerning the Amazon, and how his work seeks to instill both emotional connection and ecological urgency in viewers worldwide.

Ecozon@: *As you know, this special issue is dedicated to the vegetal humanities in the Amazon. Your work has addressed a wide range of environmentally relevant topics, such as melting glaciers and underground ecosystems, and also visualizes ecological processes connected to the Amazon in pieces like* Wither *and* Amazonium. *What draws you to these themes, and specifically to the Amazon?*

Thijs Biersteker: I don't really choose my topics; they tend to find me. Often, large institutions familiar with our work across ecological issues such as biodiversity, climate change, and environmental migration, approach us to help amplify their scientific or environmental messaging through art. I do, nonetheless, have a deep affinity for the Amazon due to its scale and role as a planetary balancing system. When you're there, in the rainforest, the connection feels completely different than walking through a secondary forest. It's a place that speaks to the imagination. In Western societies, the Amazon has become an ecological icon, and its symbolic value makes it easy to fall in love with its peoples, cultures, and river flows. It's a living metaphor for biodiversity and interconnection, like an eternal wellspring of stories that carry the voices of the forest outward into the world.

This richness is also what drives my work. *Wither*, for instance, reflects the staggering rate of deforestation, while *Amazonium* explores reforestation, centering on growth and recovery. The contrast between loss and gain is what excites me the most. It creates a narrative that holds both fear and hope. These fluctuations offer powerful moments for storytelling and emotional engagement.

Growing up in the Low Countries, where most native forests have been destroyed, I'm deeply aware of the need to raise awareness before it's too late. While the West pushes for protection measures elsewhere, it fails to acknowledge its own history of loss. Rewilding efforts are happening in parts of Europe, but these are retroactive. In the Amazon, the urgency is rooted in prevention and keeping its ecological balance intact.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Amazonium (2023) by Thijs Biersteker in collaboration with Unesco. Image by Woven Studio. © All rights reserved

Ecozon@: *As you mention fear, hope, and even grief, there seems to be a strong affective and metaphorical dimension to your work, which coexists with a very tangible, material one. How do these different elements come together in your practice?*

TB: For me, everything starts with data, often just a spreadsheet. My role is to interpret that data and bring out its emotional or human dimension. Facts alone don't move people; feelings do. So, by combining the factual with the emotional, we can motivate action. That's why I prefer physical installations over purely digital representations: they create stronger emotional connections. We're physical beings, after all.

But bringing all this together can't be done alone. It requires a joint effort. While I focus on the concept, prototyping, and part of the build, we work with scientists who provide the data, with engineers, coders, roboticists, along with the team who builds the installations. This kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential if we want to make ecological issues accessible and relevant. At our art studio, *Woven*, data translation is one of our core pillars. We've created a framework to help artists collaborate with scientists and use collaboration as a tool for communication. What started as an artist's studio is evolving into something more visionary. We're even launching a foundation to develop university training modules that help scientists communicate their work in more emotionally resonant ways.

I believe the era of purely self-expressive art is behind us. Much of it suffers from an articulation problem. The same applies to science. Researchers often speak only to other scientists using inaccessible academic language. But if their research is to have any societal impact, it must be translated—by writers, poets, artists, filmmakers, journalists. That's where we come in. With our work, we aim to create art

that is open, understandable, and invites people in, that makes scientific knowledge emotionally compelling without compromising accuracy. The shift from individualism to collective engagement is key to the art of the future. That's where the power lies.

Ecozon@: *Could you walk us through the creation of one of your pieces to illustrate both the collaborative process and the communicative strategies you use to bridge art and science?*

TB: Sure. Let's take *Wither* as an example. The piece was about making the scale of Amazon deforestation tangible. Most people might find it hard to grasp how vast it is, or how much is being lost. So we asked: *What if a slice of rainforest disappeared right in front of you?* We collaborated with UNESCO to obtain accurate data. Each leaf in the sculpture represents 100 square meters of rainforest. The leaves fade in real time, reflecting current deforestation rates. At first, visitors admire the beauty. Then they see the data on the screen. That moment, when aesthetic appreciation turns into awareness, is where the power of the piece lies.

This transformation is especially important for Western audiences, who are often removed from these issues. We want to build emotional bridges, so that someone in a village in Germany, for example, can feel a real connection to the Amazon. While our institutional partners often provide solution-based frameworks, like Trillion Trees or UNESCO's initiatives, our primary role is communication, not policymaking. It's about making people care and feel the urgency, not selling them a solution.

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Wither (2022) by Thijs Biersteker in collaboration with Unesco. On view at the Barbican Centre London. Images by the artist. © All rights reserved.

Ecozon@: *Since your work focuses on environmental issues, do you incorporate sustainability principles in your artistic process?*

TB: Definitely, sustainability is another of our core pillars. We use material passports, recycled materials, and we consider the full lifecycle of each piece—how it's produced, preserved, and eventually disassembled. That may seem self-evident, but in the art world, it's not always obvious how to make these processes truly sustainable. It takes intention and ongoing effort. We also offer guidance to other artists in establishing sustainable practices. One thing we emphasize is that art doesn't have to last forever. Most pieces should be designed to disappear. Even if they're materially lost, they have still served their function. That may be hard to accept, but it's part of the shift we're advocating. In the same vein, we don't sell our work to collectors, because we consider it climate emergency work. It needs to be seen now, not be sold and stored away from public view. If it were hidden, its value as a communication tool would be lost. In that sense, though they feel logical to us, our artistic choices are not always aligned with how the art world typically operates.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Wither (2022) by Thijs Biersteker in collaboration with Unesco. On view at the Barbican Centre London. Image by the artist. © All rights reserved

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Ecozon@: *As an artist with European heritage working on the Amazon, how do you navigate your role in relation to Indigenous land and knowledge systems? And how does your work connect with Indigenous communities?*

TB: I'm very conscious not to tell stories that are not mine to tell, or to create art based on knowledge systems outside of my lived experience. As with our other projects on plastic pollution, air quality, glaciers, or root communication of trees, our Amazon-focused works are rooted in data-driven storytelling. We rely on research gathered by those directly on the field and we translate that information into aesthetic forms that aim to communicate across cultural boundaries. Most of our production process is also intentionally hyperlocal: we aim to keep every part of the process within a one-kilometer radius to minimize our environmental footprint.

When we brought *Amazonium* to Colombia, Sônia Guajajara, the first Indigenous leader of Brazil, felt emotionally connected to the work. That meant a great deal to me. We had a meaningful conversation about how the ecological crisis affecting fragile parts of her country could be translated for international audiences in a way that still feels authentic. That moment reaffirmed something I care deeply about: that the value of this work lies not in appropriation, but in staying conscious of our role as artists, that is to translate science into art, and to do so with care and respect.

Sônia Guajajara in front of *Amazonium* (2023) by Thijs Biersteker in collaboration with Unesco. Image by Joe Short. © All rights reserved

What excites me most is when our installations use real-time environmental data to become, in a sense, living sculptures. For example, *Origin*, a permanent installation at the Zaishui Art Museum in China, connects a living cacao tree in Java to its digital twin through sensors that transmit data in-real time. Visitors can witness

 ISSN 2171-9594

the tree's growth, sap flow, and other responses as they happen. In our hyperconnected world, the more immediate and tangible the interaction with ecological realities, the stronger the emotional response. And the stronger that emotional connection, the greater the potential for meaningful action.

Ecozon@: *What you describe sounds like a beautiful process of multispecies translation, transcending not only cultural boundaries, but also species boundaries.*
TB: I think many people in the West struggle to truly connect with nature, simply because we're often so removed from it. We're no longer surrounded by it in our daily lives. That's why using real-time data from living entities, like trees or roots, can offer a new kind of relationship. It becomes one of the most powerful bridges that technology can offer us today. It's like a Babel fish for the environment translating natural processes into human terms.

Ecozon@: *Why did you choose the cacao tree specifically for one of your installations?*
TB: Because it represents so many interconnected global crises: slavery in supply chains, deforestation, soil depletion, food insecurity, corporate monopolies, and of course climate change. The cacao tree is also one of the first trees to show stress. So, in one chocolate bar you get a microcosm of global systems in collapse. It's a perfect example of beauty and discomfort interwoven.

Ecozon@: *Do you have any upcoming works planned that might engage with an environmental issue that our readers might be familiar with?*
TB: Yes, quite a few. We're currently working on a large permanent installation about the Amazon for the Science and Technology Museum in Shanghai, which receives over four million visitors a year. The piece explores the loss and regrowth in Amazonian regions, emphasizing the tension between devastation and resilience.

Another project focuses on the fragility of space and, by extension, the fragility of life on Earth. We're collaborating with an astrophysicist to create an equation that calculates how likely it is for any one person to exist at this precise point in time and space as a living organism. The probability is exceptionally small: it's basically a zero followed by thousands of zeroes after the decimal point, and then a small number. The challenge for this work is how to translate that into a visual language that captures the fragility and wonder of existence. The works tries to grasp that moment when you lie in the grass and you look up to the stars and feel both small and uniquely alive.

Ecozon@: *Your creative work and reflections offer a moving reminder of the delicate ties between multispecies life, cosmology, and the vibrant ecosystems we inhabit. Thank you for this generous conversation. It's been a pleasure to explore how your work resonates so deeply with the environmental questions at the heart of our journal.*

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Review Essay:
From Representation to Material Entanglement:
Tracing a Decade of Ecocinema

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Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, editors. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012), 344 pp.

Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, editors. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* (Routledge, 2023), 268 pp.

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ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

The past decade has seen ecocinema studies evolve from an emergent field at the intersection of film studies and ecocriticism into a broader, interdisciplinary space engaging with political economy, media infrastructures, and global environmental justice. Once primarily concerned with how films represent nature and environmental crises, the field has expanded to include questions about how cinema itself, as an industrial practice, contributes to environmental degradation. This shift reflects larger trends in the environmental humanities, where scholars have moved beyond textual analysis to examine the material entanglements of cultural production with ecological systems. At the heart of this transformation are the two volumes of *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt.

The first volume (2013) was instrumental in establishing key debates around cinematic representation of environmental issues, arguing that all films—whether explicitly environmental or not—shape ecological consciousness. The essays within the collection explore a diverse range of cinematic forms, from avant-garde slow cinema to Hollywood disaster spectacles, examining how film aesthetics, narrative conventions, and genre tropes construct environmental meaning. Some chapters focus on how documentary and narrative films communicate ecological messages, while others examine ideological contradictions within mainstream environmental filmmaking. The book draws from ecocriticism, semiotics, and media studies to analyse the ways cinema frames human-nature relationships.

By contrast, the second volume (2023) extends these conversations into the realm of materialist critique and examines the environmental costs of media industries and digital infrastructures. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on

representation, the book situates film within broader industrial networks, exposing the ecological consequences of cinematic production, distribution, and consumption. Essays within this collection analyse the extractive economies underlying camera and film equipment manufacturing, the hidden energy demands of digital streaming platforms, and the environmental labour conditions of the global media supply chain. This expansion aligns ecocinema studies with political economy, decolonial theory, and media infrastructure studies, marking a significant evolution in how scholars approach the ecological dimensions of film.

From the outset, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013) sought to define ecocinema studies as an intellectual project. The introduction, "Cuts to Dissolves: Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies," written by Stephen Rust and Salma Monani, emphasises that while environmental films have existed for decades, ecocinema studies as a discipline had, until then, lacked a unifying framework. The editors make the case for an expansive approach to ecocinema, one that considers not only overtly environmental films—such as nature documentaries or climate disaster films—but also how cinematic form, genre, and ideology construct environmental meanings. The chapters have the goal "to explicitly highlight how ecocinema studies is not simply limited to films with explicit messages of environmental consciousness, but investigates the breadth of cinema from Hollywood corporate productions and independent avant-garde films to the expanding media sites in which producers, consumers, and texts interact" (2). They argue that cinema itself is always an ecological act, from its material production to its role in shaping public perception of environmental crises, and the collection aims to push the field toward greater theoretical rigor and openness. At the same time, Rust and Monani acknowledge the material bases of cinema and its embedding in infrastructures with ecological footprints. This awareness, reflecting shifts already underway in ecocritical thought in the late 2000s, points toward the potential expansion of ecocinema studies beyond representation, even if the volume as a whole did not yet fully pursue this direction.

One of the foundational essays in the volume, Scott MacDonald's "The Ecocinema Experience," establishes an alternative, ecologically engaged mode of viewing that resists Hollywood's rapid-cut aesthetics, favouring slow, contemplative cinema that fosters attentiveness to landscape and natural rhythms. MacDonald draws on avant-garde filmmakers including James Benning, Sharon Lockhart, and Andrej Zdravič to argue that form matters as much as content when assessing a film's ecological potential. By slowing down the cinematic experience and allowing audiences to engage with images of the natural world in a meditative/contemplative way, such films may encourage more patience not only in the watchers' "engagement with the environment, but in their efforts to guide inevitable environmental change in direction that nurture a more healthy planet" (41). The chapter's emphasis on alternative modes of cinematic perception anticipates later discussions of slow cinema that gain further development in Elio Garcia's "Polytemorality in the Slow Ecocinema of Lav Diaz: An Installation in a Trauma Field" in the second volume. Garcia extends MacDonald's analysis by examining how Diaz's "aesthetics of the 'long take'"

 ISSN 2171-9594

(103), that is, extended durations and narrative ellipses disrupt Western, industrialized time structures, creating a cinematic temporality that mirrors ecological rhythms rather than conventional dramatic arcs.

Other contributions take up Hollywood's engagement with ecological crises, critiquing its tendency to frame climate change as a spectacular, apocalyptic event rather than a slow, systemic process. Stephen Rust's "Hollywood and Climate Change" in the first volume contrasts *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), showing how mainstream cinema both amplifies and distorts environmental discourse. While *The Day After Tomorrow* sensationalises climate disaster with CGI-enhanced catastrophes, *An Inconvenient Truth* presents a more data-driven, but still highly dramatised, depiction of climate change through Al Gore's persuasive, emotionally charged narration. Rust argues that while both films raise public awareness, they make it clear that "more and more people are becoming aware that new ways of imagining the relationship between people and the planetary [are] not only possible, but necessary" (205). At the same time, he cautions that they also reinforce a crisis-response mentality that overlooks the structural causes of environmental degradation. This theme is echoed in David Ingram's "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-Film Criticism," which examines different aesthetic strategies used in environmental films—ranging from realism to melodrama—highlighting how each shapes audience interpretation in distinct ways.

A related chapter by Pat Brereton, "Appreciating the Views," considers the role of landscape cinematography in shaping ecological narratives. Analyzing *Into the Wild* (2007), *Grizzly Man* (2005), and *Into the West* (1992), Brereton argues that mainstream cinema often aestheticizes nature in ways that obscure environmental politics. *Into the Wild*, for example, presents the Alaskan wilderness as both an idyllic refuge and a site of existential confrontation, yet it largely ignores the indigenous histories of the land. Similarly, *Grizzly Man* portrays Timothy Treadwell's interactions with bears as a form of deep ecological engagement but avoids interrogating the human-animal hierarchies embedded in Treadwell's perspective. Brereton's chapter is an early example of ecocinema scholars pushing beyond textual analysis to consider the ideological work performed by cinematic landscapes. This concern with cinematic representations of wildlife and ecological relationships is expanded upon in later chapters such as Luis Vivanco's "Penguins Are Good to Think With" and Jennifer Ladino's "Working with Animals," which both interrogate how wildlife cinema constructs anthropocentric narratives around animal behaviour. Vivanco's analysis of *March of the Penguins* (2005) exposes how nature documentaries reinforce human values—such as family structures, perseverance, and cooperation—by selectively framing animal behaviours, while Ladino critiques the ways in which documentary filmmakers manipulate wildlife imagery to reinforce existing cultural attitudes toward nature and conservation.

Despite these rich discussions, the first volume largely confines itself to questions of representation and spectatorship, barely addressing the material realities of film production, distribution, and consumption. This omission is precisely

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

what *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* (2023) seeks to address. The introduction, "Cut to Green: Tracking the Growth of Ecocinema Studies," frames the book as a response to the field's shifting priorities, arguing that ecocinema studies must now engage with cinema's "imbrication in the fabric of the world" (1), namely, its entanglements with global supply chains, digital infrastructures, and extractive economies. The authors distinguish between ecology (systems of interconnected flows) and environment (historical constructions of separation and exclusion), and emphasize that ecocinema must attend both to the utopian possibilities of reconnecting with the world through film and to the political urgency of confronting environmental injustice. This expansion of the field aligns with a broader shift in environmental humanities toward materialist ecocriticism, which examines how cultural production is embedded in industrial and ecological systems.

Seán Cubitt's chapter, "Unsustainable Cinema: Global Supply Chains," offers one of the volume's most incisive interventions, exposing the hidden ecological costs of filmmaking, from the mining of rare earth metals for camera equipment to the massive energy demands of data storage and streaming platforms. Cubitt critiques the assumption that digital filmmaking is inherently more sustainable than traditional celluloid production, showing that the environmental impact of cloud computing and data servers is often overlooked in discussions of cinematic sustainability. His argument builds on concerns raised in Nicole Starosielski's "Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema Under Water" and Salma Monani's "Environmental Film Festivals: Beginning Explorations at the Intersections of Film Festival Studies and Ecocritical Studies," both from the first volume. While Starosielski highlights the material infrastructures underpinning digital circulation, and Monani examines the political economies of environmental film distribution, Cubitt expands these insights into a broader systemic critique of the global supply chains that sustain contemporary media. Looking ahead, he warns that without intervention, humanity risks being caught "between two seemingly unstoppable forces: a cyborg economy out of control and a planet rebelling against market anarchy" (30). In other words, Cubitt sees the cinematic supply chain as emblematic of a wider crisis in which technological systems and ecological systems are spiralling beyond human control. Against this backdrop, he argues that by "intervening in the intervals left vulnerable by the inevitable incompleteness of cinematic illusion," (30) ecocritical film studies can help imagine and build new, collaborative forms of human–technical–ecological interaction.

Beyond its focus on material infrastructures, the second volume also broadens the geographical and cultural scope of ecocinema studies. Cajetan Iheka's "Extraction and Wild Cinema in Africa" examines how African filmmakers critique land dispossession and environmental exploitation. Iheka highlights films such as *The Land Beneath Our Feet* (2016), which juxtaposes archival footage of corporate land grabs in Liberia with contemporary struggles over land rights, demonstrating how cinema can serve as both a historical archive and a tool for ecological resistance. Similarly, Emily Roehl's "Indigenous Post-Apocalyptic Filmmaking at Standing Rock"

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

considers indigenous cinema as a form of resistance against environmental destruction. Roehl argues that indigenous filmmakers reject the apocalyptic framings of mainstream climate disaster films, instead portraying survival and resilience through indigenous ecological knowledge.

At the same time, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* retains the field's early emphasis on cinematic form, particularly in relation to temporality. In addition to Elio Garcia's chapter on slow cinema, discussed above, which situates this aesthetic within a non-Western context, Andrew Hageman and Regina Kanyu Wang's chapter "Exploring SF Ecocinema: Ideologies of Gender, Infrastructure, and US/China Dynamics" compares *Interstellar* (2014) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019), showing how different cultural imaginaries produce distinct ecological visions. Whereas *Interstellar* relies on individualist heroism and techno-utopianism, *The Wandering Earth* emphasizes collectivist solutions to planetary survival, reflecting broader ideological differences between American and Chinese science fiction. A further extension of the second volume's focus on genre comes in Carter Soles' "The Toxic Sublime: Horror Cinema and Ecological Anxiety," which examines how horror films engage with environmental crisis. Soles argues that films like *The Witch* (2015) and *Annihilation* (2018) embody what he terms the "toxic sublime," (198) a mode of ecological horror that renders nature both awe-inspiring and terrifying. His analysis builds upon his earlier work in the first volume on cannibalistic hillbillies in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), demonstrating how horror cinema reflects deep-seated anxieties about environmental collapse, mutation, and human vulnerability.

What distinguishes these two volumes from other works in the field is their comprehensive scope and methodological ambition. While David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (2000) focuses primarily on Hollywood, and Pietari Kääpä and Tommy Gustafsson's edited collection *Transnational Ecocinema* (2013) explores global perspectives on environmental cinema but remains more narrowly focused on issues of national identity and transnational exchange, the *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* volumes bring together mainstream, independent, and global cinemas under one conceptual umbrella. Similarly, while the collection *Screening the Nonhuman* (2018) makes valuable contributions to specific strands of environmental media studies, it does not offer the same interdisciplinary breadth or material engagement as the Rust, Monani, and Cubitt collections. Other recent publications, such as Hunter Vaughan's *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret* (2019), Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* (2017) and the edited volume *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (2014) have expanded ecocritical inquiry into environmental materialism, affect theory, and transnational cinema respectively, but they address more specialized aspects of media ecology rather than synthesizing the field as a whole.

That said, these volumes are not without their limitations. The first book, while foundational, now feels somewhat dated in its emphasis on representation at the expense of media infrastructures. The second book, though more materially engaged, deliberately embraces a heterogeneous structure rather than presenting a unified

 ISSN 2171-9594

argument, reflecting the plural and evolving nature of the field. Nonetheless, despite its claims to a global perspective, the second volume still leans heavily on Western theoretical frameworks, and some key regions—such as Latin America and Asia—are underrepresented. Both books also assume a certain level of familiarity with ecocinema studies, making them less accessible to general readers or those new to the field. More recent works, such as Pietari Kääpä's *Environmental Management of Media* (2023), Cajetan Iheka's *African Ecomedia* (2024), and Salma Monani's *Indigenous Ecocinema: Decolonizing Media Environments* (2024), take up precisely these gaps, extending ecocinema's scope toward infrastructures, planetary politics, and decolonial perspectives.

For scholars seeking an introduction to ecocinema, the 2013 volume remains an essential starting point, offering clear definitions and foundational debates. However, for those engaging with the field's most pressing contemporary concerns—particularly regarding media infrastructures, political economy, and decolonial ecologies—the 2023 volume is indispensable. Together, these books chart the intellectual trajectory of ecocinema studies, illustrating how a field once preoccupied with cinematic landscapes and environmental narratives has grown into a rigorous critique of cinema's complicity in ecological crisis. While *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* asked how cinema can shape environmental consciousness, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* asks how cinema itself must be held accountable in an era of planetary emergency. Taken together, they are essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the evolving role of media in the Anthropocene.

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Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick, *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction* (Northwestern University Press, 2024), 222 pp.

In *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction*, published in August 2025 as part of the *Superimpositions: Philosophy and the Moving Image* series at Northwestern University Press, Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick set up a lucid and rigorous encounter between the dominant ecocritical paradigms and the concept of "negative life" through the prism of cinema studies and extinction. This book invites readers to consider a counter-narrative to the pastoral and pedagogical ethos of dominant contemporary ecological paradigms and to recognize, instead, the fractured and incoherent nature of life in the context of climate catastrophe and growing political disorientation. Although this overview may seem hopeless and nihilistic—and in spite of the apparent absurdity and bleakness of many of the films and theoretical frameworks that the authors engage with—the book produces an energizing effect by providing hope through an inoperative and anti-redemptive act of bearing witness to the impossibility of inhabiting a world that is approaching extinction while resisting commodified environmentalism and still finding ground for aesthetic, poetic, and radical thought. In short, Tremblay and Swarbrick call for an ecocriticism that does not seek recovery or redemption but remains attuned to lack, absence, and unintelligibility: a general structure they call "negative life."

Theoretically, *Negative Life* engages with the growing interdisciplinary corpus referred to as "negativity studies" and which includes contributions from psychoanalysis, queer studies, Afropessimism, affect studies, decolonial studies, race studies, and other fields. The "negative turn" in critical theory acknowledges areas of thought and existence that are historically disavowed and oppressed (the list is long and open, as it is purposefully marked by heterogeneity and the refusal of closure) and that actively sustain the dominant structures of power and identity. One important precursor for *Negative Life* is the antisocial thesis in queer theory, represented by thinkers such as Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, and Jack Halberstam, who argue, in different ways, for a radical negativity that opposes

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"reproductive futurism" (Edelman's term, standing for the idea that politics, including socially integrative branches of queer movements, orient all resources towards reproduction and care for the Child) and all types of optimistic social heteronormativity, instead aligning with the death drive as the disruptive and unassimilable facet of desire.

Although it has attracted controversy, the negative stream of critical theory remains a persistent and valid response to the pressures of a polycrisis world. While some aspects of negativity scholarship may tread too closely to Nick Land's accelerationist death-drive enthusiasm, followed by its contemporary spawn, the dark enlightenment, Tremblay and Swarbrick manage to stir away from such swampy conceptual grounds, opting for an aesthetic approach to articulating negativity that validates affect and entropy. Thus, *Negative Life* applies the discussion of negativity to ecocriticism and proceeds polemically, as is the tradition, by identifying a framework to oppose—in this case, the recuperative logic of idealized multispecies entanglement with a strong pastoral aesthetic (meaning, generally, a vision of nature as enchanted). The authors call this logic "ecocritical positivity" (8) and associate it with a vast range of thinkers, such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and many others (the authors provide an open list of pedagogical entanglement thinkers on page 14, in the subsection "Inhuman Calculations" of the Introduction, though one should note that the list contains authors whose positions are often understood in scholarship as conflicting), who are committed to the thought of relationality (an ecological variant of the speculative realists' "correlationism"). In addition, they also refuse oppositional frameworks. In the authors' words, "[n]egative life isn't only a bulwark against the pastoralism of ecocriticism but a brake on the crypto-pastoralism of radical negativity, which, taken to its logical extreme, mirrors its opposite: anodyne positivity" (84).

The book starts with broader theoretical claims in the Introduction and Chapter 1, which situate the work in the field (cinema studies and environmental humanities), establish the theoretical pillars, and provide general concept definitions. In the opening chapters, the theoretical work is developed alongside attentive and engaged analyses of two films: Julian Pölsler's *The Wall* (2012) and Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow* (2019). Throughout the book, Tremblay and Swarbrick interweave theoretical reflections from a wide range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century sources with analyses of their chosen cinema corpus, which proceeds historically, as "representations of preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial moments" (28). Aside the aforementioned queer theorists, the book relies significantly on psychoanalysis, turning frequently to the negativity aspects in Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, and Alenka Zupančič. Freud's 1925 essay "Negation" plays a significant role in Chapter 1, establishing the subject as characterized by a constitutive lack. Zupančič's "missing signifier" cements the book's commitment to representation as fundamentally marked by incompleteness. The idea of lack becomes the basis for the book's eponymous concept. In providing an early definition of the "negative life," the

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

authors state that it "refers to that which is both of and against life, that which filibusters the conversion of staying with the trouble into making kin" (viii). If the definition seems somewhat elliptical, it is not due to the authors' lack of precision in writing but because the concept itself is set up in a manner that refuses to be fully captured by a systematic definition. This is a rigorous theoretical and stylistic choice, in tune with the authors' avowed resistance to conceptual closure and pedagogical approaches to environmental narratives. Instead, the authors lead readers on a (negative) journey of discovery of cinema and criticism on the brink of the abyss through an imaginative and deeply engaging interpretative style that is not without rhetorical flourish.

The book's formal investment is just as important as its conceptual proposal, if not even more so: the cinema of extinction, according to the authors, "punctures ecocriticism's pastoralism by obstructing characters' and spectators' access to the realm of multispecies entanglement or enmeshment—a realm often made by ecocritics to accommodate an ethics of harmonious co-living that scales up and down, from the planetary to the subatomic" (7–8). Cinema, moreover, is portrayed as technology that is formally and materially sustained by negativity, through the film negative which captures an absent presence. Although digital film no longer maintains the concrete presence of the negative, it nevertheless preserves the history of this absence, as well as the methodology of staging an encounter with the irrecuperable. The authors propose the further specification of the "cinema of extinction" as a "hyper-contemporary form" (7) due to cinema's embodiment of multiple contractions, such as participating in "hydrocarbon culture" (8) while allegorizing, through form, climate breakdown. The engagement with environmental collapse through cinema is also a way of thinking nature as external to the human consciousness by depicting its senselessness and all that which frustrates integration into reparative narratives. Chapters 2 and 3 further engage with the environmental and existential crises through the formal structures and uncanny happy endings of two films—Mahesh Mathai's *Bhopal Express* (1999) and Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020)—and, in an effort to externalize extinction, the melancholic and sadistic registers of queer ecocide in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017), which blurs the distinction between individual and ecological death and intensifies the cinematic unravelling of the crises. In closing, it is necessary to mention the experimental—almost feverish in style—ecohorror interludes in the book, "The Horror of Entanglement I: *In the Earth*, *Annihilation*" and "The Horror of Entanglement II: *Antichrist*, *Lamb*, *X*," which dramatize the annihilation of difference and the temporal fraction of entanglement narratives.

Overall, *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction* is an insightful critical work, in tune with the contemporary aesthetic and conceptual landscape. It might just be the horror-inflected revitalizing read we all need during another catastrophic year filled with never-ending heatwaves, zombie wildfires, extreme flash floods, and genocidal conflicts.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

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Massih Zekavat and Tabea Scheel, *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises* (Routledge, 2023), 248 pp.

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At a time when the environmental humanities grapple with the gap between climate-change awareness and action, Massih Zekavat and Tabea Scheel's intervention offers a theoretical framework through humor. The premise of this book tackles a stubborn problem that, as the authors argue, the environmental humanities has yet to address adequately: why does widespread alarm about accelerating climate catastrophe not translate into collective action? Rather than calling for new narratives and aesthetic forms to address this problem, the authors tap into comedy's established capacity for generating and maintaining collective identities. As Henri Bergson observed, laughter always stands in need of an echo. The question of what strikes one as funny has, in other words, profoundly social consequences: our responses to jokes serve to either reinforce the affinity we have with members of our in-group or emphasize the uncomfortable distance between ourselves and others who do not share our values. While comedy's potential to polarize and divide has drawn scholarly attention from theorists like Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, the authors argue that this same social power can be redirected toward environmental advocacy.

But, as this book makes clear, comedy's power to polarize and shame should not obscure its latent potential to inform, persuade, and mobilize for environmental causes. The potential value of comedy and irreverence to mobilize pro-environmentalist behavior is explored elsewhere in Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* (2018) and, less recently, in Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974). In contrast to these works, which largely examine historical and contemporary comedic artworks, Zekavat and Scheel's book offers both descriptive and—crucially—prescriptive measures to encourage environmentalist action. To do so, they draw from a wealth of research—spanning literary theory, cultural studies, philosophy, and psychology—to design a model for environmental messaging that amplifies comedy's inherent social power to overcome barriers (ideological and otherwise) preventing individuals and organizations alike from undertaking pro-environmental action. As this last point suggests, Zekavat and Scheel stress their book's relevance to activists and science communicators who might struggle to produce compelling—and, in this case, culturally resonant—messages. The authors

therefore take care to ground their claims in meticulous and thorough literature reviews and contemporary theoretical discussions that, in addition to advancing their argument, provide effective introductions to the respective fields and concepts *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises* covers.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Zekavat and Scheel structure their argument across seven chapters, moving from the current gaps in fields such as environmental psychology to concrete proposals for future research. After making the case for comedy and satire's force to engage the imagination in the introduction, the authors provide an overview of the theoretical concepts that inform this approach in Chapter 2. Specifically, the authors identify foundational theories of humor inspired by, among others, Freud and Kant (17). These theories of humor, while differing dramatically in their disciplinary assumptions and orientations, converge on the ameliorative or solidarity-building aspects of laughter. In view of the expansive scholarship on comedy, the authors write, it is safe to say that humor offers significant coping strategies for confronting the mental and physical toll that the environmental emergency imposes.

Having established humor's theoretical underpinnings, the authors advance their central contribution: the Modular Interdependency Model (MIM). This bespoke model aims to provide a large and encompassing overview of "the intersectionality and interdependencies of different determinants of behavior" (86). Because how humor lands always depends upon hyper-specific contexts and socio-cultural factors—who is telling the joke? To whom? Where?—the authors stress that their model's modular approach can account for the complex variables that inform behavior. MIM also strives to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives by locating individual agency among a myriad of social, cultural, and biological variables. Because humor and satire are likewise the products of a complex network of variables, they are best equipped, the authors argue, to change patterns of belief and incite individuals to act upon intentions that might otherwise go unexpressed. To bridge the gap between theories of humor and the rather applied and prescriptive features of MIM, the authors examine how popular satires already exemplify the model's principles. Examples such as *The Simpsons* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* demonstrate that satirists have already, the authors write, "intuitively" accounted for many of the same concerns outlined elsewhere in the book (128).

Here and elsewhere, 'satire' and 'humor' appear as inseparable terms, which means that the distinguishing features of satire, in particular, can appear imprecise. For example, the authors write that the comedian and television host John Oliver "uses satire and humor" to raise awareness about environmental causes (159)—and, in general, that "humor and satire can be employed to advocate critical environmentalism" (144). This tendency to collapse humor and satire will likely leave literature scholars, for example, unconvinced. It is also indicative of the slightly uneven impression the book ultimately gives. Readers interested in how the social function of comedy can be directed toward pro-environmentalist behavior will find the book's first half—which covers how evolutionary psychologists and philosophers

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

alike understand humor and satire—a rich and nuanced introduction to the subject. The more generalized observations about examples of satire and humor that appear in the book's second half, as the *Last Week Tonight* example suggests, are less compelling. This uneven presentation is, to be sure, difficult to avoid given the impressive breadth of research the authors cover in their text—and does not diminish their overall efforts to orient our attention toward comedy's mobilizing potential.

Drawing on a range of research affirming the strong social function of humor, Zekavat and Scheel emphatically demonstrate the extent to which it can be deployed for pro-environmentalist messaging. In addition to summarizing important debates regarding the social function of comedy in different disciplines, the book also serves as a worthy guide for future evaluations of humor's impact on environmental behavior. The arguments laid out here also reverberate well beyond strictly academic contexts. As they indicate, embracing levity is critical if we are to counterprogram the dominant cultural narrative that associates sustainable behavior with shame and self-denial—effectively a dead-end when it comes to motivating action. In this light, the book is aligned with recent calls for moving beyond fear- and shame-based messaging by stressing the joys of living sustainably. In short, taking humor seriously does not involve dismissing the gravity of the environmental crises unfolding before our eyes; rather, it amplifies the innate desire for solidarity and collective well-being that laughter expresses. In reframing environmental discourse through the lens of humor, Zekavat and Scheel reveal how humor might help transform our shared ecological anxiety into a catalyst for collective action.

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Roland Borgards, Frederike Felcht, Verena Kuni, Frederike Middelhoff, Robert Pütz und Antje Schlottmann, Hrsg. *Von Fliegenfängern und Katzenklappen: 39 Kleinigkeiten zwischen den Arten* (Wallstein, 2024), 379 pp.

Kleine Dinge können eine große Wirkung haben, wie etwa die Katzenklappe im Titel dieses Bandes, die dem doch nicht vollständig domestizierten feliden Hybridwesen aus Haus- und Wildtier erlaubt, die Bequemlichkeiten menschlicher Häuslichkeit mit der Freiheit des Herumstreunerns im Draußen zu verbinden. Anders sieht es aus für den Hund, dessen engere Anbindung an den Menschen von einer längeren Geschichte der Domestizierung geprägt ist, die ihren materiellen und symbolischen Ausdruck in der Hundeleine findet; selbst der Freiraum, den die Flexileine gewährt, ist nicht die der Katzenklappe. Indem die 41 Autor:innen und Herausgeber:innen des Bandes ihr Augenmerk auf "Kleinigkeiten zwischen den Arten" richten, zeigen sie, wie diese das "Miteinander verschiedener Spezies" und "artenübergreifende Kommunikationsprozesse" (9) gestalten.

Die Auswahl der Kleinigkeiten ist eklektisch und könnte beliebig erweitert werden. Ihre alphabetische Anordnung setzt keine Akzente und schlägt keine Gruppierungen vor. Das ist sinnvoll, denn die Essays beschreiben jeweils ein breites Spektrum von materiellen, symbolischen, konzeptionellen, historischen, sprachlichen und manchmal literarischen Aspekten dieser Kleinigkeiten. Es gibt viele vom Menschen produzierte Objekte, wie die Bärchenwurst, das digitale Tier-Technik-Mensch-Dreieck von Cyborg Puppy Go!, den Teddybär, die Sporen, oder die DNA-Analyse zur Kontrolle der Wolfspopulation. Eine fast gleich große Gruppe sind die von Tieren produzierten Objekte, wie der Biberbau, Maulwurfshügel, der Pferdeapfel und das Scheinauge. Von Pflanzen Produziertes, wie Moos, Mutterkorn, Schneckenhaus und Spinnenfäden ist in kleinerer Anzahl vorhanden, wobei es jedoch zusätzlich einige *aus* Pflanzen und vom Menschen hergestellte Objekte gibt, wie Kastanienmännchen, Kompost, Papier oder Punch, sowie das Ökotop des Weinkellers mit seinen diversen Mikroorganismen. Die Forschenden fassen jedoch nicht nur die Kleinigkeit selbst sondern immer auch ihre Beziehungsgeflechte ins Auge, und diese können sich durch alle Bereiche ziehen, wie sich am Konzept der Falle zeigen lässt, die sowohl von Menschen, Tieren als auch von Pflanzen eingesetzt wird, um sich Resourcen zu beschaffen. Da die Autor:innen aus vielen Disziplinen kommen, werden

die Akzente auch verschieden gesetzt, z.B. werden auch kulturhistorische Dimensionen beleuchtet oder Auftritte der Kleinigkeiten in der Literatur: Papier etwa hat eine komplexe und für die Pflanzen (meist Bäume) gewaltsame Produktionsgeschichte, es ist heute billig, doch sein Wert entsteht aus dem Tragen unserer Ideen; die Pappelwand fungiert als "Multispezies-Kosmos" im Werk Bettine von Arnims (226); und der Punch aus Zitronen und anderen pflanzlichen Ingredienzien entfaltet seine vegetabilen Kräfte und den Pflanzengeist in Erzählungen von E.T.A. Hoffmann. Eine Tierärztin und Philosophin wiederum verbindet naturwissenschaftliches Wissen vom Hormon PGF2a, das in der bovinen Reproduktionsmedizin eingesetzt wird, mit einer kulturwissenschaftlich-feministischen Kritik an der patriarchalischen Gesellschaft, die auch beim Menschen das weibliche Begehren kontrolliert und manipuliert. Mehrere Beiträge flechten persönliche Erfahrungen mit der besprochenen Kleinigkeit ein, oft humorvoll erzählt, wie im Fall des Kampfes eines Rasenbesitzers gegen die Maulwurfshügel; Maulwürfe sind eine geschützte Art, einer gerichtlichen Verfolgung des Autors/der Autorin soll wohl vorgebeugt werden, indem dieser Essay unter dem Decknamen "Anonymus" aufgenommen wurde. Ein gutes Beispiel dafür, wie eine Kleinigkeit Auswirkungen auf Kulturpraktiken, Lebenstile und selbst planetarische Entwicklungen hat, ist der Essay über die Bärchenwurst: schon Kinder werden durch die drollig aussehende, anthropomorphisierte Wurst zum Fleischessen animiert, was die Realität der Massentierhaltung und Objektifizierung von Tieren verschleiert, und womit auch nachfolgende Generationen die Fleischindustrie unterstützen sollen, obwohl sie verheerende Klimakonsequenzen hat. Ein weiteres Beispiel ist die Vorstellung des Neoprenanzugs, der zu Reflexionen über das Wasser, Wassermetaphern, das planetarische Hydrosystem, und die Blue Humanities anregt.

Die Autor:innen der Essays arbeiten auf den Gebieten der Geographie, Literaturwissenschaft, Philosophie, Kunstgeschichte, Ethnologie, Anthropologie, Kulturwissenschaft (besonders Animal Studies und Plant Studies), Soziologie, Philosophie, Theaterwissenschaft oder sind als Tierärzt:in oder Künstler:in tätig. Sie forschen interdisziplinär und beschreiben ihren Gegenstand vor allem als Akteur in einem oder mehreren Netzwerken, etwa, wenn anhand der Besprechung von Kimme und Korn die Kulturpraktik der menschlichen Jagd, Techniken des Tötens und seine Bedeutung für die Mensch/Tier-Beziehung aufgefaltet werden. Die Objektifizierung durch die Distanz der Schusswaffe, aber auch das Wahrnehmen des Tieres als Subjekt beim Blick durch's moderne Zielfernrohr, und die Frage der Handlungsmacht des Tieres, sowie Probleme des Wildtiermanagements im Hinblick auf die Waldökologie werden diskutiert.

Gemeinsame theoretische Grundlagen sind hier—wie im Geleitwort der Herausgeber:innen aufgeführt—Bruno Latours Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie, die nicht-menschlichen Tieren, Dingen, etc. Akteurseigenschaften zugesteht, sowie Donna Haraways Denken, das "ein radikales Um- und Neu-Denken im Modus des 'Miteinander-Werdens'" fordert, das auf Wechselbeziehungen und Symbiosen beruht (10-11). Auch das Forschungsfeld der *Multispecies Studies* bietet neue Perspektiven:

während ein "epistemologischer Anthropozentrismus [...] unvermeidlich ist," so gelte es doch, einen "ontologischen Anthropozentrismus [...] infrage zu stellen und durch mehr-als-menschliche (Multispecies-)Perspektiven zu ersetzen" (12).

Eine Art Vorgänger dieses Umdenkens, das den Fokus auf die nicht-menschliche Seite verschiebt, ist die von Ian Bogost und Christopher Schaberg herausgegebene Buchserie "Object Lessons," eine Sammlung von kleinen, illustrierten Bändchen, die Dinge des Alltags betrachten—kleine wie den Stöckelschuh und das Passwort, aber auch große Objekte, wie den Baum, Abfall oder die Erde. Mit ihrem Band haben Borgards et al. die Aufmerksamkeit jedoch mehr auf die Kontaktzone des Dazwischen verschoben—also auf die "Wechselseitigkeiten der Beziehungen" zwischen den Arten—und sie besprechen ausschließlich tier-, pflanzen- oder ökosystembezogene Objekte (13). Als weiteren Vorgänger im Bereich der *Plant Studies* wäre Michael Pollans einflussreiches Buch *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* zu nennen, das das Forschungsinteresse radikal auf die *agency* der Kulturpflanzen und die reziproke Beziehung zur Menschheit verschiebt. In der von Joela Jacobs und Agnes Malinowska herausgegebenen Essaysammlung zu noch kleineren Arten, *microbium: the neglected lives of micro-matter,* wird das Leben von Bakterien, Pilzen, Viren, etc. ebenso multiperspektivisch und im Kontext ihrer Netzwerke betrachtet.

Die im vorliegenden Band versammelten Essays haben generell ein hohes Niveau und sind gut geschrieben. Sie bieten eine unterhaltsame und wissensreiche Lektüre über bekannte wie auch wenig beachtete Dinge und können gleichzeitig Modell stehen für eine interdisziplinäre, breit kulturwissenschaftlich und kreativ denkende Forschungsweise auch im deutschsprachigen Raum—ein Ansatz, der den anthropozentrischen Blick reduziert oder ihn auf jeden Fall um ein Vielfaches an Beobachtungsweisen erweitert. Die beigefügten Abbildungen für manche Beiträge bereichern die Leseerfahrung (man hätte sich natürlich Bilder für alle Beiträge gewünscht). Der Band wird die akademische Leserschaft ebenso erfreuen wie Lesende, die sich für mehr-als-menschliche Lebewesen interessieren. Es ist den Forschenden gut gelungen, die Welt der besprochenen Objekte auszuleuchten und die Komplexität ihrer multiplen Netzwerke aufzuzeigen. Wichtig ist dabei nicht zuletzt auch die kritische Perspektive, die die Menschheit auf ihre problematische, allzu dominante und oft zerstörerische Beziehung zu ihrer Umwelt im Anthropozän hinweist. Dieser Band, seine Vorgänger und hoffentlich viele Nachfolger, könnten dazu beitragen, der mehr-als-menschlichen Welt gesteigerte Aufmerksamkeit, sowie Offenheit und Respekt für das Andersartige entgegen zu bringen—im Großen wie im Kleinen.

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Christina Becher, *Zwischen Mensch und Pflanze. Vegetabile Hybriden in literarischen und grafischen Texten des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Wallstein, 2024), 440 pp.

Mit *Zwischen Mensch und Pflanze. Vegetabile Hybriden in literarischen und grafischen Texten des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* veröffentlicht Christina Becher ihre Dissertationsschrift in einer umfangreichen und klug strukturierten Monografie im Wallstein-Verlag. Hybridität versteht Becher "als heuristisches Konzept im Spannungsfeld von Unterscheidung und Vermischung" (25): Hybriden seien Wesen, die aus zwei Ausgangsentitäten als etwas Neues, Drittes hervorgingen, gleichzeitig aber stets auf ihre unterschiedlichen Ausgangsstoffe verwiesen. Was in natürlicher und unnatürlicher, also vom Menschen provozierter Form zwischen zwei unterschiedlichen Spezies oder Speziesvarietäten in der Realität vorkommt, will Becher im Fiktionalen untersuchen. In den vier deutschsprachigen Texten, deren Analysen den Hauptteil der Studie bilden, geht es um eine Hybridform, die es bisher allerdings nur in der Fiktion gibt: Mensch und Pflanze.

Bevor sich die Autorin der Einführung ihrer Arbeitsbegriffe und Primärtexte widmet, gibt sie zu Beginn ihrer Einleitung einen Abriss des transmedialen Phänomens der Hybridität in Literatur- und Kunstgeschichte, der kurz, aber umfassend einige wichtige Beispiele nennt.

Bechers vier Leittexte lassen sich in zwei verschiedene narrative Medien aus zwei unterschiedlichen Entstehungskontexten unterteilen, was sich in der chronologisch sortierten Vierteilung in zwei Hauptkapitel mit jeweils zwei Unterkapitel widerspiegelt. Jedes Analysekapitel gliedert sich in weitere inhaltsgeleitete Unterkapitel mit einem kurzen Fazit; den zwei Hauptkapiteln sind botanische, kultur- und umweltgeschichtliche Kontextualisierungen vorangestellt, die im Besonderen auf zeitspezifische Krisen eingehen und sie sinnvoll mit literarischen Produktionen der Zeit zusammenbringen. Mit Kurd Laßwitz' *Sternentau. Die Pflanze vom Neptunsmond* (1909) und Alfred Döblins *Berge Meere und Giganten* (1924) analysiert Becher zwei Romane aus dem frühen 20. Jahrhundert, die sie zwei Comics aus dem 21. Jahrhundert gegenüberstellt, nämlich Olivia Viewegs *Endzeit* (2018) und Frauke Bergers *Grün I* und *II* (2018 und 2019). All diese Texte ordnet Becher dem Genre der Science-Fiction zu. Während ihre Genrezuordnung die Texte eint, unterscheiden sie sich neben dem Entstehungskontext auch im Modus der

Narration—Prosasprache vs. Bilder teils ohne jegliche Sprache—und im Geschlecht der Autor:innen.

Für das ausgehende 19. und frühe 20. Jahrhundert diagnostiziert Becher im ersten Hauptteil ihrer Studie eine Subjektkrise, die hervorgeht aus einer Reihe wissenschaftlicher Entwicklungen, wie Darwins Evolutionstheorie oder der Keimtheorie, die den Menschen in seiner Alleinstellung und Machtposition dezentrieren. Gleichzeitig verändert sich die Vorstellung von Pflanzen, etwa durch die Entdeckung vegetabiler Mobilität nicht zuletzt im "neuen Medium Film" (53). Becher führt die Krise des Subjekts um 1900 mit einer Subjektivierung der Pflanze in Wissenschaft und Literatur parallel, in der mehrere Autoren mit Pflanzen als Ich-Erzählerinnen experimentieren.

Im Kapitel I.1 zu Kurd Laßwitz' *Sternentau* analysiert die Autorin drei Aspekte: die pflanzlichen Zeit- und Raumvorstellungen als Gegenentwurf zur menschlichen Wahrnehmung, die Darstellung pflanzlicher Fortpflanzung als Alternative zur bürgerlichen Geschlechterordnung und die narrative Parallelisierung der menschlichen Protagonistin mit einem subjektivierten und anthropomorphisierten Efeugewächs, bei dem konkrete botanische Besonderheiten vom Autor beachtet wurden.

Teil I.2 der Studie widmet sich Döblins Roman *Berge Meere und Giganten*. Entlang literarischer, botanischer und mythologischer Motive untersucht Becher Elinas pflanzliche Hybridisierung als Strategie der Selbstermächtigung und mit dem *Mad-Scientist*-Topos die Thematisierung männlicher Kontrollversuche über Natur. Sie identifiziert die sog. Kanadische Wasserpest, die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts als Pflanze mit Agency und Subjektstatus Eingang in mehrere botanische und literarische Texte findet, als Einfluss auf Döblins Experimentalroman. Schließlich beschreibt Becher zwei Hybridisierungsprozesse, die in Döblins Text stattfinden. Immer wieder stellt sie die "vegetabile Poetik" (147) des Romans auf mehreren Ebenen überzeugend heraus.

Der zweite Hauptteil der Studie kontextualisiert die Entstehung der beiden Comics in der gegenwärtigen Klima- und Umweltkrise, auf die in verschiedenen Diskursen mit der Betonung des speziesübergreifenden Kollektivs reagiert werde. Die theoretische Folie, vor der die Comics laut Becher zu verorten sind, bilden der kritische Posthumanismus und der New Materialism sowie die botanische Unterdisziplin der (häufig kritisierten) "Plant Perception" oder "Plant Neurobiology" (229).

In Olivia Viewegs *Endzeit* (Teil II.1) wird das Verhältnis zwischen Mensch und Pflanze über vegetabile "Öko-Zombies" (237) verhandelt. Becher analysiert diesen Comic als feministische Utopie, die pflanzlich-menschliches Zusammenleben in einer postapokalyptischen Welt entwirft. Zentrale Themen in den Close Readings sind die (Un)Möglichkeit pflanzlich-menschlicher Kommunikation, Vegetarismus als feministische und zukunftsorientierte Ernährungsform sowie die Einordnung des Comics in gängige Zombienarrative. Einige Aspekte—etwa die zahlreichen

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

christlichen Motive oder *The Walking Dead* als wichtiger Intertext—bleiben in der Studie un(ter)erwähnt.

In Teil II.2 liest die Autorin Frauke Bergers *Grün* als "Literatur des Anthropozäns" (312), in der, mehr als in den vorangegangenen Texten, Pflanzen und deren Handlungsmacht im Fokus stehen. Dies belegt Becher durch eine ausführliche comicsemiotische Analyse von Pflanzen als Handlungszeichen, bevor sie einen genaueren Blick auf die Hybridisierungsprozesse in *Grün* wirft und zentrale bild- und kulturhistorische Referenzen wie Alraunen und Blattmasken ('Green Men') untersucht. Der Vergleich mit US-Comics wie *Swamp Thing* und *Poison Ivy* zeigt, wie sich *Grün* durch kollektive Hybridisierungen und eine geschlechterreflektierte Darstellung unterscheidet.

Im Fazit fasst Becher zusammen, dass die grenzüberschreitenden Hybriden in den Romanen temporäre Ausnahmen, in den Comics jedoch langfristige Transformationsmodelle darstellen. Sie betont, dass sich in den jüngeren Texten ein Zuwachs an pflanzlicher Handlungsmacht abzeichnet, der trotz anthropomorpher Darstellungen neue Repräsentationsformen pflanzlichen Lebens eröffnet.

Sprachlich ist die Monografie klar und verständlich geschrieben. Das macht sie sowohl für mit der Materie vertrautes als auch fachfremdes Publikum zur angenehmen und interessanten Lektüre. Es wäre allerdings zu wünschen, dass sich die Autorin stärker von der im Deutschen immer noch üblichen Passiv-Dominanz wissenschaftlichen Schreibens löst. Hier führt das leider immer wieder zu Missverständnissen, wie wenn etwa bei vielen Passivsätzen nicht klar ist, ob nun das Vorgehen der Autorin, allgemeine historische Entwicklungen oder der Inhalt des besprochenen Romans beschrieben werden. Auch ließe sich überlegen, ob nicht einige der im Passiv Präteritum gehaltenen Kapitelabschlüsse als Spuren der Qualifikationsarbeit noch zu tilgen wären.

Methodisch und theoretisch fügt sich Bechers Monografie in das produktive Forschungsgebiet der Literary and Cultural Plant Studies ein, in welchem vermehrt seit knapp zwei Jahrzehnten Studien mit ähnlichen Erkenntnisinteressen veröffentlicht werden (eine gute Übersicht bietet die Webseite des gleichnamigen Netzwerks der University of Arizona). Besonders auf die Veröffentlichungen einer der Begründerinnen des Netzwerks, Joela Jacobs, verweist Becher oft selbst und beziehen sich einige ihrer Fachbegriffe, etwa die 'vegetal violence.' Gleichzeitig bildet *Zwischen Mensch und Pflanze* eine Ausnahme in den zahlreichen neuen Publikationen des Gebiets, in denen sich bisher selten mit dem Medium Comics und noch seltener mit deutschsprachigen Gegenwartscomics auseinandergesetzt wurde.

Zusammenfassend lassen sich einige Besonderheiten und Vorzüge dieser gelungenen und sehr interessanten Studie festhalten: Die primärtextorientierte Struktur sowie zahlreiche Zwischenüberschriften innerhalb der einzelnen Unterkapitel erweisen sich als hilfreich und leser:innenfreundlich, genauso wie das Personen- und Sachregister am Ende des Buches. Die einzelnen Analysekapitel sind zwar sinnstiftend in den Gesamtzusammenhang des Buches eingebettet, können aber auch einzeln rezipiert werden, was die Monografie auch für Lesende attraktiv macht,

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

die sich über einen der vier Leittexte informieren wollen. In Bechers Studie treffen immer wieder kluge Literaturanalyse und zugänglicher botanischer Exkurs aufeinander, was die Lektüre erfrischend und interessant macht; historische Einordnungen bringen die literarischen und grafischen Texte stets mit dem jeweiligen Zeitgeist und seinen soziokulturellen sowie wissenschaftlichen Entwicklungen zusammen, oft auch mit kunsthistorischen Bildtraditionen. Mit Science-Fiction-Romanen und Gegenwartscomics erweitert Becher das formale Spektrum der im ökokritischen Diskurs üblicherweise betrachteten Texte, was ihr Buch zu einem wichtigen Beitrag zum Ecocriticism und den Literary and Cultural Plant Studies macht. Mit ihrer Primärtextauswahl bringt die Autorin zudem Forschungsfelder zusammen, die voneinander profitieren können, und macht eine Lektüre sowohl für Germanist:innen, Comicforschende und 'Ecocritics' als auch für Publikum aus botanischen oder umweltwissenschaftlichen Disziplinen attraktiv, die sich für die literatur- und kulturgeschichtlichen Grundlagen ihres Forschungsgegenstands interessieren.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

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Daniel Worden, *Petrochemical Fantasies. The Art and Energy of American Comics* (The Ohio State University Press, 2024), 212 pp.

Research in the interdisciplinary and intersecting fields of environmental humanities, energy humanities, and petroculture studies illuminates the complex yet often elusive connections between modern culture and fossil fuels. In his book *Petrochemical Fantasies*, Daniel Worden analyzes various ways in which the medium of comics has been linked to fossil fuels, particularly oil, although not exclusively. The titular concept of "petrochemical fantasies" is defined in the introductory chapter as "the clusters of conventions and tropes that naturalize and romanticize fossil fuel culture" (25). Worden positions his work as a contribution to "an environmentalist history of American comics" (21) and the book can be aptly described as a thematic and genre-focused literary history of comics, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Rather than presenting a singular chronological timeline, Worden divides the book into five primary chapters, each focusing on specific facets of the relationship between comics and energy.

In chapter 1, he examines the material and representational connections between energy transitions (from biomass and water to coal, and later from coal to oil) and comics. He highlights how the industrialization of the printing press facilitated the mass production of comics and how comics, in turn, expressed, represented, and commented on the new experiences of speed and power enabled by fossil fuels.

Chapter 2 investigates how cartoons and comics depicted and became intertwined with the rise and proliferation of automobiles from the early twentieth century onward. Notably, many of the earliest examples, particularly of cartoons and newspaper comic strips, exhibit a rather ironically critical perspective on the emerging technology. Subsequent comics, such as Sidney Smith's *Old Doc Yak*, tend instead to normalize, idealize, and romanticize automobile culture as a lifestyle.

In the next chapter, Worden explores the connections between the American oil and automobile industries and comics. His main examples are pamphlets directly produced by companies, such as *Standard Oil Comics* and *Gulf Funny Weekly*, which included promotional comic strips serving as advertisements for the petroleum industry. Worden further traces this idealization of fossil fuel use to the superhero

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

comics subgenre that gained prominence from the late 1930s onward, interpreting characters like Superman as representations of superhuman powers and speed afforded by fossil fuels. This discussion progresses in the fourth chapter, where Worden examines how petroleum-based synthetic materials, such as plastics, inspired the highly flexible bodies of many comic characters, particularly superheroes like Plastic Man and Elongated Man.

In the final chapter, Worden discusses how comics from the 1970s onwards have addressed environmental issues, including anthropogenic climate change and the necessity to move away from fossil fuels. The examples discussed in most detail in this chapter are from recent years and include Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*, Pablo Fajardo, Sophie Tardy-Joubert, and Damien Roudeau's *Crude: A Memoir*, Andrea Wulf's *The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt*, Inés Estrada's *Alienation*, and Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*. In his conclusion, Worden expresses optimism that such comics may contribute to realizing a more "sustainable future" (143).

Although the environmentalist and climate change-related comics that Worden explores towards the book's conclusion are certainly worthy of attention, their inclusion also constitutes a deviation from the focus on "petrochemical fantasies" as defined in the introduction. The works discussed in the last chapter certainly do not constitute such "fantasies" themselves, but are meant to counteract the naturalization and romanticization of fossil fuel culture that characterizes most of the other texts discussed in the book. There are also other examples in Worden's study that I find somewhat hard to classify as "petrochemical fantasies" based on his own definition, such as superhero comics influenced by and reflecting on nuclear energy, a form of energy that, while sharing some characteristics with fossil fuels, is not strictly "petrochemical." A more detailed explanation of the overarching theoretical and methodological approach could have provided greater cohesion, and a better understanding of how (and why) certain parts of the empirical material were selected. This concerns also Worden's explicit limitation to American comics, even though some of his most prominent examples are translations of texts from other geographical origins. These include the Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer's *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck*, originally written in French, or the aforementioned *Crude: A Memoir*, also initially published in French. While there certainly are good reasons for including these, it would have been helpful to make these reasons more explicit as well as to reflect on the importance of translation regarding the relation between comics and fossil fuel culture.

However, these are minor shortcomings, and *Petrochemical Fantasies* offers valuable insights into the various ways the medium of comics and diverse forms of energy use have co-evolved over time, mutually influencing each other. Many of the texts Worden discusses are relatively unknown today but likely exerted significant influence on numerous recipients. Particularly enlightening in this context is Worden's description of how petroleum companies utilized comics as educational tools to teach young audiences about the benefits and necessity of fossil fuels. This was achieved through advertising pamphlets like the aforementioned *Standard Oil*

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Comics, as well as collaboration with major producers of established comic series. For instance, Exxon and Walt Disney joined forces to impart energy-related "knowledge" to young readers in several 1970s and 1980s publications, such as the comic book *Mickey and Goofy Explore the Universe of Energy*.

The numerous black-and-white and color plates included allow readers to gain a more immediate impression of many of the examples discussed in the book. Worden's study could have been considerably longer, and one would often wish for more detailed analyses of the texts covered. However, it represents a promising beginning that will undoubtedly inspire further research into the multifaceted relationships between comics and energy cultures.

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Azucena Castro. *Postnaturalezas poéticas. Pensamiento ecológico y políticas de la extrañeza en la poesía latinoamericana contemporánea* (De Gruyter, 2025), 238 pp.

Postnaturalezas Poéticas interrogates what it means to write and read poetry in a world where extractive capitalism seems to have canceled the very possibility of a future. Hence, here is the first lesson that Azucena Castro teaches us in her book*:* that it is the critic's commitment to speak about ruins of the present if they want to theorize a path forward for aesthetics in our current climate predicament. For nature, Castro will tell us, might have ended as we once knew it, but its aftermath lies in the testament of language.

Castro's book is unusual in many ways. Its originality begins with the circumstances surrounding its publication. *Postnaturalezas poéticas* is the first translational study of contemporary Latin American environmental poetry. It is also the inaugural volume of a promising book series in the Latin American environmental humanities: De Gruyer's "SubAtlantic: Latin American, Caribbean, and Luso-African Ecologies," edited by Jens Anderman, Gabriel Giorgi and Victoria Saramago. Departing from the stratigraphic category "subatlantic"—as the climatic age currently coming to an end—, the series aims to create a cartography of voices and territories that begins with Castro's contribution. She will go on to pass the torch to incoming authors, the first of which will be Manuel Silva-Ferrer with a forthcoming book on Venezuelan petrocultures.

But *Postnaturalezas*' originality also—if not mainly—lies in the merit of its own contributions. The first one is how the ambitious breadth of its materials conveys a capacious understanding of postnatural poetics. Castro engages with textual bodies that overflow traditional understandings of poetry spilling onto transmediality, interdisciplinarity, and collective practices. This broad definition of poetry allows her to move past thematic-driven analysis of ecopoetics, environmental poetics, and nature poetry as encountered within green ecologies. Instead, Castro proposes thinking *vis-a-vis* the formal aspects of poetry to attempt answering a very ambitious question: how can poetic estrangement aid us in moving past the conceptual framework of modernity? Moreover, how can the strategies of dishabituation of twenty-first century Latin American poetry serve as a theoretical laboratory for moving past modernity's artificial understanding of nature?

Castro's answer to those questions is a radical one. Instead of lamenting the loss of a certain form of nature, contemporary Latin American poetry puts forth modes of inhabiting a damaged planet together with other-than-human bodies, territories, and material entities. Castro formulates this answer by arranging her corpus through three binding figures: assemblages, metamorphoses and animisms. Each section situates Castro's corpus within the broader tradition of Latin American poetry and goes on to show how the present state of the art is indebted to forms of experimentation that began during dictatorship context in Latin America. This is perhaps another one of the book's most valuable lessons: showing poetry itself has historically served as a site for the theorization of violence and that, unlike what we see in a lot of contemporary interventions, literary criticism can be done through our materials instead of onto them and by incorporating tradition instead of excluding it.

"Parte 1: Ensamblajes," Castro centers on a corpus that elaborates on trash and ruins *as* assemblages that enact the relationship between nature and capital. The introductory section departs from the work of Chilean poet Carlos Soto Roman—specifically his poetic chapbook *The Air I Breathe* (2013)—to theorize breathing with a polluted planet as a model of postnatural assemblage. Drawing on the theorization of the Wastelocene, Catro coins the term of residual poetics to analyzes Argentine poet Daniel Samoilovich's grotesque climate tragicomedy *El despertar de Samoilo* (2005), Mexican visual artist Verónica Gerber Bicecci's plastiglomerate haikus *Otro día… poemas sintéticos* (2020), and Venezuelan poet Santiago Acosta's petropoems in *El próximo desierto* (2019). Castro proposes that these poems formally detach from traditional poetic genres to propose strange and monstrous textual-bodies able to convey assemblages between humans and nonhumans in devastated ecologies. In this first part, the focus on residue temporalities proposes concrete coordinates to enhance our understanding of deep time.

In "Part 2: Metamorfosis," the focus is anti-speciesism. Castro takes her cue from Cecilia Vicuña's 1971 collaboration with seeds in her video-poem "Semiya" to theorize human-nonhuman assemblages. Combining Western and Indigenous frameworks, this section's analysis focuses on Nicaraguan poet Esthela Calderón's vegetal breathing in *Soplo de corriente vital* (2008), and Mapuche-Huilliche poet Roxana Miranda Rupailaf's land and water poetics in *Shumpall* (2011). The focus here is on how these poetic bodies offer a gateway to imagining territorial relationships beyond the framework of Western modernity. Affects—such as erotic desire—play a fundamental role in challenging the discrete division of bodies and exposing their porosity.

Finally, in "Part 3: Animismos," Castro departs from Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac's biopoems (1980s) as an early example of poetic creation of other than human languages. In Kac, microorganism agency come to fore allowing Castro theorize a decolonial understanding of life and its meaning. In this section, she ties Kac's experimental poetics with contemporary works informed by more-than-human paradigms as conveyed in Indigenous cosmologies. This section focuses on Mexican poet Luigi Aimara's urban necrosis in *A Pie* (2009), Brazilian poet Josely Vianna

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 2

Baptista's treescapes in *Nada está fora do lugar* (2017), and the neoliberal piropoetics of the Argentine collective poem *Humedal. Poema a cuatro manos* (2020), written by Sergio Fuster, Néstor Farino, Antonio Ramos and Sergio Ferreira with illustrations by Antonio "Pipi" Ramos. This section subtly poses the question about the legibility of non-Western cosmologies and Traditional Ecological Knowledge in the context of creolized and Spanish-language based poetics. Castro's response seems to be that new modes of cosmological imagination are possible even in the case of settler poetics.

This book's many merits are hard to convey in the brevity of a book review. Nonetheless, it would be unfair not to finalize by speaking of Castro's commitment to the Environmental Humanities *ethos* of collaboration. This open-endedness begins with the decision to include a foreword by Jorge Marcone, which shows that Environmental thinking always occurs in co-mingling with others: interlocutors, colleagues, mentors. I think it's worthwhile celebrating this book's deep commitment to the ethos of the field but, also, its independent theoretical rigor, generous engagement with her materials, and careful crafting of form. Equally, one could not but celebrate seeing the emergence of a bottom-up theoretical methodology that departs from the corpus instead of imposing others' theoretical apparatus to it. We could only expect that this, too, will be the torch Castro passes on to the future authors of SubAtlantic aesthetics.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 2*

Vol.16, no. 2

Mission Statement

This journal of ecocriticism, founded in 2010, is a joint initiative of GIECO (Ecocritical Research Group in Spain) and EASLCE (European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment) and is published by the University of Alcalá as of 2014. Its principal aim is to further the study, knowledge and public awareness of the connections and relationship between literature, culture and the environment. As a virtual space, it provides a site for dialogue between researchers, theorists, creative writers and artists concerned with and by the environment and its degradation. Its pages are open to contributions on all literatures and cultures, but its special mission is to reflect the cultural, linguistic and natural richness and diversity of the European continent.

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

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