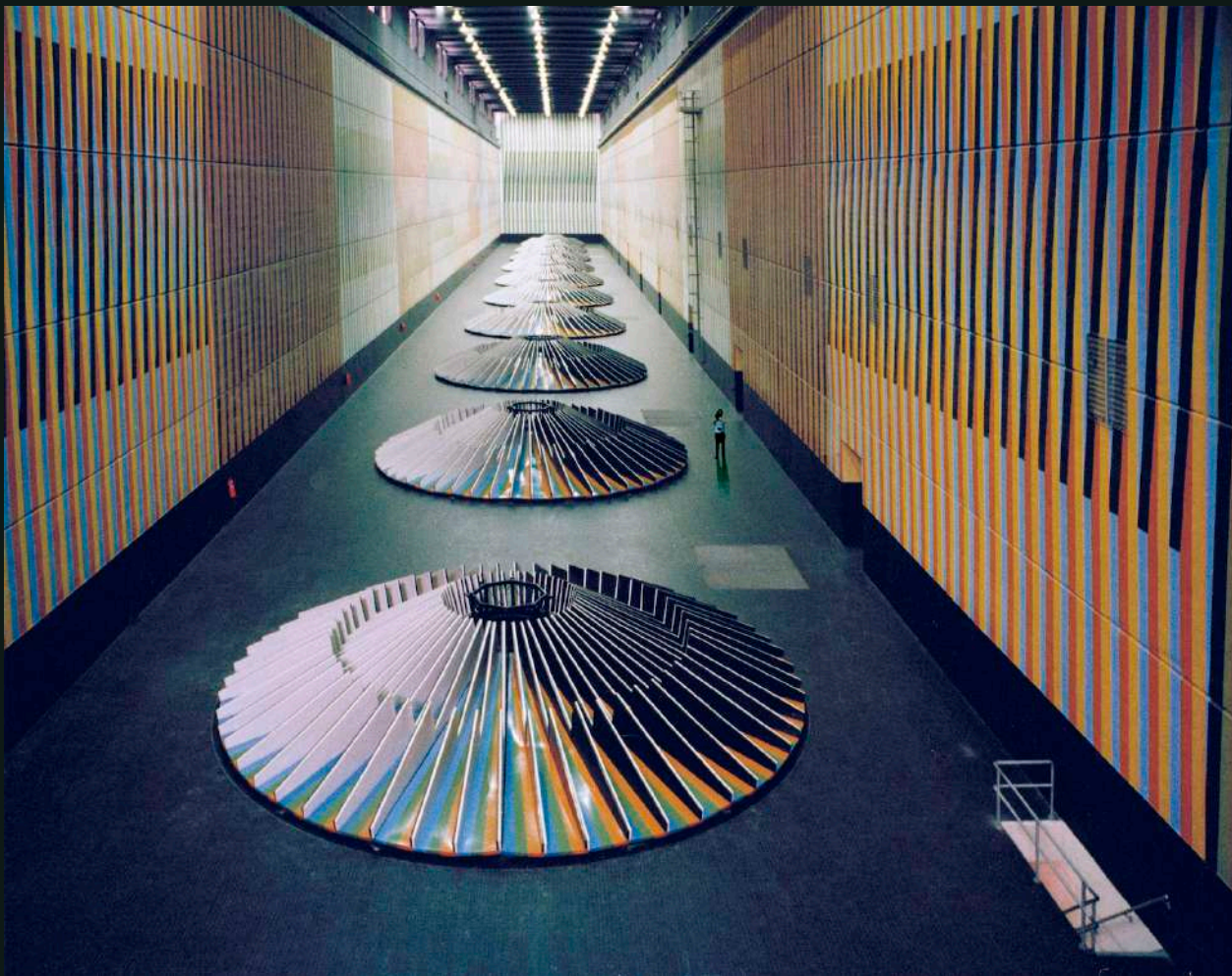


# Mediations

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## World-Ecology in the Web of Latin American Culture

Santiago Acosta, Paige R. Andersson, Orlando Bentancor, Victoria Saramago, and Brian Whitener

The role of nature in Latin America has been central to both elite and grassroots political perspectives since the colonial era. These debates and struggles have taken on many forms, from concerns about the extraction of natural resources, labor, and the meaning of humanity itself, to ideas about conservation and tourism, food production, and energy. One of the main ways these issues have been explored is through culture, yet despite intensifying interest in the Environmental Humanities within Latin American studies — and Latin America's centrality in dire contemporary environmental crises and dilemmas — culture's place in materially rooted discussions remains elusive.

One possible opening, however, is offered by world-ecological approaches inspired by Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2016) that have gained increasing traction within Latin American Studies.<sup>1</sup> Not only does it offer a *longue durée* account of colonialism and the capacity to think labor and value in new ways, but Moore includes the "cheap" or unpaid work/energy from gendered and racialized human and non-human natures in the making of capitalist value. He also notes the impinging role of negative value or the limits that emerge where nature can no longer be summoned for free (e.g., superweeds). This expansion of Marxism's labor theory of value leads Moore to a theory of crisis, framed as a tendency of the rate of the ecological surplus to fall. For Moore, capitalism both is and *makes* its own organizational form of nature (rather than a form that draws on a nature conceptualized as external to it), and this process requires not just the machinery of exploitation but, importantly, geopolitical and cultural power.

Beyond his centering of Latin American colonization as a foundational event in capitalism, there is much in Moore that resonates with Latin American perspectives. On the one hand, there is Moore's focus on extraction and attention to the geo-spatial dynamics of accumulation. On the other is Moore's attention to how non- or

partially capitalized sectors contribute to accumulation — a perennial concern in Latin American agrarian studies and in studies of class composition. Finally, we have Moore's heterodox approach to Marx which chimes with the best, and most influential, Marxism in the Latin American tradition, which has often had to translate and adapt ideas produced elsewhere into local contexts. It is not difficult, then, to see why Moore has been quickly engaged by Latin American thinkers.

Of course, Moore's work has also generated significant debate, particularly among Marxists and eco-socialists. Of these controversies three stand out: Moore's extension of Marx's law of value, Moore's attack on the so-called Cartesian dualism of other ecological thinkers, and Moore's degree of attentiveness to environmental destruction.<sup>2</sup> As co-authors of the essays in this issue, the truth is we have a diverse set of views on these arguments. What we agree on, however, is that they are important, but also that the current state of the debate can be at times not particularly helpful. Many of us found salutary Nancy Fraser's recent intervention where she argues for a trinity of concepts of Nature, each valuable at a particular moment of analysis.<sup>3</sup> Our other point of agreement is simply that Moore's world-ecology has something valuable to say to Latin Americanists, Marxists, and cultural critics, and all the combinations thereof. Our shared hope was that approaching Moore from below and the left, or reading him under Latin American eyes, could help shift some of these deadlocks by opening new avenues of conversation.

Perhaps most urgently, inspiration for this project derived from the question of the political within a world-ecological framework. What is to be done with Latin American culture amidst a set of political discussions that crisscross the environmental humanities, political ecology, and the wider climate movement and current state projects? While discourses around the Green New Deal, resource nationalism, and ecosocialism have been debated and critiqued, not only is there no viable political movement or even fragments of one, there is little agreement on a shared political horizon. Can Latin American culture conceived broadly, from the speculative to the state sponsored, intervene in questions intimately linked to the environment and capitalism, albeit in need of mutual articulation, such as security, violence, crises of care and reproduction, and the state? The essays in this dossier seek to address these questions and political horizons through cultural and material explorations of colonialism, geopower, water, social reproduction, and the political as they relate to and redefine world-ecological perspectives and potentials.

As mentioned above, one of the features that makes the world-ecology paradigm so attractive for scholars who work on Latin America is that it places Latin America at the very center of the emergence of the Capitalocene. For Moore, clearly, colonialism is the very condition of possibility of capitalism both in an historical/geopolitical and an (onto)logical sense. For Moore, fond of Maria Mies's phrasing, every act of production of surplus value in the center depends on a disproportionately larger act of appropriation of the unpaid labor of women, nature, and colonies at the commodity



frontiers. From a historical/geopolitical perspective, Moore rejects the two-century box according to which capitalism begins in England with the Industrial Revolution. By incorporating Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory into eco-marxism, Moore puts primitive accumulation and the Latin American colonial experience at the core of historical and geopolitical conditions of capitalism. Moreover, Moore assigns a material and practical preeminence to the non-valued, preexisting conditions of the production of value itself. Moore mobilizes the concept of "abstract social nature" as a way of indicating how both non-human and colonial agents not only work, but work in ways that are often seen. The very logic of capital, the very immanence of value in motion, presupposes a process of devaluation that is intrinsically colonialist because it consists of cheapening, appropriating, and removing certain metabolic processes of their own movements of reproduction treating them as if they had no agency, qualities, or determinations. Multiple essays in this dossier explore how placing Latin America within a web of capitalist value relations opens up new discursive space for thinking anew two classic Latin American problems: extractivism and colonial relations of power.

As Eduardo Galeano famously put it, Latin America is the land of the "open veins," where resource extraction has been a perennial concern and curse. After the end of the industrialization of the post-war period, the neoliberal turn recentered Latin American economies, once again, on extraction. After the disastrous decades of neoliberalism, the election of "pink tide" governments in the first years of the twenty-first century reawakened the hope, possibility, and belief in a socialist alternative. However, pink tide governments, despite their progressive, anti-imperialist rhetoric, quickly became enmeshed in the *realpolitik* and global pressures of resource dependency. Bolivia and Ecuador, whose constitutions granted rights to nature and recognized *sumak kawsay* or *Buen Vivir* as a model for the state and the economy, opened new territories for hydrocarbon and mineral extraction in protected areas and Indigenous territories. In 2015, the Venezuelan government created the Ministry of Eco-socialism and Water just as it expanded the mega-mining project Arco Minero del Orinoco (Orinoco Mining Arc). Today, extractivism not only threatens the livelihood of thousands of Indigenous peoples and the biodiversity of the region, but also integrates nature-exporting countries further into the structures of global capitalism as dependent producers of raw materials. In his essay in this dossier, Santiago Acosta charts one of the many pre-histories of this predicament, exploring how the Venezuelan artistic movement of *cinetismo* served not simply as ideological cover for state-led petro development, but rather played a critical and active role in the world-ecological transformations of Venezuela. In her essay on the work of Colombian visual artist Carolina Caycedo, Victoria Saramago explores how visual art practice can make visible the often invisible nature of hydropower and the nationalist frames and narratives which are marshaled in its sense-making, while Paige Andersson examines how the Mexican state historically tried to resolve contradictions of ecological accumulation

with gendered labor of social reproduction. Each of these essays explores how world-ecology's emphasis on global value-relations has the potential to bring a more nuanced understanding of global and national power relations, providing new insights into the constitutive predicaments of Latin American societies.

Value relations also open up new avenues for thinking the question of colonial relations of power. The dominant approach to this question in the scholarly field today is the decolonial option. In some of its most prominent U.S. scholarly manifestations and classic texts, the decolonial option is an attempt to consolidate a geopolitics of knowledge that centers the question of epistemological recognition and stresses the importance of speaking from Latin America, that is, from the colonial difference, as a valid position of enunciation.<sup>4</sup> As a result, decolonial thought has had a diffident relationship to Marxism, with foundational texts rejecting the applicability of Marxism to Latin America, although other decolonial scholars, particularly younger ones, are less apt to draw such hard distinctions or to depend entirely on epistemological arguments.<sup>5</sup>

World-ecology enables a new approach to these questions by placing the colonial perspective in dialogue with value creation and value relations. By bringing value into the conversation, colonial difference is seen not just as a place of enunciation for the creation of knowledge, but an actual material producer of value that then is retroactively devalorized by its own product, value itself. The world-ecology perspective can help to avoid the classic decolonial tendency to work within "the colonial/modern" divide by emphasizing how commodity fetishism feeds the appropriation and subordination of non-valued colonial subjects to the production of value through a *longue durée* perspective. World-ecology's synthetic character is extremely attractive because it can incorporate an anti-colonial approach that gives proper weight to the joint economic, ecological, and epistemological project of coloniality that endures into the present. Orlando Bontancor's essay in this dossier explores precisely these dynamics, tracking how the present intensification of the extractive paradigm and continued deterritorialization of capital flows has deepened colonial relations while further enmeshing Latin America within anonymous global value relations. In his contribution, Brian Whitener demonstrates the impact of global value relations in shaping the turn to para-state violence as a form of accumulation in Mexico and the devastating consequences of local pressures of global accumulation dynamics.

Certainly, few texts in recent memory combine Marxist political economy with the sensibility of the cultural turn like Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Nature*. In Moore's work, long passages on the importance of cartography sit comfortably side-by-side with excursions on the rate of profit and the tendency for the rate of ecological surplus to fall. As a result, cultural theorists have been quick on the uptake. However, when we turn to the role of the cultural in the political response to ecological collapse, Moore's text provides few guideposts, and it falls to cultural theorists to stake out our own.



In our discussions over the kind of work that needed to be done, we turned over a vast array of questions to grasp what the possible role of culture in Latin American ecological politics today might be. We asked questions like: If in 1993 John Beverley called for us to think “against literature” in the context of a revolutionary upheaval, what role is there for culture, and by extension critique, to play in the ecological present of post-Lettered City societies? If we agree that an expansion of our political imaginations is required to deal with ecological crisis does this imply a renewed role for cultures of representation? Or given the compressed timeframe of the present catastrophe in Latin America must all culture cleave more closely to the asymptote of politics, tending to the anti-representational and being of the street, the demo, the barricade? And finally, as more and more cultural workers turn to speculative modes, how can the speculative be matched with history to chart where our world-ecologies and its imaginaries have already been and where they might go?

One approach the essays in this volume take in thinking world-ecology in a Latin American cultural context is through the concept of geopower, which names the geo-managerial capacity of state-capital-science complexes. Christian Parenti describes geopower as “the statecraft and technologies of power that make territory and the biosphere accessible, legible, knowable, and utilizable”<sup>6</sup> and Moore defines it as a force “at the heart of modern capitalism,” comprised of a mix of science, technology, governance, and culture, which allows capitalists and states to “map, identify, quantify and otherwise make natures legible to capital.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, geopower acts through the symbolic production of “abstract social nature,” which in turn serves to fashion nature into a motor of capital accumulation.<sup>8</sup> Such operations are largely carried out through visual practices wherein vision and the gaze become instruments and objects of territorial control.<sup>9</sup> What is unique about these conceptualizations of the power to remake the biosphere is the active role given to the “soft” technics of intellectual labor and symbolic praxis in processes of nature appropriation.

However, and as much as Moore and others have suggested that culture plays a crucial part in environment-making, studies about the cultural dimension of geopower are scarce. On one hand, culture and ideology are still too often understood as superstructural forces with only circumstantial or indirect impacts on the material world. On the other hand, the emancipatory potential of culture and the arts is sometimes overemphasized, blinding us to the contradictory ways in which cultural producers are often already enmeshed in the conditions in which they live and work (including the cultural apparatus of state-capital articulations). Approached in the right way, the world-ecological perspective, with its emphasis on the effects that real abstractions have on human and extra-human natures, offers a way of grasping culture as a much more tangible interplay between the abstract and the concrete, between the material and the immaterial, and between humans and the rest of nature. As Santiago Acosta’s essay shows, an engagement with the notion of geopower can help scholars to elaborate a new theoretical framework wherein culture works *through*

matter as an active force that intervenes in the organization of nature in the service of capital. Essays in this dossier such as Acosta's and Whitener's bring the concept of geopower into the realm of cultural studies to explore how aesthetic objects and discourses are crucial to materialize ways of capturing natural forces and supporting regimes of extraction. At the same time, Acosta's article calls for a rethinking of the compartmentalization of scientific knowledge-making and cultural practices (which seem to remain separated in Moore's conception of geopower).

Another nodal point across multiple articles in this dossier is the focus on water. In particular, the potential of hydric formations to elaborate intersections between the cultural and the political places water in a privileged thematic, historical, and theoretical position. Moore's reframing of water as cheap nature, from its role in irrigating the Green Revolution to the historical capitalist reliance on water as a source of energy, from the water mills of early capitalism to contemporary hydropower plants, has been inspiring a growing critical corpus, which includes critical responses to the intensification of potable-water extraction, such as Sharae Deckard's discussion of "extreme water," as well as the nexus between cultural form and "strategies of enclosure and accumulation" of freshwater, among other interventions.<sup>10</sup> However, the imaginative fluidity of water in Latin America, including saline as well as freshwater, encompasses numerous and varied cosmological dimensions, the centrality of waterways in economic and migratory patterns, the availability of water for the maintenance of life, and the symbolic role of large rivers in national encodings. All these significations, extensively explored by Latin American artists and writers and also present in this dossier, allow for a productive rereading of the world-ecology paradigm as it intersects with a broader range of meanings and resonances present across the region's cultural production in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Three of the articles included in this dossier expand the critical possibilities of water-as-resource — reinforcing and challenging the world-ecology paradigm — through analyses of seas, rivers, and water infrastructures in film, literature, and visual arts. Representations of water as ungovernable can, as Paige Andersson demonstrates, challenge infrastructures of enclosure, thus making the case for a political reckoning of the related yet independent autonomies of nature and human labor. Santiago Acosta shows how state-sponsored visual arts movements can establish a close connection with nationalistic thinking through the symbolic legitimization of large-scale environmental interventions such as the building of hydropower megadams. For her part, Victoria Saramago explores the aesthetic and narrative challenges of making visible the human and nonhuman displacements implicated in the building of megadams. Read together, these contributions aim to reconfigure the cartographies of extraction and accumulation, on which the world-ecological understanding of water as cheap nature is based, from the viewpoint of cultural production.

If the essays in this dossier find traction within world-ecology with geopower and

water, they are more sanguine in their assessment of Moore's political framework, and the essays explore a number of different uncertainties and fissures. The political framework Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* offers is notoriously thin, comprising just a few pages but it heavily centers the role of the state, and while more recent work has provided more insight, political thinking is not the strongest aspect of his work.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the state horizon of Moore's politics, raises important concerns in Latin America, such as: What does this ecological politics have to offer in a region where states have terrorized, displaced and disappeared environmental and other organizers or where they have coordinated with paramilitary organizations to clear land or turned a blind eye to other forms of dispossession? What are the resonances of calls for new forms of developmentalism, even of a green kind, in a Latin American context where indigenous ecological thought is prominent and where post-developmental discourses are foundational to current critical thinking? While Moore's conceptual and historical framework centers Latin America as a global commodity frontier par excellence, at the moment of political theory, Moore's approach seems to lack the same nuanced and dynamic internationalist understanding that would allow its seamless translation into the region.

In their own ways, each of the essays in this volume touch on questions of the political and the translation of world-ecology into a Latin American context. One important line of questioning, pursued by both Paige Andersson and Brian Whitener, is the place of social reproduction within a world-ecological framework. Ecological crises and larger questions of day-to-day survival and reproduction of individuals or communities move hand-in-hand, particularly in Mexico, while struggles against illegal logging and mining are also often struggles to maintain or recuperate forms of life that are under attack. Often Mexican cultural production addresses ecological themes alongside or through the more capacious lens of social reproduction. In both their essays, Andersson and Whitener ask what it would mean to follow cultural production's lead and center social reproduction as a frame around which ecological political struggles turn and a horizon toward which they move.

Across many of the essays, but particularly those of Andersson, Acosta, and Saramago, questions of the state and state-led world-ecological projects loom large. Each of these essays asks from the position of culture what would it look like to move beyond these disastrous projects as they also chart the complicated ways in which cultural practice has participated in or dissented from them. Finally, the essays of Andersson, Whitener and Bentancor, grapple with how to understand the present and near future political horizon of capitalist ecocide and its meaning, effects, and cultural mediations in Latin America. Bentancor inverts the nihilism of contemporary weird fiction into an analytic of contemporary global capitalism's suicidal world-ecology; Andersson examines the interplay between cultural production and a capitalism which has exhausted its stocks of value and tricks for resolving its own crises; while Whitener gives us a dialectical image of a world that could be, a world-ecology of a

different order beyond capitalism and the state.

Never uniform, these essays prick and probe, translate and adapt elements of world-ecology testing and essaying their possible utility for Latin American Marxist thought and Latin American cultural and literary studies. The results, which was our aim in organizing this dossier, are also not uniform. Moore's thought is found wanting in several instances, needing supplement in others, and a supremely useful interlocutor across all the essays. As a whole the essays demonstrate the productive utility of world-ecology for cultural work in Latin America and our hope is this dossier will contribute to a deepening of these conversations.

## Notes

1. Within Latin American cultural studies there has been significant work. A non-exhaustive list would highlight: Sharae Deckard, "'Mapping the World-Ecology,'" [https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping\\_the\\_World\\_Ecology\\_Conjectures\\_on\\_World\\_Ecological\\_Literature](https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping_the_World_Ecology_Conjectures_on_World_Ecological_Literature); Sharae Deckard, "Latin America in the World-Ecology: Origins and Crisis." In *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America*, edited by Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016) 3-20; Michael Niblett, *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Kerstin Oloff, "The 'Monstrous Head' and the 'Mouth of Hell': The Gothic Ecologies of the 'Mexican Miracle,'" in *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America*, edited by Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 79-98. In the larger field of Latin American Studies, see Gennaro Avallone, "Las perspectivas de la ecología-mundo y postcolonial: buscando una alternativa al dualismo cartesiano," (2015), [https://www.academia.edu/15228892/Las\\_Perspectivas\\_de\\_la\\_Ecolog%C3%ADa\\_mundo\\_y\\_Postcolonial\\_Buscando\\_una\\_Alternativa\\_al\\_Dualismo\\_Cartesiano](https://www.academia.edu/15228892/Las_Perspectivas_de_la_Ecolog%C3%ADa_mundo_y_Postcolonial_Buscando_una_Alternativa_al_Dualismo_Cartesiano); Laura Casanova Casañas, "Megaproyectos y conflictos ecoterritoriales. El caso del Tren Maya," *Relaciones Internacionales*, 46 (2021), 139-159; Iagê Miola et al., "Bonos verdes en la ecología-mundo: capital, naturaleza y poder en la expansión financiarizada de la industria forestal en Brasil," *Relaciones Internacionales*, 46 (2021) 161-180; Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo and Lucía Linsalata, "Capitaloceno, luchas por lo común y disputas por otros términos de interdependencia en el tejido de la vida. Reflexiones desde América Latina," *Relaciones Internacionales*, 46 (2021), 81-98. Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo and Horacio Machado Aráoz, *La trama de la vida en los umbrales del Capitaloceno. El pensamiento de Jason W. Moore* (México: Bajo Tierra, 2021); and Roberto José Ortiz, "Agro-Industrialization, Petrodollar Illusions and the Transformation of the Capitalist World Economy in the 1970s: The Latin American Experience," *Critical Sociology* 42.4-5 (2014), 599-62.
2. For two representative critiques of Moore see Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018) 178-83, 190-6, and John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, "Value isn't Everything (2018)." <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/11/01/value-isnt-everything/>
3. Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital: For a Trans-Environmental Eco-Socialism," *New Left Review* 127 (2021) 107-8.
4. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Walter D. Mignolo, "I Am Where I Think: Epistemology and the Colonial Difference," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 8.2 (1999) 235-245; and Walter D. Mignolo, "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: on (de) Coloniality, Border Thinking and Epistemic Disobedience," *Postcolonial studies* 14.3 (2011): 273-283.
5. See for instance Geo Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), and Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism* (New York: Pluto Press, 2019).
6. Christian Parenti, "Environment-Making in the Capitalocene: Political Ecology of the State," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016) 171.

7. Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45.2 (2018) 245-46.
8. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part I" 245.
9. See Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II"; Timothy W. Luke, "On Environmentality: Geo-Power and Eco-Knowledge in the Discourses of Contemporary Environmentalism," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 57-81; Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (New York: Verso, 2016) 87-96; and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "At the End of Geopolitics? Reflections on a Plural Problematic at the Century's End," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 22.1 (1997): 35-55.
10. Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye, "Water Enclosure and World Literature: New Perspectives on Hydropower and World-Ecology," *Humanities* 9.3 (2020): 1-15, and Sharae Deckard, "'Waiting for the Master's Dam to Crack': Hydro-dependency, Water Autonomy and World Literature," *new formation: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 103 (2021): 134-155.
11. See for example Jason W. Moore, "Climate, Class & the Great Frontier: From Primitive Accumulation to the Great Implosion" (2021). <https://jasonwmoore.com/academicpapers/> and Jason W. Moore, "Opiates of the Environmentalists? Anthropocene Illusions, Planetary Management & the Capitalocene Alternative," *Abstrakt* (2021). <https://jasonwmoore.com/academicpapers/>



## Cultures of Geopower: Kinetic Art, the Guri Dam, and Environment-Making in Venezuela

Santiago Acosta

In the 1970s, as Venezuela rode the wave of one of the greatest oil booms in its history, abstract kinetic art (also called "*cinetismo*") rose to the status of official visual language of the nation's modernization projects. Reaping the benefits of the oil price hikes caused by the OPEC embargo of 1973 (a product of the October Arab-Israeli war), the social-democratic government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-79) launched a large-scale developmentalist program known as the "Great Venezuela." As a period of rapid urban expansion unfolded, the country became replete with eye-catching, ultra-modern murals and sculptures by Alejandro Otero, Jesús Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Diez, the holy trinity of Venezuelan *cinéticos*. Government initiatives such as the Museo Ambiental, launched in 1975, intensified the relation between abstract kinetic art and the era's ambitious environment-making efforts, which led to a radical transformation of the national landscape in only a few years. In a moment that may well be regarded as the peak of this imbrication between kinetic art and oil-led modernization, Cruz-Diez and Otero were commissioned to produce two oversized works to be integrated into the Guri dam (the world's largest hydroelectric power plant at the time), built on the Caroní River in the resource-rich region of Guayana (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> At its final inauguration in 1986, the dam's massive turbine halls boasted a pair of *Ambientaciones cromáticas* [Chromatic Environments] made by Cruz-Diez, with a total surface area of almost three acres. As the turbines extracted electric power from the waters of the Caroní, Cruz-Diez's colorful, vibrating murals performed a conversion of their own—that of the raw materials of metal and industrial paints into ethereal hues that appeared to come to life. Outside the dam stood Otero's *Torre Solar* [Solar Tower], a 150-foot tall machine-like steel sculpture that rotated with the wind, creating a spectacle that seemed to harmonize technology and nature. In the institutional publication *El arte en Guri*, prominent art critic Alfredo Boulton characterized the works by Cruz-Diez and Otero as an homage to the "new Venezuela" ushered in by the Guri dam, "donde apenas hace un siglo nada había, sino leyendas, bosques,

ríos y mitos” [where only a century ago there was nothing except legends, forests, rivers, and myths].<sup>2</sup> Similar ideas about *cinetismo* were amply disseminated through state-financed publications like *Imagen* and *Revista Nacional de Cultura*, government-friendly popular magazines like *Momento* and *Élite*, newspapers, books,<sup>3</sup> and even TV specials and films<sup>4</sup> that highlighted the alliances between *cinetismo* and the nation’s accelerated modernization process.<sup>5</sup> In this way, if kinetic art was shaped by the state’s environment-making and urbanization projects, it also attained the status of agent of ecological transformation by helping to remake the physiognomy of modern Venezuela.



**Figure 1:** Simón Bolívar Hydroelectric Power Plant (Guri dam). Courtesy of Corporación Eléctrica Nacional, C. A. (Corpoelec), 2009.

However, *cinetismo*’s takeover of the national landscape did not unfold without its fair share of criticism. Already in 1974, Argentine critic Marta Traba saw the hegemony of kinetic art as a reflection of Venezuela’s compulsion to give itself a “façade” of progress to mask deeper social issues like socioeconomic underdevelopment and the lack of an original cultural identity.<sup>6</sup> The critic also scorned the creation of the Jesús Soto Museum of Modern Art in 1973, built on the hot and humid banks of the Orinoco River near the Guri Dam, and largely dedicated to the promotion of *cinetismo*.<sup>7</sup> Kinetic art, Traba argued, offered an inadequate response to Venezuela’s identity and social dilemmas, and portrayed it merely as an “official art” catering to the questionable tastes of the petrodollar-flush ruling elites.<sup>8</sup> Traba’s insights continue to resonate in contemporary studies of Venezuelan abstract and kinetic art, where the works of Cruz-Diez and Otero are frequently seen as ideological artifices that symbolically erased or resolved the shortcomings of oil-centered modernization (namely rising inequality, economic backwardness, foreign cultural dominance, and local environmental degradation).<sup>9</sup> While it is undeniable that *cinetismo* was complicit with petroleum-driven development, more can be said about the specific

relations between abstract kinetic art and the broader national ecological shifts of the 1970s, including extensive urbanization, the expansion of the extractive industry, and the construction of large energy infrastructures. Was cinetismo, as Traba claimed, simply out of touch with its national context? Was it propaganda, a flashy distraction from socioeconomic backwardness? Or, upon closer examination, did it contain an aesthetic theory that actively supported the larger ambition of harnessing the nation's social and natural energies?

In this article, I present an alternative reading of cinetismo as a constitutive part of the mobilization of ecological forces required by the environmental project of the Great Venezuela. I analyze the artworks made by Cruz-Diez and Otero for the Guri hydroelectric dam to argue that, rather than an ideological cover upon the failures of the oil state, cinetismo played an internal role in the history of ecological transformations in Venezuela in two interrelated ways. First, by contributing to the collective understanding of nature (and not only petroleum) as a stock of resources to be harnessed and put to work in the service of national development. Secondly, through its direct involvement in a history of large-scale environment-making projects supported by nature extraction. In consequence, as I contend, cinetismo was a fundamental cultural device of *geopower*, a concept that describes the mix of science, culture, and power that enables the remaking of the earth.<sup>10</sup> My guiding assumption is that Venezuelan kinetic art can be understood as part of what Jason W. Moore calls capitalism's "repertoire of strategies for appropriating the unpaid work/energy of humans and the rest of nature."<sup>11</sup> In this way, the case of cinetismo provides insights into how geopower relies not only on practices of techno-scientific visualization, but equally on strategies of cultural production necessary to turn local ecologies into appropriable natural resources.

My article builds on the work of scholars in the environmental humanities who have studied the place of literature and the arts in the entwined histories of capitalism and nature. In particular, I am in dialogue with recent efforts aimed at picking apart the cultural narratives that sustain the power of extractive regimes in the Global South. I approach my objects from the perspective of world-ecology, an interdisciplinary field spearheaded by Moore, which conceives capitalism as a socioecological web premised on putting all of nature to "work" in the service of capital with the crucial intervention of culture and the state. Following Moore, recent scholarship suggests that the role of culture in the world-ecology extends beyond an immaterial superstructure and is not confined to the reproduction of class ideologies or the mere reflection of the social world. Daniel Hartley conceives culture in the broadest sense as one of the basic processes through which economic and social structures are formed, arguing that it should be studied as a "materially *constitutive* and *productive* moment in capitalist value relations."<sup>12</sup> Sharae Deckard has studied a wide array of examples from Latin American fiction, concluding that literary production can function as a productive force in the world-ecology by "imagining, producing, and stabilizing new social

relations, epistemes, and technics,” which can serve to either legitimize or resist nature extraction in the periphery for the benefit of core nations.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett understand literary practice as an aesthetic modality of environment-making, as it can contribute to the reconfiguration “of patterns of land use, of labouring practices, of attitudes to ‘nature,’ and so forth,” which help to reconfigure the place of human and extra-human natures in the world-ecology.

<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the role of visual cultures and the arts as historical agents in world-ecological processes is one question that the field has still not fully addressed. In this way, the active and constitutive role played by forms of cultural imagining such as photography, film, or even abstract art is still to be articulated, even though they have long been implicated in processes of modernization, environment-making, and geographical governmentality in Latin America. The same can be said for the analysis of public cultural institutions and the cultural work of states, especially during periods of intense ecological transformations. The field of world-ecology is thus ripe for the kind of questions that this article brings forth.

### **Geopower, Visual Culture, and the Ecology of Capitalism**

The concept of geopower has developed in recent years across several fields encompassing political theory, environmental history, anthropology, and philosophy. Simply stated, it refers to the knowledges, powers, and symbolic practices that make it possible to transform the earth in order to place it in the service of capital.<sup>15</sup> The term initially emerged in dialogue with Foucault’s notion of biopower, largely as an extension of its scope in order to account for the relations of co-production between human and extra-human natures. If biopower names the scientific knowledges and technologies that make biological life the object of politics, then geopower addresses the continuum spanning both the living and the non-living, the mineral and the biological, and the organic and inorganic elements that make up the earth (e.g., the atmosphere, water, energy, and so on). Central to my analysis is the conception developed by Moore, who argues that capitalism depends on strategies for appropriating nature that “cannot be reduced to so-called economic relations but are enabled by a mix of science, power, and culture.”<sup>16</sup> Geopower names this mix of forces that enables capitalists and state machines to symbolically render appropriated natures into the abstract and interchangeable units (e.g., “resources” or “natural capital”) fundamental to the production of value. In other words, geopower acts through the production of what Moore calls “abstract social nature,” which in turn serves to fashion nature into a motor of capital accumulation.<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate the ideological and cultural aspects of geopower, Moore uses the example of hydroelectric dams. He explains that dams are one of the technologies that put nature “to work” as part of the “radically expansive, and relentlessly innovative quest to turn the work/energy of the biosphere into capital.”<sup>18</sup> However, dams are also fundamentally dependent on “a collective understanding that cheap energy is

part of the *national bounty*.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in the same way that a megadam requires the work of technicians and engineers, it also demands that certain ideas about nature be disseminated through the social body with the crucial help of specific discourses and strategies of cultural planning.

For their part, Bonneuil and Fressoz observe that, since the Cold War era, geopower has been increasingly assisted by photographs of the Earth seen from space, like the so-called “blue marble” or “Spaceship Earth” that became popular in the environmentalist discourses of the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> These images, which defined the character of the era’s conservationist policies, were functional to what Timothy Luke calls the “eco-panopticon” of contemporary geo-managerialism, which re-envisions nature as a fragile system of resources to be piloted by humans.<sup>21</sup> It was also during this time that the idea of “the environment,” a rather vague signifier, lay the ground for new ways of inhabiting the earth in which “geopower exhorts its subject ... to ‘reconnect with the biosphere.’”<sup>22</sup> Geopower and what Moore and Patel call “the cheap nature strategy”<sup>23</sup> are at work precisely in such articulations between capital, state power, nature, and the work of culture. As Moore states, “abstract social nature” is not “just there,” but is “actively constituted through symbolic praxis and material transformation.”<sup>24</sup>

The role of visual culture and visualization technologies in the historical development of geopower cannot be overstated. As Moore and others have pointed out, geopower has typically been exercised through practices of visualization like mapping, surveying, and satellite photography, all of which are fundamental tools of geogovernance. Nonetheless, the visual dimension of geopower has thus far been analyzed in relation to techno-scientific practices that aim to produce exact representations of geographical features. This has left the aesthetic and cultural aspects of geopower largely undertheorized, and the relationship between geopower and the arts in general—not to mention examples of non-representational art like kinetic art—barely elucidated.<sup>25</sup> My wager is that undertaking this task requires that we look at culture both as a space of aesthetic forms and as a material web of products and producers, institutions, discourses, money flows, and ecologies where collective agreements about nature are forged and maintained. I choose the example of Venezuelan cinetismo precisely because, more than simply a style, it was a wide visual culture phenomenon encompassing publications, films, and cultural institutions, as well as state and private agencies in charge of urbanization projects and geographical governmentality.

I am not the first to propose a spatio-cultural reading of Latin American abstraction. Luis Pérez Oramas has argued that abstract constructivism, including cinetismo, can be understood not as a style but as a *site* or, more exactly, as “a system of *topoi* or ‘topologies’” that constructed the illusion of “modernity as a place.”<sup>26</sup> Juan Ledezma has also thought Latin American abstract art as a collection of sites but he bundles these places with the cultural products (such as photographs and books) that disseminated sensibilities and ideas related to a strictly industrial notion of modernity.<sup>27</sup> Alexander



Alberro uses the notion of “aesthetic field” to argue that in Latin American abstraction meaning was constructed relationally across a space that encompassed art objects, their places of display, and their spectators, as well as the critical discourses around those works and the aesthetic theories espoused by the artists.<sup>28</sup> While mine is not an art-historical approach, I am informed by these and other scholars who discuss how the production of space has long been a part of the political function assigned to art in the context of Latin American modernization. Discerning how geopower can be supported by the work of the “aesthetic field” would allow us to expand its definition to include not only visual representations of the earth, but also creative and artistic commitments that equally support projects of geographical governmentality.

### **Hydroelectric Dams and the Remaking of a Nation**

The 1970s oil boom created the illusion, to quote Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil, that “the flow of history could be redirected, that oil money could launch the country into the future and grant it control over its own destiny.”<sup>29</sup> Coronil’s words capture the essence of the era’s collective wish—to take control of a chaotic, shapeless “flow” and channel it into the image of a modern nation. Likewise, the dream of the Great Venezuela of the 1970s could only be achieved after seizing the potential of the country’s natural wealth (not only oil, but also iron, gold, bauxite, and hydropower). Because of its large reserves of minerals and the energy potential of the Caroní River, the vast highland of Guayana (which comprises slightly over half of Venezuela’s territory) was seen as the keystone of the country’s development plans. The “electrification of the Caroní,” a persistent national aspiration since the 1940s, sought to harness the enormous potential of the river and translate it into the cheap electricity upon which the nation’s modernization plans depended.<sup>30</sup> For this purpose, the company Electrificación del Caroní, C. A. (Edelca) was created in 1963 to kickstart the construction of Guri under the supervision of the state-owned conglomerate Corporación Venezolana de Guayana (CVG). At 10,300 MW of installed capacity, the dam would provide over 70% of Venezuela’s electricity and save the country around 300,000 barrels of oil per year that could be sold in the international market instead of burned for electric power at home.

As key protagonists in narratives of national progress, large dams are also materializations of political, economic, and social power. As Max Haiven argues, “dams are fundamentally *cultural* edifices: not only do they organize waters but they organize meanings and relationships.”<sup>31</sup> At the same time, they function as sites where national meanings and energies pool together, like “turbines of subdued and churning meaning-making.”<sup>32</sup> In the case of Venezuela, Guri was one of those key sites in the remaking of both nature and nation. A compulsory stop in the regional touristic itinerary until the early 2010s (and open to visitors of all social ranks), its purpose went well beyond the practical and was both a technological and artistic landmark that seemingly reconciled engineering and cultural distinction.



Developed in the context of the Alliance for Progress of the 1960s, the dam also fulfilled a political role that solidified Venezuela's position in the orbit of the United States and kept it on the path of Western-style development. In turn, it was presumed, that integrating Venezuela further into the capitalist world market would help to secure the region against the spread of communism. This is why, in his inauguration speech at the completion of Guri's first stage in 1968, President Leoni made sure to underline his role in achieving "institutional and democratic normality" against the threat of "external forces" and "internal subversion," in an implicit reference to Cuban influence on Venezuelan and Latin American leftist armed movements.<sup>33</sup> At the finalization of the dam's second stage in 1986, and almost twenty years after leftist guerrillas had been "pacified" in Venezuela, these meanings were still associated with the dam. This same year, Edelca commissioned the glossy full-color hardbound book *El arte en Guri*, written by Alfredo Boulton, to promote the dam and the colossal artworks by Cruz-Diez and Otero. In its pages, the critic drew a parallel between the triumph over the turbulent waters of the Caroní River and the birth of a new nation, and between the production of new geographies and the production of a new society:

All that world of vegetation, of primary force, of mysterious jungles, boas and of cataclysmic echoes; all that magic spell suddenly comes to a halt on the gentle shore, turned lake, before the great Dam ... So it happened on the first day of the universe, it is also the creation of a new country, a new Venezuela.<sup>34</sup>

The book's photographic sequence speaks for itself. In the first twenty-nine pages, the text is accompanied only by images of the intricate jungles of Canaima and the rapids of the Caroní. Then, abruptly, a double-page photo shows the placid human-made lake. The reader has been carried away from the maelstroms and steep waterfalls of the Caroní onto the impoundment that results from the containment of the mighty currents. The river, being funneled into the turbines of the power plant, has seen its furious and raw energy effectively *pacified* and transformed—as if by a flip of the page—into useful hydroelectric energy. The enormous reservoir, with its flat and almost polished surface, should also be understood as a docile and governable space. In this visual narrative, the reservoir itself becomes a metaphor not only of tamed nature but also of a social body that until very recently had been shaken by the turmoil of leftist armed insurgency. In this way, the idea of achieving dominion over the Caroní's free-flowing energy and the goal of controlling undomesticated social forces were dual aspects of the modernization project that was embodied by the dam. Guri can thus be seen both as the materialization of national aspirations (within an international capitalist frame) and of a specific form of authority that has the power to remake the nation—global geopolitics supported by local geopower. In the remainder of this article, I analyze the works and discourses around the works created by Cruz-Diez and Otero for Guri, placing them in the larger context that made cinetismo the paradigmatic visual language of the state's plans to translate Guayana's ecology into

an ordered, manageable network of resources integrated to the world economy.



**Figure 2:** Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Ambientación Cromática* (Fisicromía y Cromosaturación murales con Cromoestructuras cónicas), 1977-1986. Engine room No.2, Simón Bolívar Hydroelectric Plant, Guri, Venezuela. HT. 28 x W. 26 x D. 300 m [92 x 85 x 984 ft.]. Eng. Herman Roo, Argenis Gamboa, Efraín Carrera, Gerardo Chavarri. Photo: Atelier Cruz-Diez Paris. © Carlos Cruz-Diez / Bridgeman Images 2021.



**Figure 3:** Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Ambientación Cromática* (Murales de Color Aditivo con Cromoestructuras circulares), 1977-1986. Engine room No.1, Simón Bolívar Hydroelectric Plant, Guri, Venezuela. HT. 26,5 x W. 22,5 x D. 263 m [87 x 74 x 863 ft.]. Eng. Herman Roo, Argenis Gamboa, Efraín Carrera, Gerardo Chavarri. Photo: Atelier Cruz-Diez Paris. © Carlos Cruz-Diez / Bridgeman Images 2021.

### Cruz-Diez: Capturing Color

Cruz-Diez's *Ambientaciones cromáticas* took nine years to complete from the moment of their commission by Guri's engineers in 1977. Turbine hall number 1 encloses 78,500 square feet of multicolored stripes directly painted on the concrete walls (Figure 2). On top of the generators are ten metal and fiberglass "chromostructures" in the shape of truncated cones (each 6.5 feet tall and 46 feet in diameter), whose vibrating colors over the sleek black floor suggest the rotating motion of the engines below. Turbine hall number 2, much larger than the first, has one 580-foot-long chromatic mural (Figure 3). Their patterns were designed to align perfectly with the grooves left on the concrete by the formwork during construction, with the intention of making them optically disappear. A group of painted metal structures protrude from its surface to create the effect of a field of color that evolves depending on the viewer's position in space. At the back of the room is a "chromosaturación" panel consisting of a wall of 1,200 red, green, and blue light bulbs with a varying color sequence that can be controlled by the visitors from a mezzanine deck at the push of a button. Over the turbine shafts, a similar set of 10 chromostructures, only much taller—13 feet tall, 26 wide. The result is an immersive environment where color becomes a lived situation that directly involves and implicates the observers. As color is transported into space, visitors are also made part of the works, as their movements, bodily dispositions, and capacities to perceive become the ingredients that set the chromatic experience in motion. In their eyes, the murals become inseparable from the engine room, making the dam a hybrid between art and infrastructure that seems as much a work of Cruz-Diez as it is of the engineers that designed and built it.

The color-bathed atmospheres inside Guri's turbine halls were an appropriate culmination for Cruz-Diez's experimentations with color since the early 1950s. His quest, thoroughly explained in his book *Reflexión sobre el color* from 1989 (published only three years after the completion of his works at Guri), can be summarized as follows: To liberate color from its material ties—to "dematerialize" it—in order to present it as what it really is, an ephemeral and affective phenomenon removed from both matter and form. He added that the "apprehension" of color by the viewer was a phenomenological process mediated both by cultural determinations (references, preconceptions, myths) and the bodily senses of the observer, where the affective qualities of colors were ultimately decided.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it was the work of the artist to seize those chromatic, "natural" events, detach them from their symbolic and material ties, and present them under a new light as the unstable, unbound, and unsubordinated realities that they truly were.

Cruz-Diez's defining breakthrough came in 1959 when he noticed that, around the area of contact between two thin strips of cardboard (one green and one red) over a black background, a third color (yellow) appeared as a floating optical illusion. This yellow, which he called *Amarillo aditivo* (Additive Yellow), was not chemically present on the surface but rather resulted from the sum of the afterimages of red and green

blending in the retina (hence, its additive quality). Pure and isolated color, stripped of its material, formal, and symbolic ties. This was the basic device that allowed Cruz-Diez, in the words of critic Ariel Jiménez, to “capture a fleeting moment in nature [i.e., color]” and “to present [it]—free and unattached—in space and time.”<sup>36</sup> The serial accumulation of similar modules of additive colors constituted what the artist called a *psychromy*, such as the ones that cover the walls inside the Guri Dam.

Cruz-Diez’s architectural and urban integrations evolved from the desire to transpose the immaterial colors of his first psychromies into spaces that could be penetrated by the viewer. His designs since 1965 for chromosaturating chambers, where visitors would be bathed in red, blue, and green light emanating from ceiling neon lamps as they moved through labyrinthine corridors, were a first step towards this goal. In 1969 he built and installed in the streets of Paris a series of ephemeral booths made of colored transparent PVC panels and neon light fixtures from which visitors could witness a city transformed by color. Breaking down the natural phenomenon of color into its basic components allowed Cruz-Diez to create immersive, simplified atmospheres that he hoped would “recondition” and awaken spectators to a primary experience of reality that would free them from their “cultural conditioning.”<sup>37</sup>

Cruz-Diez later transposed these principles to his permanent interventions in urban space, including the floors and walls of the main hall of Maiquetía International Airport, the crosswalks in Sabana Grande district, the underground chamber at José Antonio Páez power station, and other examples made for private and public buildings throughout the 60s and 70s. If this expansion into a broader aesthetic field was meant to have an effect on subjective experience, it also acted as a force of environmental transformation, both in the production of ideal spaces for experiencing pure color and in the ways that his works shaped the physiognomy of Venezuelan urbanization. By incorporating his works into urban and industrial environments, the project of reprogramming the social body through action on the senses could be expanded into wider mechanisms of public participation cemented on the sensation of pure color. However, for this utopian articulation of object and subject to succeed—wherein the spectator was recast as a participant in the artwork—colors first needed to be isolated and reduced to manageable units stripped from their entanglements with nature’s history.

Such ideas were explicitly articulated by Boulton in *El arte en Guri*, mentioned above, where the critic wrote at length about Cruz-Diez’s works. There, Boulton described colors as “active dynamos” and claimed that the task of the artist consisted in the “capture” of the electromagnetic flows “that all objects enclose,” in the same way that the dam captured and transformed the free-flowing energy of the Caroní River.<sup>38</sup> In an earlier newspaper article, Boulton contended that Cruz-Diez’s treatment of color was an “alchemic” process through which color was first extracted and then placed under the command of the artist and his work.<sup>39</sup> These identifications between



the artist's work and the mastery of nature were widely disseminated through public artworks integrated into urban spaces, as well as generous investment publications and films with the direct financing of state corporations like Edelca. In this way, the political work performed by the state-culture nexus sought to build a collective understanding of free-flowing nature (be it hydropower, buried minerals, or natural phenomena such as light and color) as resources ready to be harnessed and put to work in the service of a "new" nation.

Nevertheless, there remains an unresolved tension in Cruz-Diez's work between capture and release, freedom and containment. Visitors of chromosaturation chambers are compelled to free themselves from the strictures of cultural conditioning, but first, they must be "forced" to linger in the color-saturated labyrinths.<sup>40</sup> Color is freed from its formal and material prison, but only to be subordinated again to the artist's ability to make environments and atmospheres (such as the environments in the turbine halls at Guri) where it can be experienced as an aesthetic event. In the same manner, color is seen as autonomous, but this autonomy is ultimately subjected to strictly human bodily senses and capacities of perception. Ultimately, the works of Cruz-Diez were devices that simplified nature (e.g., light and color) into isolated units that could be presented as aesthetic events, but always within controlled environments of the artist's design. The primacy of human sensation in his work conditioned beforehand the existence of color only as extracted resource to be mobilized, imbued with a life of its own that nevertheless was under the command of the artist (even when spectators completed the work through their active participation). In this sense, the visual spectacle of the turbine halls at Guri could not have been accomplished without a preceding radical simplification of nature through which the ideal purity of color was seized and redirected to serve human ends.



**Figure 4:** Alejandro Otero, *Torre Solar*, 1986. Stainless steel and concrete, 160 x 170 ft. Simón Bolívar Hydroelectric Plant, Guri, Venezuela. Photo: Domingo Álvarez. Courtesy of Alejandro Otero-Mercedes Pardo Foundation.

### Otero: Technologies of Redemption

As Cruz-Diez's colors engulfed the atmosphere inside Guri's turbine halls, Otero's *Torre Solar*, the artist's largest and most ambitious work, stood outside near the dam's spillway (Figure 4). Completed in 1986 by Hitachi (the same Japanese company that provided the dam's turbines and installed its computer systems), it rose 160 feet tall and had a hollow concrete core clad in 57 tons of burnished stainless steel. At its top, two concentric circles, spanning 170 feet wide, rotated in opposite directions as the wind flowed through them. Like Cruz-Diez's vibrating chromostructures, the tower's movements echoed the rotation of the turbines inside the dam, producing a mesmerizing display of reflections as the metal fins caught the shifting colors of sunlight throughout the day. The sculpture evolved with the action of atmospheric forces, remaining still on calm days until the wind sent it spinning with an audible roar.

The sculpture's polished, gleaming silhouette contrasted with a cluster of five hundred Precambrian boulders blown with dynamite from the Caroní riverbed and placed around its base. The machine-like structure emerging from the roughness of the boulders seemed to express confidence in the nation's future, which in this case appeared to spring directly from the soil. This is why Otero compared his sculpture to "a technological flower sprouting from the earth."<sup>41</sup> In this metaphor, technological development springs from the soil, conjuring up the dream of realizing the future by metabolizing natural wealth into the image of a sophisticated and modern nation. In this sense, the sculpture replicated the broader role that the state played in Venezuela, which—according to Coronil—functioned as the agent capable of magically metabolizing raw subterranean matter into the visible signs of modernity.<sup>42</sup>

More importantly, in the words of Otero, the aesthetic effect produced by the tower's flickering motion had a redemptive quality that sought to symbolically repair the ecological impact of the dam: "Its metallic reflections, its movements combined with the sun and the wind, tend to restore the grace, the transparency, the luminosity of the river, now underground."<sup>42</sup> If Otero could, in fact, recreate the aesthetic qualities of the Caroní, then his sculpture could stitch back together what the dam had cut apart, becoming in this way a sort of redemptive machine within the cultural workings of geopower. Offering a glimpse into an already achieved modernity that sprang out of raw subterranean nature, the *Torre Solar* not only set in motion the forces of metal, sunlight, and the wind but also the dreams and anxieties of a country impatiently trying to realize its future.

Otero's interest in industrial aesthetics can be traced back to 1954, when he made an aluminum and concrete monolith for a Shell gasoline station. However, it was not until the late 1960s that he would fully adopt machine-like sculptures as his preferred means of artistic practice. His embrace of steel and aluminum kinetic artworks for



urban spaces since 1967 (which he grouped under the broad category of “Spatial and Civic Structures”) was a transition that he understood in various related ways. First, as a move beyond the enclosed and privileged domains of museums and private collections, where his acclaimed *Coloritmos* of the 1950s had thrived as emblems of bourgeois distinction.<sup>44</sup> Reconceived as self-supporting urban structures of a different scale (larger works for larger crowds), his artworks would no longer be subordinated to private spaces or gas stations; instead, they would be able to reinvent the city by themselves. Secondly, but no less important, Otero’s spatial and urban sculptures were the result of a deepening of his confidence in the transformative powers of scientific and technological advancement.

There is no doubt that Otero’s works were closely associated with Venezuela’s extractive industry, for example, through the state corporations that financed them, the origins of their materials in the extraction of resources (like iron, and bauxite for making aluminum), and their physical emplacement at places like Guri and the Orinoco Steel Mill offices in Ciudad Guayana (as in the case of Otero’s *Integral Vibrante* of 1968). Nevertheless, as governments of the period adopted an incipient ecological discourse and introduced new conservationist policies (such as creating the first national parks and environmental management agencies), cinetismo was reframed as disconnected from the industry’s negative impacts on the environment. Even as Otero’s works helped to shape meanings that were functional to geopower’s capacity to remake the earth, the critics consistently praised them for being “idle technological constructs” or “useless machines.”<sup>45</sup> Some went so far as to categorize Otero’s sculptures as “environmentalist works” that became harmlessly integrated into the climatological elements, on account of their reliance on sunlight and wind.<sup>46</sup> The assumption was that Otero had achieved an art comparable to the advancements of modern technology, but without it becoming subordinated to the realm of industrial function. The real links between Otero’s sculptures and the industrial world were thus downplayed by metaphors that glorified how Otero’s sculptures brought art and technology together (at the level of *technics*), but set them apart (at the level of industrial *function*).

Paradoxically, to achieve their aesthetic productivity (after their detachment from functionality), Otero’s sculptures had to optically dematerialize through a fast spinning motion, an effect exacerbated by the ethereal reflections produced under sunlight and light reflectors. Not by coincidence, night photographs of the *Torre Solar* used long exposure to create blurry, swirling images that emphasized how the cold steel blades nevertheless concealed a fluid, evanescent character that prevailed when they realized their kinetic purpose. The collective consensus around these ideas, propagated through a wide array of private and state-financed cultural products related to the Guri Dam—such as Bouton’s *El arte en Guri* and Otero’s *Saludo al siglo XXI*—situated Otero’s work in an ideal position to symbolically replot the hydroelectric dam’s impact on the river’s ecology as “the highest monument to the

glory of the Caroní.”<sup>47</sup>

As Leo Bersani argues, these kinds of assumptions about art’s redemptive qualities are part of modernism’s “culture of redemption,” which posits that art has the task of repairing the catastrophes of history: “[in modern high culture] it is assumed ... that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of [traumatic] experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material.”<sup>48</sup> Bersani shows that such symbolic acts of reparation take the form of a repetition or reenactment that deprives historical facts of their experiential “truth” through artistic representation. However, and as he concludes, this approach to art produces a “devaluation” of both art and historical experience, because the catastrophes of history seem to matter less than their symbolic transcendence, while art is reduced to “a kind of superior patching function” that ends up enslaving it to the very materials which it presumably repairs.<sup>49</sup>

The Guri Dam’s *Torre Solar* is the prime example of Otero’s attempts to redeem the geo-managerial project of the Great Venezuela of its real impacts on nature. This is why, as I noted at the beginning of this section, Otero compared it to a “technological flower” capable of restoring the isolated aesthetic qualities of the Caroní—its “transparency,” “luminosity,” and “grace”—right at the point where the river had been sliced by the hydroelectric dam.<sup>50</sup> The Plaza de la Democracia on which it stood, made by rearranging the boulders previously blown up from the Caroní riverbed, complemented the idea that artistic intervention in nature was an act of putting back together what industry had torn apart. But as the work became subordinated to this restorative function, the traumatic event of the dam’s appropriation of the work/energy of nature, reenacted by the *Torre Solar*’s turbine-like motion, was dissolved by the aesthetic machinery of representation and thus deprived of historical substance. In Otero’s utopian belief in the harmony between technology and nature was embedded a contradictory project that attempted to restore nature by incorporating it as the simplified elements (e.g., the wind, the sunlight) that fueled the aesthetic event of his works. His invitation to reconnect with nature—understood not as an unsubordinated mixture of human and extra-human ecologies but, rather, as an environment under human command—was in itself a strategy of geopower.<sup>51</sup> The very operation of optical self-dissolution that characterized his inventions, expressed in the way that his sculptures became integrated with the “elements,” was not possible without a previous capture and reorganization of nature in the service of human perception. Here nature inevitably becomes only a means towards achieving something else: aesthetic value, modernity, progress, or the future, wherein only humans benefit while nature gets nothing in return. Moreover, Otero’s insistence on breaking up ecological forces into elementary and isolated blocks like wind, water, and sunlight, which only then become the energies that animate his sculptures, bespeaks a conception of nature as subordinated to human perception and devoid of the messy characteristics of both ecology and history. The *Torre Solar*,

more than the spectacle of a fully restituted nature, produced the image of a society being moved by its forces, but only after they had been effectively captured through the aesthetic and technological possibilities of Otero's aesthetic machines.

### **Cinetismo and Geopower in the Web of Life**

More than a neatly formed concept, geopower remains a compelling prospect for cultural analysis. The case of cinetismo provides insights into how geopower relies not only on practices of techno-scientific control but equally on the powers of aesthetics, including nonrepresentational forms like abstract art. As a cultural movement that developed across a variety of individual projects, institutional platforms, and urban spaces, cinetismo was part of the repertoire of strategies employed by the state to harness the forces of nature (and not only of petroleum). In general, these ideas implied that the forces of nature were at the disposition of humans and the state and that achieving modernity depended on harnessing their power through technological development. Such notions and cultural products help to explain how and why the works of Cruz-Diez and Otero took over the national landscape. As it proliferated, this bundle of artworks, cultural artifacts, and meanings provided ample opportunities for the symbolic reworking of the relations between society and nature during a period of intensive ecological transformations. By fulfilling a key role in the construction of such agreements, cinetismo became a force in the mutually constitutive transformations of culture, ecologies, and state-capital configurations.

In this article, I exposed the twofold nature, at once material and symbolic, of processes of environmental transformation. On the one hand, the Guri Dam was itself a cultural device. If it was able to remake the relations between nature and nation, it was largely because of its symbolic weight in a modernization narrative premised on harnessing the energies of the earth as the only way to catch up with the developed world or what we today would call the Global North. On the other hand, the aesthetic achievements of the works by Cruz-Diez and Otero were only possible because cinetismo developed *through* built space and owing to the public's collective participation. Cruz-Diez hoped that the experience of pure color would reprogram the habits and senses of spectators, leading society to new levels of freedom. However, the definitive achievement of his aesthetic project (and of his theory of color) was dependent on a universalized notion of modernity as an accomplishment of environment-making through projects such as Guri, which entailed the subordination of nature (and of society) to the ebbs and flows of oil-funded urban development. Otero's *Torre Solar*, its absolute optimism for the future—expressed both in the rhetorical machinery around the artist and the aesthetic machinery of his artworks—, functioned as a device to stitch back together what the state's violent intervention in Guayana had sliced apart.

Nevertheless, it cannot be fairly argued that cinetismo was simply the outcome of a master project of the state. As tempting as it may be to reduce it to a mere political

tool, I have shown that the relationship between cinetismo and the state often worked both ways. If kinetic art was shaped by the state's environmental projects, it also attained the status of agent of ecological transformation as artists like Cruz-Diez and Otero developed their artistic projects, many times free from external ideological impositions due to a relatively pluralistic social-democratic consensus. In other words, their privileged position within the state-nature-culture nexus allowed kinetic artists to find spaces of agency, even when this agency ended up bolstering the power of the state over nature and society. Cinetismo thus provided not a flashy distraction from the systemic social and economic failures of the oil state, but was itself an active force in the environmental project of Venezuelan modernity, wherein both cinetismo and the Guri Dam were products of the same way of seeing that envisioned a future dependent on capturing of the forces of the earth.

## Notes

1. First called Represa de Guri, in 1974 the dam was renamed Central Hidroeléctrica Raúl Leoni. This was later changed in 2006, during the government of Hugo Chávez, to Central Hidroeléctrica Simón Bolívar.
2. "...donde apenas hace un siglo nada había, sino leyendas, bosques, ríos y mitos." Alfredo Boulton, *El arte en Guri* (Caracas: Macanao, 1988) 63, 26.
3. Such as art critic Roberto Guevara's *Arte para una nueva escala* (1978), published by Maraven (a subsidiary of the state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela), and Alejandro Otero's *Saludo al siglo XXI* (1989), published by IBM.
4. Some examples are the documentaries *Carlos Cruz-Diez: En el camino del color* (1971) by Luis Armando Roche, *El artista y la ciudad* (1976) by Mario Abate, and *Cruz-Diez: El ilusionista del color* (1978) by Manuel de Pedro.
5. Additionally, frequent events, forums, and exhibitions at the Galería de Arte Nacional and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Caracas, the Jesús Soto Museum of Modern Art in Ciudad Bolívar, and abroad, helped to solidify cinetismo as the most prominent artistic style in Venezuela during the 1970s.
6. Marta Traba, *Mirar en Caracas: Crítica de arte* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1974) 126.
7. Traba, *Mirar en Caracas* 129.
8. *Mirar en Caracas* 123.
9. See Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944-1969* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) 8; Lisa Blackmore, "Colonizing Flow: The Aesthetics of Hydropower and Post-Kinetic Assemblages in the Orinoco Basin," *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape*, eds. Jens Andermann et al. (Zürich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2018) 195; Sean Nesselrode Moncada, "Oil in the Abstract: Designing Venezuelan Modernity in El Farol," *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas VIII* (2015) 58; Luis Pérez Oramas "Notes on the Constructivist Art Scene in Venezuela (1950-1973)," *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934-1973)* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2011) 54; and Megan Sullivan, "Alejandro Otero's Polychrome: Color Between Nature and Abstraction," *October* 152 (2015) 62.
10. Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45.2 (2018) 237-279; Christian Parenti, "Environment-Making in the Capitalocene: Political Ecology of the State," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016) 166-184.
11. Jason W. Moore, "The Value of Everything?: Work, Capital, and Historical Nature in the Capitalist World-Ecology," *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) 37.3-4, (2014) 251. The concept of work/energy expresses the continuity between human and extra-human capacities to do (exploited or outright appropriated) work. Inspired by Richard White's classic environmental history account of the remaking of the Columbia River, Moore introduces this notion in order to "pierce" the Cartesian divide between humanity and nature. It is a fundamental part of Moore's understanding of capitalism as a world-ecology made of nature, capital, and the state. See Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) 14-18.

12. Daniel Hartley, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Problem of Culture," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016) 162.
13. Sharae Deckard, "Latin America in the World-Ecology: Origins and Crisis," *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature*, eds. Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016) 17.
14. Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett, "Introduction: Critical Environments: World-Ecology, World Literature, and the Caribbean," *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics*, eds. Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016) 5.
15. See Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45.2 (2018); Christian Parenti, "Environment-Making in the Capitalocene: Political Ecology of the State," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (New York: Verso, 2016) 87-96; Timothy W. Luke, "On Environmentality: Geo-Power and Eco-Knowledge in the Discourses of Contemporary Environmentalism," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995), 57-81; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "At the End of Geopolitics? Reflections on a Plural Problematic at the Century's End," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 22.1 (1997) 35-55; Federico Luisetti, "Geopower: On the States of Nature of Late Capitalism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 22 (2018) 342-363.
16. Moore, "The Value of Everything?" 251.
17. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II" 245.
18. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) 14.
19. Jason W. Moore and Raj Patel, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) 179.
20. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock* 62.
21. "On Environmentality" 76-80.
22. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock* 90. Contrary to the idea of ecology or world-ecology, the "environment"—especially when used in the context of policy and state powers—is not a horizontal system of interdependent relations, but rather is "organized centrally, around a given focal point" and "reserve[s] a particular ontological position for human beings." Andreas Broeckmann, *Machine Art in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016) 224.
23. Moore and Patel, *A History* 179.
24. Moore, *Capitalism* 193.
25. With the possible exception of Elizabeth Grosz, who has used the term geopower to define art as "an extraction and harnessing of the dynamic forces of the earth" through which chaotic matter is made to appear as sensation. Grosz et al., "An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz: Geopower, Inhumanism and the Biopolitical," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34 (2017) 132-137. However, Grosz does not engage with specific instances of geo-managerialism, resource extraction, or environment-making, but rather concentrates on elaborating a posthuman ontology of art.
26. Pérez Oramas, "Notes" 55.



27. Juan Ledezma, "The Sites of Abstraction: Notes on and for an Exhibition of Latin American Concrete Art," *The Sites of Latin American Abstraction*, ed. Juan Ledezma (Miami: CIFO, 2008) 34-39.
28. Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 3.
29. Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (University of Chicago Press, 1997) 237.
30. In fact, it was the plans for the development of heavy industries in Guayana, in particular the aluminum and steel sectors, that generated the need for cheap hydroelectricity in the first place. A. Curtis Wilgus, ed., *The Caribbean: Venezuelan Development* (University of Florida Press, 1963) 84. The Orinoco Steel Mill (Sidor) was one of the main beneficiaries of low-cost electrical energy drawn from the Caroní river. Additionally, one fifth of Guri's electrical energy output went to local aluminum production in the form of heavily subsidized hydroelectricity. Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 2001) 254. The mixed company Caroní Aluminum Corporation (Alcasa) had the mission to expand into the export markets after satisfying national demand (Wilgus, *The Caribbean* 187).
31. Max Haiven, "The Dammed of the Earth: Reading the Mega-Dam for the Political Unconscious of Globalization," *Thinking with Water*, eds. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013) 215.
32. Haiven, "The Dammed" 216.
33. Raúl Leoni et al., *Discursos con motivo de la inauguración de la Presa de Guri*, (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1968) 32-33.
34. "Todo ese mundo de vida vegetal, de fuerza primaria, de misterio de selvas, de boas y de ecos cataclísmicos; todo ese hechizo se detiene, de pronto en la mansa orilla, ya vuelta lago, frente a la gran Represa ... Así, como sucedió el primer día del universo, es también así la creación de un nuevo país, de una nueva Venezuela." Boulton, *El arte en Guri* 24-26.
35. Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Reflexión sobre el color* (Caracas: Fabriart, 1989) 52.
36. Ariel Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez: The Autonomy of Color* (Texas: Cruz-Diez Art Foundation, 2017) "A Constant Struggle", "Chromosaturation."
37. Cruz-Diez, *Reflexión sobre el color* 52.
38. *El arte* 64, 70-72.
39. Alfredo Boulton, "El color en Cruz Diez," *El Nacional*, Feb 16, 1972, B-1.
40. Carlos Cruz-Diez and Ariel Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation with Ariel Jiménez / Carlos Cruz-Diez en conversación con Ariel Jiménez* (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2010) "The Liberation of Color."
41. "Obras de Alejandro Otero y Cruz Diez se inauguran en Guri," *El Universal*, Nov 8, 1986, 4-1.
42. Coronil, *The Magical State* 168.
43. "Sus reflejos metálicos, sus movimientos conjugados con el sol y con el viento, tienden a restituir la gracia, la transparencia, la luminosidad del río, hoy subterráneo en ese lugar." "Obras" 4-1.
44. Teresa Alvarenga, "Las últimas obras de Alejandro Otero," *Imagen* 72/73 (Nov 1972) 9-10.
45. José María Salvador, "Alejandro Otero: Memorabilia, 1993," *Alejandro Otero ante la crítica: Voces en el sendero plástico*, ed. Douglas Monroy (Caracas: ArtesanoGroup Editores, 2006) 238.
46. Juan Acha, "Luz, espacio y movimiento de Alejandro Otero, 1976," *Alejandro Otero ante la crítica: Voces*

*en el sendero plástico*, ed. Douglas Monroy (Caracas: ArtesanoGroup Editores, 2006) 153.

47. “...el más alto monumento a la gloria del Caroní.” Boulton, *El arte* 26.

48. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 1.

49. Bersani, *The Culture* 1.

50. “Obras” 4-1.

51. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock* 90.

## Narrativizing Hydropower: Carolina Caycedo in Brazil

Victoria Saramago

Of all of the major forms of energy generation that have decisively shaped the Earth, hydropower is one of the most elusive. For those unfamiliar with areas submerged for the creation of hydropower dams, these huge artificial lakes do not betray the immediately perceptible, glaring ugliness and devastation of a mining site or an oil field, for example. If it were not for the hydropower plant restructuring the view of the area, dams might be mistakenly seen by uninformed visitors as natural "wonders." The manufactured blend of natural and technological spectacle they provide becomes more explicit when dams have tourist infrastructure in place — think, for example, of Itaipu dam, which can complement a visit to the popular tourist attraction Iguazu Falls on the border between Brazil and Argentina. The reservoirs behind other dams, such as Três Marias in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, serve recreational purposes such as swimming and kayaking, and yet others, such as Cocorobó in the site where the city of Canudos was destroyed by the army in 1896-1897, during Brazil's early republican period, provide a politically convenient erasure of historical memory.<sup>1</sup> In these and many other cases, dam reservoirs serve a myriad of other activities unrelated to energy generation in a peculiar way that is almost unparalleled by any other extractive industry or renewable source of energy. For those who did not follow the histories of dispossession and devastation that accompany dams, they may not produce repulsion or nostalgia. Even for those concerned about their impact, the immense bodies of water dams create may, in fact, prompt enthusiasm. Herein lies the main aesthetic problem I propose to investigate in this article.

Cheap energy is one of the Four Cheaps that, according to Jason Moore, sustain the capitalist world-ecology. Through a focus on "the forces of capital and empire that have cohered modern world history,"<sup>2</sup> Moore questions the notion of "humanity as a collective agent" (Idem) implied by the concept of the Anthropocene and proposes the alternative notion of the Capitalocene.<sup>3</sup> Capitalism, Moore argues, "does not *have* an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime," and the intrinsic and mutual connection between capitalism and nature provides the double internality on which capitalism,

understood as world-ecology, relies. This process is constituted through a constant and necessary expansion of capitalism's appropriation of nature that turns it into "cheap nature," i.e., into a component external to society ready to be transformed into resources: "through this *praxis* [of nature externalization] capitalist and territorialist agencies seek to create new Natures as objects of power and production, and as new and expanded sources of unpaid work/energy" (*idem*). Water, through the energy it generates as well as through other means, such as irrigation, constitutes one of what Moore calls the "free gifts of Nature" that participate in the dynamics of unpaid work and energy supply on which capitalist expansion is based. Just like oil or wood, water is made external, cheap nature in the Capitalocenic world-ecology.

While being appropriated in the same way as oil or wood, though, water often does not work as part of the same image regimen. Staple images of the current global environmental crisis, whether under Anthropocenic or Capitalocenic paradigms, include logged rainforests, such as clear-cut landscapes in the Amazon, oil spills in the ocean, of which the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is an emblematic example, and the concentric circles of excavated land on mining sites. Such images are all immediately legible as signs of disaster, and no one needs to be fully informed about the histories of these particular places prior to their devastation in order to participate in the sense of urgency they mobilize. While being appropriated in the same way as oil or wood, though, water often does not work as part of the same image regimen.<sup>4</sup> As already mentioned, for the unfamiliar visitor, dams and their reservoirs may look beautiful. They may be indistinguishable from lakes, including artificial lakes created for entertainment and landscaping. People may flock to dammed reservoirs to admire their serene waters and swim in them. Although the massive structures of concrete surrounding them give a sense of how water has been appropriated, dams may at first look less Capitalocenic than other kinds of cheap nature.

Dams, in fact, constitute a blind spot in Moore's collapsing of the Four Cheaps, insofar as the infrastructural and cultural nexus within which dams operate make water not necessarily legible as cheap nature — even when it is cheap nature.<sup>5</sup> The symbolic weight of water is explored both in modernizing views that appeal to the magnitude of large bodies of water as well as in narratives of resistance that activate local dynamics and non-Western cosmologies. All of these mobilize the larger cultural significance of water beyond the appropriation of nature by capital. In other words, while water is not valued economically if we follow Moore's understanding of the law of value and the free labor of nature,<sup>6</sup> it is culturally valued by those who celebrate as well as those who decry the creation of megadams.

In either case, megadams do cause massive disturbance across an area that, in general, is larger than the place where they are built and the land that they directly submerge. Dams generate what Rob Nixon has called a "spatial amnesia, as

communities, under the banner of development, are physically and imaginatively removed” from the areas in which they lived.<sup>7</sup> In a country like Brazil, whose electrical supply has been historically and massively generated by hydropower, dams are an integral component of the developmentalist ethos that marks Brazil’s Capitalocene in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The histories of those displaced and dispossessed, the death of wildlife, the destruction of communities, traditions, and forms of life — such effects are all no less drastic than those of the other extractive industries mentioned above. The “free” water filling the reservoirs that power such dams is cheap nature in its fullest expression. For this reason, the fact that dams produce crises while not so often producing images with the dramatic effect associated with crisis poses a crucial problem for those who, through books, cultural production, or media, attempt to convey their impact. This problem is also shared by scholars and critics as they write academic pieces such as the present one.

This article argues that cultural production on hydropower, for the reasons explained above, demands a particular set of critical tools that put into relief the process of narrativization that shapes works denouncing hydropower’s impact.<sup>8</sup> In other words, a before-and-after story, or a sequence of events happening in time that express the changes caused by dams, or even a contrast with areas not yet flooded, all are paramount to the ways in which environmentally-engaged cultural expressions become compelling when dams are their subject.<sup>9</sup> Max Haiven has argued that there is something sublime about water systems, which go beyond “our capacity for narrative,”<sup>10</sup> whereas the megadam, as “the signature icon of Western modernity’s drive to conquer causality and to convince the ‘natural’ world to conform to the dictates of ‘progress,’”<sup>11</sup> thus constitutes “a poetic and potent moment in the political unconscious” (Idem). If megadams, by conquering causality, aim to overcome the cognitive challenges imposed by water systems, the process of narrativization I discuss here offers a counter-account to the master narrative of modernity fostered by megadam construction. Artists and activists, in presenting before-and-after stories, thus aim to disarm the totalizing narrative that combines a non-negotiable demand for energy with the usual geographical remoteness of megadams to present itself as inescapable. Such a gesture — while indirectly addressing Fredric Jameson’s call to “always historicize” and, in doing so, bringing to light some of the anxieties underlying developmentalist narratives around dams — primarily operates on a rather conscious, basic level. It is composed, quite simply, of acts of storytelling. Their reach may be limited as these narratives tend to circulate in more specialized spaces, such as museums and online niches, which are unlikely to reach the broad audience a massive protest may garner.<sup>12</sup> They are, nevertheless, a common resource that aims, more than anything, to make visible. Because dams are most clearly perceived as causing devastation when the area as it was before their construction becomes visible, visual arts, literature, cinema, and other cultural forms tend to highlight the personal and collective narratives of the changes dams impose. Shock thus becomes



aesthetically available when images of dams are framed within stories of how such a state of affairs came into being.

In order to investigate and reveal the narrative and aesthetic strategies of cultural production on dams, this article focuses on the work on Colombian visual artist Carolina Caycedo in the context of dam-building in Brazil. Her works explore three key components of the debates about the impact of megadams: the battle for visibility, the national framework underlying political and economic debates, and the exploration of storytelling and the linearity of textual experience as a way of conveying the environmental transformations at stake. I show that, turning away from earlier forms of environmentalism that were prevalent in the 1980s, Caycedo's work encompasses two distinctive features of the artistic production of the 2010s: greater attention to women's leadership and the experience of women, signaling a feminist — or rather ecofeminist — turn, and the relativization of the nation as a horizon for thinking about hydropower through the exploration of a continental history of shared violence.<sup>13</sup> The work of Caycedo and other visual artists based outside of Brazil, instead of participating directly in grassroots movements and judicial battles, brings these struggles to international art circuits whose viewers are often less acquainted with the realities of dam-building in Latin America. Fully integrated in circuits of activist art, Caycedo's work and the forms of visibility it activates also expand across multiple scales, ranging from larger networks to highly individual, even intimate engagements with the impact of dams. They circumvent the national framework discussed above by drawing attention to the materiality of rivers beyond national borders and in connection with other forms of sociality. Inversely, this expanded scope is complemented by a focus on personal experience, exploring a parallelism between individual lives and hydric histories. Before delving into her work, this article will provide more context on Brazilian dam-building in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

### The Brazilian Case

In 1988, the Centro da Memória da Eletricidade (Center for the Memory of Electricity), a research center created two years earlier by Eletrobrás, Brazil's main electricity agency, published a comprehensive history of electrical production in the country. Titled *Panorama do Setor de Energia Elétrica no Brasil* (*Panorama of the Electrical Energy Sector in Brazil*), the book coupled a wealth of data covering about one hundred years of electricity in Brazil with a sober yet unmistakable sense of progress.<sup>14</sup> The environmental and social impact of dams was mostly absent from the volume's content, and the increased level of energy production made possible by the new dams clearly superseded, according to the book's narrative, the drawbacks it entailed.<sup>15</sup> *Panorama* came out in the midst of a momentous period in the debate about hydropower in Brazil. A few months later, in February of 1989, the I Encontro dos Povos Indígenas do Xingu gathered a number of Indigenous communities in a joint effort to stop a

string of dams from being built on the Xingu River; the dams would have submerged hundreds of square miles of rainforest in the Amazon. This conference was widely covered by the media and drew decisive attention to the pause on which the project would be put for more than a decade. The conference was also the subject of an article in a special issue of the *Revista Proposta*,<sup>16</sup> published in September of 1990 by the NGO Fase, which gathered a number of articles exposing the environmental and social impact of dams, interweaving the struggle for land justice with expanding environmentalist movements in Brazil.<sup>17</sup>

Considered side by side, *Proposta* and *Panorama* present some of the key issues at stake, at the time as well as still today, in Brazil's longstanding reliance on hydropower for most of its energy generation: the narratives of progress fostered by successive waves of developmentalist policies, on one hand, and, on the other, the incommensurable ways in which megadams transformed the region, from the submersion of large areas, the mortality of fish and other animals, and the dispossession of local populations and precarious forms of life, both human and nonhuman. Taken together, thus, these two publications offer a snapshot of this highly consequential moment in Brazil's contemporary history, which featured both the first free elections held in the country in more than 20 years and the establishment of its new constitution in 1989, from the viewpoint of the larger meaning of dam-building in Brazil, including the maintenance as well as the questioning of such narratives of progress. On one hand, the larger framework of development and its energetic cost continued to dictate environmental policies during and after redemocratization. On the other, the same progressive forces that drove the post-dictatorial years were, to a certain extent, sensitive to the problematic nature of a unilateral view of progress. As such, this moment also marks a crossroad in the history of megadams between those already built by that point, such as Itaipu Binacional, and those whose construction would be postponed until the 2000s, such as Belo Monte.

Current debates on the impact of hydropower megadams, in the environmental humanities and in environmental studies more broadly, have focused primarily on two notions: the issue of visibility and the role of national states which, in Latin America and other parts of the Global South, often embrace a developmentalist mindset. These two terms intersect in Rob Nixon's foundational *Slow Violence* (2011), which defines the local populations displaced by publicly funded megadam construction as "unimagined communities" whose struggle tends to be rendered invisible.<sup>18</sup> The many movements to make such communities' situations seen and heard, of which the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (Movement of Dam Victims, MAB) is the most significant example in Brazil, are coupled with the work of activists, artists, and scholars committed to showcasing and giving voice to those displaced and affected by the building of megadams. Caycedo's engagement with activism through her insertion of activists' and victims' perspectives in transnational art circuits, as outlined above, works side by side with the fight for visibility carried

out by all these other interventions. In all cases, this struggle takes place alongside the heightened visibility of the dams themselves: unlike other pieces of infrastructure that, as Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins, and Sophia Beal argue, tend to remain invisible,<sup>19</sup> megadams are often widely advertised by their governments as symbols of development and imminent progress. This is what happened during Brazil's military dictatorship when, as Fernanda de Souza Braga notes, hydropower plants were used as advertisements to sell optimistic views of the regime's economic policies.<sup>20</sup> This imperative of development kept being repeated after the transition to democracy: the very authorization for the construction of the Belo Monte dam in the 2000s was legally based on a law reminiscent of the dictatorship, which designated infrastructure projects as matters of national security.<sup>21</sup> The many battles over the building of megadams, therefore, tend to highlight the divide between developmentalist politics that, across different governments and during both authoritarian and democratic rule, privilege infrastructure construction at any price, and politics that draw attention to the disproportional burden borne by displaced populations and dying flora and fauna in submerged areas, and to the environmental, economic, and social impacts in neighboring regions outside the most heavily affected places.

While the dams' physical erasure of these lands through submersion functions as a powerful image of the erasure of multiple forms of life, the action of federal governments tends to remain the horizon against which resistance organizes. Taking a contrasting path, these governments' publicity for hydropower plants relies instead on an imaginary that David Nye has called the "technological sublime," a sublime based on feats of engineering.<sup>22</sup> Because praise for large-scale public works such as megadams has been primarily sponsored by public funds, either directly or through public-private partnerships, popular forms of resistance have also tended to rely on a national framework that, after redemocratization, became increasingly focused on the action of federal governments. If, as Jason Moore and Raj Patel argue, state intervention and support are key to keeping energy cheap,<sup>23</sup> it is only to be expected that federal governments, often even more than the private corporations executing the work, will be the main loci of dispute. This situation became especially dramatic in the case of governments such as those of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), whose historical commitment to social movements and popular representation was at odds with the autocratic legal means required to make a plant like Belo Monte a reality.<sup>24</sup> Such a struggle for recognition and visibility is also a struggle to restore Nixon's "unimagined communities" to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" — that is, to recover the ability for these communities to participate in the democratic process as citizens instead of being seen as "surplus people," still in Nixon's words, whose voice must be erased to cede space to megadams. Furthermore, the many shapes popular environmentalisms have taken in Latin America — from the notion of *buen vivir* and the attention to the rights of nature to the defense of communal forms of understanding the nexus between humans and

nonhumans — constitute the tendency Maristella Svampa defines as “ecoterritorial.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the national framework in which debates about the feasibility, impact, and unequal benefits of megadams in activist movements and related artistic production take place has recently expanded to include a more nuanced notion of citizenship encompassing a variety of cosmopolitical forms.<sup>26</sup>

### **Carolina Caycedo: Dams as Constellations**

Among contemporary Latin American visual artists who combine artistic practice with environmental concerns and a keen attention to grassroots environmental justice movements, Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo stands out for the critical depth and aesthetic diversity of her engagement with the effects of hydropower across the continent, with special attention to the lives of rivers and the human and nonhuman inhabitants of their surroundings. Born in London in 1978 and now living in Los Angeles, Caycedo made the Colombian Magdalena River the ground zero of her exploration of hydric realities before gradually expanding the reach of her work to a myriad of rivers across the Americas. Together, these explorations constitute the centerpiece of her work: the long and ongoing project titled *BE DAMMED*.<sup>27</sup> Composed of more than a dozen works, including visual arts, performances, videos, and other forms, this project offers a sharp exploration of the importance of increasing visibility, rethinking national frameworks, and providing narratives of change in the context of dams’ impact.

From the walls of the El Quimbo dam on the Magdalena, which inspired her earlier pieces for this project, to the drawings and “geochoreographies” that draw attention to Indigenous cosmogonies that persist and animate local, alternative engagements with the Yuma River (the Indigenous name for the Magdalena) and many other rivers in Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, *BE DAMMED* is defined on Caycedo’s website as a project that “investigates the effects that large dams have on natural and social landscapes in several American bio-regions.”<sup>28</sup> The multiplicity of self-sufficient yet interconnected works that comprise this project invite modes of attention and participation that include both embodied experience and an attention to the stories told by affected populations. Performances such as the aforementioned “geochoreographies,” for example, invite participants to integrate their bodies with the shores of rivers, such as the Yuma or Magdalena, and, surrounded by earth and water, to collectively spell out phrases, such as “Ríos vivos” and “Yuma resiste,” with their bodies. The work *YUMA, or the Land of Friends* (2014) provides large-scale satellite images that, while at first glance similar to Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionism, confront the viewer with the geophysical impact of dams such as those on the Yuma and Itaipu. By relying on large-scale imaging from above, these two works crucially address the urge to make these realities visible — an urge present across activist movements that becomes formally embodied in the magnifying effect on which these works rely and politically meaningful as the stories behind the dams’ creation are

told in explanatory subtitles.

Other works operate on a smaller scale in order to focus precisely on the many stories behind the shock that the geochoreographies and satellite images provoke. Videos such as *To Stop Being a Threat and to Become a Promise* (2017) and *A gente rio* (2016) explore the realities behind such interventions, either through interviews with local inhabitants affected by dams or through the shock produced by juxtaposing images of affected areas with images of the same landscapes before dam construction, among other strategies. These and other works, as Macarena Gómez-Barris concludes, do “a kind of mapping of power that uncovers the epistemological, material, and bodily violence that thwarts biological violence”<sup>29</sup> of the extractive zone, and that, in doing so, brings attention to these “submerged perspectives and movements” (Idem). To bring such submerged perspectives to light, I contend, means foregrounding the nexus between their structural invisibility and their circumstantial submersion as voices resistant to Capitalocenic hydropower dams. It means, in other words, narrativizing them.

Displayed in the 32<sup>nd</sup> São Paulo Biennial together with the large-scale satellite image of the Itaipu dam, *A gente rio* blends documentary about victims of dams with a more poetic exploration of their impact. It opens with what would become an iconic poem on hydropower, Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s “Adeus a Sete Quedas” (1982), which laments the submersion of the waterfalls known as Seven Falls by the dam. In Caycedo’s work, the poem is read from beginning to end as images of waters flowing, “gelid” interiors of power plants, and a fisherman on his boat alternate in an experimental introduction to the more straightforward style of the rest of the video. For Drummond, the production of electrical energy and Brazil’s developmentalist ethos are fundamentally tied to the loss of the uniqueness of a nature understood in monumentalizing terms. Published in the *Jornal do Brasil* on September 9, 1982, the day that the dam’s barriers were closed and water began to submerge the falls, the poem activates an elegiac language that refuses to accept the loss of the waterfalls. At the same time, Drummond pays relatively little attention to displaced populations — a neglect that was more common in this period than it is in the early twenty-first century. In “Adeus a Sete Quedas,” the waterfalls themselves occupy the position of the displaced populations who continue to demand recognition of their presence. The poem’s rejection and denunciation of this “dissolution” of the waterfall’s natural sculptures into the fungible resource of water, in this case, is conveyed through an ironic reinvention of technocratic vocabulary at the heart of Drummond’s environmental poetics. It is by affirming the waterfall’s singularity — by assigning it an auratic status — that Drummond is able to lament its submersion “os sete fantasmas” of “a vida / que nunca mais renascerá” (“seven ghosts, seven crimes / of the living pummeling life / that will never be reborn”).<sup>30</sup> Caycedo benefits from Drummond’s legacy at the same time as she addresses its limits.

The more dramatic undertones of this poetic opening in *A gente rio* provide a bridge



from the elegiac tone of 1980s environmental art on megadams to the stories and commentaries of those affected, interspersed with images of rivers, fish, and modes of living, that dominate Caycedo's own 2010s approach in this work. After the fisherman talks about how fishing became nearly impossible after Itaipu (5'08"-6'26"), the video moves to images of and interviews with peoples and places in two other situations. The first is the catastrophic rupture of the Fundão tailings dam on the Rio Doce in Minas Gerais in 2017, which released a flood of toxic mining waste (6'40"-15'43"), and the other is the apprehension surrounding the then still unbuilt dam in the Vale do Ribeira in São Paulo, which would displace *quilombola* communities, descendants of slaves who ran away to live in forested areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (15'44"-20'43"). Finally, the video concludes with a section on Belo Monte, the megadam built in the Amazonian state of Pará in the 2010s that generated a broad, international public outcry. Images of fishing, instructions on how to use an oar, reflections on the pan-Amazonian myth of the Big Snake, and images of life by the river are replaced with images of a protest by displaced populations, precarious housing, and the dam itself. The narration is mostly provided by Antonia Melo, prominent activist and leader of the Movimento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre (Movement Xingu Alive Forever), who exposes again the disregard for environmental laws that made construction of the dam possible and the dictatorial attitude that guided the process (20'44"-29'08"). Curiously, a sign in one of the images of the protest says "Não ao golpe" (27'29"-27'31"), a rejection of the legally controversial impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff, who had, ironically, pushed hard to build Belo Monte because, in her words, "water is free."<sup>31</sup> An objective, almost technical description of the legal hurdles and precarious situation faced by those displaced by and protesting Belo Monte is made more intense through the use of images not only of the dam, but also of the river full of trash and wooden shacks teetering unstably above the water.

A *gente rio* ostensibly aims to make visible the points of view of those rendered "surplus people," in Nixon's words. It aims to give them a voice and, instead of drawing an overarching narrative of their lives, focuses on a few meaningful aspects of how their lives have changed — such as how some of them extracted small amounts of gold from the now dead Doce River or how others used an oar to navigate the Xingu River. By focusing on these small bits of personal experience, the video creates a polyphonic effect that emphasizes human and nonhuman entanglements — that is, the ways rivers become culturally meaningful not as natural wonders to be admired from afar, but as components in larger forms of sociality. In doing so, the story the video aims to tell is not about the effects of the human species as whole, but rather about how certain appropriations of natural resources entail larger impacts. It aims to make visible to viewers the many narratives programmatically erased by the developmentalist ethos that turns energy generation into a national priority capable of offsetting discussions about the human and environmental costs of specific sources of energy that are too easily assumed to be "free."<sup>32</sup>

More than that, *A gente rio*'s structure subtly informs the viewer about the very changes in attitude surrounding debates about hydropower across the decades, thus making space, narratively, for the Capitalocenic framework with which the video concludes. It opens with Itaipu, Brazil's first megadam, and ends with Belo Monte, one of the country's most recent and iconic megadams. On one hand, the portion on Itaipu is marked by the elegiac tone of Drummond's poem and fundamentally rendered through images of large expanses of flowing water, thus relying primarily on an aestheticizing effect that puts viewers at a distance from the water and is only partially broken by the fisherman's story. On the other, the last part of the video, on Belo Monte, participates in a contemporary production in which technical lingo about the political and energetic rationales — or lack thereof — for dam-building are fully integrated into the narrative, so that the story of dam construction is the story of the humans and nonhumans involved as they are imbricated in the story of the river. By giving voice to Drummond in the opening and to Melo at the end, *A gente rio* also replicates the historical arc of how representation of hydropower has evolved in Brazilian cultural production from the 1980s to the present. It is, in other words, a history of how the technical vocabulary behind hydropower ceased to be simply ridiculed as empty political parlance in Drummond's poem, instead becoming enmeshed in how dams are culturally perceived.

The materials collected for *A gente rio* also reappear in *Serpent River Book* (2017), which is one of the most intriguing and commented-on components of the *BE DAMMED* project. A 72-page accordion-fold book, it can be opened, folded, and displayed in numerous ways, but in exhibitions it is usually partially unfolded so as to take the winding shape of a river — or a serpent. Far from random, the folding that gives the book this shape follows the circumference of a map of the Berlin Wall.<sup>33</sup> While one side of the book focuses on images and the other one combines images with texts such as poems, short essays, technical texts, and manifesto-like interventions, both sides work together to illustrate a multiplicity of ways in which rivers live and allow other forms of life to thrive in them or along their banks. Both sides thus focus on Indigenous cosmogonies related to rivers, activities such as fishing, and multiple modalities of affective engagement with rivers, at the same time as the book narrates the gradual technical appropriation of the courses of rivers and the consequences of multiplying hydropower projects across the Americas, thus presenting rivers, in Lisa Blackmore's words, as "multi-temporal 'organic machines.'"<sup>34</sup> By including the Xingu in a larger reflection on the life of rivers and the lives they make possible, as well as by presenting Belo Monte alongside other dams and their impact in the Americas, this work inserts Belo Monte into a broader framework of hydropower and dam-building.



Figure 1. Carolina Caycedo. *Serpent River Book*. Installation View at *A Universal History of Infamy*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo: David de Rozas

Therefore, although the book's accordion shape allows for exhibition of all its pages at once, which privileges a spatial apprehension of its totality akin to the satellite view of a river, the narration of environmental loss and epistemicide that unfolds across its pages takes advantage of the book's linearity to convey these hydric histories.<sup>35</sup> By interspersing individual stories, collective myths, information on rivers, engineering plans, reports, and other pieces of data across the line of pages that composes the work, Caycedo invites a narrative form of engagement with the content that works alongside its spatiality. In doing so, the book draws attention to the very historicity of rivers, understood not merely as bodies of water but as communal sites that shape and are shaped by humans and nonhumans alike. Hydropower is but one factor, albeit a highly impactful one, in these longer histories. The work's materiality imitates its subject matter, the river, when it is displayed in the linear, open fashion usually adopted in exhibits, while allowing, inversely, for the narratives these rivers encompass to come to the fore when the work is conventionally read as a book, its folds actually or imaginatively turned like pages. Moreover, the temporality of these histories across the Americas, coupled with the materiality of the book-river, make the case for an engagement with the rivers' geographical materiality that does not conform to national boundaries, but sprawls across the continent. This is one of the main ways in which Caycedo challenges the national framework under which hydropower projects typically treat rivers: she focuses instead on the extra-national courses of rivers as well as on the local and shared histories of hydropower plants' impacts, regardless of the national boundaries in which they unfold.

The close connection between bodies of water and the bodies of women appears in

the book's closing essay, "Hunger as a Teacher," in which Caycedo narrates some of her travels to areas affected by dams and describes women she met in her travels who, through a variety of means, have contributed to local forms of resistance. The title is borrowed from the words of Raymunda, a fisherwoman displaced by the construction of Belo Monte. Together with the words, the struggle, and the example of Raymunda and many others, this last essay provides a cohesive sense of closure to a book that, in spite of its clear thematic unity, largely focuses on discursive multiplicity. And such cohesiveness is to be found precisely through the voices of these women and the similar experiences that they share despite their geographical distance and varied sociopolitical positions. The encounters that compose Caycedo's account suggest the possibility, in the midst of the many conflicting viewpoints found throughout the book, of finding a cogent epistemological position from which an inquiry into the meaning and consequences of the damming of rivers can emerge — a position from which the many voices interilluminate each other rather than simply being juxtaposed, as in the book's collage of texts and images.

This essay — and, consequently, the book — concludes on a personal note, with a deepening of Caycedo's reflection on how walls, dams, and flux might be shared by these and many other women. In her words:

When I had my intrauterine device removed in 2013, I felt that any internal or external dam, regardless of its size, can be removed or dismantled. [...] When I held the device in my hand, its T-shape evoked certain blueprints for the building of dams. The "T" and its copper sheath reminded me of electricity transmission towers and of the materials and substances which transmit electricity, energy and power in my body. I thought of my body as a field of learning. My body, my territory.<sup>36</sup>

Although, in their most literal sense, these sentences deal with what we may assume to be a personal choice rather than an imposed destruction of her modes of living, these final remarks promote a multiscale perspective that, by drawing a metaphoric relationship between her female body and the body of the earth, indirectly alludes to divine female figures of the planet from Andean cosmogonies that remain popular in twenty-first-century environmentalisms, such as Pachamama.<sup>37</sup> Caycedo does so by activating the feminist mottos that affirm women's ownership of their own bodies, now extended to resonate with the territorial struggles involved in the establishment of and resistance to hydropower.

At the same time, the intrauterine device's resemblance to an electricity transmission tower alludes back to the primary purpose of hydropower — to produce electricity — while drawing attention to the sources of that power, whose existence is made visible to us by the dam but largely precedes the building of it. As such, the meaning of electricity, more than a fact of contemporary life, is expanded to

include the vital energy needed to live and reproduce. This passage might point to the limits of Caycedo's metaphoric gesture, which starts with the work's very title and ends with what could be read as a puzzling celebration of hydropower through its positive association with an object made to enhance women's agency over their bodies — the IUD. The alternative interpretation I want to propose, however, points to a resignification of the very concept of energy within Capitalocenic energy regimes — one that stands in productive tension with them. In this case, the reproductive rights implied by the artist's choice to use the intrauterine device do not merely cast the electricity transmission tower as an index of the technological transformations of a foreign, antagonistic place, but rather breaks with the world-ecology view of energy as one of the four cheaps in order to recuperate a deeper sense of vital energy. The metaphoric reinvention of the IUD as an electricity tower and ultimately as bodily energy, consequently, offers an understanding of energy that goes beyond capitalist appropriation. As such, the integration of the IUD-turned-electricity-tower into Caycedo's bodily territory allows for an undoing of the Anthropocene as "a gendered concept uncritically reflecting the heteropatriarchal order,"<sup>38</sup> which makes possible a non-binary approach, as Stefania Barca proposes, to the forces of reproduction that maintain life and are excluded from the forces of production upon which the Anthropocenic "master narrative of modernity" is predicated.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Hydropower, as this article has shown, poses challenges to the contemporary imaginative framework surrounding the global environmental crisis. Once dams are built, the transformations they entail are not as immediately apprehensible as in a mining site or oil field, for example. In fact, even cleaner sources of energy, such as solar and wind ones, may be imaginatively more prone to draw attention to the crisis than the serenity of those artificial lakes and rivers. There are, however, many ways of reimagining both the areas submersed by the building of dams and the peoples turned into "surplus people" who are displaced by them. In contemporary cultural production on the Brazilian and largely on South American contexts, these modes of reimagination tend to rely on a process of narrativization that, more than mourning for the loss of natural beauty, as Drummond had done, aim to keep alive the violence dams imposed on the areas in which they are built. Amongst these voices, Caycedo's stands out as a good example of how these gestures of narrativization, covering a wide geographical and cultural span, can be made visible in circuits of contemporary art. In spite of their limitations, the cases examined in this article show how *BE DAMMED* inserts the Xingu and other rivers, those who depend on them, and the building of Belo Monte and other dams into multiple layers of signification that amplify movements of resistance to the dam while opening new avenues for critically contextualizing them, from the most intimate scale to a continental one.



### Notes

1. It must be noted, however, that the Açude de Cocorobó, unlike the others, was built to provide water for irrigation purposes and not for hydropower.
2. Jason Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2016) 171.
3. In a few words, the Anthropocene is the possible new geological epoch in which humans have become geological agents or, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known formulation, for the moment when "anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history." See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009) 201. There are many plausible beginnings for the Anthropocene: the industrial revolution, the European colonization of the Americas, and the Great Acceleration, among others. Moore, in contrast, argues that "[h]umans produce intra-species differentiations, which are fundamental to our history: inequalities of class especially, inflected by all manner of gendered and racialized cosmologies" (172). More recently, Chakrabarty responded to Moore by noting, among other things, that "[t]he insights of the proponents of the Capitalocene and the posthumanists are important and have to be taken on board, but we need to go beyond the story of original 'sins' of capital/labor and nature/culture distinctions to understand the human attachment to 'thin descriptions' of nature and thus to modernization." Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) 113. Moore, *Capitalism* 112, Moore's emphasis.
4. For a study on how literary and other artistic forms bring visibility (or not) to areas such as the Niger Delta, which was greatly affected by oil extraction, see Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
5. The Four Cheaps are "a rising stream of low-cost food, labor-power, energy, and raw materials to the factory gates." *Capitalism* 53.
6. See *Capitalism*, chapter 2.
7. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011) 151.
8. For a study, from another perspective, of the imbrication of representational practices, cultural history, and the political dimension of the building of megadams, see Corey Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
9. Albeit focusing on a larger temporal span, Lisa Blackmore draws attention to the temporal dimension of hydropower when she states, in dialogue with Martin Heidegger, that, "[I]mplicit in this notion of revealing (poises) is the idea that hydraulic infrastructures materialize *aesthetically* the temporal affects attached to resource imaginations, as well as evincing the power relations that underpin them." Lisa Blackmore, "Turbulent River Times: Art and Hydropower in Latin America's Extractive Zones," *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*, ed. Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez (New York: Routledge, 2020) 17.
10. Max Haiven, "The Dammed of the Earth: Reading the Mega-Dam for the Political Unconscious of Globalization," *Thinking with Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013) 219.

11. Haiven, "The Dammed" 221.
12. For analyses of other types of narrative engagement with the impact of dams and, more specifically, of Belo Monte, such as the work of *arpilleristas* in Brazil's Movement of Dam Victims or Maria José Silveira's novel *Maria Altamira* (2020), see my forthcoming article, "Reimagining Hydropower: Ecofeminist and Transnational Perspectives on Belo Monte," *The Environment in Brazilian Culture*, ed. Patricia Vieira (Gainesville: University of Florida Press).
13. For further discussion of this ecofeminist turn in the contemporary cultural production on Belo Monte, see Saramago, "Reimagining Hydropower."
14. See Centro da Memória da Eletricidade no Brasil, *Panorama do Setor de Energia Elétrica no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Memória da Eletricidade, 1988).
15. A new and expanded edition published in 2006 devotes some attention to these issues. In the case of Itaipu, for example, the rescue of wild animals, known as *Mymba Kuera* in the Guarani language, receives a whole paragraph (389), and the submersion of the Sete Quedas waterfalls discussed below is listed as one of the dam's negative impacts (Idem). The displacement of the Ava-Guarani and other local populations are briefly mentioned with no explanation regarding the process of removal and protests (389-90). See Centro da Memória da Eletricidade no Brasil, *Panorama do Setor de Energia Elétrica no Brasil*, 2nd edition (Rio de Janeiro: Memória da Eletricidade, 2006).
16. *Proposta: Experiências em educação popular. Dossier: "Barragens: Questão ambiental e luta pela terra"* Rio de Janeiro. 46 (1990).
17. The special issue gives prominent space to the nascent Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB, Movement of Dam Victims), which was founded in the context of populations displaced by the building of Itaipu and has become one of the largest social movements in Brazil today. The issue's articles covered a wide geographical range so as to show how widespread the problem was and gave voice to Indigenous and Quilombola communities.
18. See chapter five of Nixon, *Slow Violence*. Both categories also meet in Sharae Deckard's analysis of hydrofictions from South Africa, in which she concludes that "[t]he dialectical tension between visibilisation and containment which I have traced in the two hydrofictions in this section can be seen at the level of form and the tendency towards plots that conclude in ideological recontainments of the political prospects intimated earlier in the narratives, and can be understood, I have suggested, as embodying the political unconscious of the crisis of the neo-liberal hydrological regime." Sharae Deckard, "Waiting for the Master's Dam to Crack": Hydro-Dependency, Water Autonomy and World Literature," *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, v. 103 (2021) 154-155.
19. Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins, and Sophia Beal, "Infrastructuralism: An Introduction." *Modern Fiction Studies* 61.4 (2015): 575-586.
20. In Braga's words, "As usinas hidrelétricas, como grandes projetos de engenharia, foram utilizadas comoum desses ícones do "Brasil grande" e do poder dos militares. As usinas hidrelétricas, nessaleitura, funcionaram quase como um elo de ligação entre o desenvolvimento e as potencialidades naturais do Brasil." Fernanda de Souza Braga, *A ditadura militar e a governança da água no Brasil: Ideologia, poderes politico-econômico e sociedade civil na construção das hidrelétricas de grande porte* (Leiden: CRC Press/Balkema, 2020) 118.
21. For an overview of the "Suspensão de segurança" as a legal mechanism employed in the building of

- Belo Monte, see Ed Atkins, *Contesting Hydropower in the Brazilian Amazon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) 77-81. Because Belo Monte is a run-of-the-river plant, its dam submerged a smaller area than originally planned, but nevertheless entailed the deep changes analyzed in the following sections.
22. The technological sublime, in Nye's words, "dissolved the distinction between natural and artificial sites." David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994) 152.
  23. Jason Moore and Raj Patel, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018) 98.
  24. For an overview of this process in connection with social movements, see Idelber Avelar and Moysés Pinto Neto, "Energia limpa e limpeza étnica: As condições discursivas, jurídicas e políticas do ecocídio de Belo Monte." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 57.1 (2020): 150-171, also reproduced in Idelber Avelar, *Eles em nós: Retórica e antagonismo político no Brasil so século XXI* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2021).
  25. According to Svampa, "Los diferentes tópicos del giro ecoterritorial dan cuenta de la emergencia de una nueva gramática de las luchas, de la gestación de un lenguaje alternativo de fuerte resonancia al interior del espacio latinoamericano de las luchas, de un marco común de significaciones que articula luchas indígenas y nuevas militancias territoriales-ecológicas y feministas, que apuntan a la expansión de las fronteras del derecho, en clara oposición al modelo dominante." Maristella Svampa, *Las fronteras del neoextractivismo en América Latina: Conflictos ambientales, giro ecoterritorial y nuevas dependencias* (Guadalajara: Maria Sybilla Merian Center, 2019) 57.
  26. See Marisol de la Cadena for a study of how, in the Peruvian Andes, earth-beings (*tirakuna*) such as mountains and rivers, living together in the world of the *ayllus* with humans (*runakuna*), can offer alternatives to modern politics by composing "cosmopolitical moments with a capacity to irritate the universal and provincialize nature and culture." Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 279.
  27. Information on the various artworks and interventions that compose this project can be found on the artist's website. <http://carolinacaycedo.com>
  28. See <http://carolinacaycedo.com/be-dammed-ongoing-project>.
  29. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) 96.
  30. Carlos Drummond de Andrade, "Adeus a Sete Quedas," *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B, September 9 (1982) 8. [http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015\\_10&Pesq=%22Sete%20Quedas%20poderia%20ser%20salva%22&pagfis=49297](http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015_10&Pesq=%22Sete%20Quedas%20poderia%20ser%20salva%22&pagfis=49297) and, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, "Farewell to Sete Quedas," *The Latin American Ecocultural Reader*, ed. Jennifer French and Gisela Heffes, trans. Charles Perrone (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020) 251.
  31. The argument that hydropower is cheaper because water is free was famously made by Rousseff at the United Nations' COP 21 in 2015. See, for example, Bruno Góes, "Dilma sugere 'estoque de vento' e vira piada na internet," *O Globo*, October 10, 2015. <https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/dilma-sugere-estoque-de-vento-vira-piada-na-internet-17744645>.
  32. For a study of how the almost religious imperative of development uprooted local communities and demanded that they sacrifice their modes of living in favor of modernization, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton

University Press, 1996).

33. For Caycedo's explanation of the work's structure and its connection with the Berlin Wall, see the video included in the presentation of this work. <http://carolinacaycedo.com/serpent-river-book>
34. In Blackmore's words, "[r]ivers, in this perspective, are not linear phenomena but multi-temporal 'organic machines' whose liquid flows and structures of containment are assemblages of ancient organic matter and life forms, modern technologies and economies, all mixed together." Blackmore, "Turbulent River Times" 29.
35. I understand *epistemicide* according to Boaventura de Sousa Santos's definition, which is, in a few words, "the murder of knowledge" (92), or more precisely of all the alternative forms of knowledge that are replaced by "[t]he epistemological privilege of modern science" (152). Epistemicide — a process very evident in the Indigenous communities living in areas near Belo Monte — "involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledges" (153). See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
36. Carolina Caycedo, *Libro río serpiente* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2018).
37. Pachamama, or its Spanish equivalent, Madre Tierra, has also been at the center of the "earth jurisprudence" that emerged in the early twenty-first century and was adopted in Ecuador's constitution and in Bolivia, which opens juridical avenues for recognizing nonhuman rights. On earth jurisprudence, see, for example, David Humphreys, "Rights of Pachamama: The Emergence of an Earth Jurisprudence in the Americas," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20 (2017): 459-484. For an approach to the rights of nature that includes environmental legislation in Brazil, see Zelma Tolentino and Liziane Oliveira, "Pachamama e o direito à vida: uma reflexão na perspectiva to novo constitucionalismo latino americano" *Veredas do Direito* 12.23 (2015): 313-335.
38. Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 36.
39. According to Barca, this critique of the Anthropocene as gendered "allows us to rethink the forces of reproduction from non-binary and also more-than-human perspectives: they start to be seen as not simply coinciding with the colonized and feminized unpaid work of producing and caring for life, but as a collective of earthcare composed of all those subjects who are engaged in resisting the master version of modernity by countering the subordination of life to social imperatives of production/accumulation." Barca, *Forces* 38.

## **Metabolic Rift and Social Reproduction in *Roma* and *Temporada de huracanes*: Reading the Limits and Possibilities in Mexican World-Ecology**

Paige R. Andersson

As eco-criticism matures within Latin American Studies, discussions often still center around texts that make obvious commentaries on environment, nature, and humanity's place in it. This includes a range of genres that often blend sci-fi and speculative post-apocalyptic disaster fiction. While Mexico does have such a tradition, prominent Mexican cultural production seems to feature ecological themes less explicitly than in other parts of Latin America (as in, say, the Argentine Samantha Schweblin's much lauded 2014 ecological suspense *Distancia de rescate*), despite the fact that revolutionary struggles over land and water are so central to its history.<sup>1</sup> What is to be done, then, with a wave of award-winning and highly visible Mexican cultural production that either does not treat the topic of ecological crisis—present in multiple forms across Mexico today—or where it appears to operate in the background or as secondary to the main plot? And what can be made of what might be called a lack of political, speculative, or theoretical vision in Mexican works? To answer these questions and reconcile these absences, I focus on two contemporary products, *Roma* (2018), a film by director Alfonso Cuarón and *Temporada de huracanes* (2017), a novel by Fernanda Melchor, and I ask how world-ecological approaches can illuminate what they have to offer on the intersections of culture and its greater import for theoretical and political approaches to environment and Latin America today.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ecologies of Reproductive Labor and Family**

In both works, nuclear family structures and gendered spheres of social reproduction and labor breakdown or shift, which I contend is inherently also a portrayal of ecological crisis, despite neither's explicit engagement with the environment. Alfonso Cuarón's magnum opus, *Roma*, is a fictionalized introspection of his childhood in the eponymous 1970s upper middle-class neighborhood in Mexico



City. Instead of a traditional biopic, it is told through the eyes of his beloved nanny Libo, here named “Cleo,” an indigenous woman from Oaxaca. Over the course of about a year, Cleo gets pregnant and suffers her own tragedies of state violence and stillbirth, as she also ushers the family through a divorce. Fernanda Melchor’s *Temporada de huracanes* likewise details families in crisis, but it is more epochal in nature covering the decades before and after a particularly bad hurricane and landslide in 1978 that frame the events. The plot swirls around a set of characters either responsible for or loosely connected to the murder of “The Witch” in the small fictitious town of La Matosa in Veracruz, Mexico. Since the formation of the modern family often orders the reproductive labor necessary to sustain capitalism, it is also directly related to capitalism’s environment-making. Given the meteoric rise of Jason Moore’s approach in Latin American cultural studies, where reproductive labor (often of racialized and marginalized women or queer workers) is theorized as being intimately tied and akin to the “unpaid work” of nature that contributes value under capitalism, I take world-ecology as a point of departure for my analyses of these texts.<sup>3</sup>

While Moore’s expansive notion of value and work is productive, an insertion of the political is necessary into his breakdown theory of capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Moore predicts that given the rise of “negative value” (e.g. everything from superweeds that threaten Cheap Food models of the Green Revolution to social movements) and the exhaustion of extraction frontiers for “Cheap Nature,” including energy, capitalism is facing a terminal crisis that will necessarily give way to something else (either better or worse). Moore is right to argue that capitalism’s way of abstracting nature from humanity has been key to its voracious accumulation cycle, but both works show how this may be more visible as social reproduction and real historical rifts between the country and the city, rather than as a conceptual Cartesian dualism between Nature and Society.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that representations of social reproduction constitute and are constituted by their ecologies, these cultural works primarily depict rifts driven by anthropogenic social conflict, often mediated by state and racialized gendered violence. Furthermore, nature does not appear as laborer (or oppressor), and its expropriation is spectral. That it is being made to work “harder and harder for free” runs in the background, if at all. Instead, human need, such as hunger or physical safety, intersects with desire and personal trauma to ultimately home in on the way that current reproductive regimes have failed to fulfill basic material and social needs within a larger ecological framework. In his recent effort to define the relationship between commodity frontiers and world literature, Michael Niblett writes, “Far better, therefore, to grasp the term [commodity frontier] as a narrative category by way of which the logistics of frontier-making can be illuminated through the description of their movements as these manifest in specific historical situations.”<sup>6</sup> Both works, I argue, are narrativizing the relative exhaustion of commodity frontiers in an epochal crisis of the social relations of reproduction that are both the cause and result of

metabolic rift between town and country. Having established this, I then consider historical world-ecological regimes of “stocks” and “flows” (i.e. movements) in the novels and their dependence on gendered reproductive labor, to help further politicize Moore’s crisis theory. Misery seems in greater supply than revolution in both texts and negative value is not enough to rally new futures, but reproductive labor mediates both the interactions and autonomies of human and non-human natures in such a way that possible openings to heal metabolic rift may be imagined beyond those contained in the novels.

The concepts of metabolic rift between town and country and stocks and flows of energy are central to a number of world-ecologists and eco-Marxists, but in this essay, I put them into conversation with how culture is working through gendered labor as a way of attempting to fix, or simply survive amid — not always successfully — the world-ecological imbalance (or rift) between stocks/flows under capitalism. In dialogue with Andreas Malm and Jasper Bernes, I take *flow* to refer to forms of nature/energy that literally “flow” (like water and wind).<sup>7</sup> Capitalism began to see these forms of energy as a disadvantage because they could not be held as easily in *stocks*, like coal, which allowed nature to be controlled at will for the sake of capitalist accumulation and expansion. Bernes thus privileges flow as the more revolutionary of the options, but mostly because this means that people will organize a kind of communist society that does not depend so much on capitalist stocks. Of course, some stocks are less inimical to the web of life’s flows, and flows can be captured as in wind or solar energy, but the idea is that there is an exchange that respects a “three-fold metabolism (human-society-nature) that prioritizes life.”<sup>8</sup> Conversely, 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism is all about a different kind of flow that is far from revolutionary: the rise of logistics and the subjection of people to a highly precarious flow of migratory movement and disposability. Workers are increasingly excluded from the benefits that modern capitalist “stocks” provide (food security, healthcare, transportation, and even life itself). Many of the flows represented in *Roma* and *Temporada de huracanes* are excessive, thrown out of joint in the pursuit of stocks, from plantation agriculture and oil to logging and hydro-electric energy. In reading how town and country are traversed and in tension in both, particularly through analyses of Mexican history as they appear (spectral as they sometimes may be in the texts), it becomes evident that repairing the real metabolic rift between town and country must not only be done but accomplished by also concurrently restructuring gendered reproductive labor.

### Historical and Literary Natures

In Mexico, just how to achieve equitable distribution of land, labor, and water, along with successful food and energy systems, has also been long debated. For example, colonial and contemporary campesinos and elites alike have argued, albeit with different motivations, for the importance of the small agrarian community. Colonial paternalism gave way to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century developmentalism in the countryside,

with reformers — who were often politicians and writers alike  $\frac{3}{4}$  looking back to colonial structures, like *congregación*, to modernize the countryside through the concentrated (more urban) agrarian community.<sup>9</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century national romance novels, even if not always as archetypal or formulaic as sometimes assumed, romantic unions were engaged to envision possible responses to 19<sup>th</sup> century agrarian crises. This was especially true of utopic socialist novels, which tended to essay gendered labor regimes as part of reform. Despite an ideological range — from conservatives to utopic socialists — elites routinely had agriculture of scale as the end game, which created its own kind of path dependency toward private property and what would become post-revolutionary capitalist agri-business.<sup>10</sup>

There has thus been a growing tendency throughout Mexican history toward dispossession and land consolidation, even if it has experienced meaningful interruptions and resistance, through the drive to ever-expand “frontiers” of cheap nature. This darker side of romance and world-ecology is chronicled and exposed in mid twentieth century novels of Rosario Castellanos, José Revueltas, and Juan Rulfo. During the post-revolutionary period, there was a brief, yet genuine attempt under President Lázaro Cárdenas, to create a nation based on small landholdings in what would be the largest land reform in the history of the Americas of *ejidal* common lands.<sup>11</sup> As part of colonial-turned-developmental schemes, land reform was accompanied by a cultural and social project to educate and modernize racialized peasants who were often perceived to be ignorant stewards of the land. As Mexico approached mid-century, a techno-scientific capitalist thought (that had been cultivated since the early modern period), with private-property always as its end goal, triumphed in the form of the Green Revolution, essentially abandoning the earlier commitment to develop a robust and productive small land holding agrarian system that would feed the entire nation. This disappointment, as previously mentioned, is captured in much mid-century literature. The Green revolution’s implementation set Mexico on a decisive path toward technologically intensive practices that affected everything from the introduction of and reliance on petroleum-based agrochemicals to massive dams for irrigation and energy production. Even though outputs grew at an unprecedented rate for a time, the system soon met ecological havoc, a dynamic painstakingly laid out by Moore’s oeuvre. Tore C. Olsson is quick to remind us, however, that it was not the technology itself that set Mexico on a path dependency toward big agribusiness, but a series of political choices (as had been the case in the previous century), particularly at elite levels.<sup>12</sup>

*Roma* and *Temporada* both hinge on the 1970s, when the Mexican Miracle — a time of unprecedented economic growth indebted in large part to oil extractivism and the Green Revolution — began a clear terminal descent. As such, both works are anti-romances, wherein the absence, breakdown, or impossibility of traditional heteronormative relationships, particularly of marital property relations, is everywhere and indicative of a post-1968 nation — construed through its countryside

and city dynamic — in world-ecological crisis. In *Roma*, there is divorce, a child conceived out of wedlock, and abandonment. In *Temporada*, the Witch is trans, a young girl is raped and impregnated by her stepfather and forced to run away, two queer adolescent boys cannot accept their own desires, and a nameless grandfather figure digs the graves of the young. Through these personal stories, both detail a kind of narrative aftermath to state abandonment of the revolution's most radical promises that in turn provoked deeper metabolic rifts of reproduction since the 1970s. This is not to suggest that if the traditional social order of heteropatriarchal marriage could be restored, crisis would be solved, but rather that the relations of social reproduction have been entirely upended, and in this chaos, a new, less patriarchal and propertied system must emerge between humans and beyond the state and capital, particularly where they exist as nature, concurrently with any technological or agrarian fixes.

### Roma

Debating in theaters and on Netflix in 2018, the high-grossing *Roma* received accolades in the form of reviews and viewership, particularly for a foreign language film. Starring the first-time actor Yalitza Aparicio as Cleo, the Mixtec speaking nanny and domestic worker from Oaxaca, its acting, plot, and cinematography generated both acclaim and debate over how to reckon with race, family, and gender in Mexican history on multiple fronts. To continue these important discussions, the role of environment must also be brought into an analysis of the groundbreaking film, where fairly early on, the father abandons the family and leaves his wife, Sofia (and of course, Cleo), to pick up the pieces. Meanwhile, Cleo, gets pregnant from her boyfriend, who abandons her and turns out to be a member of a CIA trained paramilitary group that uses martial arts techniques to terrorize student protesters. She more or less continues about her daily life, doing care work Sofia and the family, until the PRI government under then-President Luis Echeverría Álvarez unleashes the death squad on protesters during the movie's portrayal of the 1971 Corpus Christi Massacre. Although not explicitly linked as a town-country relation in the film, the student protests were in part a reaction to the state's gradual abandonment of more radical *Cardenista* education projects and ecological autonomy forged in the 1930s and 40s. This highly urban movement, though, also had radical agrarian counterparts in the rural normal schools that served as hotbeds of guerrilla resistance for land rights and autonomy in the 1950s-1970s.<sup>13</sup> The terror of the attack on student protesters induces labor in Cleo after she melodramatically faces her baby's father as a killing machine in the crib section of a department store. Cleo struggles to make it to the hospital in a taxi stuck in traffic exacerbated by state violence, in a scene that dovetails with what actually happened that day, as the *halcones* strategically blocked the metro and terrorized victims seeking help in the hospitals.<sup>14</sup>

As a natural condition of Cuarón's lifestory, the film is set in the 1970s, but he also embeds historical context into the film to at times operate as political critique of the

Mexican state's paramilitarism and society and at others to address the question of nostalgia. All of the politics of the time, though, are woven into the personal life and domestic spaces of Cleo and the family she works for, as in the example above, and I contend that nature and environment operate as more than just a landscape or a setting meant to provoke nostalgia in the viewer. More specifically, the film portrays the way that the environmental question of stocks and flows that uphold Mexican world-ecology are contingent on Cleo's ability to solve, even if temporarily, contradiction generating rifts, especially for her employer's family to continue a lifestyle of upper middle-class abundance. Her body also physically endures the prolonged pain and terror of the blockage of flows caused by the *halcones* (and President Echeverría), who are ultimately quelling dissent to an era of ever-closing revolutionary political possibility in education and *ejidal* land reform. This is particularly evident in the domestic space of the home and hacienda, when Cleo accompanies Sofía and the kids on a short trip for New Year's (before the birth), and on another trip to the beach (after her baby is stillborn). In larger structural terms only alluded to in the film, when the state-capitalist nexus fails to grant nature its autonomy by insisting on corralling and controlling both the stock and flow of water for capitalist agriculture and hydro-energy, it simultaneously restricts Cleo's autonomy of labor. Water leaks, floods, and evaporates. It does not necessarily obey infrastructure, such as the vast system of water pumps installed by the Mexican state and its Green Revolution over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that provided only the chimera of disciplining water. Now, the land/water relation is left either drought ridden, sinking, contaminated, or flooding.

Take for example the much-acclaimed opening motif, where artful closeups of soapy puddles of water reflect airplanes as modern wonders and the top of the house (where Cleo will also do the very traditional reproductive labor of laundry in the *azotea's* stock of the *pila*). As the shot opens up, the water goes down a drain in the garage patio floor, and we hear Cleo declare her first lines, directed to the dog, "te vamos a bañar, Borrás." She turns off the spigot and winds up the hose, walks into the servant's kitchen area, and closes the door on the camera whose gaze rests on two birdcages and potted plants, suggesting immediately the restricted and domesticated nature of the space. In this sense, the grand botanical gardens that were so central to empire and the domination of nature have been incorporated into the humble private 20<sup>th</sup> century home. Cleo is often restraining the dog from entering certain spaces or escaping into the street, while she and her best friend, also a domestic worker in the house, have to continuously clean dog shit off of the tiled garage floor lest they subject themselves to the father's ire. These are not just mere plot points, but ways that Cleo opens or restricts movement to sustain the family structure. As Cleo struggles to keep the path clear of excrement, the dog's natural need to defecate is presented as an excess for the refined (and confined) home that demands a wasteful daily mopping of the floor. It is Cleo who opens and closes the spigot to make the water flow and



stop, who conveniently makes all of it — the poop and the dirty water — go away out of sight and out of mind. Sofia and her husband need not think about Mexico City's ground slowly sinking under their home, as Cleo operates infrastructures that—despite their often-hidden appearance (i.e. sewage pipes) and near instant magical function—actually require human labor to make nature work in an equally subjugated state.

Not long after the opening scene, Cleo washes the dishes and another closeup settles on the water running down the kitchen sink drain, followed by another masterful sequence in which Cleo methodically walks around the first floor of the house turning off the lights one by one. The shot clues the audience into her routine before she goes to her candle lit room, but the contrast also puts into relief the historical moment of fossil fuel energy, where the grid can be controlled at will. Even so, Cleo's status as a racialized laborer regulates and restricts the grid's reach, as Sofia prevents her from using electricity in her own room after a certain hour. Such scenes can be read as microcosms of the energy grid that marries the heteronormative nuclear family home to the capitalist regime of social reproduction. The methodical routine of turning off the lights and the consistent scenes of water and its drainage speaks to the stability of having a standing reserve of electricity, water, and oil that requires a parallel system of capitalist reproductive labor and the home. It requires the reproduction of yet another system of bourgeois labor, which in the 1970s would increasingly need to absorb white upper middleclass women like Sofia and leave indigenous women like Cleo, to do the precarious reproductive work without anyone to reproduce them in turn. The death of her baby at the end makes this rather obvious, and whether she wanted her or not is beside the point, since the film does not really allow an exploration of those emotions that would be nearly impossible to parse out.<sup>15</sup>

The inclusion of the *Halcones* and the Corpus Christi massacre in 1971 is the most visible historical political reference in the film, but there are other examples that contribute to the politics of the time that are inseparable from environmental questions of aquatic flows. This history of state repression has little weight unless connected to what the state was trying to repress: agrarian and anti-capitalist movements demanding different rhythms of life and labor. One notable set of scenes when the family visits a friend's hacienda for New Year's Eve offers vague context to this history. As they arrive, the viewer sees signs demanding land rights posted on the surrounding stone wall. In another sequence, the white upper-class adult guests play-act being guerrillas or joke in English about murdering them as they engage in target practice and the kids run around chaotically behind them in the woods and through large stagnant puddles or ponds. The parents fire their guns over a small stagnant pond, and while the camera zooms out, it never does a full 180 pan to the landscape to show where their bullets land. Its field of vision simply rests over the pond, the stagnancy of which perhaps symbolizes the continuity of colonial history of domination and violent primitive accumulation of land (and water). The

workers who are present minutes earlier are made invisible, just like the guerrillas the elite imagine murdering, rendering the relation with those who have been dispossessed equally invisible, as capitalist environment-making regimes are wont to do.<sup>16</sup> Other indigenous servants, at different moments, however, remind the viewer that the elite violence is real and on-going, such as when one woman shows Cleo the master's taxidermy dog murdered over a land dispute, and when another explains that a campesino activist they know has been assassinated. On one hand, both brief anecdotes show the imbalance of the stakes, where the hacienda owner continues to live and can catalogue his power in trophied form, but the human campesino is dead. On the other hand, it also speaks to the *hacendado's* propensity to catalogue, curate, and display nature in an act of power, not unrelated to the colonial projects of museums, botanical gardens, and taxonomy.

Later that night, there is a fire on the hacienda that the elite accuse local campesinos of setting, again highlighting the colonial tensions of the Mexican dirty war simmering beneath the surface. The children and racialized workers do most of the work carrying buckets of water out to the field and dousing the fire, as the drunken adult elite watch on, barking orders, including one who is dressed as the Krampus and starts singing a song in Norwegian amidst the flames. The scene is one of the most surreal of the film, with the song itself about missing one's homeland left unexplained.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, Cleo mirrors his nostalgia by mentioning her own longing for Oaxaca to another servant the following morning while on a walk through the hacienda fields to the "falda" of the mountains. The landscape is an entirely colonial ecology, with the valleys farmed in their orderly rows and with square plots, with the wooded mountains surrounding them. The elite kids have never heard of "la falda de un cerro," [the "skirt" or foothills of the mountain] perhaps because mountain landscapes are frequently indexed as "Indian" in the Mexican imagination. One little elite boy in training even quips about assault, "Alex, el cerro tiene falda. Si nos agachamos, podemos verle los calzones" [Alex, the mountain has a skirt. If we crouch down, we can see [its/her] panties]. Cleo, as an indigenous woman, then occupies this *falda* space as she climbs a ridge and recounts, "Sabes, se parece a mi pueblo. Claro, allá está seco, pero se parece. Y así, igual, hacen los animales. Y así suena. Y así huele." [You know, it seems like my town. Clearly, it's dry there, but it's similar. And like that, the animals do just the same. And it sounds like this. And it smells like this].

No matter where she is—town or country—colonial socio-ecological relations are present, and the scenery doesn't change except that here the elite have more water. Notably, massive dam projects of the time, like that of the Miguel Alemán Dam in Oaxaca, would privilege lower basin large landholders in Veracruz and displace thousands of indigenous Oaxacans.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, this particular hacienda scene shows a decadent elite that have no apparent need for urban infrastructures of on-demand water, sewage, and irrigation lines, for their peons manage the stocks and flows not via spigots, but with buckets and shear strength, displaying the "unevenness"

of the world-system that is nevertheless deeply “modern.” These elites fantasize about violent dominance in jest and live out real violence through land theft and labor exploitation that the peons still carry out for them (i.e. Cleo’s indigenous ex-boyfriend massacres his own people). The nostalgia pulsing through *Roma*, which is of course Cuarón’s nostalgia for his childhood, is also present in the nostalgia of the characters, and it has an incommensurable and violent note to it insofar as Cleo is nostalgic for another kind of possibly colonial and violent ecology. For while she may have been the product of displacement or state abandonment of agrarian resources to communal lands, she also may have come from an hacienda system of peonage in Oaxaca (we have no way of knowing in the film). In order to truly heal the longing Cleo has for her homeland of Oaxaca and the wounds in the land, the town/country division must be dissolved, and its infrastructures and labor regimes reconceived. This new world would depend on entirely different relations of social reproduction (and therefore, between humans and nature) that must upend colonial-capitalist private property, and its flows of land, labor, and water. This would likely depend on a new security politics, as well, which the movie leaves open ended through these passing references to armed agrarian and student struggle.

In this same sequence of hacienda scenes, tension between the country and the city are further represented through fluids, water, and puddles. At a celebration in the servant’s quarters of the hacienda, for example, Cleo drops a shot glass of pulque on the stone floor and shatters it. The camera zooms in again on this puddle like all the others before, symbolically presaging the traumatic birth of her stillborn baby, after another indigenous woman with whom she’s sitting teases her for having acclimated too much to city life. Cleo is herself caught between both the city and country, as indicative from the teasing, but also in that the elder indigenous woman offers her mezcal and pulque, both indexed as indigenous drinks. Cleo expresses doubt about whether or not she should for the health of her baby, but the woman counters that just a bit is actually good for the baby (echoing a more indigenous sentiment over the medicinal nature of a little mezcal), and that it is equally important to celebrate life and the New Year. The woman stresses this when she points out that a man’s son has just been murdered in a land dispute, connecting agrarian crises of the 1970s to death in both the country (the assassinated son) and the city (Cleo’s baby). That Cleo opts for pulque over mezcal could also be read as her choosing the more *capitalino* option, as working class *pulquerías* cropped up across Mexico City in its 20<sup>th</sup>-century population boom and mezcal, until recently, remained a more peripheral phenomenon. Nevertheless, she maintains an ambivalence over her town/country subjectivity throughout.

Puddles factor in again when she visits the father of her baby in a slum, carefully stepping over pools of stagnant water. Here hardly any infrastructure provides the stocks and flows of clean running water (even as PRI government propaganda promises to bring it over the loudspeaker in the background). When she finds the

father of her baby, he is training in a field for what will arguably be one of several climaxes of the film, the *halconazo*, that induces her tragic labor. The puddles are always indicative of infrastructures and labor out of joint with life itself; puddles represent that which should be flowing is stagnant and that which should be in reserve is flowing. The urban Mexico City home, the outer slums, and the rural hacienda are all pocked with non-potable puddles in one way or another. The film thus connects capitalist energy regimes with the violence of the state, since it was during the mid-century “Mexican Miracle” that the state invested in massive dams for energy, irrigation, and development, dispossessing many in the process. If neglected “backwater” areas, like the shanty town in the movie, had more state infrastructure, it wouldn’t necessarily change the political dynamics for the poor, just as it doesn’t for Cleo because such spaces must be devalued in capitalism’s ecological regime. Capitalism and its environment making create tragic puddles in both the city and the country, there is never a flow between them. The regime depends on Cleo’s ability to tragically move between both to soothe the contradiction generating rift, all for the sake of a capitalist value that does not value her life or its reproduction.

Finally, when read generously, the iconic ocean scene of the movie might allow for a meditation on a world where nature’s autonomy exists alongside that of labor to more fully value reproductive labor. Cleo joins the family on a short trip to the beach shortly after her baby is stillborn, even though she can barely manage to speak (the children tease that she has gone “mute”). Sofia uses the vacation to finally break the news to her children that their father will be moving out, and she will be returning to work (again made possible by Cleo’s domestic labor). Despite their mother’s warning to stay close to the shore, the children predictably go too far and are overcome in the waves. Cleo, who cannot swim, heroically wades out to save them, and as they all catch their breath in a melodramatic embrace, Cleo cathartically cries “*no la quería!*,” [*I didn’t want her!*] referring to her baby. In the car ride home, they all express love for each other and seem to mean it. While the trip and the ocean’s riptide symbolically mark the upending of the prior male breadwinner family relation, in the end, Sofia restores internal social relations to their hierarchical order, this time with her as the head of house, in an act of (post)colonial continuity. In this instance, a nature apart from humans (an undercurrent) acts on humans and has social consequences and creates, for a time, a shifted metabolic social arrangement with the family. Nevertheless, the ocean scene reminds us that water’s ungovernable characteristics cannot always be disciplined by humans. The scene asks us more than ever to consider what might happen if Cleo refused the reproductive activities, processes, and rhythms of all kinds that were not lifegiving to her. The film suggests otherwise, of course, but its tragic nature allows for us to consider what doesn’t happen and what could.

### **Temporada de huracanes**

Set amidst cane and oil fields not far from the Atlantic coast, Melchor’s *Temporada*

*de huracanes* has been hailed for its gritty portrayal of contemporary violence in Mexico, which for the most part is rendered as interpersonal and domestic violence. That such violence is clearly ingrained in structural issues isn't exactly lost on the novel, but references to historical or systemic violence and suffering are resigned to more vague notions of police and corporate corruption. Some, such as Marcos Eduardo Ávalos Reyes and Jafte Dilean Robles Lomelí suggest that this is a purposeful feature of the novel, and that through rumor, which I'll return to in a moment, Melchor is recreating the fragmented ability to register violence into words, subjectivity, and truth.<sup>19</sup> However, I am interested in more fully excavating the novel's presentation of historical socio-ecological processes of reproduction for their political implications. By exploring how gendered reproductive labor is central to metabolic rift and its rebalance, the more material limitations and possibilities of solidarity presented in the novel may be unearthed and put into relation with language, rather than readings that seek a vague solidarity or hope through language or narrative alone.

If Cleo's labor in *Roma* could still partially resolve the eco-social crises of a post-1970s Mexico, and where brief moments of Cleo's urban independence as a young woman and indigenous transplant to Mexico City are shown as a kind of nostalgic joy in doing things like going to the movies (a state backed cultural initiative of the era), then *Temporada's* gothic tone is indicative of a more fully neoliberal regime of gendered reproductive labor that is ultimately unable to suture contradictory rifts. Considering the novel as gothic, a resurgent genre in Latin American culture in recent years, helps to more clearly identify how colonialism continues to operate in the novel, and how it signals a present season of excessive flows where everyone is awash in an even deeper despair and precarity than in *Roma's* nostalgic, but no less violent, register.<sup>20</sup> Through capitalism's creation of stocks gone fully awry in the present moment, *Temporada* becomes a nightmarish scene of pure violent flows. In this way, hurricane season names not just 'normal' cyclical disaster, but an epochal and particularly violent moment of late capitalism where excessive flows spill out of the historical attempts to prioritize capitalist stocks that have been 500 years in the making. In a more cyclically balanced ecosystem, stocks and flows would not be at odds with one another, but complimentary ways of sustaining human and non-human life that also attended to less oppressive rhythms of reproductive labor. The opening of the book, for example, explains the recent history of the town through the Witches' gothic manor by grounding it in a foundational colonial violence that takes the reader from gendered primitive accumulation all the way to a groundless neoliberal dispossession and precarity. In what follows, I read the novel through three characters and how they can be mapped onto historical flows of Mexican history: 1) the witches who are dispossessed by eco-social disaster and enclose themselves, 2) in the story of a young runaway Norma that gives way to the aftermath of rumor, murder, and death; and 3) a nameless grandfather figure who expands the narrative beyond the personal to mass graves.



What are no doubt world-ecological regimes also appear in the novel as classic economic modes of production: sugarcane fields (worked by slaves and then peons, migrant, or seasonal labor), oil fields (employing mainly only skilled workers to the chagrin of the townspeople), and informal markets (from roadside stands to sex work) and organized crime (low level laborers and recruits to police and higher level corrupt government officials). These latter two are arguably provoked by the other first two regimes of sugar and water. Between the mountains to the west and the “eternally raging waters” of the Atlantic, the landscape is described as weedy and unruly [“vines that grew with rapacious speed during the rainy season and threatened to overwhelm homes and crops alike”], which the young migrant and virile cane cutters must constantly keep at bay with their machetes. This tracks with many colonial and neocolonial descriptions of the tropical environment as saturated with life but unruly. But it also could be interpreted as the “negative value” mentioned by Moore where superweeds have become a dominate force in a post Green Revolution ecology.

If interpretation is left open to both possibilities, we can see how the creation of capitalist organizations of nature that destabilize ecosystems become codified in colonial and environmentally racist terms. The Witch enjoys spying on the cane workers as they work and bathe in a nearby river for her sexual pleasure, and at least some of the men know it and maybe even enjoy the voyeurism. Here the sexual desire by the river mirrors the unrestrained virility of the lush landscape during the rainy season in ways that echo gothic environmental determinism and consequential downfall of the landed estate provoked by haunting Caribbean women (as in *Jane Eyre*). But in reality, the Witch and the townspeople have very little power to act, and even though desire is everywhere in the novel, the characters are often impotent sexually and politically. They are very much subject to the flows of the river, the weather currents that bring hurricanes, the shifting land beneath their feet, and the circuit of capital, so much so, in fact, that the Witch’s body will be disposed of in the cane mill’s irrigation canal.

More than metaphor, this deathly story is not without real environmental history. In this way, the townspeople’s precarity is a function, or better yet a contradictory externality, of elite capitalist attempts to make stocks (reserves) of cane and oil that narratively fall on the body as a final site of exploitation. More specific to Veracruz’s history is the massive mid-century Papaloapan dam project undertaken to provide hydroelectricity and control the routine flooding of agricultural lands. Like many other mid-century projects, it had more revolutionary roots, and while it did improve flooding for a time, it ultimately failed to prevent serious floods and landslides in the 60s and 70s, leading to the construction of yet another dam — the Miguel Alemán — to ecologically destructive ends (such as the drying of Oaxacan waterways previously mentioned that may have dispossessed someone like Cleo in *Roma*). Despite Veracruz having had some of the most radical peasant movements, according to Olsson, in the end, the Papaloapan irrigation project almost entirely benefitted larger sugar

growers in the lower basin. Over the 1970s, the state shifted fully into techno-scientific irrigation projects from Central Mexico into the North to fully pursue large corporate agribusiness.<sup>21</sup>

In the novel, this history is personalized as it explains how the original Witch came to be in possession of the gothic estate when her husband and stepsons suddenly and mysteriously die. The circumstances immediately cast doubt on her as deserving of the land, echoing the way that social relations really did work to dispossess women of land and power, as Silvia Federici has famously argued of early modern witch hunts.<sup>22</sup> The hacienda mansion is described as gothic and incomplete, and to survive, the witch collects rent but is not really involved in the means of production, nor, despite rumor of a great treasure hidden in the house, does she accumulate capital or personal wealth.<sup>23</sup> It is revealed that some years later she had a daughter, known simply to the reader as “The Young Witch,” who is the likely product of rape by local men. Together the two manage the estate and an informal apothecary business for local women to acquire tinctures, particularly for abortions. Their medicinal abilities and strange demeanor are the primary source of continued rumor for any supernatural powers they might possess, which are linked to their supposedly mad wandering over geographies indexed as indigenous or marooned, as the narrative voice explains that the abortifacient herb is found at the top of a mountain, home to pre-Columbian temples and where “los antiguos, los pocos que quedaban, tuvieron que agarrar pa’ la sierra” [the ancients, the last few who were left, had run for the hills.]<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the Witches’ freedom of movement is contrasted all the same with their confinement to their ominous manor (not unlike so many other gothic women characters).

Instead of overtly violent processes of enclosure by elites, the old witch begins to enclose herself in the house as protection against the omnipresent threats of assault and plunder by her own townsfolk, who have an ambivalent stance toward the Witches and envision them as sexually deviant from the beginning. In Melchor’s novel, the town crassly imagines The Witch to have aberrant sex with a horned devil, particularly after she swears off men and marriage, but for a time, she lives off the townswomen supporting her with food in exchange for herbs, supported by the reproductive labor of her strong and capable daughter and the garden they both tend. According to So Mayer, as part of enclosure, witches were accused along with European Jews of having horns, a parallel made more striking “considering the forced position of European Jews as money-lenders,” which happens when the Young Witch takes up the role of moneylender to make a living for her and her mother, since there is no other means of survival.<sup>25</sup> Similar distrust of non-Christian and racialized traditions is briefly mentioned when one of the novel’s characters also makes reference to the local Church’s disdain for the Afro-indigenous superstitions that pervade daily life, making a connection between primitive accumulation, witch hunts, and racialized labor regimes of colonialism. Furthermore, the young Witch is trans, and homophobia

and transphobia will prove to be main drivers of the narrative arc. In the beginning, the men fear them, and while the women begrudge having to pay for The Witch's services, and eventually the predatory moneylending practices instituted by the astute Young Witch, they are also indebted both literally and emotionally to not just the Witches' herbs, but to the protected domestic space of the dilapidated mansion where the townswomen can air their many woes of hardship.

After the old Witch dies in the 1978 hurricane and landslide on the very same mountain that once provided relative ecological and reproductive autonomy, the Young Witch (who from this moment on in the novel is referred to as The Witch) carries on with the business and her mother's garden but becomes increasingly commodified and loses autonomy as she transitions from moneylender to sex worker and then paying for sex herself. This mimics Federici's argument that women's dominion over reproductive process became criminalized and contributed to the "accumulation of differences" of gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies.<sup>26</sup> Such persecution came at a time of European enclosure when elites wanted to build a population of surplus labor, and so women who attempted to control their reproduction, partnerships, and relationships to nature became particularly heretical. As women and racialized peoples, alongside the reproductive labor they perform, are rendered closer to nature under capitalist exploitation, as Moore and many other Marxist-feminists have argued, so too are they internally divided "within a single household" and devalued along with a nature constructed as external. Both indigenous peoples and then the witches are not only dispossessed from the herb hill by social othering that makes this connection to nature seem deviant, but through the ecological disaster that will make way for the oil company to further monopolize the town economy. In other words, despite their "witchcraft," they are unable to protect themselves, and as I'll show in a moment, others, from the violent flows of capitalist ecologies.

The townspeople in all their misery do not practice any kind of collective political solidarity with The Witch, or with each other, in that they do not organize to occupy the cane fields, for example, and likely environmental destruction from nearby oil fields is left unchronicled. Most of the men are motivated by the fabled treasure hidden somewhere in the Witches' house, that in part drives waves of attempted and achieved violence against them. Early on, the novel mentions that the men at the sugar mill from whom they collect a modest rent [were]:

...aguardaban un descuido de las Brujas para despojarlas con argucias legales, aprovechando que no había papeles, que no había hombre alguno que las defendiera, aunque ni falta que les hacía por la Chica quién sabe cómo había aprendido a negociar los dineros, y era tan cabrona que incluso un día se apareció por la cocina a ponerle precio a las consultas...

[...]just waiting for the day the witches slipped up so they could be legally evicted, taking advantage of the fact there was no paperwork and not a

man alive would come to their defense, but in fact they didn't need anyone because the Girl, God knows how, had taught herself to manage their finances, and so tight was her hold on the purse strings that she even showed up one day in the kitchen to put a price on the townswomen's consultations...]<sup>27</sup>

It is striking, however, that no one in the town who isn't a landowner is after the Witches' *land* and can only imagine petty plunder. In other words, the men and the women in the novel, mostly reduced to laborers in the cane fields or in the informal economy, cannot imagine occupying land for themselves (even if ill-begotten), much less redistributing it for the community as a whole. Instead, they can only imagine further primitive accumulation and theft of what can be easily sold for cash or selling their own bodies (commodity exchange and no production). What little autonomy the townswomen had left over, natural rhythms (recourse to the Witch's herbs and the space of her home), is short circuited by her murder. For her part, The Witch is far from a manipulative sorceress and is instead subsumed as someone who both receives payment and pays for sex after the boys and men at the bar convert her pleasure into a commodity by suggesting that "she'd likely pay for it." She is literally a commodified conduit as both buyer, seller, product, and laborer. Worse still, her lands are not really her own anymore, and in the end, while the townspeople and religious folk do not burn her at the stake, she is more intimately murdered by two young queer men and secret lovers, Brando and Luisimi. For Brando, engaging in queer sex with the Witch is ultimately less about her deviance or his desire and more about his self-hating machismo. For Luisimi, he mourns a possible connection he could have had with Norma, a young runaway impregnated by her stepfather, by helping her raise the baby.

The case of Norma, for example, and the Witch's attempts to help her have an abortion, further illustrate flows out of balance and the limitations of reproductive labor to solve eco-social contradiction. When the Witch gives her a tincture to abort the fetus, Luisimi seeks revenge for his own aborted possibility of a heteronormative family that he is conditioned to see as the only escape from his suffering as a queer man. A more imaginative possibility, in contrast, might allow Luisimi and Norma to form family together without the expectation of sex, where Norma's freedom of choice is honored, and where Luisimi could be with another such as Brando, The Witch, or both. Instead, after The Witch's murder, her assassins Luisimi and Brando are in jail together, and Norma is thrust into the abusive hands of the state medical apparatus and government oversight after her abortion leads to serious infection. Although The Witch begged Norma to stay under her care and expertise to carry out the procedure, Luisimi's mother refuses and leaves her to suffer alone and away from the care of a knowledgeable Witch figure in yet another case of solidarity and reproductive labor's life-giving potential short circuited.

Although it remains at the level of metaphor, it is worth mentioning that before Norma sees a way to get her basic needs met via Luismi and his family and pursues abortion, she considers killing herself on the seaside cliffs, subjecting her body and life to the violent will of the waves. This symbolism mirrors her actual insertion into the logistical flow of capital's disposable populations, seeing no exit out of a working-class patriarchal order in Tabasco to Mexico's south and no entrance into the stable middle-class upheld by stocks of the capitalist oil regimes and extraction that surround her in Veracruz. While Luismi and Norma's relationship is arguably the most tender of the novel, it is characterized by tenuous understanding and communication, and similarly Brando's sexual experience with Luismi is not exactly consensual. They all fail to use language to articulate their needs, and when the novel does more fully shift to Norma's perspective, her immediate hunger and thirst frame her ability to gloss her entire sordid backstory to form an uneasy connection with Luismi.<sup>28</sup> In the end, this is all Luismi ever knows of her previous life and her present needs. As Bernes' notes, socioecological change may well be motivated *first* by the anthropocentric requirement to feed oneself, and it rings true here in that this material need for sustenance is the only one that creates a relation even approaching solidarity.

The second to last chapter, rather than one of linguistic blocks where characters fail to communicate or find more precise language, revolves around the feminized device of flowing rumor as it lays out a laundry list of heinous acts and reflections recounted through a stream of consciousness narrative prefaced with "They say..." As another out of control free-flow, in its content and literary form, the women's rumors and folk-horror tales similarly struggle to patch over crises of reproduction with both the social relations of language and material practices, even if rumor and warning offer a temporary stay to protect their children. For example, consider the final page of the chapter recounting the state of the town:

*Dicen que por eso las mujeres andan nerviosas, sobre todo las de La Matosa. Dicen que por las tardes se reúnen en los zaguanes de sus casas a fumar cigarros sin filtro y a mecer a los críos más pequeños entre sus brazos, soplando el humo picante sobre sus tiernas coronillas para espantarles a los moscos bravos, y disfrutar el poco fresco que alcanza a subir del río, cuando el pueblo al fin se queda callado y apenas se escucha a lo lejos la música de los congales al borde de la carretera y el rugido de los camiones que se dirigen a los pozos petroleros y el aullido de los perros llamándose como lobos de un extremo a otro de la llanura; la hora en que las mujeres se sientan a contar historias mientras vigilan con más atención el cielo, en busca de aquel extraño animal blanco que se posa sobre los árboles más altos y lo contempla todo con cara de querer advertirles algo. ... Que les cuenten a sus hijos por qué no deben entrar a buscar el tesoro, y mucho menos acudir en bola con los amigos a recorrer las habitaciones ruinosas... Que respeten el silencio muerto de aquella casa, el dolor de las desgracias que ahí se vivieron. Eso es lo que dicen las mujeres del pueblo: que no hay tesoro ahí dentro,*



*que no hay oro ni plata ni diamantes ni nada más que un dolor punzante que se niega a disolverse.*

[They say that's why the women are on edge, especially in La Matosa. They say that, come evening, they gather on their porches to smoke filterless cigarettes and cradle their youngest babes in their arms, blowing their peppery breath over those tender crowns to shoo away the mosquitos, basking in what little breeze reaches them from the river, when at last the town settles into silence and you can just about make out the music coming from the highway brothels in the distance, the rumble of the trucks as they make their way to the oilfields, the baying of dogs calling each other like wolves from one side of the plain to the other; the time of evening when the women sit around telling stories with one eye on the sky, looking out for that strange white bird that perches on the tallest trees and watches them with a look that seems to want to tell them something...That they mustn't go inside the Witch's house, probably...A look warning them not to let their children go looking for that treasure, not to dream of going down there with their friends to rummage through those tumble-down rooms, or to see who's got the balls to enter the room upstairs at the back and touch the stain left by the Old Witch's corpse on the filthy mattress...To respect the dead silence of that house, the pain of the miserable souls who once lived there. That's what the women in town say: there is no treasure in there, no gold or silver or diamonds or anything more than a searing pain that refuses to go away.]<sup>29</sup>

Contrasts of stocks and flows abound, from the unabated toxicity of filterless cigarettes to the near stagnant breeze from the river, from drifting noise of an oil economy and its brothels to the silence of a gothic house and its women. The barking dogs and "the hour when women sit to tell stories" is quite possibly a subtle homage to Rulfo's barking dogs of *No oyes ladrar los perros* that indicate life and civilization after a long trek through the desert, and to *Pedro Páramo's* "it was the hour of the day when children come out to play..." Comala, the town in *Pedro Páramo*, has no children or future, it is full of only the dead and their murmurs of the past. Although the barking dogs in *No oyes* provide signs hope that a father will be able to get his wounded son help in time, he dies just before reaching the town. While the women continue to tell stories amidst the bustle of capitalist activity, Melchor is also recounting fatal violence whose story is hidden by silence. The women want to protect their children, but in many ways the town's lifecycle has already stalled, too, not just because of violence, but also because the oil fields will be in direct conflict with life indicated by the barking dogs. For the women, the only action left is to leave the house and its history in dead silence. Its walls and its cadavers do not speak, unlike the dead in Comala. The strange white

bird is presumably the Witch, and it would like to speak, but the townswomen refuse to listen to its warnings given over the sound of trucks headed to and from the oil fields. Instead, they presume (“probably”) that it means they must avoid the history of the house and its possibilities, and they refuse to grapple with its pain. Robles Lomelí suggests that this fragmented style of gossip allows for the townspeople to form a kind of solidarity by narrativizing that which exceeds the official Mexican historical account and the ability to put into words such excessive violence and abjection. While the women may issue their own kind of warning to protect their children from the pursuit of treasure and the violence it will most certainly bring, only confrontation with the history of the house, its lands, the mountainside, and the gendered and racialized people who have worked and inhabited those spaces will ultimately achieve social protection.

Solidarity is thus still highly limited and within the rumor, deterministic ideas about environment preface the state of the town, as if to condition possibility:

*Dicen que la plaza anda caliente, que ya no tardan en mandar a los marinos a poner orden en la comarca. Dicen que el calor está volviendo loca a la gente, que cómo es posible que a estas alturas de mayo no haya llovido una sola gota. Que la temporada de huracanes se viene fuerte. Que las malas vibras son las culpables de tanta desgracia: decapitados, descuartizados, encobijados, embolsados que aparecen en los recodos de los caminos o en fosas cavadas con prisa en los terrenos que rodean las comunidades.*

[They say the place is hot, that it won’t be long before they send in the marines to restore order in the region. They say the heat’s driven the locals crazy, that it’s not normal – May and not a single drop of rain – and that the hurricane season’s coming hard, that it must be bad vibes, jinxes, causing all the bleakness: decapitated bodies, maimed bodies, rolled-up, bagged-up bodies dumped on the roadside or in hastily dug graves on the outskirts of town.]<sup>30</sup>

This is the only reference in the whole novel to possible climate change, that weather patterns are amiss, and that hurricane season — which increasingly stands in for the heightened flows of capitalist violence— has intensified. It recalls an old racializing trope that environment, particularly in hot tropical climes, drives impulsive and violent behavior in Latin America, modernized with the Gen Z speak of “bad vibes.” The marines will be a top-down corrupt force that imposes violence on top of violence, but then the hurricane will also come, and wreak havoc with consequences that no one can yet foresee. In Melchor, the hurricane approaches as an ominous threat from which the people lack protection (i.e. infrastructure), but it is capitalist social relations that allowed nature to become human-made disasters that devastate them.

In other words, bad vibes, just like miasma of yore, did not cause all the suffering and violence, rather all the violence caused bad vibes and deathscapes.

In an expansion from the personal narratives of the Witches, Norma, and their lovers and families, the novel concludes with an unknown grandfather character acting like a subcontractor for the state to help it dispose of an overwhelming number of bodies, the common casualties of everyday violence in Mexico. He ruminates on the importance of talking to them and covering them up just in time before the rains come, so that they can find their way “to the light.” Rain and water are cast as purifying and hopeful storm breaks, but to what end is never speculated. Collectivity, it seems, can only be conjured in death from a mass grave, and the light at the end of the tunnel is dim. There are no stocks, no stability, not even the mass grave is a reserve or resting place, rather it is only a temporary place for passage into some light filled beyond. Everything and everyone is a flow, a conduit, a passing storm, a landslide, from migrant laborers to pumping oil wells, from sex workers to the dead still not at rest, to the memory and its language of gossip—the ultimate linguistic flow. The grandfather tries to protect the bodies from the rain and give them a peaceful burial precisely so they cannot haunt the living, as if to say their histories should be buried and gone forever, but their histories are ones of Mexican capitalism’s insistence on violent circulation that evades the ecological and social necessity of finding more lifegiving balances between stocks and flows.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the murmurs of Comala, the dead do not speak, and the living struggle to form narrative, for both are even further removed from life in reciprocity with the land. Their seamless passage requires protection from the earthly and chaotic flow of hurricane rain as if there were no way for the living to learn from the dead and their past ecologies. But one wonders what would happen if the dead could encounter the hurricane of the living, and instead, if new balances between stocks and flows, humans and nature, town and country, could be forged by new relations of production, rather than ephemeral rumor, that do acknowledge history and memory.

While Melchor’s novel is bleak, the focus on interpersonal and familial breakdown set against the backdrop of colonial plunder, sugar plantations, the Mexican Petro-state, and the imperial Green Revolution’s highly engineered regimes, provides a prescient analysis of the need to upend reproductive labor regimes in the establishment of anti-capitalist eco-communist possibilities. Speculative, perhaps even utopic, narratives modes would be welcome counters to rumor since rumor is notorious for distortions as it loses or gains content and intent in the act of transference. It doesn’t just accompany a dysfunctional eco-social metabolism, but it also contributes to unstable flows where community members cannot forge new systems of care and reproduction with more direct intention and language until the real violence stops. What could be a revolutionary site (the Witches’ house, their lands), becomes one of gossip and gothic horror. None of the tension and destruction would have come to a head if queer desire, love, and labor had been recognized, rather

than shamed and made a site of capitalist division and control, hearsay and warning; if women had autonomy over their bodies, lives, lovers, and reproduction; and if a land ethic existed, it might function to support all of the above. At the same time, a greater connection between the epoch making and autonomous waters of hurricanes, rivers, and other flows, and an attempt to actually face world-ecological history of La Matosa, seems like the only option to forge a new, more collective epoch beyond the tragic time of the narrative.

### Conclusion

Mexican elites have for centuries drawn up plans for Mexico's gendered and racialized town and country dynamic, often responding to earlier metabolic rifts caused by colonization that persist today. Despite a thread throughout Mexican history of movements vying for communal lands and lifegiving institutions of social reproduction, ideologies and practices have consistently given way to exploitative arrangements of private property and large landholdings that are in turn environment making world-ecological regimes. This can be seen in debates over early colonial *congregación* and large *encomienda* and hacienda ownership, to revolutionary and developmentalist land distribution, water rights, and education. The Mexican state-capitalist nexus seems increasingly unable and unwilling to solve socio-ecological contradictions, leaving this task largely to gendered and racialized laborers, adrift in extreme capitalist flows, to solve mounting contradictions.

Path dependency of colonial infrastructures that drain the countryside of people and nutrients and destabilize the city through contamination and precarity, and attempts to forge new metabolic paths in response, has in many ways been at the heart of Mexican history and cultural production. In both *Roma* and *Temporada*, Mexico is on the precipice or has fully transitioned into a late capitalist model of state abandonment, and a nostalgic return to the rural community is not possible. In response to land consolidation, displacement, and grand infrastructural schemes, personal stories of human suffering have consistently also been eco-social ones. Even though *Roma* and *Temporada* are not stand alone works of eco-fiction, their shared focus on the gendered, laboring body as the site of world-ecological exploitation that mediates, often unsuccessfully or to tragic ends, are products of Mexico's historic metabolic rifts.

For example, both texts feature reproduction in its most obvious form, childbirth, as they juxtapose more community-based care practices with state-based hospital systems that are portrayed as alien, threatening, and directly tied to racialized state power in the city and the country. This contrast is evident in *Roma* through Cleo's multiple interactions with other indigenous women in the sequence of hacienda scenes, who lovingly tease more than once about her pregnancy and working too hard in the same breath as they question whether or not she speaks English yet. Meanwhile, her traumatic hospital experience in Mexico City and patronizing treatment by Sofia

and her mother do not prove lifegiving, suggesting that the movement from Oaxaca to Mexico City itself is deadly. *Temporada's* Norma — herself in a liminal adolescent child/adult worker status — is abused, neglected, or misunderstood by everyone, including the state when nurses shame her for the sins of her father, representing the contradiction of the post-developmental state's impulse to both reproduce the gendered capitalist laborer as in earlier capitalist epochs and also leave them for dead in a politics of disposability. Norma's body registers the hunger and thirst that are the product of alienation from subsistence. Neither Cleo or Norma can return home to traditional midwives and care networks because these have been broken, and violence awaits them everywhere, it seems. No longer of either an entirely rural or urban ecology, Cleo expresses an ambivalence about her home in Oaxaca and her life in Mexico City. More eco-stable Mexican futures might not ask people to choose between both or seek to make the countryside in the image of the city, but rather, would aim to solve the divide between town and country and stocks and flows instead.

In more directly political terms, Jasper Bernes' essay *In the Belly of the Revolution*, outlines the way that much contemporary green thought falls prey to path dependency or has not considered how access to food and energy will continue to be mechanisms of death and domination, survival and freedom in what will likely be a messy, rather than spontaneously clean, break with capitalism. In sum, agricultural and energy technology is path bound to capitalism and not capable of political transformation in and of itself — only “the reorganization of human society prompts a reorganization of nature.” Similarly, the rising cost and negative value described in Moore may not be enough to precipitate or prepare for kinds of community or infrastructure required to meet social need.<sup>32</sup> To break with path dependency, Bernes' point is that people will construct an emergent eco-communism that turns more toward the flow, not out of an ecological sensibility per se, but a self-interested pursuit of basic needs, like hunger, thirst, and possibly, security. In order to make flows like wind and solar power capable of holding a stock of energy for the grid, the political will and socio-ecological impact of mining and procuring such technologies may be anything but revolutionary. Andreas Malm's vision, for example, requires massive state and international cooperation. “One must imagine, then,” writes Bernes, “either an international political elite willing and able to act in the interest of human life in general, or a social movement capable of exerting massive pressure on the state. The first scenario is absurd, and the second returns us to the question of motives and the belatedness of action.”<sup>33</sup> Bernes therefore questions to what degree capitalist technology or statist solutions will ever be able to confront climate and capitalist catastrophe, since most are tied up with capitalism by infrastructural and social design (path dependency), such that they would either no longer be possible at all or have little revolutionary possibility.

If any of the communities in both works did band together, certainly it would be belated, since what they portray is a general lack of class solidarity and a neoliberal



individualism that causes absolute misery. Nevertheless, where struggle does seem like it could emerge is in the rhythms of reproductive regimes needed to feed, cloth, and shelter themselves, therein reclaiming time and nature (space, land and resources) in accordance with energy flows: "Though certain systems will require continuous energy, communism will prove itself much better able to adapt to the rhythms of flow energy, turning machines off and encouraging afternoon naps, perhaps, when the clouds cover the sun or the wind dies." (359). Cleo is never afforded afternoon naps, made apparent as she does the laundry on the rooftop and quips to the boy, who is presumably portraying young Cuarón, that she, too, might like to play dead with him just to have a rest. Whether we call it eco-communism as Bernes, or eco-socialism as Fraser, matters less than the need and possibility for social planning that would be more life giving, in particular recognition of capitalism's insurmountable internal contradictions of eco-social crisis, to which gendered and racialized social reproduction is inextricably linked. Other social relations and political economies are likewise capable of ecological imbalance, but they do not necessarily carry such internal contradictions as a pre-condition.<sup>34</sup> In excavating all of the world-ecological histories in each text and their respective locales, past struggles — so many of which had social plans to more sustainably and equitably exist with the whole of nature (including other humans) — gesture toward what must be remembered and what must be done, even if present narratives struggle to articulate such plans themselves.

In Mexico, this would entail continued collective efforts to reclaim land that provides sustenance with a commitment to small landholding, agro-ecological methods of water and land management, and the affirmation of non-patriarchal work toward more expansive spheres of gendered labor (perhaps making them more flexible or abolishing them all together). Culture and social movements that help excavate prior movements' struggles can play a crucial role in questioning renewed discourses of a Green Revolution 2.0, advocated for by powerful elites in the likes of the Gates Foundation. As Brian Whitener's essay in this issue argues, looking to other past and present movements to develop a politics of security that helps sustain communal life more attuned to and in defense of ecological reciprocity will also be necessary. All of this means finding ways that urban/rural divides might be overcome through careful planning of what kinds of services and forms of decision-making, through communal self-determination, rural communities might like to have, and ways for urban sites to become more productive of immediate needs (urban farming and planned water usage). Transformations in communal education will need to be reoriented to serve social need, from healthcare to agriculture. Such structures may mean that people move more freely between settlements and lands, perhaps even borders, and are welcome to do so, rather than being cast into one spatialized (and often racialized) realm or another. Much of this work is already being done, and has been done for centuries, by Mexico's indigenous communities, despite constant state violence. Solidarity with their many struggles to maintain

ecological autonomy will only further strengthen political possibilities for others who find themselves either forced out of, into, or trapped within capitalism's violent stocks and flows. Above all, such systems will need to place social need at the fore, but also recognize that so long as they depend on racialized hierarchies of gendered reproductive labor, they will continue to produce, rather than solve, metabolic rift.

## Notes

1. Mexico does have a tradition of some environmental speculative fiction, in the works of authors like Homero Aridjis, but much of it tends not to focus on environment so much as institutional corruption (see Alberto Chimal in *Latin American Literature Today* for an overview of science and speculative fiction in Mexico). See also Jeremy G. Larochelle “A City on the Brink of Apocalypse: Mexico City’s Urban Ecology in Works by Vicente Leñero and Homero Aridjis,” *Hispania* 96.4 (2013): 640–56. It also bears noting that Latinx, especially Chicanx, culture and criticism has a long legacy of engaging ecological and agrarian themes.
2. Cuarón, Alfonso, *Roma* (Netflix, 2018), and Melchor, Fernanda. *Temporada de huracanes* (Ciudad de Mexico: Literatura Random House, 2017).
3. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).
4. For a critique of Moore on this point, see Out of the Woods, “Human Nature,” *The New Inquiry*. <https://thenewinquiry.com/human-nature/>
5. The texts also remind us of nature’s relative autonomy alongside that of labor that cannot be fully subsumed by capitalism, and additionally, in a departure from Moore, of how multiple understandings of nature are valid and co-exist, as Fraser helpfully frames as Nature I (a kind of scientific objective nature), II (historical capitalist natures), and III (a socio-ecological conception of nature that includes humans). See Nancy Fraser, “Climates of Capital: For a Trans-Environmental Eco-Socialism,” *New Left Review* 127. Jan/Feb (2021) 108.
6. Niblett, Michael, *World Literature and Ecology: the aesthetics of commodity frontiers, 1890-1950*. (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2020) 52.
7. Bernes, Jasper “The Belly of the Revolution” Eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti. (*Materialism and the Critique of Energy*. M-C-M, Chicago, 2018); And, Malm, Andreas, *The Progress of this Storm* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).
8. In terms of Mexican environmental history, *cajas de agua* and *aniego* irrigation techniques of the kind John Tutino credits for early agricultural productivity in the *bajío* region might serve as an example of more sustainable and effective stocks and flows. John Tutino, *Making a New World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
9. *Congregación*, also referred to as *reducción* or *misiones*, was the Spanish colonial practice — both civil and religious—of spatially concentrating indigenous peoples into planned towns to harness their labor in mines and fields and convert them to Christianity. Many towns and cities across Latin America today began as *congregaciones*, which were constructed and governed by strict edicts from the crown.
10. R. Andersson, Paige, “Grounding Progress and Mexican Potential: Nineteenth Century Representations of *Congregación* and National Unity,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 28:2 (2019): 235–251. DOI: 10.1080/13569325.2019.1620710
11. The *ejido* refers to communally held lands distributed to campesinos by the post-revolutionary Mexican state, with the greatest number granted during the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas. In the turn to neoliberalism since the 1970s, but most especially since the 1994 passage of NAFTA, there has been a concerted effort to re-privatize lands. For a history of the term and concept, see

- Emilio Kourí, "La invención del ejido," *Nexos* 37.445 (2015): 54-61.
12. Tore C. Olsson, *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). See also Mikael Wolfe, *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), where Wolfe argues that campesinos often also advocated for access to these technologies, too, despite the fact that they were environmentally devastating and socially unsustainable.
  13. For detailed histories on guerrilla resistance movements in Mexico during this period, see Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
  14. For more on the massacre, see <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/mexico/2021-06-10/corpus-christi-massacre-fifty-years>.
  15. In other words, it is impossible to know whether Cleo is asserting feminist choice to reject motherhood regardless of her relationship, economic status, or personal desire. Alternatively, to what extent is not wanting the child a direct consequence of her precarity?
  16. There is not space here, but the scene is ripe for further analysis on the commentary and role of elite women (the wives), the English/Spanish dynamic, and the workers and children in the background.
  17. For an in-depth analysis of the Norwegian song's meaning, see Erick Tovar, "Nostalgia y misticismo vikingo en *Roma* de Cuarón." <https://cineoculto.com/2018/12/nostalgia-y-misticismo-vikingo-en-roma-de-cuaron/>
  18. Olsson, *Agrarian Crossings* 180-181.
  19. See Marcos Eduardo Ávalos Reyes. "Temporada de huracanes de Fernanda Melchor: una lectura del cuerpo desde el terreno del chisme y la abyección," *Connotas. Revista de crítica y teoría literarias* 19 (2020): 53-70 and, Jaffe Dilean Robles Lomelí, "El Chisme Como Representación Histórica de La Ausencia En Temporada de Huracanes de Fernanda Melchor," *Revista de Historia de América* 161 (2021): 435-58.
  20. Mat Youkee, "Gothic becomes Latin America's go-to genre as writers turn to the dark side," *The Guardian* October 31 (2021). Youkee notes a surge in the gothic, particularly in South American literature, but it is worth noting that from the 1950s through the 1970s, several Mexican films and narratives were written that could be interpreted for their gothic tones, including but not limited to the stories of Juan Rulfo, the novels of Rosario Castellanos, Amparo Dávila's short story "El huesped," and several films from the 1970s such as Gleyzer's *La revolución congelada* (1971), Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (1978), and possibly even Felipe Cazal's *La Canoa* and *El año de la peste*. Additionally, Kersten Oloff's reading of *Pedro Páramo* and *Aura* in "The 'Monstrous Head' and the 'Mouth of Hell': The Gothic Ecologies of the 'Mexican Miracle,'" *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America*, ed. Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016) offers a fantastic exploration of the relationship between ecology and the gothic in Mexico.
  21. Olsson, 178, 181, 188, 194.
  22. This is not to say that men are not alienated from the land, as well, just that, as Federici explains, this process occurred on gendered terms, ultimately leading to further divisions. For another reading of Melchor via Federici, see Victoria Baena's 2020 review of the novel, "The Murder of a Witch,"

*Dissent Magazine* Fall (2020).

23. Melchor, *Temporada* 15. The mountainside is also where the Witch is rumored to have found herbs to make the poison that she allegedly used to kill her husband and take his land.
24. *Temporada* 15. Fernanda Melchor, Trans. Sophie Hughes, *Hurricane Season*, (New York: New Directions, 2020) 7.
25. In a celebration of Federici's work, So Mayer writes of the connections between colonialism, othering, and accumulation: "Similarly scattered mentions of the parallels between beliefs about witches and Jews (including the idea, linked to devil worship, that both had horns) suggest that there is generative thinking to be done with a broader map of Europe in terms of beliefs, social structures and economics (considering the forced position of European Jews as money-lenders), particularly with the interconnections between the Crusades, Reconquista and the conquest of the Americas, to understand the configuration of Othering that continues to arise so dangerously in European populism." See Mayer, So, "House Plants and Huacas" *Caliban and the Witch: A Verso Roundtable* (2019). <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4463-house-plants-and-huacas>
26. Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (New York: AK Press, 2004) 64.
27. *Temporada* 19; Trans. Hughes, *Hurricane Season* 10.
28. *Temporada* 107-8.
29. *Temporada* 218; *Hurricane* 205-206.
30. *Temporada* 216; *Hurricane* 204.
31. Whitener's reading of the cadaver replacing the calavera as emblematic of culture's exchange with late capitalist circulation in Mexico is prescient here, where the Witch is described as a rotting cadaver, as well as the bodies the grandfather is burying. See Brian S. Whitener, *Crisis Cultures: The rise of finance in Mexico and Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019) 132-134.
32. Bernes, "The Belly" 364. "But thinking the unity of humanity and nature does not overcome the practical rifts in this flow of flows; it does not overcome the division between town and country, which is a real break within matter, not merely a theoretical one...This is not an epistemological division so much as a real one, and dealing with its effects requires practical reorganization of the relationship between humans and nature, not a mere rethinking of the problematic."
33. "The Belly" 367.
34. Fraser, *Climates of Capital* 97.



## **World-Ecology as Crisis Theory: Violence and Reproduction in Contemporary Mexican Documentary**

**Brian Whitener**

Ostula, a Nahuatl community in the Mexican state of Michoacán, sits within 19,000 hectares of Nahuatl land running along the Pacific coast and encompassing twenty-two communities. The land has been inhabited since before the conquest but only in 1964 was the Nahuatl's possession officially recognized by the state.<sup>1</sup> While their lands had been invaded and were constantly under threat even after official recognition, after the explosion of state and paramilitary violence in Mexico in 2006, the community has found themselves under intense pressure.<sup>2</sup> On the northern edge of their territory, mestizo smallholders had invaded their land; mining companies had won concessions to some of these same parcels; and drug logistics organizations were taking over towns to use for drug transport and to ship illegally mined ore and wood to China.<sup>3</sup> Ostula was, and is, not alone in facing this threat. At the 2009 National Indigenous Congress, representatives of indigenous groups from 9 states in Mexico signed the Ostula Manifesto, a document declaring the right of indigenous groups to armed self-defense of their lands.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks later the community of Ostula founded a community police and defense force and proceeded to recover their lands and expel all paramilitary and drug logistics groups from their territory.<sup>5</sup> Through constant vigilance and in spite of frequent attacks, they have managed fend off control and dispossession of their lands, as all around them in Michoacán and across Mexico, territories have been seized, cleared, and opened to capital.

This battle — for the preservation of land and against military and paramilitary violence and control — which the community of Ostula and communities like it around Mexico are still fighting, takes place against the backdrop of what Jason Moore has identified as a signal crisis of capitalism's world-ecology. As the ecological surplus has fallen, states and capital, hungry for new territories and vistas for exploitation, have gone on the offensive in Mexico seizing lands, distributing death and destruction, and dominating accumulation through violence. Sharae Deckard, building on the analysis of Moore, has described Mexico's neoliberal ecological regime since the 1980s:

Mexico's situation over these three decades displays all the hallmarks of the neoliberal accumulation regime as described by Moore: new profit was achieved through the combination of plunder and productivity, in which the enclosure of new geographical frontiers and appropriation of new sources of raw materials, energy (facilitated by Mexico's oil boom), food (via the institution of a mass agro-food sector) and labor power (through deruralization and the opening of the peasant sector) was joined with scientific-technical advances in labor productivity (the export assembly-plant), while at the same time distinguished by the hegemony of finance capital over the accumulation process, which discouraged long-term productive investment in preference of the short-term profits to be gained from asset-stripping and outright plunder.<sup>6</sup>

Deckard's analysis of Mexico's ecological regime remains an accurate description of the present, even several years into the Andrés Manuel López Obrador administration, with one exception: the increasing importance of violence or armed force in the process of accumulation.<sup>7</sup> The waves of direct violence, disappearance, and seizures of land and resources at their current scale have no precedent in the neoliberal period in Mexico and as such represent a profound new moment of on-going primitive accumulation joined to an expansion of immiseration. However, there is also newness here in the extent to which violence and paramilitarization have come to organize the entire process of accumulation, including exploitation, as theorists such as Ana Esther Ceceña have noted.<sup>8</sup> To understand and explain the longevity of para-military force and terror in accumulation and to make sense of its lived political reality, I argue we must position it within a value theoretical and world-ecological frame.

Before we advance in our discussion it is important to say a bit more about what "violence," that famously capacious and imprecise term, means here. In this article, I will be using violence to refer to forms of direct violence, often armed, often resulting in death, dispossession, and disappearance.<sup>9</sup> Direct, armed, or para-state violence functions, as Dawn Paley argues, as a form of neoliberal war and expanded counterinsurgency in Mexico.<sup>10</sup> After a bitterly contested presidential election in 2006 between Felipe Calderón and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the official elections results gave Calderón a lead of less than 1 percent. While López Obrador and his PRD party called for a full recount of votes, Calderón was hastily inaugurated in the Mexican Senate in a ceremony that lasted 5 minutes and ended with fistfights breaking out between legislators. Facing the prospect of trying to govern from a profoundly delegitimated position and facing important social movements and uprisings across the country, ten days later Calderón sent the Mexican Army into Michoacán under the pretext of combating drug trafficking. This was the first operation of what became the stunningly mislabeled "drug war," which instead of ending violence has seeded it, though unevenly, into every corner of the country. Figures vary but since 2006

more than 350,000 are dead and more than 70,000 disappeared, a catastrophic loss of life and community which is on-going.<sup>11</sup> While politics can explain the beginning of this military and paramilitary violence, it cannot explain its longevity—only the usefulness of the violence for state and capital and their ecological projects can do so.

Misconceptions about the nature and meaning of this violence are many. Most pernicious is the common narrative that the violence in Mexico today results from a confrontation between two groups, shadowy drug cartels bent on profit without limits and the state's military and police forces who are struggling to restore order and peace. As Oswaldo Zavala's masterful *Los carteles no existen* (*The Cartels Don't Exist*) shows, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, there is widespread interpenetration between the state and paramilitary groups, so much that Zavala argues "esa violencia obedece más a las estrategias disciplinarias de las propias estructuras del Estado que a la acción criminal de los supuestos 'narcos'" ["this violence obeys more the disciplinary strategies of the structures of the state than the criminal acts of the so-called 'narcos'"].<sup>12</sup> As Benjamin T. Smith notes, releasing the military from their barracks did not decrease the amount of violence, it increased it and led to further imbrications between the police and military and drug logistics organizations.<sup>13</sup>

However, there is another side to this discussion, as Dawn Paley demonstrated in her *Drug War Capitalism*. The "violence" we often see in the news media appears spontaneous and without reason. What Paley demonstrates is the violence of the "drug war," which now has spilled over into so many other areas of life, serves to open new areas of accumulation for capital and to discipline, and remove, those who stand in the way.<sup>14</sup> This violence comes from both the military and police forces and from drug logistics organizations that are linked with them in complicated, obscure ways. Because of this I will refer to the violence as paramilitary or as para-state and what I mean is that it is both of and alongside the state and its armed forces.

This violence is immanently ecological in two ways: it forms a part of an ecological project to open new territories for accumulation and to discipline labor but it is also driven by the consequences of an on-going ecological collapse. As deforestation, rising temperatures, water scarcity, and contamination proceed and as the global and Mexican economies have stagnated, Mexican and international capital have had to look at marginal, dearly held, or fiercely contested spaces and sites for new inputs and sources of accumulation and have leaned on direct force to oversee the entire process of accumulation.

These dramatic transformations in Mexico need to be positioned within Jason Moore's world-ecology or his prescient analysis of a world trapped in a signal crisis of the tendency of the ecological surplus to fall. In Moore's argument, without an ever-expanding stream of cheap resources (including labor) capitalism stagnates. As ecological limits have been hit, prices for key inputs have risen and capitalism has begun to generate "increasingly direct and immediate barriers to the expanded reproduction of capital," or "negative value" as Moore calls it.<sup>15</sup> Moore's work intervenes

into one of the key debates of the present wherein Mexico should be a focal point of discussion: will either capitalism or humanity survive the ecological contradictions of the Capitalocene? Will the signal crisis of capitalism turn into a terminal one? Moore, along with many other Marxist critics, is skeptical of capitalism's ability to solve the contradictions it has generated. I share in this sentiment but contend that posing these questions in a Mexican context requires their reframing. Instead of an either/or question of capitalism's survival pitched on a theoretical level, the present and very real world-ecological crisis in Mexico — including the domination of finance, the limits of and damages caused by industrial agriculture and mining, and the outsized role of violence and terror in the accumulation process — put the question in the tense of the present progressive: how are capitalists attempting to extend the life of capitalism in spite of the terrible consequences of its domination of the planet, particularly in hotly contested territories of the global periphery and semi-periphery? What I want to explore in this essay is how para-state violence being used in Mexico to extend capitalism's life and preserve its disastrous world-ecology can be integrated into Moore's ecological value theory and how cultural works that center these forms of violence outline an emerging political imaginary of reproduction and self-defense as a response to the present signal crisis.

In the first part of this essay, I approach Jason Moore's world-ecology as a theory of crisis to test its utility for making sense of the particular social and political consequences of ecological pressure in contemporary Mexico. I argue Moore's crisis theory tends towards the monocausal: if capitalism does not expand appropriation more quickly than exploitation (and thus push down the price of labor, energy, raw materials, and food) then crisis sets in. I suggest that in the work of Ernest Mandel we find a dynamic, multi-variable approach to capitalist crisis (and capitalist expansion) which can enrich Moore's theorization. Mandel's work centers the role of the extra-economic, particularly violence, in capitalist recovery from crisis which, I argue, allows us to grasp the role of violence in present state and capitalist attempts to maintain and extend accumulation.<sup>16</sup> By holding together Moore and Mandel, I build a theory of crises and their overcoming which give us the necessary tools for holding together the way ecological pressures have combined with para-state violence in Mexico.

In the second half of the essay, I turn to the recent documentary films *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* [*Kings of the Town that Does Not Exist*] (2015) and *Caminando hacia la autonomia* [*Walking Towards Autonomy*] (2015) approaching them as complex sites where the condensation of ecological and economic pressures in Mexico can be registered. I read these films as a form of "ecological realism," or a charting of new social forms produced under the pressure of ecological crisis and the para-militarization of accumulation. Through a discussion of these films, I show how ecological pressure and violence twine together to produce a larger crisis of reproduction. In each film we can see communities articulating new forms of social

reproduction and learning to live differently in the context of ecological pressure and catastrophe. These films demonstrate how ecological pressure and violence create crises of reproduction, which leads to politics that turn around alternative forms of reproduction. As a result, I argue these films show that any coming ecological politics has to join an understanding of the contradictions of political economy and the mediations of crisis as security as an everyday obstacle to survival. Ultimately, what my analysis illustrates is that ecological catastrophe, crisis, and pressure imply a politics that simultaneously is ecological and abolitionist, one that requires new forms of self-defense and social reproduction.

Prior cultural criticism has taken up Moore's work in, at least, two important ways. The notion and centrality of commodity frontiers have been used by critics such as Michael Niblett in his masterful *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950* to remap relations between literature and political economy. The idea of capitalism as possessing ecological regimes has been deployed by Sharae Deckard to offer an account of world literature that is "not merely world-systemic but world-ecological in its horizon."<sup>17</sup> In this essay my approach to Moore and the politics of cultural analysis is other. While other critics have utilized Moore's work to analyze the mediations between political economy and culture, the present essay specifically centers value theory and global value relations. It investigates and intervenes into debates in value and crisis theory to then focus on the mediations between global value relations and cultural production. Its aim is to read the aesthetic modes emerging from ecological pressure and para-militarized accumulation alongside the changes, patterns, and transformations of value and value relations to constitute a materialist cultural theory of value.

### **World-Ecology as Crisis Theory**

One of the most outstanding features of Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* is how it balances Marxist value theory with extensions of it. Value theory in its most basic form sees labor as the site of value production in capitalist societies, but the labor-centrism of some orthodox versions of value theory has been critiqued by feminists, anti-racists, and environmentalists. Moore's book holds together these two traditions of value theory and its extensions and revisions from allied positions. Moore envisions capitalism as a dialectic between two processes: appropriation, where unpaid work/energy is plundered, and exploitation, where those streams of appropriated work/energy are put to work. Moore, however, inverts the traditional relationship between these two moments:

For if the production of capital has been the strategic pivot of capitalism, to an even greater extent accumulation has unfolded through the appropriation of planetary work/energy. Such appropriation — of cheap resources, yes ("taps"), but also of cheap garbage ("sinks") — does not



produce capital as “value”; but it does produce the relations, spaces, and work/energy that make value possible. Capitalism does generalize commodity relations, but the actual extent of such generalization depends on an even greater generalization: the appropriation of unpaid work/energy.<sup>18</sup>

For Moore, in other words, appropriation is the key driver of the system; it is, as he says elsewhere, the pedestal on which exploitation sits.<sup>19</sup> Moore wants to train our attention on this vast world of so-called appropriation, which includes the realms of unpaid work by women in the home and natural resources ripped from the earth. As Sara Nelson has insightfully observed, “rather than appropriation operating in the service of capitalization (by expanding commodity relations), Moore suggests that capital’s guiding imperative is in fact to expand the sphere of appropriation.”<sup>20</sup>

Appropriation is imminently cultural for Moore. Work and energy are not just found but rather they must be made available to capital, which requires science, culture, and geopower. Moore productively advances current conversations around on-going primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession by demonstrating how nature must be made legible as a resource through a vast set of cultural practices before it can be appropriated and by clearly specifying how appropriation ties into exploitation.<sup>21</sup> To make vast realms of work/energy available to capital, science and scientific revolutions have been paramount in making nature “nature,” that is visible as source, supply, and input. Just as important for Moore’s account are the global devices of culture and geopower — and while Moore does not dwell much on race there is space here in his theory for an account of it.<sup>22</sup> For Moore, capitalism is defined by exploitation, but exploitation requires an expanding field of appropriation and for capitalism to function, the zone of appropriation must expand “faster than the zone of commodification.”<sup>23</sup> Capitalism needs to secure the acquisition of what Moore calls the “four Cheaps,” labor, food, energy, and raw materials, for as close to free as it possibly can.<sup>24</sup> To do so requires a vast cultural apparatus of knowledge and power, including technologies such as mapping, the hard sciences, and the softer sciences of persuasion and control.

Moore’s other intervention is to bring front and center the falling rate of profit, which was once fundamental to Marxist thought but remains a minor current even within the on-going Marxist revival.<sup>25</sup> In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx develops a theory of how capitalism can enter into, and importantly, exit out of crisis by examining the impact of different variables on the rate of profit. The rate of profit is simply the society-wide average profit of capitalists within a given time frame. Marx argues that if unchecked the rate of profit has a tendency to fall, meaning that over time capitalist enterprises make less and less leading to a potential crisis. In the most basic scenario as capitalists invest in machinery and raw materials (or constant capital), the number or amount of laborers (also known as variable capital) necessary can decline. Because

labor is the quintessential source of value, if this changing ratio of machinery and raw materials to labor (known as the organic composition of capital) goes unchecked the overall rate of profit will decline. If it declines enough it leads to a crisis. This very shorthand sketch is one of the versions of crisis theory which we find in Marx's works. It has been an influential one in different moments of twentieth century Marxism and the concept, if not the details, are central to Moore's world-ecology.

Moore argues that in order to avoid crisis capitalism must expand appropriation (and push down the price of the four Cheaps) more quickly than the zone of exploitation expands and labor productivity rises. This is a crisis tendency in capitalism that Moore, recovering the term from Marx, calls "underproduction" or "the insufficient flow of labor, food, energy, and materials relative to the demands of value production."<sup>26</sup> This conceptual move frames Moore's intervention into current debates on whether and if capitalism has a future on this planet. Against green capitalists who argue that market-based solutions can solve the crisis and Marxists who believe that a technological fix is possible, Moore argues that capitalism as a world-ecological project has run up against limits of its own making and entered into a signal crisis — a crisis that is not yet a terminal crisis but one that is on its way to becoming one. As Moore writes:

Understanding the capital relation as co-produced in and through the web of life entails a

conceptualization of capital's internal crises as co-produced: the rising organic composition of capital, broadly conceived, entails the rising capitalized composition of global nature. The two are distinct expressions for a singular, uneven, historical process. If the former generates a tendency towards a declining rate of profit, the latter not only reinforced the former but also generates a new set of problems. These problems as I will try to make clear, combine the old and the new: in part, resource depletion and rising costs of production, yes. But in part a destabilization of the condition of biospheric stability and biological health that have obtained for centuries, even millennia.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, with no new frontiers or technological revolutions on the horizon that could increase appropriation, capitalism enters into a twinned crisis of rising organic composition of capital and of capitalized composition of global nature. And at the same time, these two conditions produce a new set of problems, including the present global climate crisis.

Moore's world-ecology blends then a thoroughly culturalist account of capitalist accumulation with one based in Marxian value theory, where the tendency of the rate of profit and of the ecological surplus to fall play a critical role. Moore rehabilitates Marx's crisis theory of a declining rate of profit by recasting it within an ecological

frame where appropriation necessarily must outpace exploitation to stave off crisis. The point of difference I have with Moore is in how his theory takes the theoretical richness of Marx's value and crisis theory and tends to reduce it to a narrative of predominantly one variable: the end of limitless appropriation or the closure of the Great Frontier. As he writes: "The great secret and the great accomplishment of capitalist civilization has been to not pay its bills. Frontiers made that possible. Their closure is the end of Cheap Nature — and with it, the end of capitalism's free ride."<sup>28</sup> There is an ambiguity here: at times it sounds like Moore believes capitalism might simply collapse without frontiers and, consequently, that the end of the Great Frontier means simply that capitalism might expire without being pushed.<sup>29</sup>

The root of this ambiguity is that Moore's wants to hold onto historical richness but also to make a winnowing theoretical claim. In other words, as Michael Neblitt has helpfully noted, "The difficulty Moore faces ... is in combining his account of large-scale historical and economic change with his otherwise value-relational approach to the contradictory unity of exploitation and appropriation."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most generous reading one could make of Moore is that his stand-alone essays (both before and after the publication of his book) do more of the work of combining a value theoretical and historical account — but even having said this there has yet to be a full synthesis of these two aspects of his work, particularly of the present and particularly at the level of value theory.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, one can find examples in more recent work of the tendency to privilege appropriation and the ending of frontiers as the key, and at times, only, variable for understanding crisis. Take for example, this passage from a 2019 interview:

Negative-value, then, can be understood as a barrier to capital accumulation that cannot be fixed on the "business as usual" model of the past five centuries. The end of the Holocene, ushered in by capital's radical carbonization of the atmospheric commons, is a paradigmatic example (but not the only one). The technical means for an immediate transition to renewable energy exists - as the brilliant Andreas Malm (2018) and others have shown. And yet such a transition is nowhere on the horizon. Why? Because the five century model of capitalism is ruthlessly anarchic and competitive.<sup>32</sup>

Because of the centrality of the exhaustion of the Great Frontier has for him, Moore discards a sudden shift of capital into an energy transition as impossible. Even if, from the perspective of the present, a full commitment seems unlikely, certainly we have to note that Green New Deal energy has a number of adherents and bet-hedgers.<sup>33</sup> If such a transition kicked in, perhaps it would not create an expansionary wave but certainly it would deepen the new commodity frontier around lithium and possibly provide a momentary stabilization and slowing of the downturn. From within Moore's

narrowed approach to value relations, however, there often isn't space to see or to explore the potential impact of these shifts.

There are then two salient arguments for keeping in play other variables in the conception of how capitalism will respond to the present. First, the emphasis on the closure of the frontier and negative value means Moore's perspective on contemporary capitalism is largely negative: that is, focused on the strategies that Moore believes will no longer work. This can obscure the point that capitalists and states will, of course, pursue strategies to restart or increase accumulation, and that this will look different depending on where one is on the globe. We need a means of tracking these strategies and that means is a more expansive account of value relations. Second, even if no upturn is possible, there is still a need to pay attention to all the variables at play, because they will determine the political ground, which will not only or necessarily be defined by the closing of the frontier, negative value, or the end of Cheap Nature. Because we can't know which variables or which set of tactics to forestall, a declining rate of profit will be the most salient politically in a given moment; we have to have an account of the present that holds these variables, tactics, and plans together in their totality and interconnectedness. In protests against high bread prices like those of 2008, we are able to draw a straight line between the great frontier closing and the political form. But in Mexico, there is no such clear and direct mediation between Moore's primary crisis variables and the present political forms, and this demands of us a different accounting.

To accomplish this, I turn to the work of twentieth-century Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel. Mandel's work is concerned precisely not just with the question of how capitalism enters into crisis but with how capitalism has successfully exited crises in the past. On my account, Mandel provides us with a dynamic account of crises and recoveries. Moreover, one of the key variables he touches on is that of violence. My goal in the next section is not to substitute Mandel for Moore but rather to synthesize aspects of them to produce a more robust theory that can help us grasp not to just the centrality of para-state violence in Mexican accumulation but what this will mean for a political struggle against and within capitalism's world-ecological signal crisis.

### **Ernest Mandel and Capital's Countervailing Tendencies**

Of twentieth-century Marxists, Ernest Mandel was the theorist who most seriously investigated and defended the analytic of the falling rate of profit. The corpus of Mandel's work spans more than half a century, so for the purposes of this essay I will focus on his *Long Waves of Capitalist Development* which is the last major formulation of his theoretical concerns and deals with precisely some of the same questions which drive Moore's own work. A recurrent concern for Mandel was how and why do booms and crises occur; early in his career the critical question was how to explain the post-war boom and, in the latter stages, the crisis of the 1970s. Mandel positioned his work against other Marxists who argued that, in fact, there was no post-war boom

and against economists of all kinds who argued that the post-war boom signified that capitalism had entered into a new stage and had solved the contradictions which previously plagued it. The first position was stuck in an overly deterministic fidelity to Marx: the orthodox Marxist position was that capitalism was marked by a secular declining rate of profit, so there could be no actual upturn. The second position was marked by an overly determined apologetic for capitalism and an unrealistic belief that no downturn could ever be possible. Against both, Mandel argued for a Marxist approach to booms and crises which centered the tendency for the rate of profit to fall but which was equally attentive to the historical fact that capitalism had, several times, reversed this tendency and to the economic and non-economic variables which made upturns and downturns possible. Mandel's theory was what he called "an accumulation-of-capital theory ... or *rate-of-profit theory*"<sup>34</sup> (author's emphasis) and his research was directed at determining how to explain "*long-term upsurges in the average rate of profit at certain historical turning points, in spite of the cyclic downturn of that same rate of profit at the end of each industrial cycle, and in spite of the secular decline pointing to the historical limit of the capitalist mode of production*" (author's emphasis).<sup>35</sup>

In *Long Waves*, Mandel's approach to these turning points is two-fold. On the one hand, he centers economic variables which exist in a "complex dialectical interplay"<sup>36</sup> and which, in dynamic and overlapping ways, push and pull on the average rate of profit. Mandel saw five factors as predominating, including the rate of surplus value, the organic composition of capital, the turnover rate, the mass of surplus value, and the movement of capital into sectors and geographies with lower organic compositions of capital:

In other words, a sharp increase in the rate of surplus value, a sharp slowdown in the rate of increase of the organic composition of capital, a sudden quickening in the turnover of capital, or a combination of several or all of these factors can explain a sudden upturn in the average rate of profit. In addition, Marx indicated that among the forces dampening the effects of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline are an increase in the mass of surplus value and a flow of capital into countries (and, we should add, sectors) where the average organic composition of capital is significantly lower than in the basic industrial branches of the industrialized capitalist countries.<sup>37</sup>

For Mandel, no one of these variables could explain a significant upturn or downturn in the rate of profit. Rather it was only when these countervailing or reinforcing forces worked together in a "synchronized way"<sup>38</sup> could the rate of profit be shifted off its trajectory. If the countervailing forces were weak then the "tendency of the average rate of profit to decline will assert itself with full force"<sup>39</sup> and a sustained period of depression would follow.



There are limits, however, to what these purely economic variables can explain. Mandel argues that the internal laws of capitalism can explain two phenomena: “the *cumulative nature of each long wave, once it is initiated*” and “the transition from an expansionist long wave to a stagnating long wave” (author’s emphasis).<sup>40</sup> What these purely internal capitalist laws of motion cannot explain is the sudden, long-term uptick in the rate of profit. Mandel is saying, in a sense, that Marx was right, that capitalism suffers from a tendency for the rate of profit to decline. Nonetheless, there have been at least three times (1848, 1893, and 1940) that sustained expansionary waves have followed moments of deep depression in which many believed capitalism had finally hit a historical limit. To explain this, Mandel argues sustained upturns are the result of non-economic factors and explaining the sustained recovery of the rate of profit requires us to include a wider range of dynamics in our analysis:<sup>41</sup>

This upturn cannot be deduced from the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production by themselves. It cannot be deduced from the operation of “capital in general.” It can be understood only if all the concrete forms of capitalist development in a given environment (all the concrete forms and contradictions of “many capitals”) are brought into play. And these imply a whole series of noneconomic factors like wars of conquest, extensions and contractions of the area of capitalist operation, intercapitalist competition, class struggle, revolutions and counterrevolutions, etc. These radical changes in the overall social and geographic environment in which the capitalist mode of production operates in turn detonate, so to speak, radical upheavals in the basic variables of capitalist growth (i.e., they can lead to upheavals in the average rate of profit).<sup>42</sup>

There is a lot here, but what I want to focus right now is how Mandel centers a wide set of countervailing tendencies or variables that can shift the direction of the rate of profit and gives us an expansive account of the role of the non-economic.<sup>43</sup> To be sure, Mandel and Moore start from a similar place: their projects are motivated by critiques of crisis theories which invest too heavily in the purely economic. For Moore, this takes the form of centering appropriation as the pedestal on which exploitation takes place. For Mandel, this takes the form of centering non-economic factors as the explanatory force for upturns and in the overcoming of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline. If we want to think about how states and capitalists might work through the contradictions of climate and ecology, we can already see that Mandel provides us with a broad canvas to work with, but we haven’t established what might be useful about that. So let’s turn there now.<sup>44</sup>

*Long Waves* is a fascinating book partially because of how it and its author are positioned historically. In Mandel, we have a thinker whose work had been directed,

at least in part, for over fifty years at trying to understand why capitalism enters into crisis and how it has been so successful at saving itself from the brink of ruin. In *Long Waves* Mandel is grappling with the very questions which Marxist crisis theorists today are trying to think through. Two questions here are key: first, how, if there has been no major upturn, has capitalism managed to survive since the 1970s and, second, given this history, what means are available to the capitalist system now to try to restart accumulation in the midst of an epochal crisis of climate? In the latter half of *Long Waves*, Mandel addresses from the perspective of the mid-90s essentially the same question that Moore is asking in his work for the present: could there be a sustained upturn given the prevailing conditions or has capitalism hit a historical limit? It is worth spending a moment with Mandel's answer.

He writes that a "new expansionist wave that would significantly increase the rate of economic growth above the average levels of the 1970s 1980s, and 1990s would require an explosive increase in the rate of accumulation and therefore in the average rate of profit and a no less remarkable expansion in the market for capitalist commodities."<sup>45</sup> Mandel's shorthand for expansionary waves is that the market for goods has to expand (meaning as the expansion produces more things those things have to be bought by someone) and labor militancy has to be broken (driving down the cost of labor and lessening the pressure of the organic composition of capital on the rate of profit). Imperialism has been a common means by which markets have been expanded, but clearly that was no longer an option in the 1990s. What Mandel very presciently notes is that for an expansion of market to happen "there would have to occur a huge credit explosion, which would involve several hundreds of billions of dollars."<sup>46</sup> Few writing in 1990 could have foreseen the possibility that countries such as Brazil would have consumer debt problems rivaling the United States in 2020 but Mandel could imagine debt as a countervailing tendency that capitalism could have recourse to in order to sustain the rate of profit.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of breaking labor militancy, Mandel has this to say: "[I]n order to drive up the rate of profit to the extent necessary to change the whole economic climate, under the conditions of capitalism, the capitalists must first decisively break the organizational strength and militancy of the working class in the key industrial countries."<sup>48</sup> While this is something that capitalists most certainly have done, particularly in the United States, unionized labor does still exist in certain critical industries and there is still a wage differential between the minimum wage and unionized wages and benefits. But in imagining what the full defeat of labor would entail Mandel makes an interesting point concerning the role of extra-economic violence:

The important point to stress is that such a drive would imply radical curtailment of the democratic freedoms currently enjoyed in most of the imperialist countries. The numbers of representative spokespersons

of the capitalist class who have confirmed this have become impressive. The previously quoted speech of Sir Charles Carter stated unequivocally that unemployment caused by new technology, coupled with continual inflation, could result in a breakdown of law and order and collapse of the present political system. W. W. Rostow claimed no less unequivocally that the solution lies in a middle way between the welfare economy and the warfare economy. And most ominous of all are the trends spelled out in the report of the Trilateral Commission, *The Crisis of Democracy*, which reflect the convictions of a significant sector of the top leaders of international monopoly capital. They imply a direct attack on “excessive democracy,” and they express the conviction that the types of decisions that will have to be taken in the coming years (in the interests of the capitalist system, obviously) and the very “governmentability” of the imperialist countries will depend on curtailment of democratic freedoms.<sup>49</sup>

Taking Mandel’s synoptic variables of market expansion and labor discipline as our guides, we can see that in the subsequent years there has been no sustained expansion, but capitalists have used the levers indicated by Mandel to keep the system from entirely collapsing. Credit expansion has served as an outlet for the consumption of goods and labor has been disciplined along a number of vectors including the rollback of political participation and liberal democratic norms (which is to say nothing about true democracy). While there is a place for ecology amongst Mandel’s countervailing tendencies, he doesn’t center it and the best he can do is note: “We leave aside the question whether or not mankind’s environment can support another fifty, not to say one hundred, years of economic growth.”<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, I contend that Mandel in partnership with Moore has something valuable to offer us as we attempt to think through what the relationship between ecological crisis and capitalism will look like in the coming years and, more importantly, the conditions under which organizing against crisis and capital will take place. Specifically, Mandel’s wider array of countervailing factors and emphasis on forced-based non-economic factors (such as counter-revolution, state violence, and attacks on political freedoms) give us not only a map of possible levers capitalists will use but also allows us to see how such levers are connected to ecological and economic pressure. However, this has to be combined with Moore’s revelatory value-theoretic approach to capitalist world-ecologies, their internal dynamics, and historical formations and regimes.<sup>51</sup> In a sense, my aim here is simply to use Mandel to make Moore’s account of value relations as supple as it imagines itself to be.

Moore, for his part, tends not to center or highlight violence or direct coercion.<sup>52</sup> The closest he comes is in his definition of appropriation when he writes, “*Accumulation by appropriation* involves those extra-economic processes — perhaps directly coercive, but also cultural and calculative — through which capital gains access to minimally or

non-commodified natures for free, or as close to free as it can get. If appropriation is partly about primitive accumulation, it is equally about the cultural hegemonies and scientific-technical repertoires that allow for unpaid work/energy to be mobilized.”<sup>53</sup> There are, of course, reasons for this. Moore’s intervention is against classic accounts of primitive accumulation as primarily driven by direct coercion. As an astute theorist working after the cultural turn, Moore wants to highlight how important science, knowledge, and cultural power was and are to the project of appropriation. Nonetheless, this helpful intervention means that violence gets abstracted in his theoretical apparatus (though less so in his historical account).<sup>54</sup> In Moore, then, violence and direct coercion are subsumed into a technics of appropriation that are equally, or depending on the passage, predominantly, cultural and scientific. A strength of Mandel is that his work allows us to see violence and the extra-economic as potential and autonomous partial responses to long-term economic and ecological pressures and as more than adjuncts to a process of primitive accumulation.<sup>55</sup>

Having said all this, both Moore and Mandel (if we extrapolate his argument forward) would agree that an upturn in the present seems unlikely, although each would give a different account of why. Without a doubt, Moore’s work enables us to see, in a *longue durée*, how and why a return of cheap inputs is unlikely (in ways Mandel’s work could never do). Moore, unfortunately, can’t take us any further than this into the political and social realm of the present decline, as his work doesn’t have much to say about how capitalists might try to restart accumulation, or the specific social and political forms crisis might take. For those thought experiments, we need a theorist of the upturn and violence as an autonomous variable: enter Mandel. For precisely what we see around us, particularly in Mexico, is that direct, armed force, now more than ever, is critical, not to jump starting a new wave of expansionary accumulation, but to counteracting the tendency of the rate of profit to decline. Although there are many problems with GDP as a metric, between 2010 and 2018, Mexico’s GDP grew 3.0% per year as waves of violence washed across regions of the country, and in technologically advanced sectors of the economy the returns have been higher.<sup>56</sup> Being able to account for violence as a partially autonomous variable in accumulation is critical since we are starting to see, as discussed in the next section, that organizing against ecological crisis will also have to be, and perhaps first of all, organizing against state and capitalist violence. What we see in Mexico today is that ecology from below and to the left will have to walk hand-in-hand with truly democratic forms of security, self-defense, and abolition.

### **Violence and Reproduction in Contemporary Mexican Documentary**

In the years since Mandel’s book crises of capital and ecology have only continued to accumulate. There has been no new expansionary wave, while the rate of profit has been kept afloat with a combination of financial schemes, attacks on labor and dispossession, and the internationalization of the system of production. Alongside this,

as Moore demonstrates, ecological crises and pressures have accumulated to the point that today the question is not if future generations will witness sustained ecological damage but how they might withstand it. As the global rate of profit continues to decline and ecological pressures continue to mount, their repercussions are present everywhere but in particularly acute ways in the periphery and semi-periphery of global capitalism. What does it look like, and what might it look like in the near future, to live through such pressures? In two contemporary Mexican documentaries, *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2015) and *Caminando hacia la autonomía* (2015), we can already see the critical role violence plays in mediating ecological predicaments. In each documentary, what at first appears as a situation of ecological pressure — flooding resulting from a new dam in the case of *Los Reyes* and illegal logging in the case of *Caminando* — turns out to be layered with para-state violence, and, moreover, this violence is a significant mediation which political organizing is responding to.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a boom of documentary film production in Latin America, to the point where in Argentina documentary films count for almost 40% of all films made.<sup>57</sup> Mexico has also seen a significant increase — due in part to the demand of streaming platforms but also to the curation of major festivals.<sup>58</sup> The same is true for critical work on film. Where once documentary was the oft overlooked cousin of fiction filmmaking, the last decade has seen a number of important edited collections addressing this gap in theorization, including Miriam Haddu and Joanna Pages' *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (2009), Antonio Traverso and Kristi M. Wilson's *Political Documentary Cinema in Latin America* (2014), and María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara's *Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium* (2016).<sup>59</sup>

While the aesthetic strategies of *Los reyes* and *Caminando* are vastly different, they are both examples of what Julianne Burton calls the “social documentary” tradition in Latin America as their aim is to document social conditions and political struggles.<sup>60</sup> However, each represents a departure from the dominant contemporary trend in documentary filmmaking which Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara have termed “the subjective turn,” or the inclusion of first-person perspectives and reflexive aesthetic strategies which “allow filmmakers to more easily introduce a critical point of view and to deconstruct the narratives that shape individuals and modern societies.”<sup>61</sup> Both *Los reyes* and *Caminando* adopt a more traditional documentary film style of “objective” observation, allowing subjects and editing to do the work of presenting a narrative and providing the viewer with access to a situation and environment.

As mentioned above, the aesthetic strategies of the films, while they do share a broadly objective style of documentary presentation, are radically different. *Los reyes* takes its cues from art house filmmaking traditions, blending sumptuous shots; clever, cerebral editing; and overtones of cinematic horror to produce a captivating visual odyssey into a town destroyed by a dam's construction and the people who resist



and refuse to leave. *Caminando* is a much more straightforward example of Mexican political documentary, similar to films such as *Granito de arena* (2005) and *Recuperando el paraíso* (2017), which have sought to record important social movements in Mexico before they have had a chance to be repressed or forgotten. It employs head-shot interviews, voice-over, and footage of key events to construct an overview of the community of Cherán's struggle against illegal logging and armed domination.

Despite differences in aesthetic approach, I read these films as forming part of what, building on Badia, Cetinić, and Diamanti's notion of "climate realism," I call "ecological realism." In their discussion of climate realism, Badia, Cetinić, and Diamanti note the present is marked by the proliferation of realisms (speculative, indigenous, capitalist, etc.) and they argue this proliferation is indicative of the fact that "figurative mediations of climate will prove as necessary to climate realism today as the scientific facts that mark its reality."<sup>62</sup> They define climate realism as "a reparatory concept that foregrounds the political and ecological contradictions inherent in capital's facility with energy" and note that "[t]he core suggestion of Climate Realism, then, is that weird weather today is not weird just because it is unseasonable, but also because it names features of the present that strain the epistemological and historical underpinnings of meteorology, philosophy, realist aesthetics, cultural criticism, and the physical sciences — namely, it erodes traditional distinctions that have stabilized disciplinary work in both the arts and sciences."<sup>63</sup> As is apparent, their definition foregrounds weather as a site of increasing weirdness which pushes at epistemological limits and calls for new realisms and new means of description and imagination.

Neither *Los reyes* nor *Caminando* is a film about weather specifically; however, each foregrounds the production of new means of living in common and new forms of social reproduction or a community's means of producing the day-to-day conditions of its survival.<sup>64</sup> The newness or weirdness of each is located not in weather but rather in a proliferation of new forms of human relation in the face of para-military violence driven by the ecological pressures of capitalist accumulation. Instead of climate realism, we could see them as exercises in "ecological realism": each film represents an attempt to map the improbable and strangely beautiful forms of human community and resistance that have spread in Mexico as the traditional norms of governance and accumulation have shifted under the weight of para-militarized strategies of accumulation. Ecological realism, then, as it makes available to perception these new social forms is a direct response to the expansion of para-state violence across the accumulation process as a means to stabilize and elevate the rate of profit. At the same time, these two particular ecological-realist works demonstrate how, as Nancy Fraser argues, "Social reproduction is ... intimately entwined with ecological reproduction, which is why so many crises of the first are also crises of the second — and why so many struggles over nature are also struggles over ways of life."<sup>65</sup>

*Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* most explicitly foregrounds the strangeness of its



community, as it opens with a shot from a camera affixed to the front of a boat. In the distance are buildings half-submerged in water but no voice or text clarifies for us where we are or why. The film, which traffics in such liminal states and indirection, uses interviews to slowly reveal the town, San Marcos, is partially submerged during portions of the year because of a new dam that was built. Through interviews with the remaining residents the film pulls the curtain back on a world of alternate social reproduction, of people learning how to live differently after an environmental catastrophe. A man faithfully paddles a boat out to a cow stranded on an island because of the floods to feed it. Another resident compares himself and his wife to “tordos” — birds who live in other birds’ nests — implying that he and his wife have occupied someone else’s house in the village. A couple cook outside at night over a fire with a flashlight—improbably the town still has electricity but it has gone out. The film doesn’t explain or narrate or frame these scenes in a particular way — it allows them to exist in their strangeness and in so doing allows the viewer to do the cognitive work of trying to understand what is happening in this peculiar town. What the film slowly discloses over the course of 83 minutes is the emergence of new forms of life in the midst of an on-going ecological disaster.

At the same time, the film, using its indirect style, presents another element of this new world: violence. Again and again in the interviews, dark shadows emerge and ominous events are referred to but not directly explained. The form of the film mirrors the circumspection of its protagonists: there are many things which can’t be directly said or presented and are best gestured to by pointed silences. The couple who were cooking over a fire mention feeling scared. One says, “If there was something we would have left by now” and the other replies, “Let’s hope they never come.” One begins to talk of soldiers visiting and the other says, “Let’s not talk about it ... Like you say, the walls have ears.” Later in the film, we get another story but this time with more detail. A man describes being chased and shot at in his truck, escaping only by driving on the rims of his car after his tires were shot out. He notes that this wasn’t as bad as what other people went through and concludes darkly that “life doesn’t have any handles, nothing to hold on to. We’re just floating through the universe.” What we see is that this is an abandoned town but one filled with violence, and we begin to question whether people fled from the water, the armed violence, or both. Finally at the very end, in a set of intertitles, the film reveals its truth. The film is dedicated to those community organizers who fought and were killed organizing for justice in the aftermath of the dam project.<sup>66</sup> In other words, what the film has captured is a classic example of paramilitary violence used to discipline resistance, in this case to a megaproject resulting in ecological damage to the town of San Marcos. In fact, so successful have the *comuneros* of San Marcos been in their resistance that as of writing the government has still not fully and legally appropriated their land and, even though the face of the dam has been built, it is still not fully functional.<sup>67</sup>

*Caminando hacia la autonomía* registers a similar overlay between ecology and

para-military violence. The film documents the struggle of the Pur'êpecha community of Cherán to secure their community land holdings against illegal logging. The film narrates how one morning, after years of having their lands stripped, a group of women stopped a truck transporting stolen trees, and the city erupted in a struggle to prevent further logging. Residents set up and kept watch at nightly blockades and bonfires all around the city. When representatives of political parties and police tried to stop this process, residents expelled them and organized themselves to return town governance to *usos y costumbres* or governance by assembly and Indigenous common law. In so doing, Cherán became a symbol of resistance to the imbrication of the government with drug logistics organizations in Mexico and proof that other ways of living are still possible. The documentary registers the community's process of struggle and the social forms and relations that were produced alongside it. As it tracks the selection of the first council and the other deliberative bodies (such as a women's group) that emerge during the process, the film shows us all the work that goes into producing this new political formation. We also see the importance of different informal public spaces, like the bonfires, where people come together to share ideas, plan, and build new social relations.

At the same time, *Caminando* presents a community with an anti-capitalist relationship to land. The Cherán community holds in common 17,000 hectares of land, much of which is forested. The community has used this land for generations to supply its needs and the community has carefully taken care of it, replanting trees, tending to the forests, and living in a symbiotic relationship with it. As one interviewee explains, "We don't look at a tree like money ... it is a source of life." It is this deep relationship, as the film shows us, which provoked the initial uprising. In recent years in Mexico, drug logistics groups have diversified their income streams, turning to kidnapping, extortion, and resource capture.<sup>68</sup> In Cherán these groups saw an unspoiled resource that could be plundered. After almost half of their land was deforested in only a few years, community members felt called to defend the land and their custodianship of it. Lest we think Cherán is a small village isolated from global capitalism, one interviewee helpfully notes there is a direct connection between the logging, *narco-gobierno* in Mexico and foreign investors or, in other words, the search for new streams of profit under the pressure of a declining global rate of profit.

While *Los reyes* shows the effects of para-state violence as it has spread across Mexico and gestures to resistance, *Caminando* shows us people actively organizing against it. Before the uprising, Cherán was terrorized by armed violence and after they sustained serious threats and attacks from para-state groups. This intimate relationship with para-state violence gives community members an insightful relationship to it. The documentary opens with a young women's voice explaining what it means to live and fight in such a situation. She says, "People who think that peace can be accomplished through peace, must be people who have never lived through a situation of violence .... The only way to achieve peace is by first hitting

back, and getting rid of the people who wish to destroy us.” Both *Caminando* and *Los reyes* show alternative social worlds, experiments in living differently with ecological pressure and under threat by para-state violence which wants to secure areas for accumulation and erase any opposition from them. In *Caminando* the need to solve a security crisis and repel attacks on alternative social reproduction is present in the immediate foreground; it is a struggle of life or death. However, we can see it in *Los Reyes* as well: to find ways of living in the wake of the dam project means not just learning to live with water but also to solve the violence aimed at those who resist.

Both films also demonstrate communities learning to live differently in the context of ecological pressure and catastrophe. In each, we see communities articulating new forms of social reproduction, or ways and means of securing the reproduction of a community and its individuals over time. And in both cases, learning to live differently or resisting the state and capital-imposed mandates of how to live properly leads to violent repression. Perhaps most importantly, each of the journeys into new forms of social reproduction is set off by a unique ecological situation: the dam in *Los Reyes* and illegal logging in *Caminando*. In each, these ecological crisis situations are connected in specific ways to global capitalism. As deforestation continues globally and in Mexico, logging pressure is applied to areas which previously were exempt from it. As oil prices rise, states and capital have turned to renewable energy projects, such as dams, which lead to displacement and their own set of problems.<sup>69</sup> The violence in each situation is not aleatory but is itself linked to on-going crises and downturns in the global economy. Mega-projects, and other public-private partnerships, are a way for construction and infrastructure companies to pad their bottom-lines with state support and the logging in Cherán is one of many examples of what Paley argues is violence to open up previously off-limits areas to exploitation. In short, what each film shows us in a different way is that capitalist and para-state violence in Mexico is a current and future means for maintaining accumulation in the face of dwindling investment opportunities, rising environmental costs, and the new forms of social relations and social reproduction that are emerging in its midst.

While each film deploys different techniques, at the center of each is an ecological realist charting of new social forms developing from Mexico’s crucible of declining ecological surplus and para-militarized accumulation. Aesthetically, we can see the films as two different experimentations with techniques for apprehending and presenting these phenomena. *Los reyes* draws on traditions of art house cinema and adds tonalities from the horror genre, while *Caminando* turns to the resources of classic political documentary. As a result, the shape of the intervention in each is different. *Los reyes* through its combination of objective documentary and suspenseful editing centers the lived experience of violence in Mexico today — the uncertainty, the silences, the fear and its effects on institutions and social relations. For its part, *Caminando* highlights the process of struggle, centering the presentation of everyday tools and strategies used to produce and rebuild community. We can read each film

as an investigation into the utility of the aesthetic tools of different filmmaking traditions for the cultural work of ecological realism or of mapping the improbable yet necessary forms of human community and resistance that have spread in Mexico in the face of para-militarized strategies of accumulation.

What these contemporary Mexican documentaries can help us see is how political responses to conditions resulting from a declining ecological surplus are both ecological and abolitionist in nature, centering both self-defense and new forms of social relations and reproduction. Abolitionist in this context means calling for the end, not just of police violence and policing institutions, but military and paramilitary violence and military institutions as well — which has been a long-standing demand of indigenous groups in Mexico. It also means that these demands, and the practices of self-defense, communal care, and transformational justice which move alongside them, are in clear dialogue with the best spirit of the abolitionist tradition. Moreover, in these documentaries we can see that ecology and abolition, self-defense and new social relations, require and imply each other. If in advance of or on the heels of ecological catastrophe, crisis, and pressure we find state and capitalist violence, then politics must directly concern itself not only with ecological matters but with the cessation and abolition of this violence. This means, on the one hand, the abolition of the repressive forces and institutions, and, on the other, self-defense or the building of capacity for generating new forms of security and justice. Learning to live the ecological relation differently, as well as producing new forms of security and justice, means learning to sustain and reproduce a different society and developing and mastering new forms of social reproduction.

The lesson these films have for us is that manifestations of ecological and capitalist crisis are never, and will never be, lived as an ecological crisis alone. This is because, as we have seen in this essay, the value theoretic mediations producing these situations of crisis, pressure, and catastrophe are also multiple. In contemporary Mexico, ecological pressure and devastation and violence twine together producing a larger crisis of reproduction, embodying Nancy Fraser's characterization of the present as "[a] crisis of ecology, to be sure, but also one of economy, society, politics and public health — that is, a *general crisis* whose effects metastasize everywhere."<sup>70</sup> What we can see in both *Los reyes* and *Caminando* is that any response to an ecological crisis also often has to be a response to a security crisis. As the rate of profit continues to trend downward and ecological pressures mount, one of the only levers available to states and capitalists to keep accumulation running will be violence. This violence, as we see in these films, can and will take many forms and it will be used not just to dispossess but also to organize broader swaths of accumulation and governance. If these films, and Mexico more generally, are a bellwether for what is to come, and what is already here, any ecological politics will have to walk hand-in-hand with an abolitionist politics of self-defense and social reproduction.

## Notes

1. María del Carmen Ventura Patiño, “¡Nosotros queremos la tierra! Despojo y resistencia en la costa nahua, el caso de la comunidad de Santa María Ostula, en Michoacán, México,” *Estudios Socioterritoriales. Revista de Geografía* 27 (2020) 3.
2. See Alejandra Guillén, *Guardianes del territorio: Seguridad y justicia comunitaria en Cherán, Nurio y Ostula* (México: Grietas Editores, 2016) 76-9.
3. Subversiones, “Ostula en alerta ante restauración del narcogobierno,” July 9, 2018, <https://subversiones.org/archivos/132787> and Luis Hernández Navarro, *Self-Defense in Mexico: Indigenous Community Policing and the New Dirty Wars*, trans. Ramor Ryan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020) 155.
4. Hernández Navarro, *Self-Defense in Mexico* 160. As Hernández Navarro notes, contemporary armed self-defense and community policing models have their roots in the Zapatista rebellion.
5. Drug logistics organizations is the term I use to describe groups dedicated to the production, transport, and selling of prohibited substances. I do so to avoid the unhelpful term cartel. For more detail as to why see Brian Whitener, *Crisis Cultures: The Rise of Finance in Mexico and Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019) 122-4.
6. Sharae Deckard, “Mapping the World-Ecology,” [https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping\\_the\\_World\\_Ecology\\_Conjectures\\_on\\_World\\_Ecological\\_Literature](https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping_the_World_Ecology_Conjectures_on_World_Ecological_Literature). For critical pre-history to the neoliberal period see Michel Gutelman, *Capitalismo y reforma agraria en México* (México: Ediciones Era, 1971) and Tore C. Olsson, *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). For accounts of transformations in agriculture and food production and consumption during the neoliberal period see Elizabeth Fitting, *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Alyshia Gálvez, *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of Berkeley Press, 2018); and Gerardo Otero, *The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018). On the shifting nature of rural labor and globalization of labor power, see Gerardo Otero, *¿Adiós al campesinado? Democracia y formación política de las clases en México Rural* (México: M.A. Porrúa, 2004) and for histories of Mexico’s energy politics see Jonathan Charles Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1993) and Germán Vergara, *Fueling Mexico Energy and Environment, 1850-1950* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2021). On the contradictions of capitalist ecology in Latin America more generally, see Enrique Leff, *Political Ecology: Deconstructing Capital and Territorializing Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) and for an account of neoliberal transformations from a world-ecology perspective at the level of Latin America, see Roberto José Ortiz, “Agro-Industrialization, Petrodollar Illusions and the Transformation of the Capitalist World Economy in the 1970s: The Latin American Experience,” *Critical Sociology* 42.4-5 (2014) 599-621.
7. While AMLO’s megaprojects, such as the Tren Maya, have the potential to significantly shift the form of accumulation in Mexico (not in any way for the better), they need to be completed before a full evaluation can be undertaken. Because of this, I do not address his presidency in great detail in this essay. What is clear from his presidency is that he has not followed through on his campaign promise



to return the army to their barracks and, instead, through the creation of the Guardia Nacional, as well as handing control over significant infrastructure projects to the military, increased the power and impunity of the armed forces. He has as well classified projects and certain resources as critical to “national security” further militarizing ecological matters. See Dawn Paley, “AMLO Has Been a Disappointment to the World—for Mexico, He’s Been Far Worse,” <https://www.dawnpaley.ca/blog/blog-post-title-one-2ybl9-kjrrn-2ld7y-f4adh-kc4kp> and Gloria Leticia Díaz, “Acuerdo de AMLO sobre seguridad nacional acelerará el despojo de los pueblos: ONG,” *Proceso* Dec 12, 2021, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2021/12/2/acuerdo-de-amlo-sobre-seguridad-nacional-acelerara-el-despojo-de-los-pueblos-ong-276829.html>

8. Ana Esther Ceceña, “Ayotzinapa: emblema del ordenamiento social del siglo XXI,” *Observatorio Latinoamericano* 15 (2016) 32-33 and “El militarismo,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtuY7Nc76iQ&t=2s>. See as well the essays collected in Laura Raquel Valladares de la Cruz (ed.), *Nuevas violencias en América Latina: Los derechos indígenas antes las políticas neoextractivistas y las políticas de seguridad* (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2014) and Gareth Williams, *Infrapolitical Passages: Global Turmoil, Narco-Accumulation, and the Post-Sovereign State* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).
9. My focus here differs significantly from the slow violence perspective of Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis and Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli (eds), *Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
10. See Dawn Marie Paley, *Guerra Neoliberal: Desaparición y búsqueda en el norte de México* (México: Libertad bajo palabra, 2020).
11. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2021/06/14/mexico-guerra-narcotrafico-calderon-homicidios-desaparecidos/>
12. Oswaldo Zavala, *Los carteles no existen: Narcotráfico y cultura en México* (Barcelona: Malpaso, 2018) 6.
13. Benjamin T. Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021): 379.
14. Paley refers to this as “paramilitarized extraction.” See Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014) 151.
15. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) 276.
16. For a brilliant exposition of a different use of Mandel, see Andreas Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital,” *Mediations* 31.2 (2018) 17-39. Malm uses earlier Mandel to argue that each long wave is underpinned by a new energy source and this source solves the blockages of the prior downturn (but then generates a new set of contradictions).
17. Deckard, “Mapping the World-Ecology,” n.p. Obviously there is a larger group of cultural scholars who have also made use of Moore’s world-ecology within Latin American and Caribbean contexts, including Kerstin Oloff, Chris Campbell, and Claire Westall.
18. Moore, *Capitalism* 37.
19. *Capitalism* 27.
20. Sara Nelson, <https://antipodeonline.org/2016/03/09/capitalism-in-the-web-of-life/>
21. For a more detailed discussion of problems with combining exploitation and expropriation in



contemporary theory see Brian Whitener, "Rosa Luxemburg in Mexico," *Critical Sociology* 44.1 (2021): 75-88.

22. See for example Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45.2 (2018) 237-279 and Jason W. Moore, "Climate, Class & the Great Frontier: From Primitive Accumulation to the Great Implosion" (2021) <https://jasonwmoore.com/academicpapers/> 1-35.
23. *Capitalism* 69.
24. In more recent work with Raj Patel, Moore has expanded the four Cheaps to seven. Since my discussion focuses on *Capitalism in the Web of Life* in this essay I will use the figure of four Cheaps.
25. Minor perhaps but making a comeback. As Anwar Shaikh notes, "The profit rate is central to accumulation because profit is the very purpose of capitalist investment, and the profit rate is the ultimate measure of its success." Shaikh, *Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 62.
26. *Capitalism* 92 and 91-94 more generally. It is important to note that when talking of actual crises, and not just tendencies, Moore specifies that the key is how overproduction and underproduction fit together.
27. *Capitalism* 278.
28. *Capitalism* 94.
29. This is what the Out of the Woods collective is pointing to when they write: "In the weak version, capitalism stagnates in sluggish growth without new frontiers (i.e. cheap natures) to appropriate. Expressed strongly, this claim means that capitalism would cease to exist without them. We agree with the former, but are not fully convinced of the latter, although it is the latter that seems closer to Moore's own position." Out of the Woods, "Human Nature" (2016), <https://libcom.org/article/human-nature-o>. For a critique of Moore's crisis and value theory from an autonomous Marxist position see Emanuele Leonardi, "Autonomist Marxism and World-Ecology: For a Political Theory of the Ecological Crisis," <https://projectpppr.org/pandemics/autonomist-marxism-and-world-ecology-for-a-political-theory-of-the-ecological-crisis>
30. Niblett, *World Literature and Ecology* 50. This ambiguity is on full display in Moore's debate with the Monthly Review School over whether capitalism will survive until the last tree is cut. See Jason W. Moore, "World Accumulation and Planetary Life, or, "Why Capitalism will not Survive until the 'Last Tree is Cut.'" *IPPR Progressive Review* 24.3 (2017) 185-7. As well, the reduction of historical richness in Moore's value theory, is, in part, what is at stake when Andreas Malm critiques Moore for reducing value to price: "... [This] leads Moore to stress the price of material substrata as the main vector of socio-ecological - well, shall we say 'fitting' - so that, for instance, the transition to steam-power is said to have been caused by the cheapness of coal relative to alternative fuels. Here is an empirically testable hypothesis, and it turns out that it fails to correspond with extant data from the crucial frontlines of that transition .... Entirely different factors were at work. A history of the fossil economy must juggle many more factors than price levels." Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018) 191-2.
31. Moore's most recent work seems to have added a new emphasis on a cyclic connection between climate crisis and opportunities for class struggle. See Moore, "Climate, Class & the Great Frontier"

- 29-31. But there is also a renewed emphasis on struggle in general and, importantly, the “liberation of all life from the tyranny of capitalist work.” See Jason W. Moore, “Opiates of the Environmentalists? Anthropocene Illusions, Planetary Management & the Capitalocene Alternative,” *Abstrakt* (2021), <https://jasonwmoore.com/academicpapers/> 13.
32. Jason W. Moore, “World-ecology: a global conversation,” *Sociologia urbana e rurale* 120 (2019) 18.
33. See Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development” for an account of the limits and possibilities of a switch to green energy.
34. Ernst Mandel, *Long Waves of Capitalist Development: A Marxist Interpretation* (New York: Verso, 1995) 7.
35. Mandel, *Long Waves* 9.
36. *Long Waves* 10.
37. *Long Waves* 11.
38. *Long Waves* 11.
39. *Long Waves* 11.
40. *Long Waves* 16.
41. Makoto Itoh, “Ernest Mandel on Long Waves and Socialism,” *Review of International Political Economy* 4.1 (1997) 249-251. Debates of the time over “long-wave theory” were couched in the language of endogenous and exogenous arguments for an expansion turning into a decline and vice versa. Makoto Itoh describes Mandel’s account as an asymmetrical exogenous one; however, we shouldn’t read too much into the endo- and exo- prefaces. Wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions are all inside capitalism at the end of the day — what these terms referred to was whether dynamics internal to capitalism were able to set off an expansionary wave or shut it down.
42. *Long Waves* 16-17.
43. Mandel was criticized by some in his time for his supposed eclecticism, namely that his system suffered from incoherence. I have never found those criticisms particularly generous and as Malm says, “Mandel’s theory is messy and labyrinthine and intended to be so, because it is, first and foremost, a guide to the study of ‘actual historical dynamics.’” Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development” 28.
44. This is not to say that Mandel is absent from Moore’s work; rather Moore clearly builds on Mandel in certain places. See Moore, *Capitalism* 142.
45. *Long Waves* 83.
46. *Long Waves* 91.
47. For more on this see Lena Lavinas, *The Takeover of Social Policy by Financialization: The Brazilian Paradox* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 41.
48. *Long Waves* 88.
49. *Long Waves* 88-9.
50. *Long Waves* 94. Andreas Malm has recently delved deeper into Mandel’s utility for political ecology. See Andreas Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development.”
51. As Jim Kincaid has noted, one of the strengths of Moore’s approach over other eco-socialists is how his work makes possible a discussion of counter-tendencies to reverse downward pressure on the rate of profit. See, Jim Kincaid, “Value Theory and the Schism in Eco-Marxism,” <https://readingsofcapital.com/2017/04/30/value-theory-and-the-recent-schism-in-eco-marxism/>.

52. This holds true for his most recent essays, though certain ones have made a little more space for discussions of violence. See Moore, "Climate, Class & the Great Frontier" 26 and Moore, "Opiates of the Environmentalists?" 10.
53. *Long Waves* 95.
54. Moore frequently speaks of the violence of abstractions. See Moore, *Capitalism* 35, 85.
55. Mandel uses the language of "partially independent" or "partially autonomous" variables throughout his work. Mandel, *Long Waves* 9-10, 121.
56. Computed from World Bank data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=MX>
57. María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara, "Introduction: Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium" in María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara (eds), *Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 1.
58. See Stephen Woodman, "Documenting the truth: Documentaries are all the rage in Mexico, providing a truthful alternative to an often biased media," *Index on Censorship* 47:3 (2018) 18-20 and Andrew Jeffrey, "Netflix and Ambulante launch fund for Indigenous, Afro-descendant filmmakers," April 19, 2021, <https://realscreen.com/2021/04/19/netflix-and-ambulante-launch-fund-for-indigenous-afro-descendant-filmmakers/>
59. Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page, *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Antonio Traverso and Kristi M. Wilson, *Political Documentary Cinema in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara, *Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
60. Julianne Burton, "Towards a History of Social Documentary in Latin America" in Julianne Burton (ed.) *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990) 3.
61. Guadalupe Arenillas and Lazzara, *Latin American Documentary Film* 6.
62. Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić and Jeff Diamanti, *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2021) 3.
63. Badia, Cetinić and Diamanti, *Climate Realism* 4, 5.
64. Cinzia Arruzza and Kelly Gawel have recently defined social reproduction as "refer[ing] to the social organization of what Karl Marx would call the reproduction of labor power, and of what some social reproduction theorists have expanded to include the reproduction of human life more generally. Social reproduction, understood as such, is a primary condition of extraction and accumulation under capitalism, and struggles on its terrains are essential to political resistance against them." See Cinzia Arruzza and Kelly Gawel, "The Politics of Social Reproduction. An Introduction," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.2 (2020): 1.
65. Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital: For a Trans-Environmental Eco-Socialism," *New Left Review* 127 (2021) 105.
66. Part of this story is told in Jesús Antonio Ramírez López, *La construcción de la presa Picachos: una visión histórico-socioambiental* (Culiacán: Once Ríos Editores, 2008) 117-139.
67. Lidia Lizárraga, "Presa Picachos: obra millonaria en desperdicio" *Debate* March 28, 2016, <https://www.debate.com.mx/mazatlan/Presa-Picachos-obra-millonaria-en-desperdicio--20160328-0130.html>
68. Smith, *The Dope* 385-8.

69. After pulling away Mexico's investments in green energy and recentering its energy strategy on coal and oil, AMLO has tried to green-wash these moves by declaring the revitalization or authorization of dam projects across the country, even though dam construction requires significant carbon output. One of the dam revitalizations is the Picachos dam protested by the *comuneros* of San Marcos. See Amy Stillman and Max De Haldevang, "Mexico pouring money into Pemex, at the environment's expense," Jan 8 2021, <https://www.worldoil.com/news/2021/1/8/mexico-pouring-money-into-pemex-at-the-environment-s-expense>
70. Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital" 95.

## Weird Nature: Abstraction, Horror, and Capitalism in Latin American Speculative Fiction<sup>1</sup>

Orlando Bentancor

This essay uses a historical and dialectical critique of the ontological opposition between Humanity and Nature developed by Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and Accumulation of Capital* (2015) to examine "abstract horror" in Latin American new weird fiction. This paper honors but goes beyond the world-ecological emphasis on the Cartesian division between corporeal substance and thinking substance, by paying attention to cultural works that produce different ways of imagining the Nature/Humanity division. The first section provides a theoretical framework that examines the role of "real abstractions" and fiction writing in establishing and sustaining the ontological division between Nature and Humanity. It argues that commodity fetishism holds the key for understanding the split between a Nature as a noumenal world-in-itself and a Humanity as the phenomenal world-for-us. The second and third sections examine two novels that are part of a recent trend of weird fiction in Latin America in which "abstract horror" manifests as a blend of literary fiction and philosophical speculation that introduces new ontological and aesthetic divisions between nature and humanity.

These two novels are *Mugre Rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías and *Guitarra Negra* (2019) by Ramiro Sanchiz, which are great examples of the recent revival of speculative fiction in Hispanic literature. On one hand, *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías, dwells on the affect of horror at how both capitalism and capitalogenic climate change transform everything into an insubstantial matter, a "pink scum" that is the byproduct of commodity fetishism. On the other hand, the theory-fiction of *Guitarra negra* (2019) by Ramiro Sanchiz, introduces a new division between a humanized nature domesticated by capitalism and a nature in-itself, an insubstantial void outside humanity that ends up being identical to capitalism itself. By creating a character who practices theoretical-fiction that explicitly addresses ontological problems, *Guitarra negra* allows us to see that the fiction about the nature of capitalism is the same as the one capitalism believes about itself. I claim that these novels do not produce a vision of

nature exploited by capitalism in terms of an external substantial and separate matter, but one of an insubstantial, and formless, matter that ultimately ends up becoming capitalism itself. An analysis of these texts' approach to capitalism's relation to nature tells us something about how capitalism thinks about itself in the current ecological crisis associated with what Moore calls the "end of cheap nature."

Importantly, my reading of "weird" theory-fiction ends up transforming the world-ecological view of Cartesian dualism as the philosophical template behind the commodification of nature. Abstract horror's nihilistic pessimism obliges us to rethink the philosophical template of capitalist ecology as a dialectic of process and performance in which fictional cultural objects play a central role. The philosophical platform of capitalism is no longer the one mobilized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with its early modern dualisms of matter and form or extended and thinking substance. In the present haunted by mass extinction and the end of cheap nature, the ideological platform of capitalism is an ontologizing of the death drive that naturalizes capitalism itself.

### **A Critique of the Ontological Division between Nature and Society**

Moore's is a synthetic project that ties together the historical/colonial origins of capitalism in the sixteenth century and the ideological/ontological division between humanity and nature as an intrinsic part of the value-creating process and of capital accumulation. Moore's world-ecology is also an attempt to supersede "Green Arithmetic," which Moore defines as "the idea that our histories may be considered and narrated by adding up Humanity (or Society) and Nature, or even Capitalism plus Nature."<sup>2</sup> The dualism of humanity and society is "part of the problem" and presupposes two pure abstractions, which are "Society without nature," and "Nature without humans."<sup>3</sup> The ontological division between Nature/Society taken for granted in the Capitalocene was crucial for the rise of capitalism for many reasons. First, it is central to capitalism's attempt to conceive nature as something external, manipulable, and calculable. Second, it is deeply associated with colonialism because it is inseparable from the distinction between humans that are part of nature and those who are part of civilization. Third, it parallels the global division between unpaid and paid labor, since it allows capitalism to treat the web of life as a free gift, ready to be plundered and appropriated without paying for it. As a result, the ontological division between humanity and nature (not the division between the ontological and the ontic!) is *the* crucial philosophical question inseparable from the capitalogenic material conditions of the ecological crisis today.<sup>4</sup> In Moore's words, "the birth of Nature, which implied and necessitated the birth of Society, both dripping with blood and dirt, is the necessary ontological counterpoint to the separation of the producers from the means of production."<sup>5</sup> In Moore's account, the philosophical template that served as the ideological justification of this division was Cartesian dualism, which introduced an exclusionary division between material substance and



thinking substance that subordinates the former to the latter.

The world-ecology critique of the division of nature and humanity is tied to the notion of real abstraction developed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel.<sup>6</sup> Sohn-Rethel argues that the key to speculative-conceptual abstraction is the real, that is, materially, spatially, and historically situated practices of commodity exchange. Material exchange as practiced within society assumes that exchange value is separate and that use value can be measured and is homogenous.<sup>7</sup> Moore's conceptualization of the Nature/Humanity division is based in Sohn-Rethel's account of the human/nature split. For Sohn-Rethel, the idea that there is such thing out there called "Nature" completely external to humanity is produced by commodity fetishism. Commodity exchange "creates the division of society and nature which emerges with commodity production and outdates the anthropomorphic blending characteristic of the communal forms of society preceding commodity production."<sup>8</sup> In sum, the split between humanity and nature derives from commodity fetishism itself: the belief in a division between a false, changing, transient world-for us and a true, permanently present world of true essences of a world-in-itself or without-us is the byproduct of commodity exchange where mutable and changing things are compared to a third fixed and immutable measure that is assumed remain identical to itself.

While Moore mobilizes a notion of abstraction as separation because he is interested in the history of appropriation of nature, Sohn-Rethel also directs our attention to abstraction as equalization to explain the genesis of a permanent and ideal world entirely different from nature: "A coin, therefore, is a thing which conforms to the postulates of the exchange abstraction and is supposed, among other things, to consist of an immutable substance, a substance over which time has no power, and which stands in antithetic contrast to any matter found in nature."<sup>9</sup> Sohn-Rethel criticizes the fetishist independence of the intellect of the Kantian subject by offering a historical materialist reading of the categories of pure understanding. Although he does not declare this in an explicit way, it is possible to infer that the sphere of the Kantian noumenal, which is the inaccessible substantial Thing-in-itself as completely separate from any sensorial phenomenal attributes, also emerges out of the material practice of exchange. It emerges as expelled from the realm of the human into an outside, a transcendent realm. Nature becomes an abstract amorphous changing thing without properties and money an immutable substance that creates itself. The idea of an inaccessible transcendent substance beyond the sensible as an ontological presupposition is an important component of the weird fiction that I will examine in this article. By highlighting the centrality of commodity exchange in the genesis of real abstractions, I extend Moore's critique of Cartesian ontology to the fiction of a noumenal substance independent of the phenomenal sphere in weird fiction and abstract horror.<sup>10</sup>

I think that it is valuable to pay attention to new emerging ideological, ontological and aesthetic formations that are related to the crisis of capitalism. If ontology derives

from capitalism but there is no ontological essence of capitalism itself, we can make more room for other ontologies, ideologies, or fictional systems capable of accounting for the nature-humanity separation. One way to track these emergent formations is by seeing that Moore's Cartesian dualism has taken different forms historically. There are different historical instantiations of dualisms that are not exactly the same as the dualism strictly associated to the historical figure of "Rene Descartes," which consists of presupposing the existence of two separate and discrete entities, one material and the other mental. What I have in mind is a non-linear yet historical sequence that goes from the real abstractions of scholastic metaphysical instrumentalism, through Kantian-Hegelian transcendental extractivism, to the "abstract horror" of weird fiction and speculative philosophy.<sup>11</sup> For instance, there is an instrumentalist scholasticism, in which the dualism between matter and form is put at the service of justifying the conquest and colonization of the new world, dividing between an active and determining form/purpose and a passive and indeterminate matter/means, while identifying the common good and civilization with the first and the indigenous people who provided labor with the second.<sup>12</sup> Another example of these dualisms is the transcendental extractivism described by Marcus Driscoll, according to which, a transcendental and superior European interiority (or World Spirit) maps a non-European exteriority (nature) to justify the transformation of Japan and China into peripheries of US and British capitalism under an emerging formation of white supremacy, a phenomenon Driscoll calls Climate Caucasianism.<sup>13</sup>

The last piece of the puzzle of these preliminary sketches of a history of the roles that dualisms of Nature and Humanity play in capitalist expansion is weird abstract horror as a literary practice which is intertwined with the philosophical school called speculative realism. Weird fiction and speculative realism have a very close mutually supportive relationship that shares the centrality of speculation, understood as the act of stipulating a reality independent of experience in an attempt to escape the prison-house of language. The return of speculation cannot be separated from the incapacity of poststructuralism and culturalism in response to the anxieties of capitalogenic climate change and the financial collapse of 2008. Before explaining how weird fiction can contribute to a world-ecological critique of ontology, let us say a few words about speculative realism. The speculative realist movement joins diverse thinkers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, and Iain Hamilton who are united by the common goal to attack what Meillassoux calls "correlationism," which "consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another."<sup>14</sup> Although speculative realism looks for a reality independent of human structures in an attempt to transcend anthropocentric humanism, Nick Land, who was also a precursor of the speculative realist movement and leader of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in the 1990s, ends up identifying the noumenal reality independent of humanity with capitalism itself, as will become

evident in the final section of this article.<sup>15</sup>

Katherina Kolozova provides us with interesting clues about the dualisms behind speculative philosophy in general when she identifies the self-valorizing movement of capital MCM' with speculative philosophy itself, which takes as given the division between matter and mind: "Capitalist materialism is about an absolute mastery of the mind over the material, it presupposes the hierarchy between matter and mind where the latter is superior to the former."<sup>16</sup> Capitalism-as-philosophy consists of a "speculative postulation" that imposes itself upon "unruly reality"<sup>17</sup> that pretends to *replace* material, sensuous and practical life with abstractions, one of them being a naturalized version of nature: "The 'out there' that is presumably material is always already 'nature.'"<sup>18</sup> This nature "out there" that is devalued in advance and sacrificed in the name of meaning and the "real needs" of the self-generating power of value. If Sohn-Rethel emphasizes the process of homogenization and Moore stresses the moment of separation in the historical genesis of capitalism's abstractions, Kolozova alerts us to how abstractions replace the material real with value: "The materialism of contemporary capitalist society is deprived of a sense of realness, since the real is replaced by operations of abstraction which is made of the meanings that we have assigned to the real and materiality."<sup>19</sup> This process of derealization and the replacement of the material by abstractions will, sooner or later, hit the wall of the limit of natural resources, as Jason Moore argues in his theorization of the "tendency of the ecological surplus to fall."<sup>20</sup> In a moment, we'll have the opportunity to observe this process of replacement in texts that blur the boundaries between philosophy and literature, in our examples of weird fiction.

Having established that ontology's divisions derive from exchange operations and that these operations introduce divisions at the service of the primitive accumulation of nature, I can say that it is beneficial to supplement world-ecology with the study of literary fiction. I call these fictions "fictional abstractions" to designate two overlapping dimensions: first, the fictions' association with capitalist abstractions (ontological division of Nature and Humanity, matter and form, the noumenal and the phenomenal), and second, the specific expressions of these fictions within an assembled corpus of images and texts (abstract horror and weird fiction). In the sense of homogenizing, separating, subordinating, and replacing, all abstraction operations are also exercises in fictionalization, in the way that they involve distortions and illusions, such as commodity fetishism and the market or capital. Fetishizing consists of acting according to a fiction or belief, such as the existence of an inherent, immutable, eternal, and permanent property such as value, the market, or capital. The point of the critique of real abstractions is to show that they are not actual entities but fictions, even though they are fictions inscribed in the fabric of reality and rule reality. In this sense, fiction and abstraction are not two separate things. It is not that abstraction produces fiction or fiction produces abstraction. Both are producers and products of each other and part of larger metabolic processes. In sum, paraphrasing

Moore, ontological fictions are a way of organizing nature.<sup>21</sup> The thesis of this paper is that the theoretical fiction I call weird nature can provide a new perspective on contemporary Latin American capitalist ecology. This theoretical fiction foregrounds the operations of abstraction such as separation, subordination, and homogenization reformulating the ontological dualism of nature and humanity and shows us how contemporary Latin American capitalist ecology depends on the replacement of the web of life with a full-blown naturalization of capital's impersonal compulsion to self-reproduce.

### **Abstraction and Horror and Amorphous Cheap Nature in *Mugre rosa***

In order to explore the notion of weird fiction in literature, I will analyze two novels, *Guitarra negra* (2019) by Ramiro Sanchiz and *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías. These two works are part of a larger contemporary literary movement, weird fiction, that mixes horror and science fiction. This movement draws on the weird fiction genre fostered by Howard Phillips Lovecraft and published in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. The two novels analyzed in this essay are part of the recent weird literature trend in Latin America, a phenomena presented in a special issue of the journal *Orillas* that explores this literary movement's theoretical and philosophical genealogy, co-edited by Gabriele Bizarri and Ramiro Sanchiz himself.<sup>22</sup> There, Bizarri, Sanchiz, and the rest of the contributors argue that what separates the weird from the gothic or the fantastic is the preeminence of *weirding*, a process by means of which a disproportionately large non-human agency takes over the human, generating a peculiar atmosphere associated with an encounter with the Outside.<sup>23</sup> This form of fiction emphasizes atmosphere over plot and always generates a sense of impending doom that produces an estrangement from reality accompanied by a sort of cognitive dissonance caused by the intervention of outside, unknown forces that disrupt any fixed natural order.<sup>24</sup> This notion of the weird as a fear of the unknown is linked to Lovecraft's emphasis on "cosmic horror" as the affect triggered by a radical Outside that is elusive, absurd, and indifferent to human needs. Weird fiction is a search for a "real externality" that is not merely "empirical" but "transcendentally"<sup>25</sup> exterior to humanity very much like an abstract and separated "world-without-humans." This externality is not a Cartesian substance in the strict sense, but closer to the above mentioned inaccessible substantial Thing-in-itself as completely separate from any sensorial phenomenal attributes, a real abstraction that has emerged out of the material practice of exchange.

My Sohn-Rethel/Moore informed reading of the role of nature in weird fiction positions weird fiction at the end of a long history of extractive and colonial capitalist ecology that not only presupposes but produces nature as amorphous and separate nature. Although these twenty-first century novels do not directly thematize the centrality of the Latin American colonial experience, far from breaking with the colonial past, they stage an intensification of the extractive paradigm that has its

origins in the 16th century. As I mentioned before, the ontological and epistemological project of Latin American coloniality consisted in transforming both nature and natives into a devalorized passive matter, a mere means to the end of the accumulation of precious metals.<sup>26</sup> The centrality of the concept of raw material, which has its roots in this colonial ontological abstraction, becomes an aesthetic object of fascination and estrangement typical of the weird.

In the novels that I will analyze, the aesthetic fascination with the ontological status of materiality points in the direction of a deepening of extractive coloniality. However, in them, the imperial presupposition that nature and natives are a passive matter that must be subordinated to an active form is transformed into something different. Weird fiction shows how capitalism transforms humans and non-humans into an amorphous matter, a Thing that produces fascination and horror. Furthermore, the colonization of amorphous matter by the form of value culminates in the replacement of nature by dead value. Ultimately, the coloniality of value produces the extinction of life. The general tone of these novels is pessimistic as they describe a process that is inherently nihilistic and consists of a process of abstraction that is inseparable from the capitalist deterritorialization that enmeshes Latin America within anonymous global relations. However, by showing how contemporary capitalism and commodity fetishism evacuates any commitment to bodily matter and labor, the novels I will analyze put the aesthetic force of weird alienation at the service of showing that the true horror of the present is capitalism's suicidal ecology.

The weird atmosphere triggered by the intrusion of a radical Outside is part of the narrative background of Fernanda Trías' *Mugre rosa* (Pink scum), a novel that won numerous awards such as the Bartolomé Hidalgo and the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz prizes. I argue that *Mugre rosa* depicts the effects of capitalogenic climate change and capitalist production in terms of a violent process of reduction of everything to a threatening, amorphous, and insubstantial pink slime that swallows both human and non-human beings. The plot unfolds in a city like Montevideo during a plague or pandemic quite similar to the one we are currently experiencing. Although its origin appears to be almost unknown, the reader can easily identify it with an anthropogenic ecological disaster associated with climate change wherein non-human elements are not only affected, they are also the main protagonists. An unbearable humidity appears in the form of a fog produced by a pestilential "red wind," which affects human beings by drying out their skin and peeling it off, leading to death. These red winds come from "outside," affecting not only humans but also other non-human actants. Fish and birds disappear, and the human population exudes anger and fear, as bewilderment and uncertainty reigns. An authoritarian state protects the rich, who emigrate to the countryside, producing a sort of ecological apartheid. The neoliberal capitalist economy falls apart, and hunger spreads. The only functional institution that remains is a sausage factory that is an extractive machine that processes chicken and carcasses of cattle. These dead meats are processed with ammonia and other

chemicals and are sold as pâtés in tubes and as sausages and hams packaged in square wrappers called “mugre rosa” (pink scum).

In the following excerpt the narrator describes the process of production of this cheap foodstuff highlighting both the horrific fascination with and the revulsion at the production process:

A veces me llevaba a recorrer la fábrica y hasta hoy recuerdo el olor rancio a gelatina de carne y a tierra enmohecida. Le llamaban mugre rosa y olía a sangre coagulada y al líquido que Delfa usaba para lavar el baño. También Delfa olía así, sus dedos, que restregaban el mono de don Ornar con jabón antibacterial, quitaban los cordones de los zapatos de tela para lavarlos con Jane y los colgaban en la terraza, donde el sol los terminaría de blanquear.

[Sometimes he gave me a tour of the factory and to this day I remember the dank smell of meat gelatin and moldy soil. They called it pink scum and it smelled like coagulated blood and like the product that Delfa used to clean the restroom. Delfa also smelled like this, her fingers, that rubbed anti-bacterial soap all over don Omar's monkey, that removed the shoelaces from canvas shoes to wash them with Jane soap and then hung them on the balcony, where the sun would finish whitening them]<sup>27</sup>

This cheap food is horrific and expresses the weirdness, the alienation, and separation of the production process.<sup>28</sup> The smell of the gelatin mixes with that of the soil, coagulated blood, and a cleaning product. The smell is the smell of a composite of artifact and nature and also the smell of an amorphous body, a body literally desubstantiated and sanitized. The product of this value-creating process is just pure materiality deprived of any quality and reducible to an exchange value abstraction. The horrific and weird component of this quite banal scene consists in a shift of perspectives that highlights the process of production of a commodity that involves using antibacterial cleaning products to separate life from its own conditions of production. The transference of the homogeneous, ideal, metaphysical character of exchange value (Sohn-Rethel) — the very act of treating nature as if it was deprived of active qualities — transforms bodies into an amorphous material endowed with new qualities that produce horror and revulsion.

The narrator continues: “Claro que la mugre rosa tenía un nombre técnico. Todo lo inconveniente tiene un nombre técnico, insípido, incoloro e inodoro. Pero yo prefería decirle así.” [Of course, the pink scum had a technical name. Every inconvenient thing has a name that is technical, insipid, colorless and odorless. But I preferred to call it that way.]<sup>29</sup> The technical name of the “pink scum” has the opposite characteristics of the product. It is a name without odor, without any of the sensuous, undesirable



features of the thing in question. Naming has the same function as the cleaning products, which is to separate the object/commodity from all its sensuous features. This naming parallels the process of abstraction/extraction in taking advantage of dead waste itself:

Simplemente otra forma de aprovechamiento. Una máquina que calentaba las carcasas de los animales a altísima temperatura y las centrifugaba hasta extraer los restos de carne magra de las partes más sucias del animal. No había por qué desperdiciar nada.

[Just another way of profiting from it. A machine that heated the animals' carcasses at a very high temperature and that centrifuged them to extract from then the remaining lean meat from the dirtiest parts of the animal. There was no reason to waste anything]<sup>30</sup>

The process of production is described as a process of abstraction/extraction using extreme temperatures to maximize profit (aprovechamiento) from the wasteful and dirtiest parts of the dead animals. The last stage of the process of progressive separation of matter from its living agency is the act of disinfecting meat. The novel depicts this stage with gory details:

Fuera de cámara, en los confines de las bateas de acero, la carne centrifugada, mezcla de desechos, tripa y todo lo que había ido quedando de los cortes finos, pasaría a la unidad de desinfección. El hombre de corbata señaló las mangueras que rociarían la carne con amoníaco. Dijo: seguridad. Dijo: bioingeniería. Dijo: superbacteria. *El amoníaco eliminaba las bacterias y ayudaba a aglutinar lo que, por impulso del desecho, se resistía a aglutinarse.*

[Off-camera, in the depths of the steel cauldrons, the centrifuged meat, a mix of refuse, tripe, and all that was left from the finer cuts, would go on to the disinfection unit. The man in a tie pointed to the hoses that would spray the meat with ammonia. He said: safety. He said: bioengineering. He said: superbacteria. *Ammonia eliminated bacteria and helped agglutinate what, due to an impulse typical of that which has been discarded, refused to agglutinate*]<sup>31</sup>

Nothing goes to waste and everything is disinfected, and yet disinfection is only just a stage in the process of production of cheap meat as abstract commodity. The sensation of weirdness here comes from the impulse of the dead viscera in resisting

to agglutinate, the persistence of an undead life that opposes value production. The horror is double: the “impulse” of dead animals haunts value and value is the horror that haunts the material process of production itself.<sup>32</sup> However, the true horror of turning useless waste into exchange value is not evident until abstraction reaches the sphere of circulation.

At one point, the factory is depicted as the only productive or life-giving agency left sustaining human life with its slimy, amorphous, shapeless product:

La gente hacía cola en los supermercados y en las estaciones de servicio. No quedaba agua, no quedaban pastillas purificadoras; las góndolas de los supermercados desabastecidas, excepto por los vasitos de Carnemás apilados en las gigantescas heladeras. Ahora verían lo que se siente. El olor eternamente impregnado en la nariz, la textura arenosa erosionando la lengua. Carnemás era el producto estrella de la nueva procesadora, y los de adentro lo evitaban siempre que fuera posible. El alimento soñado: veinte gramos de proteína por porción, en un minúsculo vasito de plástico. La nueva fábrica se abría como una gran boca para escupir esa mugre rosa, los vasitos resbalaban por la lengua transportadora y caían, hermosos y bien diseñados, sobre nuestra falda. Todos odiábamos la nueva fábrica, pero dependíamos de ella, y por eso le debíamos agradecimiento.

[People lined up in supermarkets and gas stations. There was no water left, there were no purifying tablets left; supermarket shelves were empty, except for the cups of Carnemás [Moremeat] piled up in gigantic refrigerators. Now they would find out how it feels. The odor eternally impregnated in the nose, the sandy texture eroding the tongue, Carnemás was the star product of the new factory, and those who were inside avoided it as much as possible. This was a dream food: twenty grams of protein in each portion, in a minuscule plastic cup. The new factory opened like a large mouth to spit out this pink grime; the cups slid from the vehicle tongue and fell, beautiful and well designed, into our lap. We all hated the new factory but we depended on it and, for that reason, we ought be grateful for it]<sup>33</sup>

While the previous excerpts describe the process of production, this one describes the process of circulation in the marketplace. Let us recall that for Sohn-Rethel real abstraction did not consist so much in the division of the world into two substances (as in Moore) but in the transfer of the sphere of exchange to nature, and that this transfer produced the separation between a substantial world and an insubstantial one. The real horror of the novel appears in the sphere of circulation where value remains the

same and nature appears as a passive and amorphous abstraction. The cheap nature produced by capital here is not the Cartesian extended corporeal substance that is the object of capitalist plunder in Moore. It is an insubstantial material that contrasts with the immutable and eternal essential reality of value personified in a factory that gives away cheap nature. “Carnemás” is a cheap commodity designed for the surplus populations created by a climate apartheid that isolates macronutrients such as protein in the same way that the state separates those who can live from those who must die. The factory produces this pinkish bodily fluid in the same way that the red winds produce skinned human bodies. The boundaries between the human and the non-human are blown-away transforming everybody into “pink scum.”

Both the skinless victims of the capitalogenic red winds and the “pink scum” are nothing but the result of an extractive economy that commodifies animal flesh by stripping it of its qualities and turning it into a formless, slimy, and shapeless abstract horror. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator states: “¿Y quién te dice que los desechos no seamos nosotros?”<sup>34</sup> [What if we are the ones who are the garbage?] Both the outside non-human forces, such as the red winds, and the human institutions such as the state, the free market, and the factory produce the same effect, a pinkish, amorphous thing. The process of cheapening the commodity and the process of peeling skin off is the consequence of the same process of abstraction that treats material things as if they could be separated from sensuous qualities and transformed into amorphous raw material. In the novel, both humans and non-humans are subjected to a process that appears to come from outside like the red winds themselves.

The process of “weirding” nature is inseparable from the uncovering of the process of production of cheapness itself and the fantasies, fictions, and abstractions that sustain it. The specific real abstraction produced by *Mugre Rosa* is that of an insubstantial amorphous material. In the novel, capitalism transforms both humans and non-humans into a pink scum, which is abstract because it consists of treating both humans and non-humans as if they were separate from their qualities, agencies, and specific sensual characteristics and reduced to one single homogenous quality which is pink meat itself. The point is not that fiction is valuable because it shows us the pernicious effects of capitalism or the meat industry, but because it helps us imagine the process of abstraction itself, whether we understand it as speculative philosophy (Koložova) or dualistic ontology (Moore). Fiction produces horror through a parallax change of perspectives by means of which a sensory quality like pink ends up permeating the whole in a process of continuous expansion that is strictly abstract: all qualities are exchanged for a single quality, pink, transforming the web of life into an insubstantial amorphous matter. In sum, the horror of an amorphous insubstantial matter that results from the division between an active form of value and a passive material as the guiding fiction of capital is nothing but the horror of commodity fetishism itself. In the next section, we will see how *Guitarra Negra* goes a step further by transforming amorphous matter that is simultaneously an external

source and a result of capitalism into the capitalist drive itself.

### **Abstract Horror and Noumenal Capitalism in *Guitarra negra***

Ramiro Sanchiz's *Guitarra negra* is part of a larger series of texts he calls the "Proyecto Stahl" (Stahl project), a mega-opus that consists of a series of narrations that explore the infinite variations of multiple possible universes. He defines it as a work-in-progress that brings together short stories, novels, essays, and "theory-fiction" in one macro-novel whose protagonist is Federico Stahl. Federico Stahl is a "non-character," an empty referent of a rigid designator that repeats itself throughout multiple variations across different possible narrative universes. *Guitarra negra* is a book that does many different things at the same time. As the title indicates, it is a commentary on the title of an LP recorded by Alfredo Zitarrosa and released in 1977. It is also a dense work of theoretical fiction attributed to one Federico Stahl who, in the alternative universe of the novel, shares many traits with the British philosopher Nick Land. In the alternative universe of *Guitarra negra*, Federico Stahl, a sort of Nick Land of the periphery, has gone missing and his students try to unsuccessfully reconstruct his scattered notes, among which we find a commentary on Zitarrosa's album.

Federico Stahl's notes also include a series of commentaries on Uruguayan environment and culture, where he proposes a philosophical system that is similar to Nick Land's.<sup>35</sup> Nick Land is a British philosopher, the so-called father of accelerationism and leader of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in the 1990s. Land used Lovecraftian mythology to launch an accelerationist critique of humanist anthropocentrism by mobilizing the concepts of "hyperstition" and "abstract horror" to refer to mythologies or concepts that have the performative capacity to become more real than reality. Land is also famous for the way his anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, hyper-neoliberal, and reactionary ideas are implicated behind the neo-reactionary movement called "Dark Enlightenment."<sup>36</sup> Land is also a pioneer among a group of contemporary philosophers like Graham Harman and Eugene Thacker, who are associated with the "speculative turn" in contemporary continental philosophy, a turn which increasingly engages with horror fiction as a way to critique correlationism and anthropocentrism.<sup>37</sup> Defenders and sympathizers of Land argue that he is the proponent of a compelling materialist critique of anthropocentrism called anti-humanism. In this section, I will show how, by creating a Nick Land of the periphery, *Guitarra negra* identifies Lovecraft's noumenal reality with capitalism itself, allowing us to see how this ontological fiction about capitalism is also the fiction that capitalism creates about itself.

Among the many subtexts of *Guitarra negra*, we find Eugene Thacker's reading of the history of philosophy as horror fiction and Nick Land's theorization of abstract horror. In his work, Thacker identifies the notion of a noumenal amorphous and threatening exteriority as the object that is common to both Lovecraft's weird

fiction and the world-without-humans envisioned by cosmic pessimism.<sup>38</sup> While Thacker's version of Lovecraft's noumenal abstraction produces horror because it is unknown, Land directly equates the noumenal with matter and death: "One must first unleash the noumenon from its determination as problematic object in order to glimpse that between matter and death there is both a certain identity and an intricate relation."<sup>39</sup> This noumenal death appears in Land as Schopenhauer's "will to nothing" and can only be grasped as "abstract horror" and pure fiction. In Land, death is the embodiment of time and pure entropy, that which cannot be resisted.<sup>40</sup> For Land, fiction and abstraction are two sides of the same coin, they are ways of dealing with what is not (yet) but is always-already-extinct, the unknown and unknowable thing in itself. Since fiction is what is *not*, and the unknown Outside can only be experienced in a negative way, fiction is the perfect vehicle for abstract horror. A Sohn-Rethel/Moore reading of the ontological division of Humanity and Nature helps us see how Land ontologizes the human-nature division elevating fiction to an ontological status and thus hypostasizes the Outside, turning it into a transcendent principle. In my understanding, a Sohn-Rethel/Moore interpretation of the ontological division between the noumenal world-without-humans and the phenomenal must question such ontologization as another form of metaphysical extractivism that treats nature as if it were deprived of sensuous qualities, agency, or actual movement. An examination of *Guitarra negra* will help me unfold the new forms of this split once we bring the sphere of extractive abstraction into the picture.

The following paragraphs are part of Stahl's reflections on the natural environment of Uruguay, in the frame of speculative realism:

Federico Stahl parte de una distinción elemental entre el mundo-para-nosotros (es decir, el ordenado en nuestro conocimiento y replegado sobre una taxonomía basada en dicotomías del tipo biología/geología, vivo/inanimado, orgánico/mineral, natural/artificial, humano/animal) y un concebible mundo-sin-nosotros, al que es tentador aproximar a la "cosa-en-sí" kantiana, aunque el realismo (o "materialismo fisicalista") de Federico Stahl pretende esquivar lo que Quentin Meillassoux llamó "el círculo de la correlación."

[Federico Stahl begins with an elemental distinction between the world-for-us (that is, the world that is ordered in our knowledge and supported by a taxonomy based on dichotomies such as biology/geology, alive/inanimate, organic/mineral, natural/artificial, human/animal) and a conceivable world-without-us, that one could be tempted to liken to the Kantian "thing-in-itself," even though Federico Stahl's realism (or "physicalist materialism") seeks to skirt what Quentin Meillassoux

referred to as “the circle of correlation.”]<sup>41</sup>

Stahl’s philosophy, which he names “physicalist materialism” falls squarely within speculative realism, that is, as a critique of correlation that emphasizes the centrality of the Kantian noumenal sphere. Stahl’s point of departure, the noumenal-phenomenal division and all the ontological binaries that come with it (biology/geology, alive/inanimate, organic/mineral, natural/artificial, human/animal) is, as I showed previously, a real abstraction introduced by the transference of the sphere of exchange to conceptual thinking. Although Stahl seems to follow the speculative realist program that identifies the noumenal realm of a world without humans with capitalism, he also opens a space for a sort of social constructionism that negotiates the boundaries between what is given and what is constructed:

Cuando se plantea a la naturaleza en el contexto de un orden del mundo, a partir de la diferencia, en el vasto escenario del mundo-para-nosotros, entre aquello que ha sido *construido* o *manufacturado* en el proceso de la civilización, y aquello que es *dado*, que no ha sido *hecho* y es por tanto una parte de esa “naturaleza” que simplemente está allí como la contraparte otra del nosotros humano, se sigue que esa “naturaleza” es de algún modo falsa o espuria, en tanto existe como una figura más en un orden del mundo, una construcción cultural, simbólica. En términos de dominios, Federico Stahl habla del macrodominio, ohm (“orden humano del mundo”), que contiene a su vez los dominios C y n (“civilización” y “naturaleza”, respectivamente), dejando a la N mayúscula (la “verdadera naturaleza,” en algunos textos) como el Afuera radical o un macrodominio aparte de (y ajeno a) ohm. Entonces, n minúscula equivale a “la naturaleza como nos la representamos en oposición a lo humano, pero *dentro* del orden humano del mundo.”

[When nature is posited in the context of an order the world, taking as a starting point the difference, on the vast stage of the world-for-us, between that which has been *constructed* or *manufactured* in the process of civilization, and that which is *given*, which has not been *made* and is therefore a part of this “nature” that is simply there as the “other” counterpart of the human us, it happens that this “nature” is somehow false or spurious, as it exists as one more figure in an order of the world, as a cultural and symbolic construction. To put it in terms of domains, Federico Stahl refers to the macro-domain, the how (“human order of the world” —ohm in the original), which contains both the C and n domains (“civilization” and “nature” respectively), leaving the capital N (the



“true nature,” in some texts) as the radical Outside or a macro-domain separate from (and foreign to) the how. The small n is therefore equivalent to “nature as we represent it in opposition to that which is human, but *within* the human order of the world.”]<sup>42</sup>

Here, the text simultaneously blurs and complicates the ontological division between Humanity and Nature. It blurs it because the distinction between the human and the non-human becomes internal to the human. And it complicates it because for Stahl (and Land) the true division is between nature as a noumenal radical Outside and the rest of human beings. The division between what is given and what is constructed is not the last word when it comes to Stahl’s speculative turn, however. On one hand, the opposition between humans and nature is internal to humanity. On the other hand, this new ontological split is turned into a split between a humanized or civilized nature and the radical Outside that is completely beyond humanity.

In this way, Stahl posits a difference between nature as *given* and nature as constructed or manufactured, but this difference is still a difference internal to humanity. True Nature as a radical Outside is no longer the passive material that needs to be molded by humans. Iberian metaphysical instrumentalism cannot account for this division and neither can Moore’s substantial division between extended and thinking substance. This Nature with capital letters or radical Outside is not only opposed to humanity but is beyond humanity and accessible only negatively through fiction. It is “weird nature,” completely indifferent to human projects: Lovecraft’s “cosmic horror” that both Land and Stahl identify with capitalism itself. The new real abstraction being developed here is an ontological division between *nature* and *Nature*, a division that makes the opposition between what is given and what is constructed completely irrelevant:

La naturaleza según *National Geographic* no es la verdadera naturaleza”, precisa Federico Stahl, “para empezar porque está allí ocupando un lugar en un sistema que le es ajeno; es la naturaleza del antropocentrismo, aquello que resulta de la abyección de todo aquello que entendemos como humano y *nuestro*, pero, a su vez, un abyecto con el que *debemos sostener una relación*”. A partir de la idea de “relación”, entonces, esa “abyección” primaria debe pensarse como una circulación: por un lado, la naturaleza es todo aquello que expulsamos en tanto inhumano (es decir el ámbito de la geología y el ámbito de la biología: la vida bacterial, arquea y eucariota *una vez llevada a cabo la sustracción del nosotros*), pero, por otro, es también aquello que *hacemos ingresar* a tal dominio bajo la categoría de la *materia prima*. Esa naturaleza, según Federico Stahl, es “producida” entonces por ese doble proceso: “entendemos lo natural según qué provecho podemos

sacarle en términos reales/económicos y en términos simbólicos.

[“Nature according to *National Geographic* isn’t the real nature,” adds Federico Stahl, “first, because it is there, in a place in a system that is foreign to it; it is the nature posited by anthropocentrism, the result of the abjection of all that we understand as human and as *ours*, which is also an “abject” with which we *must maintain a relation*.” It is from the idea of “relation,” therefore, that this primary “abjection” must be thought of as a circulation: on the one hand, nature is all that which we expel as it is in-human (that is, the realm of geology and that of biology: bacterial, archaea y eukaryote life *once the subtraction of the we/us has been completed*), but, on the other hand, it is also that which we *bring into* this domain within the category of *raw material*. This nature is therefore, for Federico Stahl, “produced” by this dual process: “we understand that which is natural in function of how we can profit from it in real/economical terms and in symbolic terms.”]<sup>43</sup>

In this paragraph we can see how, for Stahl, anthropocentric and humanized nature (*National Geographic’s* nature) is the non-human abstract residue that results from the gradual subsumption of the real nature, the radical Outside, into the economic socio-symbolic world-for-us. It is nothing but the picture-for-us that remains once we subtract ourselves from the picture. On the other hand, humans seem to not be part of either the radical Outside or the false “National Geographic” view of nature, a move that reinstates the ontological division between Humanity and Nature. In other words, despite the attempts to elude the Kantian division between the world-in-itself and the world-for-us, the division between Nature and “National Geographic nature” reproduces the antinomy between the physicality of nature (pure matter following physical laws) and the subjective appearance of humanity (pure form imposed on humanity). Like in Land, nature here is devalorized, pure meat, mere living entities destined to abstract extinction. Moreover, the nature in the human domain is described as being produced, which is an important detail, because it basically replicates the logic of the positing presuppositions of capital. Capital acts as if it produced reality. The value form acts as if it created material nature itself. Value is retroactively actualized and performatively enacted through a complete devalorization of its own material conditions.

What we have seen so far is how Stahl’s speculative realism introduces a form of abstraction that brings about a shift within the Capitalocene: attention shifts from the process of the transformation of nature into a raw material to the ontological division between Nature as radical Outside and nature as extractive material. I’ve shown how the difference between Nature and Humanity is a real abstraction that

introduces the violent division between a noumenal world in itself (nature without humans) and a world for us (humanized nature). Here we can see how the difference between a radical Outside and human and non-human beings is also the result of a transference of the practice of exchange into conceptual thought. However, we can also see in Stahl how it is capitalism that engenders the fiction of an abstract outside that culminates in the ontologization and naturalization of an absolute difference between capitalism as ultimate reality and the rest of human and non-human beings. Fiction is the means by which the ultimate fiction of capital is naturalized, its dream of replacing all reality.

Although both weird fiction and world-ecology place a great deal of importance on the asymmetrical primacy of the non-human over the human, speculative fiction ontologizes this relation while world-ecology historicizes it. In the most rigid forms of “abstract horror” there is no place for the complex metabolism of humanity and nature: instead of flows of humanity in nature and flows of nature in humanity we have a split between the old transcendent noumenal beyond and human experience. In sum, the more capitalism pretends to produce nature by extracting raw material, the more it engenders a residual specter of a completely external and desubstantialized Outside, pure nothing and pure death.

If humans are not part of weird nature as radical Outside, what is the ontological status of this weird nature other than its physicality? In *Guitarra negra* we read:

El petróleo (la negrura), después de todo, es quemado (el blanqueo) para avanzar en la conversión de la biósfera en tecnósfera, del mismo modo que la religión basal y las potencias de lo ctónico han de asociarse a un “retorno de la naturaleza”. *Pero este retorno es también una de las consecuencias del colapso*, porque una vez obliterado el orden humano del mundo lo que “regresa” es la N mayúscula, la verdadera naturaleza. Nada de lo humano sobrevive al futuro, sea porque nos precipitamos a lo alien y lo weird, sea porque el capitalismo terminó de hacernos pedazos, sea porque la tensión biósfera tecnósfera activa mecanismos de catástrofe ambiental en frenesí.

[Petroleum (blackness) is, after all, burned (whitening) to make progress in converting the biosphere into technosphere, just as basal religion and the powers of the chthonic shall come to be associated with a “return of nature.” *But this return is also one of the consequences of the collapse*, because once the human order of the world has been obliterated, what “returns” is the capital N, true nature. None of that which is human will survive the future, either because we are hurtling toward that which is alien and that which is weird, or because capitalism has finally fully torn us to pieces, or because the tension between biosphere and technosphere activates

frenzied mechanisms of environmental catastrophe.]<sup>44</sup>

Although the division between nature and humanity persists, the dualism of Outside and inside is no longer Cartesian (i.e., the Outside cannot be an object of plunder) but more complex. First, Stahl sustains that the destruction associated to burning crude oil is inseparable from the transformation of biosphere into Technosphere. Second, he associates this transformation with the “return of Nature.” The words in italics indicate that the “return of Nature” is a *consequence* of human extinction brought about by capitalism and the ecological collapse. Stahl is borrowing heavily from Nick Land who thinks that capitalist deterritorialization and compulsive repetition (death drive) are also two sides of the same process.<sup>45</sup> In other words, like Land, Stahl is associating directly the return of Nature, the world-without-us, with human extinction caused by capitalism. The real abstraction that absolutely externalizes nature into Nature is inseparable from the elevation of capitalism itself to the status of the noumenal “Thing-in-itself.”<sup>46</sup> Once capitalism is ontologized, nothing is outside it, and Nature is nothing but the process of producing and consuming itself like the Ouroboros symbol of infinity or a Borromean knot. It is the pure return of death, which is incompatible with human beings. Here weird Nature (to keep with Stahl’s usage) takes the form of pure, empty form of death and destruction that excludes humanity in a misanthropic subtraction precisely *because* the pure immanence of capitalism is all there is. Weird Nature is the pure undead physicality of capitalism’s self-consumption, the other side of capitalism in a Moebius strip. In Stahl, there is nothing outside this loop of capitalism positing its own presuppositions, nothing but an empty form of physicality.

In this division between nature and Nature, however, the capitalist death drive comes to replace Nature itself. In this way, both Stahl and Land’s critique of anthropocentric ontology ends up ontologizing capitalism itself and generating a new ideology of capitalism based in this ontologization of its thanatic compulsion. Herein, the radical Outside is not conceived of as a resource to subordinate and exploit, but rather is identified with the subjective agency of capital itself as automatic subject, the empty interiority of a process of destruction. The process by means of which capitalism decides what is real and valuable and what is not ends up retroactively devaluating and desubstantiating matter to the point where only the only real thing that remains is the speculative dance of capital’s self-valorization. In Stahl and Land, the philosophical platform of capitalism is no longer Iberian metaphysical instrumentalism, nor Cartesian dualism, nor transcendental extra-activism. In the present marked by mass extinction and the end of cheap nature, we can see in their work the creation of a new ideological platform for capitalism which is an ontologization of the death drive that naturalizes capitalism itself.

Although the general tone of these novels is pessimistic, they provide us with a map of a conception of nature that emerges from the end of cheap nature. In spite

of producing a “weird affect” (so apt to aestheticizing climate change), these novels are not speaking from the perspective of the classic weird of H.P. Lovecraft or the New Weird.<sup>47</sup> Sharae Deckard and Kerstin Oloff argue that Caribbean New Weird fiction appropriates and inverts Lovecraft’s inclination to identify disposable nature and racialized workers with noumenal horror by showing that capitalism itself “is the true source of horror, the extinguisher of life of all kinds.”<sup>48</sup> Instead, *Mugre rosa* depicts capitalogenic climate change and capitalist production as a machinery of reducing everything to an insubstantial pink slime that swallows both human and non-human beings. By imagining Stahl as a periphereic Land who writes theoretical-fiction that explicitly addresses ontological problems, *Guitarra negra* goes a step further and identifies Lovecraft’s noumenal reality with capitalism itself, allowing us to see how this ontological fiction about capitalism is also the fiction that capitalism creates about itself. My point is precisely that *because* abstract horror takes nihilism to the extreme, while introducing new ontological divisions between humanity and nature, extinction and capitalist noumena, it becomes a valuable tool for diagnosing new ongoing speculative practices that cause extinction by reducing nature to a cheap amorphous resource. For this reason, weird fiction makes visible the cutting edge of deterritorialization at the new commodity frontiers: the threat of extinction triggered by the Capitalocene that exhausts its own conditions of reproduction. In other words, these Latin American novels depict not only the horror of a world-in-itself or a world-without-us that comes from the outside, but also the horror of value fetishism, the act of retroactive abstraction that deprives nature of all its concrete features to transform it into a devalorized slimy substance that comes back to haunt us.

## Notes

1. My thanks for ongoing conversations with Santiago Acosta, Paige R. Andersson, Victoria Saramago, and Brian Whitener reflected in the following pages. I want to give special thanks to Brian Whitener for his constant patience when reading all the versions of this paper.
2. Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason Moore (Oakland, CA: Kairos PM, 2016) 99.
3. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature" 99.
4. It is important not to confuse Heidegger's ontic and ontological difference, the division between beings and Being, with Moore's questioning of the ontological division between Humanity and Nature because Moore deontologizes ontology by deriving the division from historical and dialectical modes of production and exchange.
5. "The Rise of Cheap Nature" 99.
6. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ.: Humanity's Press, 1978).
7. See Alberto Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," *Rethinking Marxism* 20.2 (2008): 273-287. Recent interest in "real abstraction" has been accompanied by a plethora of scholarly production on this concept. See Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva, and Iván Novara, eds., *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Real Abstraction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
8. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* 71.
9. *Intellectual and Manual Labour* 59.
10. It is important to keep in mind that real abstractions are themselves part of larger metabolic processes. I follow Kohei Saito and Thomas Nail who place the triple metabolism of nature/nature, nature/humanity and humanity/humanity as the material kinetic conditions of the production of abstract value. Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors, 2018), and Nail, *Marx In Motion*. For a scientific non-metaphysical account of the continuum of humanity and nature see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, second printing (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
11. This is, of course, one possible line of thought, but there are other historical ontologies that play different goals in the process of continuous recreation of the commodity frontiers.
12. See Orlando Bentancor, *The Matter of Empire: Metaphysics and Mining in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), and Jason W. Moore, "Climate, Class & the Great Frontier: From Primitive Accumulation to the Great Implosion," unpublished paper, World-Ecology Research Group, Binghamton University, 2021.
13. Mark Driscoll sustains that there Kant and Hegel provided the philosophical template for an extra-active attitude of white superiority over non-white people and natural resources. Mark Driscoll, *The Whites Are Enemies of Heaven: Climate Caucasianism and Asian Ecological Protection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
14. See Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2009) 5.
15. Nick Land taught two of the four members of the speculative realist movement, Ray Brassier and



Ian Hamilton Grant. There is a connection between abstract horror fiction and speculative realism based on the works of Eugene Thacker and Nick Land who theorized the link between ontology and H.P. Lovecraft's fiction.

16. Katerina Kolozova, *Toward a Radical Metaphysics of Socialism: Marx and Laruelle* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015) 66.
17. Kolozova, *Toward a Radical Metaphysics* 61.
18. *Toward a Radical Metaphysics* 61.
19. *Toward a Radical Metaphysics* 34.
20. Jason W. Moore. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2015) 91. Let us clarify that Moore's more subtle historical sensibility understands these limits not as absolute but as historically coproduced between capitalism as a social formation and extra-human agents.
21. In Moore's words: "Capitalism is a way of organizing nature" *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2015) 78. Moore proposes a way to overcome the separation between Nature and Humanity in terms of double internality: nature flows into humanity and humanity flows into nature. I understand that this procedure is not in itself a fiction or a real abstraction, but rather a chiasmus that attempts to capture a larger metabolic process by which human beings confront nature as a force of nature. Although it is not in itself a fiction, there is a place for fiction in this chiasmatic structure and it is marked by the preposition "in". The fictions, distortions of reality are an inherent part of reality in the same way that the flows of humanity are an inherent part of nature and vice versa.
22. For an introduction to the genre, see Ramiro Sanchiz and Gabriele Bizzarri, "'New Weird from the New World': escrituras de la rareza en América latina (1990-2020). Introducción," *Orillas: revista d'ispanística* 9 (2020) 1-14. Among the authors credited by Sanchiz with bringing new blood to the old weird horrorism, Sanchiz finds Mariana Enríquez, Liliana Colanzi, Samanta Schweblin, Alberto Chimal, Pablo Dobrinin, Teresa Mira, Solange Rodríguez Pappe, Mónica Ojeda, and Luis Carlos Barragán. Adding to Sanchiz's list we find *Pasadizo a lo extraño: Antología de New Weird iberoamericana* published by Exegesis in 2019, and *Paisajes experimentales: Antología de Nueva Ficción Extraña*, published by Indómita Luz Editorial in 2020.
23. See Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London, Repeater, 2017).
24. See H.P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature: Revised and Enlarged*, annotated edition (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012).
25. See Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*.
26. See Orlando Bentancor, *The Matter of Empire: Metaphysics and Mining in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).
27. Fernanda Trías, *Mugre rosa* (Barcelona: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2021) 49.
28. For Moore's definition of cheap food as "more calories" in "less labor time" see *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. 241. For the role of negative value and the role of food in the totality of the contradictions of neoliberal agriculture see "Cheap Food and Bad Climate: From Surplus Value to Negative Value in the Capitalist World-Ecology" *Critical Historical Studies*, (2015) 1-43.
29. Trías, *Mugre rosa* 49.

30. *Mugre rosa* 49.
31. *Mugre rosa* 50-51, my emphasis.
32. For the role of the meat-industry in the creation of antibiotic resistance as one of the factors in the emergence of negative value when nature cannot be captured for free see *Capitalism in the Web of Life* 285.
33. *Mugre rosa* 113.
34. *Mugre rosa* 14.
35. Let us add that Ramiro Sanchiz has also translated Nick Land to Spanish and also has written various texts on abstract horror For Sanchiz's translations of Nick Land into Spanish, see Nick Land and Ramiro Sanchiz, *Fanged Noumena* (Barcelona: Holobionte Ediciones, 2019), and Nick Land and Ramiro Sanchiz, *Teleoplexia* (Barcelona: Holobionte Ediciones, 2021).
36. For the most detailed analysis of the entanglement between Nick Land's anti-humanism and the neo-reactionary movement see Roger Burrows, "Urban Futures and the Dark Enlightenment: a Brief Guide for the Perplexed" in *Philosophy and the City: Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Perspectives*, (London, UK; Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2019) 245-258.
37. See note 14.
38. See Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015).
39. Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) 78.
40. Nick Land, "Manifesto for an Abstract Literature," *Chasm* (Time Spiral Press, 2015).
41. Ramiro Sanchiz, *Guitarra negra: Alfredo Zitarrosa* (Montevideo: Estuario Editora, 2020) 32.
42. Sanchiz, *Guitarra negra* 33. All emphasis in this and the rest of the quotations are in the original.
43. *Guitarra negra* 33-34.
44. *Guitarra negra* 115.
45. For Land's identification of the noumenal with capitalist death drive see "A Critique of Transcendental Miserabilism" in Nick Land, Robin Mackay, and Ray Brassier, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011).
46. Sanchiz's own ontology and aesthetic project is way more complex than Federico Stahl's. In the "Posdata" to the latest reedition of this novel *Trashpunk*, I argue that Sanchiz's blend of cyberpunk and horror does not separate between a noumenal and a phenomenal realm because it folds the phenomenal back into the noumenal, dissolving the ontological division in a radical non-anthropocentric and non-human materialism. See Bentancor, Orlando, "Posdata," *Trashpunk* (Montevideo, Mig 21 Editora, 2021) 155-159.
47. While in the Old Weird the "weirdness" is an adjective that qualifies an external and indifferent Thing from outside this world, the New Weird is an attempt to embrace the monster that comes from outer space and include, accept it within an ethics of finitude. See Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy, "Introduction: Old and new weird," *Genre* 49.2 (2016): 117-134.
48. Deckard, Sharae, and Kerstin Oloff. "The One Who Comes from the Sea": Marine Crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015)." *Humanities* 9.3 (2020): 12.

Joseph Staten. "How Amazon Killed the Novel—More or Less." *Mediations* 36.1 (Spring 2024) 122-128. [www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/moreorless](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/moreorless)

*Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*

Mark McGurl

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## How Amazon Killed the Novel — More or Less

Joseph Staten

Mark McGurl insists at the beginning of *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* that "This is not a book about Amazon."<sup>1</sup> Yet the book's gambit is that the contemporary novel can only be understood as having been indelibly shaped by that titanic corporate entity, an entity whose name McGurl thus sees fit to bestow upon the entire literary Age. "[T]he rise of Amazon," McGurl writes in the Preface, is the most significant novelty in recent literary history, representing an attempt to reforge contemporary literary life as an adjunct to online retail" (xii), and this reforging is occurring, for McGurl, on two distinct but related planes. First, it is indisputably true that Amazon has revolutionized the way people both buy and publish books. McGurl reports that Amazon—a company that came into existence less than 30 years ago — is now responsible for more than half of US print book sales, as well as an even higher percentage of ebook sales—the latter being "a market [Amazon] essentially made" (2). Meanwhile, on the production side, Amazon owns sixteen "more or less traditional" publishing imprints (including Amazon Crossing, which puts out more translations into English than any other publisher [102]), as well as, most significantly for *Everything and Less*, the massive self-publishing operation Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), which has apparently facilitated the minting of literally millions of books from independent authors since its launch in 2007, fundamentally altering the composition of contemporary literature in the process (37). Amazon, in other words, despite the

minute percentage of its business that bookselling now represents, has become the most important mover of both literary consumption and production in the US, if not the world. “Increasingly,” says McGurl, from every measurable perspective, Amazon “is the new platform of contemporary literary life” (2).

Yet all of this is scene setting for McGurl’s central interest: the way the novel has registered these seismic changes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the main development on this score has been fiction’s ever more precise internalization of the markets it serves, part of what McGurl calls Amazon’s reconceptualization of literature as a “service” aimed at catering to consumers with exceedingly particular interests (27). And if the hardware at the core of the service model of literature is the Kindle, whose ebook libraries are characterized by a “digital liquidity” reinforces that model (3), the software is a far more ancient one: genre, a concept more central to *Everything and Less* than perhaps any other. Genre, as “a form, indigenous to the literary field, of the broader phenomena of market segmentation and product differentiation,” is the means by which the market and its whims become immanent to the literary work, and though Amazon certainly didn’t invent genre, it has been involved in proliferating it at an unprecedented level (162). This has been nowhere more visible than on KDP, where authors have access to “no fewer than ten thousand separate generic domains” by which to classify their novels and help them find an audience (162) — domains spanning everything from the relatively straightforward “epic science fiction” to the slightly more niche “cozy mystery” to the highly specific “Adult Baby Diaper Lover (ABDL)” erotica, the last of which McGurl is tempted to call “the quintessential Amazonian genre of literature” (153). In this way, Amazon’s larger standing as the “Everything Store” is thus mirrored in its panoply of literary offerings, where seemingly every conceivable readerly desire can be immediately fulfilled at the click of a button.

It is debatable how much of a “novelty” this state of affairs actually is — genre (and the broader phenomenon of catering to audience tastes) has been with us as long as books have been sold, and Amazon’s intervention here often seems like one more of scale than of fundamental rewiring. Yet by actually reading these novels (and reading them, as it were, for genre), McGurl is able to draw out many complex facets of life in the Age of Amazon as they’re refracted through the marketized logic of generic form. In something like the framing move for the entire book, McGurl identifies as the two poles of genre the maximalist epic (e.g. *Game of Thrones*) and the comparatively minimalist romance (e.g. *Fifty Shades of Grey*) — a schema that extends that of McGurl’s previous book *The Program Era* (2009), which situated postwar literary fiction within a similar matrix, between maximalist Pynchons and minimalist Carvers.<sup>2</sup> For *Everything and Less*, the epic and romance correspond to the opposing yet perpetually intertwined imperatives of “more” and “less” within capitalist social existence, where our desire for “more” (money, time, fulfilling reading experiences) is always stalked by an equal desire for “less” (toil, information overload, wait time for the next Amazon

package). Novels, McGurl argues, inevitably position themselves somewhere along this spectrum, if not at multiple points: “contemporary fiction makes its way by either aligning itself with or resisting the flood of muchness by which the modern sensorium is assailed, or by executing some more complex combination of the two” (260). McGurl brilliantly identifies the latter case in postapocalyptic sci-fi: the terrible sublimity of an entire world destroyed is dialectically countered by the intimacy of the small group of survivors through whom the narrative is focalized. Or, reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which functions as a kind of ur-text for Amazonian literature (originally self-published, as it was, as *Twilight* fan-fiction, itself a generic niche servicing ample consumer hunger), McGurl notes how Christian Grey, the ravenously consumptive “alpha billionaire” figure, ironically allows the protagonist Ana, in submitting to his domination, to herself be “absolved of the existential inconvenience of choice” that the consumer is always assailed by (128). “In this sense,” McGurl concludes, “even as he admits to being the ultimate consumer, the alpha billionaire presents himself as a fantasy antidote to consumerism.” More, as everywhere in the contemporary novel under Amazon, leads inevitably to less, and just as frequently back again.

Yet if “more and less” is the core dynamic undergirding fiction today, McGurl employs a number of other hermeneutic frames to illuminate different aspects of that dynamic — whether it be anthropologist Alfred Gell’s use of opportunity cost as a window onto human decision making, social reproduction theory’s braiding of consumption with reproduction in the site of the home, or largely forgotten sociologist Orrin E. Klapp’s positing of variety and redundancy as the competing imperatives of human informational intake. Characteristically, this capacious critical infrastructure is generative of analyses and readings that convincingly reveal the allegorical or ideological content of their object texts, even (or especially) if that text be a work of, say, “Bisexual and Gay Threesome MMF Military and Cowboy Romance” (180). As the book progresses, however, one can’t help but feel as though McGurl’s liberal assimilation of such a broad array of interpretive tools begins to mirror the manic variegation of the Everything Store itself. Perhaps this is a feature rather than a bug, but it at times works at cross-purposes to McGurl’s stated goal for viewing contemporary literature through the lens of Amazon in the first place: to give the data at hand a “vehicle of meaningful focalization, something to lend analytical coherence to what might otherwise seem the impersonal unfolding of scattered techno-capitalist processes” (2). As the frame widens and brings more thinkers and modalities into its ambit, the intended coherence risks loosening into more or less connected pivots from one frame to another, like the nudgings of an erudite yet scattered recommendation algorithm. People Who Bought Alfred Gell Also Bought: Niklas Luhmann, Max Weber, Frederic Jameson, Georges Bataille, etc.

In a conversation with Mark Greif, McGurl describes this approach as “testing out different ways of understanding fiction as a boon that somebody might want and thus might buy.”<sup>3</sup> And indeed, fiction in the Age of Amazon — whether understood

as an “existential supplement,” a “structured fantasy,” or an “existential scaling device” (257) — is always about fulfilling a need—that is, being purchased. As such, the concept that most holds *Everything and Less* together is genre, and this is where McGurl’s analysis is most compelling and also most problematic. It is through genre that we can most clearly see what McGurl, following Rita Felski, calls the “uses of literature,” and chief among these for McGurl—he offers the designation with bracing courage — is “therapy.” “[A]s soon as they are detached from their uses in formal schooling,” he writes, “stories provide therapeutic comfort to those who read them” — full stop. And though this is “a pointedly unheroic answer” to the question of literature’s use, it is one that McGurl nonetheless fundamentally embraces, seeing in it a more robust and democratic way of understanding fiction as it actually exists in the current moment than the traditional hierarchies of literary value would allow. While fiction loses “a certain glamour” in this conception, that loss is “partially recompensed in the revelation of [fiction’s] basic necessity. We need novels like we need food to eat and clothing and shelter — at least some of us do, numbering in the hundreds of millions” (256). Which is to say, we need novels like we need commodities — and indeed, on McGurl’s account, novels are always first and foremost commodities, if uncommonly soothing ones.

But what about so-called “literary fiction,” that mode of novelistic writing that purports to achieve something beyond the rote satisfaction of genre conventions and thus provision of therapeutic benefit? Unfortunately for literary critics, literary fiction in the Age of Amazon is best understood, McGurl says, as simply one more genre among others. If, “according to Amazon, *all fiction is genre fiction* in that it caters to a generic desire... [t]his includes — on occasion, depending on where you’re coming from — a desire for complex literary artistry,” a desire our scores of literary writers are satisfying more thoroughly than perhaps ever before (14-15). Even novels with ostensibly more sophisticated aesthetic ambitions than your average cozy mystery can thus be understood as simply responding to market incentives — far from a bad thing for McGurl since that response, on his account, is the satisfaction of a social necessity and thus a kind of social good. “[T]he pursuit of finer things is a habit like any other, and one with mostly therapeutic benefits if we’re honest,” he writes — literary critics are no different than ABDL consumers on that score. There is thus no practical difference between a work like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and more manifestly literary novels Tao Lin’s *Taipei* or Anna Moschovakis’s *Eleanor, or, The Rejection of the Progress of Love*. McGurl reads all three convincingly and compellingly, but as commodities responsive to markets rather than artworks determined by their own immanent logic, they can only finally be read symptomatically.

This, indeed, gets to the heart of the problem with *Everything and Less*: if a novel is nothing more than a commodity, we can still “read” it in the sense of analyzing the way it emblemizes social phenomena (the way any commodity does), but it is no longer responsive to what we call, in the business, interpretation. This is a crucial



point recently made by Nicholas Brown, who argues in *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (2019) that that nature of the art commodity (as opposed to the artwork) is that, since it is structured through and through by market imperatives, it can only be analyzed in reference to those imperatives, not immanently. Brown puts it thus, in the context of slasher films (but he might as well have been talking about zombie apocalypse novels or ABDL):

The question “Why do slasher films have boyish female protagonists?” is interesting, but despite appearances, it is not an interpretive question: it is not to be answered by a close reading of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, whose “meaning” is entirely subordinate to an audience’s demand for a certain set of narrative conventions. Rather, it is answered by, in essence, querying the audience rather than the film, and when we have answered the question, we have learned something about audience rather than about the film.<sup>4</sup>

Far from hierarchizing slasher films “below,” say, art house films—a move McGurl would rightly caution against — the point here is simply to say that slasher films and art house films have different ontologies, and thus are amenable to qualitatively different forms of interpretation. In not attending to this distinction and thus folding all literary production into the genre (and thus commodity) system, McGurl forecloses the possibility that a work of fiction might at times attain the kind of internal aesthetic coherence — what Brown calls “meaning” — that would call for an interpretation that does not finally collapse into “querying the audience.” And yet querying the audience appears, at moments, to be precisely what McGurl has set out to do, as when he cautions against fixating on “meaning” as such and advises rather that the Amazon reader’s “sensation” of meaning is what’s more relevant: “perhaps we should be wary of overstating the importance of complexly effable meaning...to the reading that most Amazon customers do.... We might say instead that what the reader is looking for in fiction is a *sensation* of meaning” (173). That such a shift in interpretive attention from “meaning” to “*sensation* of meaning” requires an equivalent methodological shift from reading the text to reading the audience is also alluded to when McGurl mentions in passing in an endnote that his book is concerned with “matters more proper to literary-economic sociology than to aesthetic theory per se” (272 n25). To say that McGurl’s mode of literary criticism moves from aesthetics to sociology is to restate Brown’s point about replacing the object with the audience quite precisely. We might say, then, that *Everything and Less* teaches us an enormous amount about *readers* in the Age of Amazon, while the novel’s capacities as an aesthetic, rather than merely sociological, form — if it still retains an aesthetic identity not assimilable to sociology, an open question — remain obscure.<sup>5</sup>

There is, of course, a politics to all of this. And McGurl’s politics, despite his at

times disconcerting enthusiasm for the commodity form, are partly redeemed at the book's conclusion when he writes that the "underlist" — his term for the countless thousands of KDP books that not only fail to make best-seller lists but are never read by anyone at all — expresses in negative a hope for a better world. McGurl writes that his:

purely speculative, possibly crazy framing of the matter...transvalues the monumental waste of internet-enabled literary history as a collective demand for transformation. It sees it as representing the possibility of a world organized fundamentally otherwise than this one is. Strange and almost traitorous as it sounds, it posits literary waste as clearing conceptual space for a world that *doesn't need so much fiction*, at least not as we know it, having progressed beyond a desire for the forms of therapy it currently offers (258).

If our insatiable hunger for fiction is one concrete manifestation of our desperate need for therapeutic relief, a world in which we need less therapy is surely one we can all hope for. Yet in the Age of Amazon, when the walls that art might erect against the endless barrage of market forces that make us need therapy in the first place are understood as having disintegrated—and more, when that disintegration is, in a laudable if mistaken spirit of aesthetic populism, celebrated — such a world seems as hopelessly far away as ever.

### Notes

1. Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*. (London: Verso, 2021) 22.
2. While *Everything and Less* is, by McGurl's own account, something like a sequel to *The Program Era*, it's also worth considering its relation to McGurl's first book, *The Novel Art: Elevations of Literary Fiction after Henry James* (2001). If *The Novel Art* charts the historical emergence of the "art novel," *Everything and Less* can be understood, for reasons that will become clear later in this essay, as implicitly positing its death. This narrative continuity would make McGurl's three books a kind of trilogy—"the quintessential epic form," McGurl observes, as well as the quintessential Amazonian form (27).
3. Community Bookstore Live, "Mark McGurl presents 'Everything and Less,' with Mark Greif," YouTube video, 1:03:36, Oct. 20, 2021, <https://youtu.be/4IfFQUEpTnE?t=1606>.
4. Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2019) 185 n15.
5. Brown, for his part, argues that the novel still can attain a degree of aesthetic autonomy, and can in fact use genre itself to do so by treating the genre as a constraint to work through and subvert rather than a set of imperatives to simply fulfill. Though this subversion might be more likely to occur in a work classed as "literary fiction," there's no reason why a work of Adult Baby Diaper Lover erotica couldn't carve out a space of autonomous meaning by challenging its own generic norms. (And, conversely, much if not most "literary fiction" is, per McGurl's analysis, really is just genre fiction). The whispers of potential generic subversion haunt some of McGurl's readings, yet without a distinction between artwork and art commodity in hand, they can never be more than whispers. See Brown, 25–27.

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Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value

Seb Franklin

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## Hyperreal Abstraction

Marina Vishmidt

The shelf of transdisciplinary critical theory on the networked condition in an era of planet-scale, planet-wrecking digitally enhanced capitalism is, just like its object, in an expansive phase, albeit one seemingly less prone to crisis. Marxist or Marx-adjacent publications by theorists such as Jonathan Beller, Christian Fuchs, or Jathan Sadowski hint at the scope of academic well as journalistic inquiry, as well as the blurring of those spheres enabled by social media.<sup>1</sup> On a wider terrain, incisive work is being done by technology critics, historians and theorists drawing on phenomenology, ontology, ecology, media theory, process philosophy, cultural studies, black studies and feminism, including Ramon Amaro, Ruha Benjamin, Simone Browne, Orit Halpern, Yuk Hui, Lisa Nakamura, Safiya Noble, and the all-present Shoshana Zuboff.<sup>2</sup> Many of these are interlocutors for Seb Franklin's project. Yet extensive as this rollcall may be, it remains a snapshot of a field whose heterogeneity indexes the success of an intellectual current that seems to not only be expanding but actively redefining more established disciplines as it goes — the march of the digital humanities since at least the mid-2000s.

With this plurality of coordinates in mind, it is clear that Franklin's work has some distinctive stakes. Besides the polemical likes of Tiqqun, it is the only one in the landscape charted above that excavates the actuality of cybernetics and information science in the constitution of digitally mediated social relations and productive forces

both over time and as we know it today. This is a focus that is evident throughout his work, as in the previous book *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (MIT, 2015). Further, it adapts that media-theoretical frame by not only grounding it in a historicised critique of political economy, but by mapping it onto works of fiction, visual art and cinema. This involves making use of contemporary approaches in Marxist analysis such as value critique/value-form theory and racial capitalism, and throughout it generates sharp and striking – if variably persuasive – readings in light of the limited congruence of these paradigms with one another. If value-form theory is consistently defined by its prioritisation of the “logical” over the “historical” dimension of the capitalist mode of production, the critical category of racial capitalism situates itself in the capitalist social formation, challenging the analytic and political utility of both those priorities and that distinction. A number of recent Marxist interventions, however, have sought to redefine that opposition, collapsible as it is into the zombieified terms of “class” versus “identity,” and such efforts include Amy De’Ath, Alberto Toscano, as well as the late Kevin Floyd and the edited volume he initiated, *Totality Inside Out*, where notably Chris Chen and Sarika Chandra develop an “ascriptive” theory of the role of racism in the reproduction of capital drawing on the most generative aspects of both approaches.

Franklin’s project is at an oblique angle to these, though a dialogue can definitely be traced in the text and the endnotes. However, the driving principle of the project is not a synthetic one, such as some kind of fusion of media theory and historical materialism, but rather a reticular one. *Digitally Disposed* is animated by tracing connections and dependencies (“require and obscure” or “support and disavow” are the types of framing that recur) between the “congealed” and the “coded,” in the wording from Spivak cited early on, as modalities of more and less valued, more and less coerced, labor power in capital. “Computation” is placed closer to elite labor, and “congelation” to lower levels of autonomy in the work and lower levels of humanity imputed to the worker, drawing on Marx’s graphic simile of labor as bone jelly. This use of a passing if provocative reference in Spivak’s work on the subaltern is intriguing, though questions can be asked about how sturdy a distinction it provides, especially if we think about the material infrastructure of digital commodities and networked logistics that now organize so much manual labor even when it is not directly involved in generating the machines and the transport enabling it, not to mention the app-based gig economy or online piecework. In that sense much labor is computational nowadays, however differently the value produced (or not) is recognized by the wage or the credit system. Likewise, it can also be put as an open question whether it is waged workers or the enslaved, in Franklin’s account, who are closer to the computed side, if the enslaved are both commodities and producers of commodities and can be securitized like fixed capital.

With the emphasis on connection – key as well in Franklin’s positing of reliable or intermittent connections to value as the ground of the racialized division of labor

— there is correspondingly little mediation, in the dialectical sense of reading the concrete through the abstract. The methodological implications of this are that the argument repeats in different formulations or ‘cells’ of its reticular construction (the chapters are often short, feeding this snapshot impression) and builds its conceptual momentum partly by echoing the algorithmic structure of the value abstraction it takes as its core object.

This mimesis of information theory paradigms is fascinating, if occasionally dense, but is always motivated in the analysis, as in Chapter 7, where a sentence like “the process through which the human subject is produced *as autonomous* by an informatic mechanism that *conditions and sets limits on its autonomy*” (106 italics in original) captures both the critical stakes and the recursive structure of the argument. The impersonality of capitalist coercion is the grounding premise, yet for Franklin, the value-form of labor highlights how the experience of that abstraction is anything but homogeneous. Here there is a decisive step taken beyond the coordinates of an argument that could be read as a media-theoretical update of Sohn-Rethel’s foregrounding of the “exchange abstraction.”<sup>3</sup> The social synthesis, as presented by Franklin, doesn’t just implicitly pass through or over labor but is laser-focused on it. Its gradation and degradation is not just the political or ethical but theoretical core of the book. More precisely, the concept of “disposal” allows us to see both how the organization and the compromised reproduction or abjection of labor operates to shore up this social synthesis, with racialization and gender inequity as its chief modalities.

Here the most successful chapters stay close to mid-twentieth century cybernetic social theory and sociometry, which are re-narrated with their assumptions on display. Crucially, these are not just ideological, normative or formal assumptions, but represent an “unthought” in the value-form subtending Western capitalist social life and the premises of information-as-value they contain. Here, Franklin’s main argument that value is informatic all the way down is most substantive, although class seems to be substituted by race – a methodological presupposition whose premises in the work of the proponents of the “racial capitalism” paradigm remain indirect in the text. The exclusion of class is deliberate, but it does make it harder to grasp why and how “value-mediated social forms” work, or why the choice was made to superimpose race and class rather than articulate them as lived social, or, in Sianne Ngai’s terms, “visceral,” abstractions. Concurrently, a discussion of “form-determination” which unfolds into the suggestion of form and formlessness as a complementary prism to the reliability/unreliability dyad of life and labor as viewed from the perspective of value extraction lends heft to chapters on speculative fictions such as Samuel Delany’s *Return to Neveryon*. Form and formlessness are correlated with “information” here in complex and suggestive ways. Franklin’s template yields fewer results in the somewhat more literal takes on Elena Ferrante or on Sondra Perry’s *Typhoon coming on*, where digitality is flatly equated with abstraction in a way that undercuts a



promising angle on Romantic painting as a recursive subject-object relationship. The limits of analogy show themselves here. If the digital sea is in the same relation to any actual sea as value is to concrete social relations, where does this leave the artwork? Or analog photography? Or any process of mediation, for that matter? Such passages do not amount to blockages in Franklin's narrative, though they may signal that its "propositional" (rather than critical) dimension could be further developed, perhaps by engaging in a more material thinking with the artworks that can pre-empt such illustrative uses.

Overall, however, Franklin's achievement with this book is undeniable. He establishes a singular project even while raising the threshold for like-minded initiatives in reading race through and against value-theory in Marxist cultural critique and media theory alike. The centrality of dispossession over production or waged labor recasts the ironic double freedom of the waged worker as secondary to the primary blow of "wageless life." The emphasis on structural violence over accumulation, or, perhaps, the centrality of the former to the latter finds its emphasis in current lines of inquiry into appropriation over commodification in capitalist accumulation, or surplus population, externalization, devalorization as the modes of capitalism in crisis but also in standard operation. These approaches join the recent focus on social reproduction and ecology in both Marxist research and political strategy. Here it is outlined in the terms of a digitalized biopolitics (a politics of life encoded via race rather than class) which gives us an 'automatic subject' of value as a form of quantification that the capital-labor relation always imposed, often destructively, on labor power. Capital's homeostatic reproduction (*vis-a-vis* Marx: "value-sustaining appearance of labour appears as the self-supporting power of capital") requires notionally free persons/workers/subjects/users as its vehicles insofar as they have a regular connection to the network.<sup>4</sup> This "automatic subjectivity" of value transfers to them, but they remain needy partial-subjects whose ontological cohesion and material survival is secured by connectivity to capital. This continues to be enforced by the modern and colonial norm of self-ownership as underpinned by whiteness and maleness (or the asymmetries between those identified or ascribed as such and those who aren't or can't be). Concomitantly the structural centrality of labor and life turned into externality or waste by the reproduction of capital is that it can always be valorized later as new, "free," or "cheap" inputs, in Jason Moore's terms.<sup>5</sup> Yet this is only one possible iteration of a central argument which the book's reticular structure at times makes it a challenge to infer, evoking the relations of style and substance, essence and appearance, which its hex on mediation both exposes and keeps at bay.

## Notes

1. See Jonathan Beller, *The World Computer: Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021); Christian Fuchs, *Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory*. (London: University of Westminster Press, 2020); Jathan Sadowski, *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*. (MIT Press, 2020).
2. A sample of references here could include Ramon Amaro, *The Black Technical Object: On Machine Learning and the Aspiration of Black Being*. (London: Sternberg Press, 2022); Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015); Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015); Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White. (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. (New York City, New York University Press, 2018); Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. (New York City: PublicAffairs, 2019).
3. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*. (London: Macmillan, 1978).
4. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes. (New York: Penguin, 1976) 1020-1021.
5. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. (London: Verso, 2015).

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