

LANDSCAPES OF EXTRACTION: CAPITAL AND NATURE IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
LATIN AMERICA

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A mi esposa Pamela

A mis hermanos Felipe y Pablo

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## ABSTRACT

LANDSCAPES OF EXTRACTION: CAPITAL AND NATURE IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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In this dissertation I analyze the relationship between extractive capitalism and ecological crisis in a series of novels and documentary films from contemporary Latin America. Focusing on novels such as Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004), Lina Meruane's *Fruta Podrida* (2007), Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de Rescate* (2014), Juan Cárdenas' *El diablo de las provincias* (2017), and documentary films such as Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) and *El botón de nácar* (2015), I show how an uncontrolled wave of resource extraction, also known as neo-extractivism, unfolded in Latin American countries during the authoritarian and neoliberal governments that followed the revolutionary struggles of the Sixties and Seventies, and provoked reforms that led to the systemic privatization of nature and labor through political and economic violence. Drawing on a Marxist critique of capitalist ecologies and ecocriticism, this dissertation makes three key claims. First, I argue that resource extraction is the other side of the free-market economy, in that by forcibly separating resources and goods from their environment, particularly in indigenous territories and borderlands, it makes them available as commodities to be traded. Second, I contend that the violence of neo-extractivism provokes a crisis in the aesthetic representation of the landscape and its project to organize social and natural relations,

which leads to narratives of environmental catastrophe that contradict ideas of progress and development. Finally, I show that due to Latin America's role as a source of exports in the world-system, the region's artistic production not only reveals the intimate relation between extractivism and neoliberalism, but also allows us to visualize the symbolic articulations that emerge from the fracture between human and non-human nature in the peripheries of global capital.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *La cordillera de los sueños*, Patricio Guzmán's latest documentary film from 2019, the inaccessible landscape of the Andes Mountains works as a metaphor for the secrets of Chile's recent history. Guzmán is referring, on one hand, to the archives of State terrorism that remain hidden or unknown to the Chilean people. He explores these archives of horror through the testimony of filmmaker Pablo Salas, who has been relentlessly documenting State violence during the dictatorship and postdictatorship periods. On the other hand, Guzmán refers to the secrets of resource extraction, a practice which intensified during and after the dictatorship through neoliberal reforms implemented by way of violence and repression. The secrets of history and the secrets of extraction thus intersect through landscape, linking the time of capital and the time of nature. We see an example of this intersection during an aerial shot of the Andean mountains. The camera, despite the overwhelming beauty of the landscape, focuses on a mining site in the middle of the mountains—an open pit that breaks down the gargantuan landscape into equal circular roads that lead to extractive machinery accompanied by trucks packed with minerals and where no human presence is perceptible. Guzmán claims that these places are not on the maps, and access to them is impossible for a regular citizen. They are precluded for purposes of enjoyment, exploration, or preservation, but readily available for exploitation by transnational companies.

I am interested in these questions posed by Guzmán's film about the place and visibility of extraction. Where exactly does extraction take place? Why are extraction sites hidden from public scrutiny? Who does have access to these sites of extraction and who is

excluded? Who is excluded but simultaneously affected by the effects of extraction on the environment?<sup>1</sup> I believe that these questions highlight our lack of awareness of the scale of resource extraction, which is often concealed from sight despite being constantly determining our daily life through the materials that constitute the digital technologies or the infrastructures of circulation where these materials and we transit every day. Moreover, these questions point to one of the fundamental aspects of resource extraction in the present day: the overwhelming presence of projects of resource extraction for global markets on one hand, and, on the other, a systematic displacement of people to the margins, where they become invisible and go on to enlarge the surplus populations of contemporary capitalist societies in the periphery.

This dissertation seeks to answer these questions about the visibility and invisibility of resource extraction and the people affected by it through the analysis of contemporary 21<sup>st</sup>-century films and novels that attempt to convey the operations and socioenvironmental effects of extractivism in Latin America. Eduardo Gudynas (“Extracciones”) and José Seoane (“Neoliberalismo”) define extractivism as the appropriation and exploitation of natural resources without significant processing and transformation by private capital - sometimes with the mediation of the State- for the global markets (Gudynas 2; Seoane 6). Focusing on novels such as Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004), Lina Meruane’s *Fruta podrida* (2007), Samanta Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate* (2014), Juan Cárdenas’s *El diablo de*

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<sup>1</sup> A similar set of questions is posed by *In Plain Sight* (2018), an art exhibition that offers a geospatial documentary about the discrepancies between nighttime illumination and population. Using the Gridded Population of the World and NASA’s nighttime lights datasets, artists Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Laura Kurgan, and Robert Gerard Pietrusko illustrate how extraction is today a highly technologized operation of capital that utilizes huge amounts of electricity and infrastructure but needs few people to function, whereas human settlements, especially those located next to extractive projects, are not connected to the electric grid and actually displaced to the margins. A case of this kind is Hidroaysén, a dam project in the Baker River in Chilean Patagonia that sought to supply Santiago’s demand for electricity and mining operations in the North, but that was overthrown by local communities and environmental activists.



*las provincias* (2017), and Patricio Guzmán’s documentary films *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) and *El botón de nácar* (2015), I assert that these works explore the poetics of extractivism through the ruination of the natural and social landscape as a result of industries such as mining, agribusiness, and manufacturing. In other words, these texts center on the traces and ruins left by infrastructures and technologies of extraction in the spaces and the bodies of the workers that make extraction socially possible. I argue that this archaeological drive addresses the hidden status of resource extraction in the capitalist system, which tends to deny nature as a condition of possibility for accumulation. In this regard, these novels and films help me to explore and disclose what I call, following Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*), the extractive unconscious that defines capital accumulation in the periphery, where the exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of the centers stands as the condition of possibility for exploitation and circulation of commodities on a global scale. Following Kathryn Yusoff’s analysis of how the social is intimately interwoven with the geological, I also propose to see capital both as a “parasitic force feeding off the substratum of earth minerals” and a “geosocial machine that capitalizes on geopower” (“Geosocial Strata” 113). In this way, I am able to show that the driving logic of capitalism is not only to extract resources from the Earth, but also to reproduce the capitalist ecologies and social structures that make possible extraction as such.

### ***The Extractive Unconscious***

The notion of “extractive unconscious,” even though it can be traced back to the colonial period, is understood here in relation to the artistic and political discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the notions of landscape and environment were refashioned to sublimate the

crisis of the natural world caused by the acceleration of capitalist production, and to promote ideas of national identity and progress in the recently independent nation-states of the Americas. This vision can be found in literary texts considered “foundational” for Latin American literature, such as Andrés Bello’s “Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida” (1826), José de Alençar’s *Guaraní* (1857), and Jorge Isaac’s romantic novel *María* (1867). These texts were open advocates of the exploitation of natural resources as a way of consolidating independence from Spain. Furthermore, these texts associated extractivism with the subordinate place of the recently independent countries in the world market, and the role they could play in the emergent industrial revolution as suppliers of raw materials, ignoring past and upcoming environmental crises.

The belief that natural resources could be sold on the world market as commodities is grounded in the alienation of societies from their environmental conditions, and the fiction of exchange value as the gateway for the symbolic and material modernization of Latin America. Extraction, in this sense, could be considered another instance of what Ericka Beckman has called “capital fictions,” that is, the material articulation of ideology and imagination that convert nature and products of labor into commodities, regulating social life in terms of capitalist economy. Furthermore, the transformation of Latin America into a supplier of raw materials for the benefit of Europe and the United States, and Asia in the case of neoliberalism at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, promotes the idea that the entire region is for sale, partly because it “lies somehow outside of or anterior to modern capitalist social formations” (Beckman xviii). In other words, through extractivism, the natural world and Latin America itself are considered fictions of capital, preconditions for

capital accumulation, instruments for development elsewhere, but not real presences with different levels of determination in social, environmental, and artistic life.

As Beckman has demonstrated, novelistic discourse internalizes the fictions of capitalism and extractivism in Latin America, especially during the Export Age at the turn of the 20th century, by imagining possible and even impossible ways of appropriating and exporting previously uncommodified goods to the rest of the world. These dreams of accumulation are key in the construction of novelistic discourse; however, the process of extraction and its violence are often concealed through tropes of individual heroism and epics of conquest of geographical and racial differences. In this vein, Alok Amatya and Ashley Dawson (2020) have explored the unconscious prevalence of resource extraction in the discourse of the novel since its inception as a genre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A foundational example of the novelistic genre, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for instance, shows how "resource extraction, settler-colonial land grabbing, and narratives of personal, cultural, and material development are tightly entangled in the formation of the novelistic discourse" (8). At the same time, "resource extraction and the colonial location of such extractions are rendered invisible ... Indeed, it might be said that, in the nineteenth century, the novel comes to be characterized by a constitutive absence that centers on empire and resource extraction. We might call this the novel's resource unconscious" (9).

I believe that the concealment of the extractive process in the artistic discourse continues in the historical present despite the overwhelming production of images and narratives that seek to make visible the social and environmental violence of resource exploitation. This suppressed condition of resource extraction could be also understood according to Amitav Ghosh's assertion in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and*

*the Unthinkable* (2016) that our historical moment is determined by a colonial politics of “concealment” of the logics of capitalism and the racial, social, and ecological structures of power that sustain free market economies.

The resource unconscious, or the extractive unconscious as I would like to call it here, must be understood following Fredric Jameson’s definition of the political unconscious as an “absolute horizon of reading and interpretation” that aims to restore “to the surface of the text” repressed and buried historical realities (*Political Unconscious* 1). This means that extraction is another layer of the absent cause of history, which is not a text, but “it is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (2). Extraction has the additional particularity of being a common structure for different modes of production, given its function of providing the conditions—raw materials—for the production of value. Consequently, the extractive unconscious emerges in the artistic text as a space where different modes of production collide, opening the process of interpreting the text to the dialectical relation between capital and nature in a nonsynchronous way. Thus, if we are to follow Jameson’s claims that literary forms are the abstract presentation of antagonistic modes of production and social relationships, in the case of the extractive unconscious, we must think of literary forms as the abstract presentation of contradictory socioecological relationships.

This dissertation is an attempt to address this extractive unconscious in Latin America during the 21<sup>st</sup> century by analyzing literary and cinematic discourses about resource extraction. These discourses do not address the extractive processes so explicitly we can understand every aspect of this capitalist force, but I think that this is something that responds not so much to the tropes of invisibility inherently found in colonial

discourses of resource extraction, but to the scale and automatization of extractive infrastructures. These infrastructures represent a new and more profound crisis in the social relations of nature given the levels of exploitation, pollution, and displacement they operate. In this way, the main task of this dissertation is to make legible the extractive process, but the cost of such legibility is the certainty of a crisis in the socio-ecological conditions of life.

### ***Extracting Latin America***

The memory of extractivism in Latin America dates back to the colonial period, when the extraction of gold, the plantation of monocrops, and the exploitation of indigenous and African people led to the consolidation of world capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Matter of Empire*, Orlando Betancor demonstrates that mining and imperialism were intimately interwoven through “metaphysical instrumentalism,” which Betancor defines as the “global technological expansion as the aimless transformation of everything into useful material” (19). This ideology, which started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is consolidated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the technological domination of life on a planetary scale, but as a historical process it cannot be separated from the commodification of nature and the constitution of world markets (21-23). In this sense, the extraction and circulation of resources for the expansion of imperial and technological domination is the result of capitalism and the subordination of geographies and populations, such as Latin America, for capital accumulation.

One of the main symbols of extractivism in colonial and postcolonial Latin America is El Dorado, the mythical place located in the heart of the Amazon rainforest that inspired

many expeditions by conquistadors and explorers in search of its abundant reserves of gold. This myth was questioned during the Enlightenment as an instance of Spanish rapaciousness and idiocy, but during the new wave of resource extraction at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the myth helped to recuperate the idea that Latin America had copious reserves of wealth available for export. At the same time, the perceived negative effects of extractivism on the environment led to another debunking of the myth. As Charlotte Rogers has recently elucidated, El Dorado offers the possibility of “wealth and pleasure, yet it also underlies the goals of extractive industries that have damaged the cultures and ecosystems of the forest” (10). Focusing on texts such as Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La casa verde* (1966), Rogers demonstrates that, rather than just describing the new processes of extraction during the era of development that marked mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin America, these texts convey the sense of ecological disillusion produced by “the failures of the promise of El Dorado” (11), which was no longer a synonym of copiousness, but of the threatening exhaustion of natural resources and destruction of landscapes. In this way, the texts analyzed by Roger do not so much celebrate El Dorado as “mourn the passing of” as well as “lament the destruction wrought by” (10) the myth.

Jennifer L. French (2005) anticipated some of Rogers’s findings about the mourning of El Dorado in her analysis of canonical texts from the *novela de la selva*, such as José Eustasio Rivera’s *La vorágine* (1924) and Horacio Quiroga’s short stories. According to French, the colonial drive in representing nature as extractable resources in the Spanish American literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is due to an overlapping of layers of imperial domination and the mediation exercised by the discourses of Hispanic tradition, national culture, and European imperialism, especially British. It is at this

junction that one must understand the role of extractivism in the consolidation of an export economy between 1870 and 1930 and, later, between 1930 and 1973. In these different periods, French affirms,

[T]he central metaphor of nature as national identity and source of productivity persists ... It is this persistence of nature as central cultural metaphor, transcending periods, literary movements and styles, changing with changes in industries and products (silver, coffee, bananas, oil, beef, coca) that reflects the relatively unchanging economic circumstances or “concrete conditions” in which it was produced. (15)

In fact, extractivism stands out as a continual driving force of capitalism in Latin America that restores colonial relations and imperialist practices, and consequently constantly evolves in peripheral relation to the history of global capital.

After the decline of the era of development and the centrality of nation-state power, a new stage in the relationship between Latin American societies and the environment began to be forged by 1973. Indeed, between the 70s and 80s we witness a strong deregulation in the protection of the environmental and labor systems, which directly benefited transnational corporations that were high polluters of the environment, as well as destroying the local communities in which they were inserted. This is the case of the *maquiladoras* in post-NAFTA Mexico or the forest industry in southern Chile, which were implemented through violent processes of accumulation by dispossession of previously noncommodified goods, especially in indigenous territories and borderlands. Despite the evidence of this process, however, the analysis of contradictory socioecological relationships in contemporary literary and visual representations of extraction from Latin

America entails a theoretical and methodological challenge, as I explained earlier, due to the apparent placelessness and invisibility of extractivism, which traces back to colonial capitalism, but also acquires specific forms that are unique to neoliberalism.

The neoliberal period in Latin America has been associated with financial capitalism, the privatization of services, and the deregulation of the economy. However, the condition of possibility for the neoliberal economy has actually been intense natural resource exploitation as a means of maintaining the economic and political order imposed by the authoritarian governments of the 70s and 80s. According to Maristella Svampa, neo-extractivism, as it is known in Latin America the extractive turn of the economy in the neoliberal and postneoliberal periods, references a transition from the Washington Consensus, predicated upon the structural readjustments of the economic and political sectors, to the Commodity Consensus, which restores Latin America's role of raw materials supplier through the exploitation of primarily nonrenewable resources. Thus, apart from restructuring the financial system through speculation and debt, the neoliberal reforms at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also paved the way for a renewed process of intensified resource extraction that ranges from hydroelectricity to industrial-scale agriculture through a new round of enclosures of the last reserves of nature.

The co-dependence between resource extraction and financial capitalism is readily observed in Chile, where extractivism is often overshadowed by the "success" of the market economy and the credit system, but which is printed all over the infamous 1980 Constitution through neoliberal laws that allow unregulated exploitation of natural resources and guarantee the predominance of a privatized model of exploitation over any sort of environmental and social protection. In other words, Chilean neoliberalism shows



how contemporary capitalism functions by extracting natural resources not only for production, but for supporting almost the entire financial system. This coincides with Sharae Deckard's view that neoliberalism in Latin America functions as an "eco-financial imperialism" rather than a model of industrial production. This means that the reprimatization of the Latin American economies works hand in hand with the financialization of natural resources through biodiversity and carbon credits, which are traded in international markets where transnational corporations from the North tend to "outsource waste and heavy-polluting industries to free trade zones and export enclaves throughout" the Global South ("Latin America in the World-Ecology" 9). As a result, the effects of extractivism become once again obscured by Latin America's division of labor and nature within the world-system.

Apart from the concealment of resource extraction by the financial market, extractivism casts its own strategies of concealment against alternative forms of development. This is the object of analysis of Macarena Gómez-Barris's *The Extractive Zone*, where she defines extractivism as a paradigm that "mark[s] out regions of 'high biodiversity' in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion" while simultaneously excluding local communities "through forms of sexual, gender, class, and race exclusion" (xvi), chiefly among indigenous and African populations. The extractive zone is thus the result of the authoritarian views of the Empire, the State, and the Corporation on the territory, which transform natural resources into global commodities while integrating, often in violent ways, "the complexity of social ecologies and material alternatives" (xv) within the global economy. Gómez-Barris highlights the structural continuity of extractivism in spaces such as Ecuadorian and Colombian Amazonia or the rainforest of

Southern Chile, where capital accumulation has been sustained by different waves of extraction of resources that date back to the colonial period but continue in the neoliberal era.

In this regard, I argue that the neoextractive turn certainly implies a continuity of earlier forms of extraction that can be traced from the colonial to the modern period, but also a new stage of accumulation and degradation of the environmental conditions. The upscaling of the infrastructures and technologies of extraction as well as the multiplicity of capitalist operations associated with extractive projects call for a broader notion of resource extraction in the neoliberal period that can bring justice to the complex flows of value in global capitalism. An example of this is the aforementioned financialization of natural resources through ecosystem services and carbon credits, or the infrastructures of energy and transportation that accompany mineral extraction, which emerge as distinctive conditions of the neoliberal model of extraction.

This dissertation is also concerned with a broader definition of extractivism because it makes manifest associated processes of accumulation that affects the life of workers and the state of the environment. As Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra explain, “la extracción no puede ser confinada a materias inertes. Esta se vincula también a la extracción de fuerza de trabajo, en un sentido tal que permite ampliar y complementar la noción misma de explotación” (43). Extractive capitalism therefore involves different forms of exploitation of labor force made available by the processes of accumulation by dispossession that make extraction possible in the first place, especially when contemporary technologies prevent the incorporation of the dispossessed into the industrial sector, thus pushing surplus populations to illegal and informal economies. Furthermore,

the combination of extractive modalities of raw material with policies of social inclusion of these surplus populations by way of subsidies can lead to a renewed presence of the State, as in the now fading progressive Pink Tide states. At the same time, the analysis of neoextractivism cannot overlook the negative effects that the convergence between financial economies and increasingly sophisticated extraction technologies has on the environment. Fracking, transportation, monocrop agribusiness, cheap labor, among others, apart from producing vast sums of capital, have dreadful consequences on the environment, particularly the displacement of communities, loss of biodiversity and local ecological knowledge, deforestation, the contamination of bodies of water, and so on.

In this fashion, the novels and films that I analyze in this dissertation point to the profound crisis between capital and nature that characterizes resource extraction in our historical present, and looks for ways to counteract the acceleration of capital's destructive logic in the present.

### ***Capital and Nature***

Before we move on to the specifics of each chapter, it is important to shed some light on the dialectical relationship between capital and nature, which is understood here within the perspective of the metabolic rift, a concept introduced by Karl Marx (*Capital*) to designate the crisis between the expansive process of accumulation of capital and the limited reserves of nature. According to Marx, the exchange between precapitalist societies and nature was regulated by the "natural laws" of social metabolism, a production process through which society exploited nature only to a certain degree in order to give nature time to replenish itself. Nevertheless, the introduction of capitalist relations of production generated an

“irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism” (949) by alienating the “natural” process of production for greater surplus value. This process of alienation takes the form of a so-called primitive accumulation, positing the dissolution of the organic relations between society and the Earth as a precondition of the regime of capital accumulation. The enclosure of common lands and the expulsion of the peasantry, who are then forced to migrate and be part of the urban proletariat, leads to one of the main instances of the metabolic rift identified by Marx: the separation between the city and the country, which consummates the dissociation between means of subsistence and production in the capitalist system.

The growing division between society and nature implies that the environment becomes the background of physical conditions for commodity production and capital accumulation, especially in terms of resources and space, as James O’Connor argues in his classic introduction to the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*. Moreover, nature becomes a free gift for commodity production, separating ecological conditions from the realm of economy. As a result, the value of nature is both “presupposed and disavowed,” as Nancy Fraser puts it, as an endless “source of supply of ‘raw material’ that is available for appropriation without compensation or replenishment” (63). Nature therefore constitutes a background condition for capital, which shows how primitive accumulation is not only an original mechanism, but an ongoing strategy of the capital economy. This is particularly noticeable in the current neoliberal phase, which is characterized by a new round of enclosures of territories and previously uncommodified goods.

At the same time, the scale and violence of the exploitation of nature in our epoch means the ecological conditions for capital accumulation are not sustainable anymore.

Global warming and climate change are showing that capitalism's free ride on nature has reached its limit. With the expansion of capital on a global scale, the capitalist threat to the reproduction of environmental conditions is "not only [a threat] to profits and accumulation, but also to the viability of the social and 'natural' environment as a means of life" (O'Connor 29). In this fashion, the "two crisis of capital" identified by O'Connor—between the relations and forces of production and the contradiction between forces/relations and their conditions of production—become a crisis between capitalism and the planetary condition. The present ecological crisis we associate with the Anthropocene is thus the result of the unsustainable metabolism of the capitalist world system and its processes of accumulation by dispossession within Earth's system.

### ***The Crisis of the Landscape Form***

The ecological crisis of our historical present epitomizes a representational challenge in terms of visual and literary aesthetics. I believe that the landscape, as a privileged form of expression of the metabolic rift between society and nature in capitalist modernity, can shed light on the crisis of the ecological conditions for capital accumulation and planetary life.

Graciela Silvestri ("Paisaje"; *El paisaje*, with Fernando Aliata) maintains that the notion of landscape assumes a structural separation between subject and nature through different strategies of distancing and enclosing that range from painting and drawing to gardens, parks, and land divisions. The separation between subject and world, which increases with technology and progress, often entails the violent domination of such enclosed spaces and their arrangements of human and extrahuman natures for the

extraction of resources and the production of value. In other words, the modern landscape was invented on the foundation of the metabolic rift between society and nature produced by the capitalist system. As Andermann (“Introduction”) explains, the landscape form was born at the same time as European colonial expansion, as an imperial technique to organize social relations of nature from the point of view of a detached observer in a moment of rapid transition from use-oriented to value-oriented relations with the environment. This then constituted a crucial component of the system of appropriation installed by colonial capitalism in the 1500s, and converted natural resources into global commodities (13-14). At the same time, Andermann argues that the landscape, as an “apparatus of capitalism,” necessarily externalizes the violence that constitutes its object, generating the utopian representation of a space-time beyond modernity in which accumulation of resources is presented as infinite. Such illusory distance between subject and nature falls into crisis in late modernity, in which the expansion of the capitalist system on a planetary scale displaces the majority of the population towards zones of exception where the regime of accumulation meets its social, political, and ecological limits. In this regard, Anderman wonders whether the depoliticized image of nature presented by the landscape form continues to be useful today to address the new challenges posed by the ecological crisis and the new assemblages between the organic and the inorganic generated by the technological control of life. In other words, Andermann alludes to the exhaustion of the landscape form—and with it, the colonial/modern horizon of Western aesthetics—as an abstract representation of nature, or a utopic space and time of infinite accumulation that is nonetheless radically undermined everyday by the ever-increasing loss of environment that characterizes the relentless violence of neoextractivism (23-24).

This dissertation takes Silvestri's and Andermann's radical critiques of the landscape form as a means to enable an interpretation of the experience of resource depletion, environmental degradation, and human displacement that are the results of the processes of extraction in Latin America. This is a central topic of discussion in the first chapter, which should also be taken as a methodological section on my reading approach to the textualization of the extractive unconscious. In this chapter, I argue that the exhaustion of the landscape form as a means to represent extractivism and the ecological crisis in Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* shed light on processes of symbolic and material extinctions in the Atacama Desert and Patagonia. Thus, instead of reading the abstract representation of the natural world as the landscape's incapacity to convey the violence of ongoing processes of accumulation, I contend, rather, that it exposes the overwhelming presence of more and more infrastructures and technologies of resource extraction that seemingly require minimal or no labor at all, thereby emancipating accumulation from production and the subject from history. Alberto Toscano has made a similar claim in reference to Allan Sekula's photography of capital infrastructures of circulation, whose depopulated landscapes highlight how human beings "increasingly appear as supplements, extras or surplus" in a world where capital "has taken center stage, or rather it becomes the stage" ("Landscapes"). Thus, Guzmán's aspiration to represent the memory of the universe through landscape becomes a way to show how capital has moved from the global to the planetary, which intensifies the ecological crisis to the brink of extinction.

The crisis of the landscape form as a means of exposing the environmental crisis on a planetary scale has important theoretical and methodological considerations for this

dissertation. First, because the question about the landscapes of extraction, which is a question about the place and visibility of extraction, comprises an inquiry about the natural conditions of capitalist production and about the general state of nature today. Indeed, contrary to the idea that geological changes are not visible at the level of our everyday activity, landscapes must be considered a point of connection between our lives and the life of the planet (Bonneuil). Second, because it is impossible to know the current natural conditions of capitalist production, and thus of the ecological crises we associate with the Anthropocene, without exploring the complexity of the extractive operations of capital related to “larger formations of capitalism seemingly remote from the domain of primary sector but crucial to its functioning within global markets” (Mezzadra and Neilson 187). Working with such an expanded notion of extraction, which goes beyond mines and plantations to reveal its organic relation to other forms of exploitation, is, in my opinion, the only way to assess the real consequences of the intertwining among capital, nature, and society on a planetary scale.

The conjunction of these theoretical considerations shows how my reading method seeks to bring together, in an eclectic and imperfect way, two forms of textual analysis: the dialectical analysis of the relationship between capital and nature, and the archaeological excavation of the extractive unconscious in the matter of the landscape. This demands situating ourselves on the threshold between history and nature, as well as between the human and the nonhuman, to unearth from the surfaces of textualization the extractive unconscious as an experience of discontinuous socioecological crises. This is precisely what Foucault intended to achieve with the archaeological method, which centers on the traces of things left dispersed in spaces to reconstruct a discontinuous history of concepts



and discursive formations, which are structurally conceived beyond the limits of the human and without the “indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject” (12)—which for Foucault always represented the epitome of anthropocentric humanism and capitalist ideology.<sup>2</sup> The archaeological method, as a slow exercise of extraction itself, may also help us to tackle the representational challenges posed by the slow violence of resource extraction, not only by introducing a conception of space-time that is at once historical and geological, but also by compelling us to unearth what Macarena Gómez-Barris designates the “submerged perspectives” (11) of alternative forms of development. These theoretical and methodological considerations are explored in greater detail in the two sections of which this dissertation is comprised, and which I will describe in the following pages.

### *Deserts*

The first part of the dissertation is organized around the imaginary of the desert landscape and consists of two chapters. In the first one, I focus on Patricio Guzmán’s essay films *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) and *El botón de nácar* (2015), two documentary films that, as I mentioned earlier, intertwine different explorations of the journey through the landscapes of the Atacama Desert and Tierra del Fuego, respectively. These films focus on the intersections between the histories of colonialism and political violence that have shaped neoliberal Chile, but without delving into the extractive fever that is the result of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 90s, which I understand as an expression of the

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<sup>2</sup> According to Foucault, “Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode” (10).

aesthetic and political crisis of landscape representation.<sup>3</sup> In the second chapter, I analyze the capacity of the Sonoran Desert in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) to reveal, from a world-ecological perspective, the necropolitical strategies of capital in the uneven development of the periphery. I analyze how Bolaño's novel uses the desert to expose the different processes of accumulation by dispossessing bodies and landscapes in the periphery for the benefit of the centers, which confronts the novel with its own degradation as a literary device. As a result, the bodies of the working women of the maquila industry, which are thrown as waste into the desert, blend with the land and its materiality to acquire an extrahuman form that aesthetically contests the alliances between neoliberalism and patriarchal violence.

The desert plays an important role in this dissertation because it enables an interpretation of the landscape as both a zone of intensified resource extraction and as a space of profound crisis between society and nature in late capitalism. According to Elizabeth Povinelli, the desert operates a fundamental distinction between life and nonlife, or between Bios and Geos, that provides an environmental framework for planetary domination in late liberalism. Resting on this distinction between life and nonlife, society extracts from the planet the conditions for the production of more and more sophisticated forms of life (Bios), while producing more and more forms of nonlife. Taking the fossil as an example, Povinelli asserts that the desert is a place full of material forms that were once "charged with life, have lost that life, but as a form of fuel can provide the conditions for a

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<sup>3</sup> Geographically speaking, deserts refer to spaces uninhabited by human beings, whether they are a mountain, a plateau, or a polar zone. Furthermore, deserts are ancient places that evoke the origins of life, but also its end. For this reason, I have also included in this section *El botón de nácar*, a documentary which centers on Tierra del Fuego, a landscape of forests, lakes, and rivers, and thus the opposite of the barren Atacama Desert but which has been historically related to the desert of the *pampas*, and thus considered a *terra nullis* ready to be filled with colonial narratives.

specific form of life—contemporary, hypermodern, informationalized capital” (17). The accelerated extraction of resources to sustain these capitalist forms of life generates immense levels of residues, technology, infrastructure, and zones of exception, thus revealing the intimate connection between biopolitical and necropolitical power in the production of material life in neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> In this fashion, the desert should not be taken as just a landscape or an ecosystem, but as the strategy of accumulation across forms of life and nonlife that motivates the search for life at the same time that it projects the dangers of a lifeless future.

The emergence of the desert as a strategy of accumulation is readily observed in the new media industry, which can be defined as the epitome of the extractive operations of capital in the landscape. In fact, minerals extracted from the desert, and thus sedimented in the deep time of geological processes, are used in new media applications that constitute the heart of digital capitalism, from videogames and cellphones to the mining of massive amounts of data to capitalize on financial practices, consumption habits, personal information, security, and so on. In other words, the “cloud,” which purportedly represents the immateriality of contemporary capitalist production, is actually predicated upon the extraction of rare earth materials and human labor—resources that are part of the geological and social fabric of the planet. For this reason, Jussi Parikka claims in *A Geology of Media* that the new media generate a jumble of temporalities that stretches across deep and virtual time, connecting extraction and exploitation in contemporary capitalism. In this fashion,

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<sup>4</sup> The desert is the ultimate expression of Geos, of nonlife, of “the Inert, Inanimate, Barren,” and thus the opposite of life, of Bios. Geo and Bios are intimately interrelated, however: during the process of accumulation, nonlife becomes subordinated to the primacy of life. The desert becomes merely “the other of Life,” a lifeless space from which you can take for free. Capitalism is what animates desert with life through profit—as for capital “everything is vital from the point of view of capitalization [and] of extraction of value” (Povinelli 21).

the desert reveals the organic relation between extraction and other operations of capital that range from the geological to the digital, and from raw materials to social labor, in the process of the planetary expansion of the capitalist system.

The imaginary of extraction, exploitation as well as death projected by the desert landscape into the future, is one of the reasons why it is at the center of the cultural production today about the ecological crisis labeled the Anthropocene, which actually has been depicted as an era of deserts and desertification (Eswaran et al.). In fact, global warming generates the sensation that the desert advances while life withdraws. Forests becomes green deserts due to monocrop agribusiness, droughts and wildfires turn land into barren soil, and glaciers melt due to rising temperatures and seas (Taddei). The Earth seems to become a sea desert or a sand desert. Simultaneously, vast segments of the world population are displaced from their homelands as a result of climate change and the destruction of national and local economies by extractive industries in association with technologies of security. In this way, the landscape of the desert comprises both the imaginary of lifelessness—of pure Geos without Bios—that constitutes our vision of the end of the world, and the alarming present of displacement and environmental degradation. A counterpoint to this pessimistic vision of the desert is that the desertification of the planet, as Gayatri Spivak has claimed, makes our own home uncanny (*unheimlich*) and unlivable, which becomes a signal for the urge to overcome the crisis and to imagine a politically different and ecologically sustainable future (73).

The Atacama Desert and the US–Mexico border are central landscapes of extraction where we can explore the intertwining between Bios and Geos, biopolitics and necropolitics, that characterizes our current environmental crisis. Both regions are

profoundly shaped by long histories of extractivism, colonialism, and militarism, and currently represent global centers of extraction. The Atacama Desert, especially after the neoliberal reforms of the 80s—violently enforced by the Pinochet dictatorship—and the democratic restoration of 1990, became one of the major mining centers on the planet, with around 43 million cubic tons of mineral extracted per year, particularly metals like copper, molybdenum, silver, gold, iron and non-metals like lithium, iodine and potassium (Arboleda, “Financiarization”; *Spaces*).<sup>5</sup> The Atacama Desert also hosts ALMA (the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array),<sup>6</sup> a massive observatory park that focuses on the study of the early universe. It expects to host 70% of the world’s telescopes by 2020, which will require colossal infrastructure to store and transport the information extracted (Messeri). The Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts at the US–Mexico border, for their part, are the setting for one of the global centers of the export-led manufacturing industries known as *maquiladoras*, particularly around major cities such as Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, both the Atacama Desert and the US–Mexico border constitute black holes in the dark geography of capital, concentrating exceptional levels of labor

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<sup>5</sup> Chile is today the main copper producer and exporter in the world, above countries such as the US, Canada, Zambia, and China, which also imports about 10% of the Chilean copper for the automobile, electronics, and their own mining industries. The copper industry alone provided an average of 15% of the national budget. Sixty-five percent of this production is operated by private companies, namely Barrick Gold, Exxon, BHP-Billiton, Sumimoto, Mitsubishi, Anglo American, among others, which occupy 10% of the national territory and take advantage of Chile’s weak environmental and tax regulations (Folchi).

<sup>6</sup> ALMA is situated between Calama—the site of Chuquicamata, one of the largest opencast copper mines—and San Pedro de Atacama, the starting point of Spanish colonization, and is managed in partnership among the US, the EU, and Japan, among other countries (Messeri).

<sup>7</sup> This development started to scale up specifically thanks to the Bracero Program, which allowed the importation of workers from Mexico to the US between 1942 to the mid-60s. After the cancellation of the Bracero Program, developmental programs such as the 1961 Programa Nacional Fronterizo and the 1965 Industrialización de la Frontera contributed to the industrialization of Northern Mexico that, together with heavy investment from the US, paved the way for the rise of the maquiladora industry in cities like Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Nogales in subsequent years (González Rodríguez).

exploitation, illegal migration, drugs and arms trafficking, sex trade, and environmental pollution.

In the case of Guzmán's films, the transformation of the Atacama Desert and Patagonia into global landscapes of extraction is not overtly treated in the visual narrative. However, both films are particularly interesting for the deployment of an extractive view, at once planetary and technological, that seeks to turn the Atacama Desert and Patagonia into posthuman landscapes—and consequently once again up for grabs. This view is explored through the juxtaposition of mesmerizing images from ALMA telescopes, satellites, and science-fiction-type shots that reinstate the sublime condition of the landscape of the desert, thus alienating it from human use. The exploration and appropriation of territory and resources through new technologies is a major feature of contemporary extractivism, which converts “territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data” (Gómez-Barris 5). In this fashion, by focusing on astronomy and the scientific gaze, Guzmán seems to be exploring the planetary framework for environmental domination that characterizes digital capitalism, wherein “surveillance, data mining, and the mapping of resource-rich territories work together as complexly interlinked, rather than discrete manifestations of hegemony” (3).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Guzmán's films shed light on another form of extractivism at the epistemological level, which consists of extracting knowledge for the discovery of new commodities, new regions of plunder, and even new configurations of the world in outer space. Concomitant to epistemic

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<sup>8</sup> “If colonial seeing first appeared as administrative rule over peoples and land, then in the digital phase, extractive states currently dispossess through new technologies. Modernized states coordinate with multinational corporations, using reconnaissance systems to collect large data sets, acquire surface readings of the Earth, and produce high-resolution maps that are deployed to build extractive infrastructure on the ground” (Gómez-Barris 7).

extractivism is the restoration of a colonial gaze that contributes to the concealment of indigenous knowledge and local ecologies, and the extinction of forms of life alternative or subversive to capital. In fact, any life outside capitalist extraction in these landscapes, such as the “Mujeres de Calama” that comb through the sand of the desert for the remains of the disappeared, or the last survivors of the Yaghan genocide in Tierra del Fuego, emerge just as vestiges of histories of colonialism and extractivism and warnings of extinction rather than active forms of resistance.

Whereas Guzmán’s depiction of the Atacama Desert and Patagonia centers on the abstract rendering of the landscape and past and present processes of extinction, Bolaño’s novel *2666* (2004) expands the centrality of the desert as a privileged space for the analysis of sacrificial zones resulting from uneven divisions of labor as well as nature. In this novel, the surroundings of Santa Teresa, a city—arguably based on Ciudad Juárez in Northern Mexico—known for its thriving maquila industry and profound social and environmental violence, are the location of hundreds of bodies of mostly working women of the maquila who were murdered in brutal ways and then thrown into the landfills and wastelands located between the industrial parks and the desert. Moreover, Bolaño’s *2666* reveals how the bodies of the working women become themselves a site of accumulation by dispossession, stripping women of citizenship, subjectivity, and even bodily life, and thus uncovers the necropolitics of the capitalist system. In this way, the desert landscape reveals the violent transformation of the periphery into a zone of extraction and sacrifice, where the search for cheap labor has converted the workforce, especially poor and indigenous women from Southern Mexico and Central America, into waste products of the global factory.

The desert is a fundamental spatial metaphor in Bolaño's narrative. On the one hand, the desert works as a counterpoint of the nation-state, which for Bolaño represents less a place of identity than a place of nationalistic, patriarchal, and cultural violence. The desert is thus a space outside of the reach of the State, aligned with Bolaño's exile identity, which for him is the only true locus of enunciation for a deterritorialized literature. On the other hand, the desert in *2666* is a means of revealing the devastating effects of global capitalism in the periphery, especially in the border between Mexico and the US. This, for Bolaño, represented, as he put it in his review of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, "un paisaje sadiano, un paisaje sediento e indiferente regido por unas extrañas leyes que tienen que ver con el dolor y con la anestesia, que es como a menudo se manifiesta el tiempo" (Bolaño *Entre paréntesis* 187). The strange laws of the desert allow Bolaño to explore, perhaps better than any other space, the possibility of the end of the world. Therefore, the desert emerges in *2666* not only as a postapocalyptic setting, a wasteland where the workforce comes to die and blend with the sand, but also as a place of warning and redemption. Indeed, as Christopher Domínguez Michael puts it, "Bolaño escribe las cinco novelas de *2666* con la idea metafórica, un tanto religiosa, de que el desorden del mundo se explica en Ciudad Juárez, y que la investigación de esos crímenes trae consigo la posibilidad de ver el futuro" (78). This is readily observed in the treatment of the working women's dead bodies as dreadful objects of brutal violence, but also as graceful entities that outlast death by blending with the landscape of the desert. These bodies emerge, in other words, as forms not completely exhausted by the maquila or patriarchal violence, and as sites of contestation of the commodification of death in late capitalism.



As we can see, Patricio Guzmán’s essay films *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* provide different approaches to two of the fundamental problems of the landscapes of extraction: first, the reprimarization of these deserts into peripheral deposits of “cheap nature,” particularly raw materials and cheap labor for the world markets; and second, the appearance of surplus populations derived from the different processes of accumulation by dispossession. I approach these problems in my analysis by drawing from world-ecology and critical geography, which are two fields of study that provide a theoretical framework based on the uneven structure of social relations of nature on a global scale. World-ecology, a concept introduced by Jason W. Moore in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life* to understand the dialectical relationship between the accumulation of capital and the production of nature in modernity, allows me to analyze how Guzmán and Bolaño are interested in the reorganization of social relations of nature in the neoliberal present, especially on the borders of the nation-state. Moreover, by centering the view on the neoextractive turn in Latin America, I argue that Guzmán and Bolaño prove that capitalism is less a social or economic system than *a way of organizing nature* grounded on the accumulation of new human and extrahuman resources, particularly low-cost food, labor power, energy, and raw materials, which capital “must ceaselessly search for, and find ways to produce” (Moore, *Capitalism* 53) to achieve its endless process of expansion despite the limited number of resources.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Guzmán and Bolaño expose how the capitalist system, in the wake of the current ecological

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, following Deckard, world-ecology “enables an extension of environmental criticism beyond its usual boundaries to encompass the whole historical range of regimes of organizing nature that constitute the capitalist *oikeois*. Finance and maquiladoras, haciendas and mass urbanization, free trade agreements and resource nationalism, global empires and world markets are all forms of environment-making which knit together human relations and extrahuman processes, and thus ripe for analysis in respect to cultural form” (“Roberto Bolaño” 4).

crisis, follows new strategies of accumulation that are both internal and external at the same time. In Guzmán's case, the extractive gaze is directed outside the planetary scope, towards outer space, while in Bolaño's, the view is focused on the body of surplus populations, which are somehow inside and outside capital, as a site of accumulation.

At the same time, the processes of accumulation by dispossession that constitute the extractive turn of the economy in Latin America should be seen according to the different geographies of capital and scales of environmental degradation and social dislocation. As David Harvey notes, the spaces of capital are zones "geographically differentiated" and their appropriation "depends upon spatial strategies to gain access to and command over them" (92). For this reason, we should pay attention to the different "spatial strategies" of extraction and accumulation that Guzmán and Bolaño also highlight in their respective works, because this can allow us a glance at the discontinuities and interruptions of the planetary integration of capital. As I show in my analyses of Guzmán's films and Bolaño's novel, these discontinuities and interruptions take the form of failed synchronizations and haunting pasts that create *room* for spaces in between and movements of resistance to the history of extractivism. Such are the cases of the women in *Nostalgia de la luz* who comb the landscape of the Atacama Desert looking to extract bones that are valueless for capital, but which are charged with the injustices of the past and the fears and desires of the future; and of the bodies of the murdered working women in *2666* which become one with the landscape of the desert to reveal and resist the appropriation of space and labor by the global factory. In this regard, this dissertation engages with a concept of history that differs from the arrow or the cycle, the two predominant metaphors of time as progress or succession (Gould). I view history as *constellations*, in the Benjaminian sense

of unexpected relations between objects that enable the extraction of the repressed layers of history.

### ***The Return of the Plantation***

The second section of this dissertation deals with the return of the plantation as a category of analysis for theorizing the arrangements of capital, labor, and nature within the Global Farm through the analysis of the novels *Fruta podrida* (Lina Meruane, 2007), *Distancia de rescate* (Samanta Schweblin, 2014), and *El diablo de las provincias* (Juan Cárdenas, 2017). These novels show how plantation capitalism persists in neoliberal Latin America through its processes of land alienation, labor extraction, and racialized and gendered violence for the large-scale commodity production of nonsustainable monocrops for the world markets. At the same time, these novels show how monocrop agribusiness, through biotechnological alteration and commodification of natural processes, appropriates not only the entire food chain, but also medicine and the ecological conditions of life for vast zones of the population (Shiva, “Life, Inc.”). In this way, my analysis of these novels illustrates how monocrop agribusiness restores an essential feature of the plantation system: its tendency to violently take over human and extrahuman natures to destroy other forms of socioecological relation and preclude any future other than that of the capitalist regime.

The plantation’s propensity to reorganize social–natural relations according to capitalism is readily observed in the transfer of cash crops from the metropolises to the colonies and vice versa, as in the case of sugarcane or cocoa in the 16th century. These transfers were forms of ecological imperialism to the extent that they contribute to the spread of a cultural and biological order based on the exploitation of bodies considered

subordinate (Crosby). The relationship between exotic monocultures and endogenous species thus reproduces the relationship between colonizers and indigenous people. Furthermore, monoculture appears as one of the fundamental tools of white man's domination, which is the purest expression of what Vandana Shiva (*Monocultures*) calls a monoculture of the mind—a social structure that promotes capitalist development as the universal goal of humanity, assimilating cultural, political, and even biological diversity, under the paradigm of a single class, race, and genus of a species.

On the one hand, this part of the dissertation addresses the problem of the persistence of a mode of extraction that originated in the colonial period, became integral to the rise of global capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and lasted into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries through industrial agriculture. Indeed, as Sidney Mintz argues in his classic study of the social and economic history of sugar production and consumption in Europe and its colonies, the colonial plantation, which became established as a synthesis of field and factory in the colonial space, was crucial for the development of wage labor agroindustry, and therefore can be considered one of the legacies of the plantation through its model of discipline and alienation. On the other hand, the focus of my analyses is the legacies of the plantation system in neoliberalism, which exhibit particular forms of racial and gendered violence, biotechnological intervention, and extractive technologies. In this manner, my dissertation contends that contemporary iterations of the plantation in agribusiness, while reproducing the structures of power and labor of plantation capitalism, also interpose a different arrangement of life due to the commodification of natural processes and biological cycles and the displacement of people to zones of exclusion where the effects of climate change are felt more powerfully than in others parts of the world. In other words,

my goal is to demonstrate, as Tania Murray Li claims in reference to oil palm plantations in Indonesia, that the “plantations are back” (328), restoring strategies of colonial capitalism but also creating new ways of resource extraction and labor exploitation that have particular consequences in a context of climate change.

The capacity of the plantation to return and to reemerge was noticed by Antonio Benítez Rojo in *La isla que se repite* (1989), where he argues that the plantation is a self-replicating machine that travels through histories and geographies reproducing the same pattern of land and labor alienation and structures of power based on racial hierarchies. Thus, the native labor-based colonial plantation was the model for the modern plantation based on enslaved black labor, and both haunt the modern plantation by dispossessing anew indigenous people from their lands and means of production, as in the coffee plantations in Guatemala during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Benítez Rojo also explores how the plantation is always embedded in imperial formations of power, which take the plantation as a model for governance. Similarly, Achilles Mbembé (2003) underlines the importance of the plantation for the construction of modern sovereignty through racial domination and the power to kill, or necropolitics, arguing that enslaved labor was the model for the factories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Nazi concentration camps. In other words, the plantation persists, beyond land enclosure, within social and economic structures that continue to shape political life through racial capitalism. This includes, as Moore et al. (“Plantation Legacies”) and Aikens et al. have analyzed, institutions such as the prison industrial complex and industries that maintain a monoculture of export-oriented commodity production located next to former plantations, as in the case of oil palm plantations in the north of Colombia, or the manufacturing plants and mineral extraction mines in regions

such as the Gulf Coast region of the US. These industries also often employ, “under coercive labor conditions, the descendants of enslaved plantation laborers” (Aikens et al.). As a corollary, I contend that a capacious notion of the plantation in these terms occludes the specific social relations that plantation capitalism advances, which is the separation of human beings from the soil, food, and the ecological conditions for material life. In this sense, I coincide with Getachew and Taylor that when framed within the *carceral*, for instance, the “plantation’s persistence as a site of a particular regime of labor process is occluded” (*boundary2*). In other words, even though the plantation continues beyond the land enclosure, today it designates primarily a specific type of relation between human beings and nature that, thanks to biotechnological intervention and commodification of natural processes, has vast negative consequences in the environment.

The recently coined concept of the Plantationocene attempts to grasp the continuity of plantation capitalism in these terms. According to Donna Haraway, the continuation of the plantation can be seen today “with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests,” which are still relying on “forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor.” Considering that the slave plantation is the motor for the “carbon-greedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene” (162), it can thus be seen as an important factor in the human-led geological transformation of the planet due to carbon emissions and biodiversity loss. According to Aiken et al., however, the Plantationocene is more than just an ecological simplification of the world generated by technological development of the plantation, a “set of ideas, archives, ideologies, and ... narratives” which “shape history, economics,

and ecologies on a planetary scale, and they also fundamentally shape how human beings relate to each other and to the natural world”. In this way, the plantation is always the object of restructuring according to new narratives and logics that regulate social relations, bodies, and the environment.

In Latin America, as in many parts of the Global South, the return of the plantation is primarily visible in the acts of racial, gender, and environmental violence that constitute the processes of land alienation, precarious labor, displacement of people, and ecological destruction that occur during the expansion of transgenic monoculture. As a result, monocrops of soybeans, sugarcane, African palm, avocado, fruits, pines, eucalyptus, among others, for purposes other than food, such as energy or the cosmetic industry, spread unrestrainedly throughout Latin America, with massive losses in biodiversity and local ecological knowledge accompanied by the appearance of both legal and illegal economies linked to extractivism and forced migration. Moreover, agribusiness seeks to exterminate, through pesticides and genetic manipulation of seeds, all those species or varieties that hinder the growth of a single type of plant and thus the economic benefit. Consequently, agribusiness has generated a profound crisis in the health and food sovereignty of poor communities, which are forced to migrate or submit to agribusiness’s regime of exploitation. The intervention of agricultural corporations at all stages of the food chain also means an appropriation of the conditions of reproduction—and therefore of life—by capital (Shiva, “Life, Inc.”). Furthermore, agribusiness is considered a direct cause of climate change due to high carbon emissions, desertification of territories, and loss of biodiversity. All these processes have been enabled by the deregulated economies of neoliberalism, which promotes the use of transgenic seeds and pesticides for intensive

production of food, oils, and energy through different forms of exploited labor, thus drastically transforming the social relations of nature, especially in rural peripheries and borderlands.

Chile and Argentina are two countries with different histories and cultures radically affected by this process. Under the dictatorship of 1973–1989, which favored agribusiness by redistributing land and furthering exploitation of the labor force, Chile became one of the world leaders in the export of fruits such as grapes, citrus fruits, apples, pears, blueberries, kiwis, and peaches, mainly to the United States, Europe, and Asia, leaving food production vulnerable to economic and ecological crises, and food stocks in the hands of corporate multinationals. The shift to a corporate-intensive model of production also transformed rural populations into a casual labor force, particularly female seasonal workers known as “temporeras,” altering social relations in the countryside and deepening social and economic inequality and food and water insecurity (Holz Cárcamo). Argentina, likewise, has been deeply transformed by agribusiness during the neoliberal period, although in this case, within the country’s long history of export economy, especially cereals, for the world markets. After the restructuring of the rural economy in the 70s and 80s, which facilitated the transference of land property from a vast number of owners to fewer corporations, Argentina emerged as one of the leading countries in the export of transgenic soybean for food production and biodiesel, which has led to economic dependency on transnational corporations such as Monsanto. The expansion of the transgenic frontier has been highly negative for the environment as well, primarily due to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and displacement of rural populations to *villas miserias*, which are centers of informal and popular economies that, according to Verónica Gago (*La*



*razón neoliberal*), represent the underside of the neoliberal market economy. Another important consequence is the use of pesticides such as glyphosate in the production of soybean, which has generated a health crisis in the population due to water contamination and fumigations (Manzanal; Sáñez; Taddei).

In the third chapter of the dissertation, I analyze in comparative terms Lina Meruane's *Fruta podrida* (2007) and Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014), two novels from Chile and Argentina and set in rural areas filled with transgenic crops of fruits and soybean, respectively, that convey the socioenvironmental conflicts surrounding the corporatization of food production in the Southern Cone, particularly genetic intervention in food production and bodily functions. In the specific case of *Fruta podrida*, the novel provides a dystopian view of the fruit industry in Chile by linking the use of pesticides in the production of grapes and berries to the immunization and control of the bodies of female seasonal workers, and to furthering exploitation of their (re)productive capacities, thus exposing the corporatization of both food and life in agribusiness. *Distancia de rescate*, on the other hand, uses elements of gothic fiction such as narrative tension, gloomy settings, and fantastic events to illustrate the effects of the transgenic soybean industry and its regimes of immunization on the production of poisonous bodies and the perversion of forms of care. My final contention is that both novels show the socioenvironmental implications of agribusiness for the environment and the body, particularly in the reproduction of social and biological conditions for life.

In the fourth and last chapter, I analyze Juan Cárdenas's *El diablo de las provincias* in relation to the loss of landscape as a consequence of the expansion of oil palm plantations in Colombia's Cauca Valley. As Jean-Francois Bissonnette explains, the increase in

plantations on a planetary scale means that more and more people live surrounded by them, and thus those “who have experienced a territory before it became a plantation ... may be living in solastalgia,” which means “not being able to find solace in the environment” (8-9). Solastalgia, a neologism coined by Glenn Albrecht from the combination of the Latin word *sōlācium* (comfort) and the medical suffix *-algia* from the Greek root *algos* (pain) to express to the distress caused by environmental change, is a kind of affect grounded in the radical alteration of the territory and the material conditions of forms of vegetal and animal life. In Cárdenas’s novel, we see this clearly in the story of a biologist who returns to his hometown in the Cauca Valley after fifteen years living in Europe, only to find the local landscape profoundly transformed by oil palm monocrops and infrastructures of extraction such as highways, supermarkets, shopping malls, and real estate developments. In this way, the novel highlights the rearticulation of plantation capitalism in Colombia at the end of the long-standing armed conflict between the State, the guerrillas, the paramilitary, and drug cartels, when agribusiness accomplished a new round of appropriation of rural lands and displacement of people to expand the frontier of extraction, especially to the benefit of the palm oil industry and its three million hectares.

The perception of the progressive disappearance of landscape in Cárdenas’s novel, a perception that is itself the product of capitalism’s reorganization of nature–society relations, can be identified, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, as proof of the Cauca Valley’s transition to a historical period when modernization is complete and “nature is gone for good” (Jameson *Postmodernism* ix). At the same time, the ineffable experience of climate change in the novel, indirectly linked to the negative effects of the plantation in the environment, marks the return of nature not as a domesticated form, but as unpredictable

and destructive environmental conditions. In this way, the novel exceeds the landscape-form and opens the space of extraction to the temporalities of the ecological crisis, which represents a limit to capital. As Andreas Malm has recently discussed in *The Progress of This Storm*, the experience of climate change in our daily life, which is the result of long-term human intervention in the environment, reintroduces the past, including the geological past, into our horizon of perception. Nature, therefore, returns to history, perhaps not through the form of the landscape anymore, which was so instrumental to capitalist accumulation, but as an assemblage of biological, geological, and technological processes defined by climate uncertainty and fear of extinction.

**CHAPTER 1. LANDSCAPES OF EXTRACTION AND MEMORIES OF  
EXTINCTION IN PATRICIO GUZMÁN'S *NOSTALGIA DE LA LUZ* AND *EL  
BOTÓN DE NÁCAR***

Focusing on Guzmán's essay films *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) and *El botón de nácar* (2015), in this chapter I argue that the ambiguity between reference and abstraction that pervades the visual representation of landscape in late capitalism offers a productive way to map out the processes of extinction caused by continual histories of extraction. This ambiguity not only reveals the limits of the landscape-form to convey the degradation of nature, but also the progressive disappearance of the human subject from the center of history in such spaces where capital seeks time and time again to resolve its internal contradictions through new forms of resource extraction. In this fashion, Guzmán's totalizing aspiration to represent the historical, archaeological, and even cosmological pasts through the landscapes of the Atacama Desert and Patagonia becomes a way to explain how capital has moved from the human to the planetary, which entails a larger alteration of ecological metabolism and transforms extinction into the only historical horizon. I conclude that the memory of past processes of extraction and extinction inscribed in these landscapes can also function as a prolepsis of a future without us, thus presenting an opportunity to reactivate the subject's historical potential to change the way we relate to nature.

***Extraction and Extinction***

The relationship between extraction and extinction is, at least, twofold: ever since industrialization of the modes of production, capitalist modernization has relied on the

extraction of fossil fuels resulting from processes of extinction that took place millions of years ago. At the same time, the expansion of these very modes of production on a planetary scale has been determinant for the extinction of multiple species in the new geological epoch driven by human intervention in the environment known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer “The ‘Anthropocene’” 2000). Moreover, the alarming biodiversity loss due to climate change and global warming provoked by fossil fuel industries might be leading to a Sixth Extinction event (Kolbert *The Sixth Extinction* 2014). We witness a massive recording of these processes of extraction and extinction in images and narratives that convey how we see not only our past as species, but also our future (Heise *Imagining Extinction*). In this context, it is crucial to ask about the role of the landscape, within the growing field of artistic and critical explorations of the global ecological crisis, in the making and representation of environments where extraction and extinction are articulated.

Recurrent depictions of landscapes intertwining extraction and extinction focus mostly on non-human environments significantly altered or even in the process of ruination as a consequence of capitalist crises. These landscapes often appear depopulated or precariously inhabited, thus indicating past or ongoing extinction processes. These landscapes also appear often times accompanied by geological or cosmological imagery that projects a world without us. Patricio Guzmán’s essay film *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) on the memories of colonialism and political violence in Chile’s Atacama Desert; David Maisel’s photographic work on opencast mining in the US (*Blacks maps*, 2013) and the Atacama Desert (*Desolation desert*, 2018); Allan Sekula’s *The Forgotten Space* (2010) on the catastrophic effects of the global economic crisis in the urban space; Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s film *Homo sapiens* (2016) on the nuclear disaster ruins in Fukushima and

Chernobyl; or Karim Aïnouz's and Marcelo Gomes' film *Viajo porque preciso, volto porque te amo* (2009) about the disappearance of landscape and social life prior to the implementation of an up-scale irrigation canal in the Brazilian Sertão; are some thought-provoking examples that come to mind.

Despite their critical importance for the study of the intersections between extraction and extinction, the pictorial drive that lies in these visual works conveys natural and material landscapes as abstract forms, making them lose sight of the social relations that organize them as environments. In that sense, they privilege abstraction and the painterly rather than documentation and reference, which works towards a memorialization of the past. According to Jens Andermann ("Introduction"; *Tierras en trance*), this reveals the exhaustion of the landscape form -and so of the colonial/modern horizon of Western aesthetics- as a utopian space and time outside capital where accumulation of nature seems endless. In other words, landscape as a form has become incapable of showing the ever-increasing loss of natural world that has characterized the relentless violence of extractive capitalism. At the same time, the ambiguity between documentation and abstraction that pervades the visual representation of the landscapes of extraction may offer a productive way to map out the destruction of planetary ecologies. On the one hand, I argue that extinction is not just an apocalyptic event, but a slow process that affects environments as well as social and cultural formations unevenly depending on their position in the capitalist world-system. As Donna J. Haraway puts it, "extinction is a protracted slow death that unravels great tissues of ways of going on in the world for many species, including historically situated people" (38). On the other, as Alberto Toscano has claimed with reference to Allan Sekula, depopulated landscapes highlight how human beings are

becoming “increasingly appear as supplements, extras or surplus” in places where dead labor contemporary capitalism. In other words, the planetary expansion of infrastructures of extraction and circulation are making human beings redundant to the production of value.

Taking these two arguments as a point of departure, I contend that the destruction of forms of life in planetary scale is linked to specific transformations in the capitalist system, where the extraction of value directly from nature emancipate accumulation from labor and thus provokes an even larger alteration of the ecological metabolism in the peripheries of global capital. Understanding the link between extraction and extinction in this way –namely, as specific historical transformations and world divisions of nature and labor- demonstrates how the notion of the Anthropocene is insufficient to explain the ecological crisis in a more systematic way. As Justin McBrien points out, recognizing geological changes as anthropogenic is part of the systematic conceptual exclusion of capitalism as their main cause. In fact, accumulation by extinction has been fundamental to capitalism from the beginning of what Jason W. Moore (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*) designates as the Capitalocene, that is, the historical stage dating back to the genocide of native Americans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in which nature is transformed into a commodity for the world markets. Drawing on deeper historical roots than the industrial revolution, which is often cited as the starting point of the Anthropocene, Moore’s concept of Capitalocene emerges in this fashion as a better way to tackle on the expansion of capitalist modes of production that is putting the life of the planet at risk. What is more important, a critique of the Anthropocene in terms of capital accumulation allows us to see the seemingly depoliticizing depiction of the landscapes of extraction in contemporary

visual production as a way to deconstruct the spectacle of apocalyptic futures and restore our capacity to intervene in history.

Patricio Guzmán's cinema offers an interesting case in point of these problematics. His documentary films can be defined as archaeologies of Chile's historical memory, with particular reference to the human rights violation that followed the demise of the revolutionary project in the early seventies. Even the significant trilogy *La batalla de Chile* (1976-79), which Guzmán conceived originally in terms of direct cinema,<sup>10</sup> ultimately represented an attempt to recompose the fragments of a broken past: the years between Salvador Allende's election in 1970 and the military coup of 1973 that instituted a brutal 17-year-long dictatorship resulting in thousands of people executed, disappeared, tortured, or exiled. The consequences of the dictatorship also shape Guzmán's second film trilogy - the films *Chile, la memoria obstinada* (1997), *El caso Pinochet* (2001), and *Salvador Allende* (2004), in which the focus is on the memories of the victims of human rights violations and the amnesia of Chilean society after the 1990 democratic restoration. In this respect, *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) and *El botón de nácar* (2015) represent a significant turn in Guzmán's exploration of the past. Constructed as essays rather than documentary films, they privilege subjective narration instead of historical accounts and emphasize

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<sup>10</sup> A variation of *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema seeks to directly capture the truth of reality in the present. Accordingly, Guzmán conceived his project for *La batalla de Chile* as a newsreel to register Allende's socialist government day by day. Chris Marker, after watching *El primer año* (1971), the first part of the project, helped Guzmán to distribute the film in Europe through SLON and provided him with filmstrip to continue the project. By the third year, needless to say, the military coup interrupted brutally both the documentary project and Allende's political experiment. The enormous footage accumulated was secretly transported to Sweden, and then to Cuba, where Pedro Chaskel reassembled it (Rufinelli). In the montage room, the linear narrative of the film was transformed into a circular one, starting with the defeat of Allende's government and ending with the popular empowerment that marked the first year of his presidency. As a result, the film represents the history of the events as a future moment in which the Chilean revolution is still pending (Pérez Villalobos).



natural landscapes for the representation of memorial sites and historical subjects.<sup>11</sup> The portrayal of human rights violations in the Atacama Desert or the Patagonia during the dictatorship are also connected to other histories of violence, such as the exploitation of labor force during the nitrate boom in the North or the extermination of indigenous people from Tierra del Fuego. Furthermore, Guzmán explores the geological and cosmological dimension of the past contained in these landscapes, stretching the temporal and spatial scope of his films. In this fashion, as Martin-Jones has studied, Guzmán transforms the landscape into an archive of the memory of the universe and advocates for a non-anthropocentric view about historical time.

Guzmán's emphasis on the subject and the essay over history and the documentary has been criticized for moving away from the political emphasis of his previous films (Klubock). According to Andermann (*Tierras en trance*), in his vindication of the revelatory potential of the landscape to reveal the past, Guzmán overlooks the present of the Atacama Desert and Patagonia, which endure multiple conflicts between nature and capital in the present. This is not because of Guzmán's negligence or omission, but because of the landscape's incapacity to expose the violence of extractive capitalism (340). This explain the mesmerizing effect of the images of natural sites shown in these films as well as the explicit lack of reference to the historical present of Atacama Desert and Patagonia.

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<sup>11</sup> Both *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* should be seen in relation to other minor documentaries previously made by Guzmán about collective memory and the landscape. *Barriers of Solitude* (1995), for instance, is a portrait of a small agrarian town in the state of Morelos, Mexico, whose inhabitants are more interested in the frequent cosmological events that occur in the sky, such as aurora borealis and comets, than in the historical changes of the country. In *Mon Jules Verne* (2005), Guzmán explores his own personal memories of Jules Verne's books, and the experiences of people who have materialized his voyages and adventures around the globe. Likewise, the documentary *Robinson Crusoe* (1999) focuses on the landscape of this remote island in the Pacific Ocean to reveal the collective memory of its inhabitants. In all of these films, astronomy and science fiction play a significant role in stretching the cinematic scope of Guzmán's films from history to landscape and from the human to the planetary.

This is particularly problematic insofar as these regions constitute historical frontiers where capital seeks time and time again to resolve its internal contradictions through new forms of resource extraction.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that it is precisely the ambiguity between document and abstraction in the representation of the landscape in these films which can shed light on the intertwining between extraction and extinction in contemporary capitalism. Based on this, in the following pages I analyze how *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* seek to portray not only the memories of extraction and extermination during the colonial and modern periods, but also the progressive disappearance of the human subject as the center of history in contemporary capitalism. I contend that there is not historical present to tell because history has become something else than the tale of human alteration of the world. In this fashion, Guzmán's totalizing aspiration to represent the historical, archaeological, and even cosmological pasts through the landscape becomes a way to explain how capital has moved from the human to the planetary, which entails a larger alteration of ecological metabolism and transforms extinction into the only historical horizon. Following Toscano and Kinkle (*Cartographies*), I also contend that Guzmán's films must be read as an attempt to create a cartography of the capitalist system and its

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<sup>12</sup> Lessie Jo Frazier, in her historical ethnography of the Nation-State formation in Chile, shows that the Tarapacá region in the Atacama Desert functions as a microcosms of the historical dynamics of the Chilean Nation-State. Focusing on the affective ties between memory, violence and space, Frazier studies the history of the desert in a nonlinear way, which contradicts the linear narrative of progress and emphasizes the deep temporal resonance of violence during the making of the northern frontier. In this sense, her analysis puts under scrutiny the discourse of exceptionality that characterizes Chilean official history, like the alleged isolation from the rest of the world, or the assumption that the Pinochet's dictatorship meant a disruption in the otherwise peaceful history of a democratic country from South America. On the contrary, the history of Tarapacá symbolizes the militarism, nationalism and extractivism of the State toward the Desert, which became the site of some of the bloodiest massacres in Latin American history perpetrated to secure the interests of foreign capital and the national oligarchy. The *Oficina Ramírez* (1891), *Santa María de Iquique* (1907) and *La Coruña* (1925) massacres constitute three important moments in the tragic history of the nitrate industry the paved the road to its definitive decay and the end of Chile's oligarchic-parliamentary system. At the same time, these same memories of violence have played a crucial role in the construction of the Chilean left and in the struggle against capital, raising awareness among new generations about the violence imposed by the State and foreign interests against the working class.

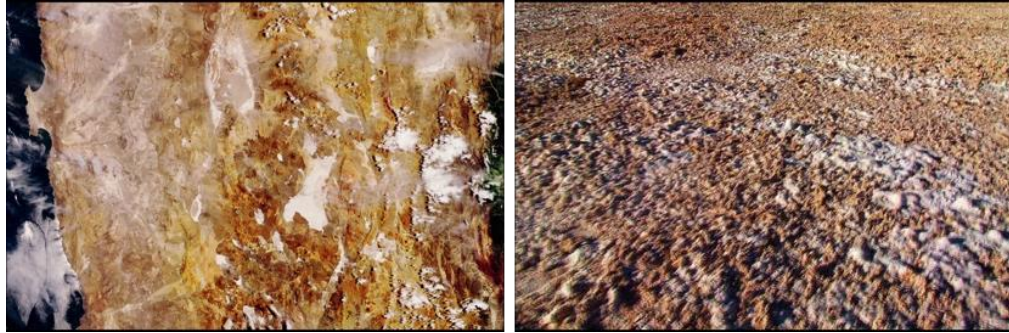
structural crises beyond the human conceptions of time. In so doing, Guzmán can help us to understand the global ecological catastrophe in relation to the deep time history of capitalist accumulation and to question the role of the Anthropocene in obscuring the specific political regime responsible for the ongoing waves of extinction.

### ***Nostalgia de la luz: Extraction of the Past and the Futures of Extinction***

*Nostalgia de la luz* examines three different searches of the past conducted in the Atacama Desert at the same time: that of the astronomers and their study of the cosmological past; that of the archaeologists who investigate the traces of indigenous cultures; and that of a group of women looking for victims of the dictatorship whose remains were scattered in the sand. Guzmán shows how these seemingly separated searches overlap in the desert, where the total absence of humidity allows the long-term preservation of material traces. The Atacama Desert is described by Guzmán in this way as “a great open book of memory” situated in a country that paradoxically turns its back on history, eager to forget rather than remember. Throughout the film, we see the different conceptions of time at stake in these searches of the past. For astronomer Gaspar Galaz, for instance, any phenomenon that the telescopes or antennas capture in outer space is just an echo of something that happened in cosmological time. The present time of perception, therefore, does not exist. The title of the film seems to originate in this contradiction: the light coming from the stars was emitted in the past and is a memory of itself even if constitutes our present. From the perspective of archaeologist Lautaro Núñez, however, the desert is a palimpsest of multiple times and communities present in the material landscape. Everywhere we see the traces of continuous waves of occupation and extraction, from pre-Columbian sites and Spanish settlements to

modern mines and futuristic telescopes. Núñez points out that our treatment of these different pasts is uneven. Whereas the ancient cultures of the North are carefully preserved in museums, the abandoned mining sites from the nitrate boom are monumentalized and commercialized, and the cosmological pasts are scientifically observed through telescopes, the remains of the disappeared are forgotten in the desert. This leads us to the third conception of time as justice poised by the “Mujeres de Calama”, the group of women who comb the sand of the desert looking for the rests of their relatives. For these women, the past represents an open wound caused by the human rights violation committed during the dictatorship, and the desert their last hope of finding their relatives and obtaining justice for their disappearance.

In the initial sequence of the film, we see a massive telescope capturing cosmological images such as lunar maria, aurora borealis, and star showers. Guzmán combines these images of the telescopes with satellite pictures of the Earth that lead to the geospatial localization of the Atacama Desert. The desert is present as a brown patch in an image of the planet evoking “The Blue Marble”, the famous photograph taken by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972. Ursula K. Heise (*Sense of Place*) has identified this picture as one of the milestones of the “sense of planet” that underpins the emergence of the Earth as a living organism in our present. Using more satellite images, the film scales down to the desert’s surface, a vertical movement which suggests the imperialist gaze behind geological explorations, military interventions and extractive projects (Parks). In this manner, Guzmán seems to switch not only scales of observation, but also forms of appropriation of local and global landscapes.



At this point, the film presents a montage of salt crystals, rocks, bones, and finally the impressive telescopes and antennas of ALMA. The first signs of human presence also emerge in the film: the astronomers and operators of the telescopes at the observatory, which Guzmán describes as the setting of a science fiction film. The domes that cover the telescopes resemble houses of an alien landscape, and the astronomers as colonizers from another planet. Images of rock paintings and ancient roads also evoke traces of inhabitants from distant pasts and worlds. In addition, the shaking camera suggests a rover exploring a post-human, even extraterrestrial landscape. The whole sequence symbolizes the transformation of the Atacama Desert into a token for extraterrestrial imagery in the last decades. Indeed, the Atacama Desert has become a preferred location for science fiction films about Mars as well as training for potential travels to the red planet. Furthermore, the astronomers that work with the telescopes from ALMA are close to discover an exoplanet -a planet like our own that orbits around a star like the Sun at such a distance that liquid water can exist on its surface (Messeri). Guzmán shows how this otherworldly imaginary, however, represents the estrangement of human beings from the history that arise from Chacabuco, the former nitrate mining town located not far from the observatory park that the dictatorship converted into a concentration camp in 1973.

Chacabuco came to life first as Oficina Salitrera Chacabuco in 1924, at the end of the nitrate boom, and closed after the Great Depression in 1935. *Oficina* was the name given to the mine sites established in the second half of the 19th century during the beginnings of the nitrate boom.<sup>13</sup> Apart from sites of extraction, these were units of colonization of indigenous communities and displacement of workers from the South that moved to the North to work in the mines. In 1971, Salvador Allende transformed the *oficina* into a Historical Monument to commemorate the nitrate workers,<sup>14</sup> but between 1973 and 1975 the Junta Militar used it as a prisoner of war camp and torture center for Allende's supporters.<sup>15</sup> Surrounded by anti-personnel mines until 1997, Chacabuco conveys the low intensity warfare that Pinochet's regime implemented against Allende's supporters. Moreover, the site incarnates the continuance between the exploitation of the miners in the 19th century and the destruction of the working class that created the political conditions

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<sup>13</sup> According to Chilean historian Julio Pinto-Vallejos, by 1830 Chile was a nation in construction, still moving at a precapitalist pace, until nitrate made it enter into the world of industrial revolution. Nitrate, or saltpeter, laying in vast deposits on the surface of the Atacama Desert, showed to be an essential fertilizer for the worn agricultural soils of the European nations that were on the path of industrialization. For this reason, Pinto-Vallejos has called the Atacama Desert the cradle of contemporary Chile, the starting point of the capitalist modernization of the country and of the working class that shaped its political history.

<sup>14</sup> In the short documentary "El pueblo construye" (1971), also titled as the Informe N. 3 of Chile Films, we see one of the trips Allende made to the North to strengthen the participation of the workers in the Chilean revolution. The film starts with images of the ruins of Oficina Pampa Unión that remind the tragic years of the nitrate boom, and images of President Balmaceda, one of Allende's role models. Subsequently, we see images of Allende's discourses in the mining towns María Elena and Pedro de Valdivia, the last active nitrate *oficinas* of the country. The film ends with the phrase: "El salitre hará revivir el norte de Chile".

<sup>15</sup> The nationalization of copper occurred in July 16, 1970, a day honored as the *Día de la Dignidad Nacional* by Allende's government and pondered as the second Independence of Chile. The UP found in the copper fields a key point to change the history of capital accumulation in Chile, from the underdevelopment due to foreign capital, to the complete development of a capitalist society based on State-led industrialization and popular political power (Salazar *Historia*). After the Coup, however, the dictatorship transformed the region into an exceptional focus of political violence and resource extraction, building concentration camps and military bases alongside public works for the mine industry that not only threw away the project of the Left but also made the Atacama Desert the neuralgic point of the neoliberalization of the mining industry in Chile and Latin America (Machado Aráoz).

for the transition to a new stage of capitalist accumulation in Chile after the democratic restoration of 1990 (Spira “Neoliberal”).<sup>16</sup>

The film presents the relationship between Chacabuco and the observatory park by means of an extended sequence displaying archaeological, historical, and cosmological artifacts and events. First, a mummy from the Chinchorro culture, which are the oldest examples of artificially preserved human remains, blends with the image of a supernova. Following after, views of indigenous rock paintings, salt crystals and the blue sky precedes the slow exploration of the mining site. Inside the mining site we see close-ups of forsaken objects --a boot, a bulb, bottles, spoons. The camera then explores a cemetery next to the mining site. The remains of a miner lead to iconic images of Luis Emilio Recabarren, founder of the Partido Obrero Socialista and one of the driving forces in the political organization of the workers of the North. A train crosses the horizon, dividing the screen in two. The metallic noise of the train switches to the aerial noise of the observatory park, where still photos of the impressive telescopes intersects with aerial footage of Chacabuco. At his point, Guzmán explores the architecture of the site through interviews with survivors the concentration camp, who examine the inscriptions on the remaining walls.

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<sup>16</sup> Chacabuco replicates the case of Pisagua, another site of terror examined by Spira that is also the focus of Guzmán’s documentary film *El caso Pinochet* (1999). An important port during the 19th century, Pisagua served as a detention camp for homosexual men in 1920, for communists in 1948 and then in 1956, and for Allende’s supporters during the dictatorship. Guzmán’s *El caso Pinochet* initiates with a sequence on a group of relatives of the 27 disappeared political prisoners whose remains were found in a mass grave outside Pisagua. Guzmán shows these relatives in the desert as collectors of bones, which are now part of the desert, becoming themselves part of the landscape. Guzmán suggests that the desert erases the distinction between the human and the non-human, confronting historical memory with a type of nonlinear memory that cannot really separate cultural and natural history. I believe that both Chacabuco and Pisagua illustrate in this way the profound connection between extractivism and human rights violation, between labor exploitation and political persecution, but also stand for a kind of spatial memory that blur the distinction between us and the landscape.



In my view, the whole sequence comprises the history of capital accumulation in the Atacama Desert from the point of view of extinction. First, the sequence connects the appropriation of labor-force and land during the colonial period, which led to the extermination of indigenous cultures, to the nitrate boom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that entailed the deaths of thousands of workers in the name of the industrial revolution. Second, the cargo train on the horizon symbolizes the extraction of minerals that provide the means for the accelerated capitalism that Chile experiences nowadays. In fact, transnational corporations extract nowadays around 43 million cubic tons of mineral per year from the Atacama Desert, particularly metals like copper, molybdenum, nitrate, lithium, or borax that are crucial for industries such as electronics, informatics, transportation, pharmaceuticals, and foods substitutes. As a result of these extractive processes, many urban and rural centers of the North have been transformed into sacrifice zones, which impacts profoundly in the social and ecological conditions of the region (Folchi). Northern Chile is indeed a space of intersection of multiple criminal activities, such as money laundering or human trafficking, with disastrous rainy seasons, massive flooding, and earthquakes.



Despite that, the images of telescopes moving mechanically suggest the radical automatization of the labor process in contemporary capitalism, in which telescopic extraction of material and virtual resources contributes to the disappearance of the historical subject. This illustrates with precision of why Elizabeth Povinelli considers the desert a central geontological figure. The desert is a place full of materials forms, like fossils, that were once “charged with life”, but that as form of fuel or energy can provide the conditions for a specific form of life “—contemporary, hypermodern, informationalized capital” (17).

In contrast to these processes of extraction and extinction, the last section of the film concentrates on the “Mujeres de Calama”, the group of women who search for the remains of their relatives killed by the Pinochet’s regime. Guzmán depicts them pacing around the desert as if they were also collectors of the bones of an extinct species. When Guzmán interviews them, these women appear to be what Deleuze and Guattari called *têtes chercheuses* (*A Thousand Plateaus* 190), that is to say, searching heads digging through the layers of earth in search of the faces of their loved ones. The sequence reminds William Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858*, a painting centered on the encounters between human and cosmological time through women that pick up meteorites. The “Mujeres de Calama” look for remains of their relatives, but in similar way to the women in Dyce’s painting, they find rocks and fragments of meteorites in the process. Their search for future justice become thus intimately connected to the material traces of the geological and cosmological past. This is tragically expressed in the exhumation of a woman executed during Pinochet’s regime that Guzmán’s film crew came across during the shooting of the film. The exhumation is depicted by Guzmán as an archaeological site,

where the forensic anthropologists are disinterring not just the skeleton of a disappeared, but the fossils of another species. Later on the film, Guzmán interviews astronomer George Preston, who explains how the calcium in the bones of the disappeared was made shortly after the Big Bang, meaning that we are constituted by the same matter as the Universe: “We live among the trees, but we also live among the stars (...) The calcium in my bones was there from the beginning”. The film points thus towards the coalescence of human and cosmological time in the Atacama Desert, which becomes an archive of rocks, bones, and starts where the memories of past and future extinctions are written. As Nilo Couret claims, this shows how the object of longing in *Nostalgia de la luz* is not located in the future nor in the past, but “in the meeting point between both”, which allows Guzmán to tell the history of human rights violation “not in a retrospective mode but instead in a subjunctive mode” (“Scale as Nostalgic Form” 88).<sup>17</sup> In this fashion, the demand for memory and justice carried out by these women stands against the primacy of profit and presentism in neoliberal Chile, where no future other than capital is possible. Instead of possessing extractive value for the global markets, the bones of the disappeared that these women look for are valueless and “do not matter to anyone”.

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<sup>17</sup> Nilo Couret suggests that nostalgia according to Guzmán’s film can only be the product of scalar conversions, that the nostalgia for the light is bent to a time that doesn’t locate in the future nor the past, but in a point of encounter between both. *Nostalgia de la luz*, which translates as both *nostalgia of the light* and *nostalgia for the light*, plays with the object of longing and the spatio-temporal location of the light that motivates the documentary. For this reason, the documentary focuses so much on the technological sublime of the telescopes, which can capture emissions of light produced millions of years in the past thanks to the size of their refractive mirror, while the cinematographic camera can capture only the present time of movement, even if this present is just a chimera. In the meeting point of both, the Earth meets the Universe.



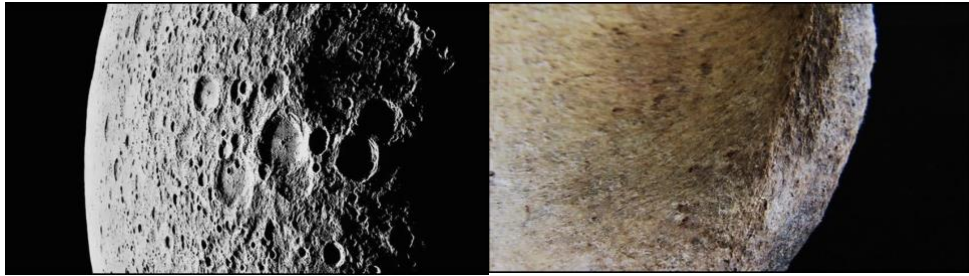
From left to right, William Dyce, *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup> 1858* and the “Mujeres de Calama” in *Nostalgia de la luz*

By juxtaposing the search for justice with the struggle against neoliberalism, *Nostalgia de la luz* subtly reveals the radical transformation of the Atacama Desert into one of the major extractive zones of the planet after the dictatorship (Arboleda “Financialization”). Now, if these processes of extraction are not explicitly depicted in *Nostalgia de la luz*, is because in the current stage capital accumulation has progressively emancipated from labor. In this way, the film opens an explicit but negative dialogue with *La batalla de Chile*. By looking at the ruins of the revolutionary culture in the desert, Guzmán shows the disappearance of the working class not only as the engine of history, but also as a subject in documentary film. Furthermore, through images of desolated landscapes, where only forensic searches of the past can take place, *Nostalgia de la luz* makes manifest the anticipated memories of extinction caused by the new waves of extractivism in the Atacama Desert. The riddle posed by the film is whether the production of life in extractive capitalism will increase the levels of death and desertification until history is no longer possible. This is even more significant in a landscape whose resemblance to Mars materialize the desire to expand capitalist life to other worlds. Mars, however, symbolizes not only the imagination of other worlds, but also how the planet Earth could become, in Elizabeth Povinelli’s words, a place

“once awash with life, but now a dead orb hanging in the night sky” (*Geontologies* 36). In this sense, Guzmán shows how the exploration of other planets contributes to subordinating the continuity of life to the discovery of other worlds and new frontiers of extraction, and not to a change in the regime of accumulation responsible of the global ecological crisis. In other words, the film is saying that, if we continue relating to nature as an endless source of accumulation, and the desert as if it were merely a deposit of lifeless minerals, then our memory as historical subjects will be only the memory of an extinct species. And those who dare to unearth our remains in the future will do so only to discover our exterminating nature.



In the final sequence of the film we see a montage of images of the moon analogically related to bones and crystal balls. Unfolding in almost an anamorphic way on the screen, this montage works as a *memento mori* or a warning sign about the kind of relationship we have built with the desert and the planet. The bones we see on the screen rewrite the assemblages of life and nonlife that proliferate in our world, showing that the main path to the outer space is none other than the extinction of our planet and the fossilization of all forms of life present in it. In this moment, we realize that the fourth search of the past emerges, as performed by the documentary itself at the level of species.



### **The Debris of History in *El botón de nácar***

In *El botón de nácar*, Guzmán explores the intersecting histories of extraction and extinction in Patagonia. In the same way as the desert in *Nostalgia de la luz*, water becomes an archival device that preserves material traces from the past, tying together the seemingly discontinuous histories of the indigenous people from Tierra del Fuego and the dictatorship. The point of connection between these histories is a pearl button found in one of the rails used to sink the bodies of political prisoners into the sea by agents of the military regime, which Guzmán links to the pearl button in exchange for which the Yaghan native Orundellico –later known as Jemmy Button- was extracted by Captain FitzRoy from Patagonia to England in 1830. According to Guzmán, these different buttons tell “una misma historia de exterminio”, proving that water does not just have a voice but also memory (“el agua tiene memoria”).



The film begins with the image of a 3,000-year-old quartz rock containing a drop of water found in the Atacama Desert followed by views of telescopes of the observatory park. Mesmerizing views of Patagonia's desolate marine landscapes fill the following minutes of the film, accompanied by the sound of rain pouring, rivers running and icebergs cracking—a reminder of the effects of global warming in the South Pole. As one of the last frontiers for global capital, Patagonia is currently under a huge ecological distress due to the extraction of resources such as natural gas, oil, and coal as well as the use of water for hydroelectricity and fish farming. Guzmán captures this extractive view through satellite images of Chile's 2,670-mile oceanic coastline, which despite of its importance for Chilean identity and national economy, is now overwhelmingly occupied by transnational fishing corporations as a result of the neoliberal reforms that granted rights of exploitation to private companies almost without public regulation.<sup>18</sup> At this point, Guzmán concentrates on the history of the indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego -Selk'nam, Kawésqar, Aónikenk, Haush, Yaghan- that were exterminated by colonial settlers between 1890 and 1910. In this way, the genocide of these indigenous peoples appears as a counterpoint to the beautiful sights of the Patagonian landscapes that open the film, and to the massive commodification of water that guides the ecologically devastating economic success of contemporary Chile.

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<sup>18</sup> A defining moment in the recent history of Chilean Patagonia was the acquisition by deep ecologist and magnate Douglas Tompkins of more than 2 million acres to protect wilderness from appropriation and exploitation, resulting in a process of "green" dispossession and ecological imperialism that only opened the door for further exploitation. Such transformation of Patagonia into a commodity frontier can be seen symbolically expressed in the 200 ton Antarctic iceberg that Chile brought to the Seville Expo of 1992. This event, brilliantly depicted in Ignacio Agüero's documentary film *Sueños de hielo* (1992), intended to show not only the country's capacity to export resources, but also the image of a nation cleansed of the past and open to a future of extraction.

Based on ethno-visual documents by Salesian Alberto Maria de Agostini, missionary Martin Gusinde, and Paz Errázuriz's extraordinary photographic work in *Los nómades del mar* from 1996, Guzmán reflects on different moments in the genocide of these native groups that established themselves in the region around ten thousand years ago, after the last interglacial period. The origins of the genocide can be found in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Nation-State began the occupation of the territory. This led to the sheep farming boom and the gold rush of 1890-1910, which attracted large number of Argentinians, Chileans, and Europeans. The new dominant class of settlers began a violent process of appropriation of pristine ecosystems and extermination of indigenous peoples.<sup>19</sup> The Chilean State openly supported the extermination by persecuting and relocating the indigenous of Tierra del Fuego on Dawson Island, where European settlers such as Julius Popper hunted them down for bounty. In less than 50 years, the Fuegians were decimated to the point of extinction. Guzmán interviews three survivors of the Yaghan genocide – Gabriela, Martín, and Cristina- as if they were the last reservoirs of a memory doomed to disappear. One of the striking passages of the film occurs when the filmmaker asks Gabriela to translate some Spanish words into Yaghan language. All of the words have a meaning in Yaghan, namely “foca, ballena, canoa, remo, papá, mamá, niño, Sol, Luna, estrella, playa, cholga, botón”, except “dios” and “policía”, two key words in the process of colonization operated by Western imperialism that led them to extinction.

Dawson Island serves in the film as the first link between the genocide of the indigenous of Tierra del Fuego and the military dictatorship of 1973-1989, which

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<sup>19</sup> Settler colonialism, unlike colonialism as such, did not deploy in Patagonia by exploiting the indigenous population economically but by removing and exterminating them, naturalizing extinction as a condition for progress (Harambour and Barrena).

established a concentration camp where around 700 political dissidents were imprisoned and tortured. Guzmán interviews a group of survivors of the camp, making them pose in front of the camera in similar ways to the Fuegians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pictures, thus connecting their histories of defeat as well as survival. Guzmán takes this analogy to draw together the history of Yaghan native Jemmy Button and teacher Marta Ugarte, a member of the Chilean Communist Party assassinated by DINA, the secret police of Pinochet. Though these poetic operations can be seen as weakening the historical dimension of Guzmán's recent films, which makes them essays rather than documentaries, they make manifest the relationship between different instances of racial and political violence operated by both colonialism and neoliberalism in the peripheries of global capital. The story of Jemmy Button is crucial to understanding this relationship. He was one of the four Yaghan taken back to England in 1830 by Captain Robert FitzRoy in the *HMS Beagle*. As Benjamin Subercaseaux tells in his novel *Jemmy Button* (1950), the visit of the Yaghan to London constituted a public sensation and even were received by the Queen. The Yaghan not only contributed to the kind of archaeological pleasure that fossils, ancient artifacts and prehistoric animals afforded in museums and public exhibitions in Victorian England (Dawson). At the same time, they represented a central point of comparison for evolution theory. *Beagle's* crew member Charles Darwin, who travelled with the Yaghan back to England, despite calling them "animals", considered them "fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world" (*Voyage* 309). The Yaghan, in other words, were an example of the continuity of natural history, and thus threw "more light on the appearance of organic beings on our earth, and their disappearance from it" (253). Darwin's claims reveal not only the imperial gaze behind evolution theory, but also the effect that the



negative environmental changes provoked by industrialization had in in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. In this sense, Jemmy Button's travel to England meant a clash not only between present-time British and past-time Fuegians, but also a collapse between the time of nature and the time of capital in the industrial revolution, which contributed to the large-scale transformation of the planet's metabolism that is putting us on the same path of extinction as the Yaghan and the Victorian in the past.



Jemmy Button before and after his journey to England. Robert FitzRoy  
(c. 1830-1834)

The assassination of Marta Ugarte, whose body was thrown into the sea and then washed up by the Humboldt Current on Los Molles beach in September of 1976, is also relevant to the intertwining of extraction and extinction of bodies displayed in the film. Ugarte is considered one of the first disappeared whose remains were found and publicly claimed as proof of state terrorism during the dictatorship. In this section of the film, Guzmán reconstructs –with the help of journalist and human rights activist Javier Rebolledo– Ugarte's murder and attempt to disappear her corpse. Rebolledo's reconstruction is a dark passage in the film that reveals the technologies of death that Pinochet's regime used against its opponents. This section evokes the forensic nature of Guzmán's *The Pinochet*

*Case* (2001), in which images of bones of the disappeared haunt relentlessly the present of Chilean democracy depicted in the film. Apart from the electric bed or the lethal drugs used during Rebolledo's reenactment, Guzmán focuses particularly on the rails that the secret police used to put on top of the bodies before throwing them into the sea. Some of these rails are in display in Villa Grimaldi, one of the torture centers of Pinochet's secret police, as a reminder of the techniques and non-human alliances developed by the dictatorship to kill dissidents. At the same time, these rails evoke the trains we see in *Nostalgia de la luz* crossing the desert in search of minerals. Interestingly enough, the rails are one of the symbols of the deindustrialization practiced by the dictatorship, which dismantled the train system that used to connect the country's long territory. The rails illustrate, thus, the transition from an era centered on development and emancipation, which Allende remarkably represented with "el tren de la Victoria" ("the train of victory") during his 1958 presidential campaign, to another centered on automatization of the labor process and disappearance of the working class. Furthermore, they link the history of technology with the memories of violence during the dictatorship, and so the history of extraction with the memories of extermination.



As a critique of Chilean indifference to these past histories of violence represented by Jimmy Button and Marta Ugart, Guzmán displays the unfolding of a large-scale cardboard

map of Chile made by painter Ema Malig. By slowly panning the map in slow motion, Guzmán uncovers the memories of violence that shape national landscapes. In *Nostalgia de la luz*, Guzmán shows that the landscape of the desert can store the past, but in *El botón de nácar* he is proposing waterscapes as a way to connect and even to remember these two histories of extraction and extinction. The idea that water has memory, however, implies that the past is actually fluid and cannot be entirely fixed either in time or in space. As the only chemical compound that can be found as a solid, a liquid, and a gas at the same time, water is the most formless materiality of all. Every trace of information contained in water will eventually disappear due to its fluidity, but this very information will return in another form without form. For this reason, the film follows the signals, indications and vestiges of history as if they were pure vibrations of liquid matter. Many sections of the film present sounds and vibrations produced by water, from waves and rain to icebergs collapsing into cold lakes to bodies falling into the sea and oars sinking in the waterways. In parallel, the film inserts aural fragments from the languages of Fuegians. Anthropologist Claudio Mercado also performs in the film a series of vibrating chants that resemble the sound of water. In this manner, *El botón de nácar* is flooded with sonic encounters with the formless memory of water. At the end of the film, the sad and sometimes soporific Guzmán's voiceover sets the tone of this sonic encounter. While we see images of a Quasar recently discovered, which holds 120 million times more water than the Earth in the shapeless form of vapor, Guzmán wonders how many wandering souls that, like the indigenous people of Patagonia or the victims of the dictatorship, might find refuge in this vast ocean drifting in the cosmos. Perhaps the answer to that question, in my opinion, wanders in the water of our planet.

## *Conclusions*

Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* show how the relationship between reference and abstraction in the representation of the landscapes of extraction is directly proportional to the processes of extinction developing in the Capitalocene. In this manner, the apparent incapacity of the landscape-form to represent the violence of extraction responds to capital's capacity to work beyond the zones of extraction already available. In other words, the extractive view operates by producing historical natures – through science, technology and power- as abstract value to be appropriated (Moore *Capitalism*). The production of these historical natures implies a regime of visibility of the frontiers of appropriation that sees accumulation as endless. In this illusion, capitalism sets in motion its strategies of destruction, including its own. The landscape-form responds to this totalizing impulse of capital, but fails reciprocally to represent a future with us. The result cannot be other but the fragments of a broken totality without human presence.

Similar to the landscape as a form of representation, there is an opacity and obliqueness in the apparatus of extractivism that renders invisible its own activities. In this way, the fantasy of transparency in visual representations of commodity chains, which promotes ethical consumerism as possible solution to environmental issues, epitomizes the “new kind of opacity” that occludes the increasing scale of the capitalist system (Toscano and Kinkle). In contrast, the failed transparency of the landscape might be able to better expose the anticipated memories of extinction that can result from the expansion of extractive practices to planetary levels. Guzmán's use of the landscapes as archives functions in this way as a sort of prolepsis of world loss in the exact moment when the

planet is becoming fully appropriated by capitalist modes of production. Memory, in this case, does not amount to memorialization, but to warning and awareness. As Diana Colebrook puts it, the discourse on the end of the world “relies on looking at our own world and imagining it as it will be when it has become the past” (24). While this might sound pessimistic at first glance, Colebrook claims that “in imagining this world after humans we are reading what is not yet written or inscribed” (24). I argue that what is not yet written are the conditions for socio-historical change needed to halt the process of accumulation by extinction in late capitalism. In this fashion, *Nostalgia de la luz* and *El botón de nácar* show there is an immanent force in the landscape that offers submerged perspectives on the social/natural relations that can challenge such process. These perspectives are drawn on the very histories of extraction and extinction already inscribed in the matter of the landscape. These histories might be about disappeared subjects, but their capacity to remain in the landscape can be used to produce an image for the future in which we are still here.

Guzmán’s *Nostalgia de la luz* works indeed as an essay film, but by putting the desert -and not the I- in front of the subject of the film, he confers the landscape a political agency that used to belong to social subjects. As David Martin-Jones puts it, the I in *Nostalgia* is “eclipsed by a much larger non-anthropocentric force: the matter that constructs the Universe” (710). This does not imply that social subjects are no longer crucial in political action, but that they are deeply engaged in environmental relationships. In this sense, I argue that *Nostalgia de la luz* reframes the history of the workers that protagonized *La Batalla de Chile* in terms of the ongoing changes in capitalist accumulation that signal their apparent disappearance, questioning extinction in both historical and environmental levels. Guzmán’s approach to nature is thus ultimately

political, but by posing the point of view on the landscape, his documentaries pull out a non-anthropocentric memory of the planet that alters the ontological level of the political itself.

## CHAPTER 2. BOLAÑO'S *2666* AND THE NOVEL OF THE UN-WORLD

Bolaño's posthumous *2666* is a hypernovel from 2004 constituted of five segments that operate autonomously but can also be read as a whole. Each part intertwines different stories about Santa Teresa, the fictional thriving maquila-city located on the Mexico–US border that has been ravaged by a series of femicides from 1993 to 1996. The first three parts of the novel take Santa Teresa as a point of arrival for characters from places as different as Barcelona, Detroit, London, and Berlin. The fourth and longest part centers on the femicides and explores the viewpoints of characters as diverse as policemen, journalists, psychiatrists, activists, politicians, and even a psychic on some of the social issues—e.g., labor exploitation, migration, drug trafficking, sexual commerce, corruption, and structural sexism—underlying the ongoing murder of women. The fifth and final part centers on the life of the prominent but obscure German writer Benno von Arcimboldi, whose whereabouts are a matter of investigation by four literary critics in the first part. The story takes place mostly in Germany and Eastern Europe, but finishes with Arcimboldi's trip to Santa Teresa to help his nephew, who has been imprisoned as a suspect in the murders. As we can see, the city appears as the spatial center of all five parts of the novel, intertwining multiple geographies and temporalities ranging from WW2 to neoliberalism, which attributes a sense of globality to the novel. In this way, Santa Teresa emerges as a hotspot from which to examine critical issues such as migration, the labor force, and commodity production on a world scale. At the same time, Bolaño's novel shapes Santa Teresa not only as a city, but also as a body that both includes and experiences the murders

of women. Thus, the city appears as the embodiment of a dialectical relationship between part and whole, periphery and world embedded in the formal structure itself of the novel.

In this chapter, I argue that such dialectical relations can be read in the novel, in terms of both world literature and the world economy, as a literary expression of the peripheries of the world system, which also points toward a world-ecological dimension that links the novel's exploration of the conflicts between capital and labor to the uneven condition of the global ecological crisis. This hypothesis takes as a point of departure Sharae Deckard's analysis of *2666* as a "world-system novel" that exposes the systemic violence in post-NAFTA Mexico as a result of the structural adjustments provoked by the rising of neoliberalism in the Third World after the WW2 ("Peripheral Realism"; "Roberto Bolaño"). According to Deckard, *2666* should be read as a novel that seeks to reveal the uneven structural relations caused by late capitalism at the margins of the world-economy. I contend that these uneven structural relations also express themselves in ecological forms, and thus should be taken as conditions of the particular arrangement of the social relations of nature on the periphery, which is there to provide cheap labor, energy, and raw materials for the benefit of those at the center while also being brutally forced to suffer the social and environmental costs. In other words, I understand the structural adjustments of neoliberal Mexico represented in *2666* as an instance of the capital's ceaseless search for ways to accumulate and revolutionize commodity production through the "Cheap Natures" that can make this possible. In this way, I believe that *2666* seeks to reveal how the maquila industry in northern Mexico is the result not only of a radical change in the relations of production from agriculture to global manufacturing, but constitutes a new process of accumulation by dispossession of labor and land, of bodies and landscapes, to provide the world with



manufacturing and cheap labor—even if this means the destruction of the world itself, as the apocalyptic overtones of *2666* may hint.

My reading of *2666* as a world-ecological novel is also informed by a spatial analysis of Ciudad Juárez, the city on which Santa Teresa is manifestly based, as a Third World city where populations become not only cheap labor, but also sacrificial sites of accumulation. As a space of encounter between necropolitics, narco-trafficking, manufacturing, and frontier war on a world scale, Santa Teresa is nothing but “one of the many black holes of global capitalism into which entire populations disappear—often in horrifyingly literal ways” (Sauri, “Autonomy” 403). To explain this, I draw on “accumulation by dispossession,” a concept introduced by David Harvey in *Spaces of Global Capitalism* to explain the continuing process of primitive accumulation of previously noncommodified goods for the benefit of capitalism, and to analyze the violent conversion of spaces and communities largely forgotten by global capital into new sites of production and circulation.<sup>20</sup> This process is readily observable in Ciudad Juárez. After its conversion into a new export process zone in the nineties, it became ruthlessly industrialized, attracting thousands of women, especially poor, indigenous women from Southern Mexico and Central America, to the assembly plants that provide the raw materials for transnational corporations. Here, the women become objects of patriarchal and capitalist violence (Wright; Kopinak). This led to the social and ecological deterioration of the city, which became a “sacrificial zone,” or the object of profound resource extraction, as well as social and environmental violence, for the development of the global center.

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<sup>20</sup> Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession is informed by Neil Smith’s definition of space under capitalism as the result of uneven social and physical conditions of production.

Drawing on this spatial perspective, in the first part of this chapter I discuss *2666*'s inscription in both world literature and the world economy, while in the second part, I analyze the world ecological dimension of the novel by focusing on the processes of appropriation of bodies and nature that constitute the basis for the labor exploitation that we see in Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa. I support my analysis with different readings of the novel focusing on the tensions between metropolitan centers and peripheries that inform the plot, which puts into question the alleged cosmopolitan nature of *2666* as well as its inscription in the circuits of the international market as a global novel. Subsequently, this allows me to read *2666* rather as a literature of the un-world; that is, a novel of the damaged world of the periphery and of the "sacrificial zones" of the capitalist system where the destruction of the landscape and the work coincide with the destruction of the world itself (Andermann "Despajamiento"). I believe that this contradicts the discourse of world-literature as a field of production that transcends the conflicts between periphery and center, as well as between coloniality and modernity. This has been pointed out in relation to *2666* by Héctor Hoyos, who uses the novel to show the nonhuman components of the world through the abject dimension of the text: "World Literature has yet to assimilate how much of the world is not human; the abject, in its liminality, is a useful starting point" (*Things* 139). To explore this further, I focus mainly on the intersection between the murdered bodies of the working women of the maquiladora and the landscape of the desert, which produces a single space of degradation of the socioecological conditions, entering the realm of the abject and the unworldly. Finally, I analyze *2666*'s emphasis on the capacity of the murdered women to resist their total reduction to waste by the maquila

industry and patriarchal violence, and to engage in a form of postdeath political agency to denounce, reveal, and finally disrupt the necropolitics of the capitalist system.

### ***World Literature in the World System***

Bolaño's editorial and critical success after *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) is considered his point of conversion into a global author capable of speaking to a variety of publics from different nations, such as Mexico, Chile, or Spain, as well as non-Spanish-speaking readers in the United States, France, or China (Birns and de Castro 1). As Sarah Pollack has demonstrated, this success was also accompanied by Bolaño's commodification as a countercultural figure, which reproduced a sort of reductive image of Latin America as a revolutionary region. This vision certainly came to replace the similarly reductive translation of Latin America as an ontologically wonderful setting of magical realism that the global market had advanced in the past years through novels like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Castellanos Moya). In a similar vein, Hoyos claims that Bolaño's global inscription in the literary market is thanks to his capacity to thematize "the intensity of migration and cross-cultural flows that characterize our present" and at the same time continue "to be recognized as Latin American" (*Beyond Bolaño* 19). In his words, Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* is both "residual of the Cold War imagination and cognizant of [the] budding multipolarity" (19) of the present world. Reading *Los detectives salvajes* in connection with Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999), Hoyos goes on to argue that Bolaño also resingularizes literary work through a rhizomic understanding of literature on a world scale over a center-periphery logic, which coincides with Casanova's vision of world literature as a "market

where non-market values are traded within a non-economy, and measured by an aesthetic scale of time” (*Beyond Bolaño* 72).

With more than a thousand pages, and five segments addressing Santa Teresa’s social, political, economic, and ecological issues, Bolaño’s *2666* may indeed also be read as a total novel that, by focusing on one place on the periphery, can account for the flows of global capital, erasing the divisions of the world system in the literary space. The main case in point would be “La parte de los críticos,” in which four European critics—a Spaniard, a Frenchman, an Italian, and an Englishwoman—develop a friendship based on their common passion for German writer Benno von Arcimboldi. However, I believe that this part ironizes globalization in the most simplistic terms by focusing on connectivity and mobility privileges, as can be seen in the abundant modes of communication and transportation, such as emails, telephone calls, trains, cars, and airplanes, that mediate the dispersed relationship between the four critics. But as a result of their *global* condition, these critics cannot really grasp the economic, cultural, sexual, or racial differences of the global economy, producing a rather flat picture of the world from the center that contradicts directly with their critical thinking. The clash in London between Espinoza, Norton, and Pelletier, three of the critics, and a cab driver of Pakistani origin who calls Norton “puta,” offers an example of their rather ethnocentric views of cultural difference: “métete el islam por el culo, allí es donde debe estar, esta patada es por Salman Rushdie...esta patada es de parte de las feministas de París...esta patada es de parte de las feministas de Nueva York” (2004: 103).

In a similar way, when they see the devastating effects of the maquila industry in Santa Teresa, they cannot see the material conditions behind the pollution, the violence,

and the inequity, preferring instead to turn their back on reality and spend most of their time in the city reading or drinking. I argue that their incapacity to see the world as the setting for social struggles on a global scale may be a reflection of the structural contradiction between the different spaces and temporalities that coincide in Santa Teresa. Rather than showing the unmediated flows of global capital, *2666* thus shows the fractured social relations produced in the periphery by commodity production for world markets. Moreover, the novel is actually shaped by this discrepancy between our inability to see the structural contradictions behind the murder of hundreds of women and their spectral projection in the desert landscape, which emerges as a spatial metaphor for making visible the bodies of the victims but without inscribing them into the space of legality.

As I mentioned before, Santa Teresa is manifestly inspired by Ciudad Juárez in Northern Mexico. The city, globally associated with the most violent inconsistencies of late capitalism in the Third World, is considered the birthplace of Mexico's export-processing industries known as *maquiladoras*, which provide low-cost and high-quality labor-intensive manufacturing processes supported by a workforce fed by the constant inflow of migrant women from the Mexican interior and Central America (Wright; González Rodríguez, *Huesos*). Basically, *maquiladoras* are low-wage industries usually run by foreign companies that import raw materials to Mexico in order to transform them and re-export them, primarily to the US. In other words, their primary good is neither the production nor the product but cheap conditions of production: cheap labor, cheap energy, corporate control, environmental flexibility. They started in the 1960s to absorb the available labor force after the cancellation of the Bracero Program, but rapidly became a laboratory for neoliberal reforms, starting with the feminization of the labor force. After

the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and with the decline of the state's historical role as mediator between local and global capital, Ciudad Juárez suffered “a drastic round of privatization, deregulation, and land appropriation to remove barriers to transnational capital,” catalyzing “criminal and social violence alongside the rapid expansion of the shadow economy in narcotics, arms, and smuggling” (Deckard, “Roberto Bolaño” 354). This led to the intensification of the maquiladora labor strategy, which offered even lower wages for workers desperately looking to escape from the poverty and violence of the rural zones. The most violent consequence of NAFTA was thus the vulnerability and precariousness of women workers, who became the preferred object of systemic patriarchal violence, resulting in the femicides of as many as thousands of women, especially between 1993 and 2003, when the murders became an international humanitarian crisis.<sup>21</sup>

Reading *2666* as world literature, but from a political philosophy viewpoint, both Patrick Dove and Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott argue that the femicides of Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez illustrate the violent reduction of the workforce to bare life in late capitalism. Accordingly, the novel should be read as narrating the transition from the nation-state—and thus of sovereign power—to the state of exception that characterizes the co-constitution of global war and global capital in the present. In Mexico, in particular, this transition begins with the withering of the welfare state after the crisis of capital accumulation in the 60s and 70s, which led to the privatization of public institutions and

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<sup>21</sup> In addition, the worsening of illegal migration to the US turned the border with Mexico into a war zone crowded by border patrols, paramilitary forces, coyotes, smugglers, prisons, and refugees (Alonso Meneses 75-77). The State responded ineffectively to local and international demands for justice, exposing the corruption of the police force and the government, and actually contributed to the exacerbation of the crisis in 2006, when the government of Felipe Calderón sent over six thousand soldiers to Ciudad Juárez as part of a War on Drugs, leaving over 100,000 dead by 2012 (del Sarto 54-56).

the adoption of neoliberal measures that eventually resulted in considerable economic growth, but also caused a crisis of sovereign power that pushed significant segments of the territory and the population into a state of war. This is particularly true for Ciudad Juárez, which for Bolaño resembled “el espejo desasogado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (*Entre paréntesis* 339). According to Dove, by “libertad” Bolaño refers here “explicitly to neoliberal theory and its powerful identification of unregulated economic opportunity with freedom,” which can be defined, nevertheless, as the ideological legitimation of the violence of appropriating another’s labor without any restrictions. *Libertad*, in this sense, “is a euphemism for the reduction of the workforce to bare life” (141). For Bolaño, Ciudad Juárez thus shows the radical transition from nation-state, which provided some sort of juridical protection to the subject in the form of citizenship, to the generalized state of exception that characterizes the life of surplus populations in global capital.

The transition from nation-state to state of exception constitutes perhaps the unrecognized truth of our political times. *2666* emerges as a novel about this transition’s main consequence: the apparent redundancy of human beings for capital. That seems to be the meaning, in my opinion, behind one of the most quoted passages of the novel: “nadie presta atención a estos crímenes, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo” (439).<sup>22</sup> For Bolaño, a narrative aesthetic capable of addressing the “secret of the world,” even if that means exposing literature to the horror of the exceptionality of the law on a global

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<sup>22</sup> Villalobos-Ruminott claims that Santa Teresa’s capacity to reveal—partially, we might add—those secrets makes fiction a privileged way to grasp the exceptionality of political violence today, but at the price of desecrating literature altogether. For that reason, *2666* should be read beyond the modern articulation of world literature as a means to illustrate human societies (“A Kind of Hell” 194).

scale, has to comply with the formal demands of the total-novel. Bolaño explicitly advocates for such genre by claiming in an interview that in Latin America “el subdesarrollo no permite la literatura de género. El subdesarrollo sólo permite la obra mayor. La obra menor es, en el paisaje monótono y apocalíptico, un lujo inalcanzable” (Boullosa 106). *2666*, as a “major work,” indeed seeks to represent the totality of Santa Teresa’s social life and become, as one of the characters puts it, “un retrato del mundo industrial en el Tercer Mundo ... un *aide mémoire* de la situación actual de México, una panorámica de la frontera, un relato policial de primera magnitud, joder” (373). This aspiration to totality implies, however, accounting for the contradictions, rather than merely the flows, of global capital. Thus, as Chucho Flores, a mediocre journalist from Santa Teresa, puts it:

ésta es una ciudad completa, redonda ... Tenemos de todo. Fábricas, maquiladoras, un índice de desempleo muy bajo, uno de los más bajos de México, un cartel de cocaína, un flujo constante de trabajadores de otros pueblos, emigrantes centroamericanos, un proyecto urbano incapaz de soportar la tasa de crecimiento demográfico, tenemos dinero y también hay mucha pobreza, tenemos imaginación y burocracia, violencia y ganas de trabajar en paz. Sólo nos falta una cosa ... Tiempo, falta el jodido tiempo ... —“¿Tiempo para qué?, pensó Fate. ¿Tiempo para que esta mierda, a mitad de camino entre un cementerio y un basurero, se convierta en una especie de Detroit?” (362)

This passage shows that any understanding of totality that *2666* can provide must show the mutilated reality of capitalist modernity, where the parts of social totality not only do not coincide, but contradict each other in violent ways. The novel tends to use irrealist tropes



to represent the shattered social life of Santa Teresa without falling into the realism of mere denouncement. This is evident particularly in the second and third parts of the novel, where Amalfitano, an exiled Chilean professor of philosophy, and Fate, a black journalist from Detroit, fall respectively into an alienated reality, becoming more and more paranoid about their surroundings. This kind of representation conveys “the fractured social relations of reality in the semiperiphery” (Deckard, “Roberto Bolaño” 369), which cannot be narrated merely in a realistic way at the cost of otherwise reaffirming “the dominant ideologies” that the novel wants to expose and criticize. At the same time, *2666*’s emphasis on the realistic description of the femicides through morbid depiction of the murdered women’s bodies situates the novel in the tradition of what Deckard, drawing on the work of Jean and John Comaroff on “millennial capitalism,” calls “peripheral realism,” which refers to the narrative strategy of inscription of the real into the unreal that expresses the violence of the margins of the world economy (“Peripheral Realism”).

I believe that Deckard’s clever reading of Bolaño’s novel in terms of “peripheral realism” may lighten the actual implications of *2666*’s inscription into world literature. The raw narrative of the murders in the fourth part of the novel shows that, for Bolaño, a literary discourse about the radical violence in Latin America is impossible after the commodification of the novel by the Boom, and consequently the contemporary novel must openly display the contradiction between “its own commodity status and its aim to produce an ideologically distanced understanding of totality” (“Peripheral Realism” 372). Thus, Bolaño’s choice to narrate the murders in a way that could be shocking for the reader shows his own awareness of the novel’s commodity status within the literary market. In this regard, Emilio Sauri argues that *2666* provides “the literary with an unexpected political

valence in the form of an autonomy after the autonomy” (“Autonomy” 404), which is the autonomy resulting from a self-awareness of the novel as itself a commodity. This can be seen in the novel’s explicit emphasis on different intellectual viewpoints about the social crisis in Santa Teresa, which indicates the novel’s “acute awareness of the manner in which relations within world literary space reflect and often contest unevenly developed relations within the world-system” (399). This awareness opens the possibility of registering the contradictory nature of social relations on the periphery of the world economy, and thus the contradictions between the autonomy and heteronomy of the work of art in the peripheries of the World Republic of Letters. Sauri’s argument therefore contrasts sharply with Casanova’s conception of the “world literary space” as a “parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature” (Casanova “Literature” 72). In contrast, Sauri criticizes—via Ignacio Sánchez Prado—Casanova’s disregard of the persistence of colonial relations even after the constitution of an autonomous literary field in the periphery, and her lack of interest in the functioning of global capital on the borders of the world market, thus failing to provide a complete picture of the world literary space in relation to the world system, according to Sauri, “a relationship that seems crucial to our understanding of the novel today” (399).

### *Un-world-literature*

The inscription of *2666* as a world system novel in world literature allows us to understand that the crisis between the maquila industry and the female workforce in Santa Teresa takes place on a global scale, and thus the environmental consequences of such a

crisis go beyond the local ecologies of the border. In other words, the crisis between capital and labor in the periphery also enables a crisis between them and the ecological conditions of production on a world scale. This is consistent with the scale of the environmental crisis today, where issues like climate change or global warming exceed local, national, or even transnational political concern, to be geological in nature. In this way, I propose here to move from world economy to world ecology to understand the novel's conception of the social crisis in Santa Teresa as a process of global rearrangement of resource extraction. As a result of this, *2666* becomes, in addition to a world system novel, a world ecology novel that captures the voices of the damaged world of the periphery—a novel, then, of the un-world. Here I draw on the notion of *in-mundo* proposed by Jens Andermann to name not just the breakdown of the landscape into zones of extraction, but also “la confluencia apenas negativa de singularidades absolutamente insuturables ...: muñones de sobre-vida impedidos existencialmente de crear ‘mundo’” (4). In other words, in *2666* we are not only faced with the violence of labor exploitation and resource extraction, but also of the appropriation of the ecological conditions that make life possible, situating us, then, on the brink of the impossibility of recovering the world from the ruins. As a novel of the un-world, *2666* thus expresses the “crisis del lenguaje ... para hacerse entender y para reestablecer comunidad a partir de sentidos compartidos” (5).

From the beginning, the physical descriptions of Santa Teresa concentrate on two fundamental aspects as a result of the city's rapid economic development: the rampant urbanization and the degraded state of the environment. In other words, the explosion of maquiladoras, industrial parks, supermarkets, and real estate developments, on the one hand, and the overwhelming presence of slums, landfills, and wastelands where women's

bodies are regularly found, on the other. In the first part of the novel, for instance, the four European critics drive around Santa Teresa and offer us a long, comprehensive depiction of Santa Teresa's landscape, which is worth citing in its entirety:

En el norte encontraron fábricas y tinglados abandonados, y una calle llena de bares y tiendas de souvenirs y pequeños hoteles ... y en la periferia más barrios pobres ... y lotes baldíos en donde se alzaba de vez en cuando una escuela. En el sur descubrieron vías férreas y campos de fútbol para indigentes rodeados por chabolas, e incluso vieron un partido, sin bajar del coche, entre un equipo de agónicos y otro de hambrientos terminales, y dos carreteras que salían de la ciudad, y un barranco que se había transformado en un basurero, y barrios que crecían cojos o mancos o ciegos y de vez en cuando, a lo lejos, las estructuras de un depósito industrial, el horizonte de las maquiladoras.

La ciudad, como toda ciudad, era inagotable. Si uno seguía avanzando ... aparecían, como un reflejo de lo que sucedía en el oeste, los barrios miserables, que aquí se confundían con una orografía más accidentada: cerros, hondonadas, restos de antiguos ranchos, cauces de ríos secos (...) En la parte norte vieron una cerca que separaba a Estados Unidos de México y más allá de la cerca contemplaron, bajándose esta vez del coche, el desierto de Arizona. En la parte oeste rodearon un par de parques industriales que a su vez estaban siendo rodeados por barrios de chabolas. (170-71)

We find these kinds of descriptions throughout the whole novel: contradictory signs of massive economic development and profound socioenvironmental degradation at the same time. Santa Teresa appears as a city systematically appropriated by capital, which has

alienated the space, the social relations, and the environment. This generates a gloomy, disturbing, if not ominous, picture of the city. For example, in the eyes of the character Marco Antonio Guerra, a native of Santa Teresa, the presence of new housing developments generates the illusion of a place that moves unrestrained towards the future, but the fact is that the city does not have one (“Dicen que estas colonias son el futuro de la ciudad, dijo, pero yo creo más bien que esta pinche ciudad no tiene futuro” [274]). Indeed, the city is constantly compared to a garbage dump, a cemetery and even a postapocalyptic landscape. In the first part, for instance, the critics notice the persistent presence of vultures in “potreros yermos” that made the sky resemble a carnivorous flower. Amalfitano, in the second part, compares the University of Santa Teresa to a “cementerio que de improvisto se hubiera puesto vanamente a reflexionar” (239). In the third part, a TV report about the murder and disappearance of women in Santa Teresa displayed the landscapes of the city as the result of “fábricas de montaje” situated next to “depresiones del terreno, como cráteres de la Primera Guerra Mundial, que poco a poco se convertían en vertederos” (328). In the same vein, Albert Kessler, a private investigator hired by the Santa Teresa police to investigate the crimes in the fourth part, while exploring the hazardous surroundings of the city, filled with garbage dumps and wastelands, described the area as if “hubiera caído una bomba atómica y nadie se hubiera dado cuenta” (753).

This postapocalyptic picture of Santa Teresa coincides to a great extent with that of Ciudad Juárez, which was described by Eduardo Galeano as a gas chamber (“Afterword” 121). As Charles Bowden has shown in his abundant journalism on Ciudad Juárez, after NAFTA, the city was transformed into a laboratory of global capital where we can see the same socioecological issues affecting the fictional Santa Teresa: a flourishing maquila

industry escorted by social and environmental violence. Bowden frames Santa Teresa's social and environmental issues within the necropolitics of commodity production, which produces wealth by destroying local communities and their living conditions. In other words, the devastating effects of the maquila industry are visible not only in the workforce of Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa, but also in the urban landscape, and especially in the desert, which emerges as the repository of both human and nonhuman waste from the production process. *2666* conveys this transformation of people into waste and space into landfill through "el Chile," a clandestine dumping site where the bodies of the murdered women are usually thrown:

El basurero no tiene nombre oficial, porque es clandestino, pero sí tiene nombre popular: se llama El Chile. Durante el día no se ve un alma por El Chile ni por los baldíos aledaños que el basurero no tardará en engullir. Por la noche aparecen los que no tienen nada o menos que nada. En México DF los llaman teporochos, pero un teporocho es un señorito vividor, un cínico reflexivo y humorista, comparado con los seres humanos que pululan solitarios o en pareja por El Chile. No son muchos. Hablan una jerga difícil de entender. La policía preparó una redada la noche siguiente al hallazgo del cadáver de Emilia Mena Mena y sólo pudo detener a tres niños que rebuscaban cartones en la basura. Los habitantes nocturnos de El Chile son escasos. Su esperanza de vida, breve. Mueren a lo sumo a los siete meses de transitar por el basurero. Sus hábitos alimenticios y su vida sexual son un misterio. Es probable que hayan olvidado comer y coger. O que la comida y el sexo para ellos ya sea otra cosa, inalcanzable, inexpresable, algo que queda fuera de la acción y la verbalización. Todos, sin excepción, están enfermos. Sacarle la ropa a

un cadáver de El Chile equivale a despellejarlo. La población permanece estable: nunca son menos de tres, nunca son más de veinte. (466-67)

The El Chile dumping site points out one of the fundamental issues of Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez: the surplus population. In different passages of the novel, but especially in the fourth part, we see how the city is a repository of people, especially indigenous and migrants without social security of any kind that come to work at the maquiladora. In his book *Huesos en el desierto* (2002; translated in 2012 as *The Femicide Machine*), one of the most detailed and lucid chronicles about the series of femicides that made Ciudad Juárez globally infamous at the turn of the century, the Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, who appears as a fictional character in *2666*, also relates the femicides to the surplus population resulting from the massive migration of women who go to work in the maquila. This industry produces commodities by exploiting and then discarding the labor force to the margins of society, where they are left exposed to the forces of the black market and organized crime—much like the inhabitants of El Chile. Accordingly, the femicides should be understood within this dark geography of capital, which in the case of Ciudad Juárez refers to the unregulated market of drugs, organs, pornography, sex, and even snuff movies.

Apart from the exploitation, González Rodríguez also mentions as one of the causes of workforce marginalization the corporatization of life in Ciudad Juárez, which prevents the formation of any strong social and political infrastructure that could sustain or protect the women of the maquiladoras, who cannot organize against the injustices of capital and are left completely vulnerable to the necropolitics of the black market. In this way, we see how the maquila intensifies the process of exploitation by cutting down the process of

social reproduction—the time and conditions for material replenishment of the workforce, reducing the reserve army of labour to a disposable waste. In the same vein, in her profoundly theorized ethnographic study, Melissa Wright describes that one of the ultimate myths of global capitalism is the “disposable Third World woman,” which refers to women who come to the maquila industry because their labor is particularly valuable to global firms that require dexterous, patient, and attentive workers, but over time they turn into a form of industrial waste, at which point they are discarded and replaced.

Bolaño’s *2666* approaches the femicides through this notion of disposability of the maquila workforce. The novel narrates how women often come alone from Central and Southern Mexico, or from countries like Guatemala and Honduras in Central America, to work at maquiladoras with corporate names like Key Corp, File-Sis, K&T, Nip-Mex, and Multizone-West<sup>4</sup>, only to be found dead later in the landfills, wastelands, and polluted streams next to the industrial parks: “Se encontró a una mujer muerta en un basurero situado entre la colonia Las Flores y el parque industrial General Sepúlveda ... En el basurero donde se encontró a la muerta no sólo se acumulaban los restos de los habitantes de las casuchas sino también los desperdicios de cada maquiladora” (449). While in some cases the narrator is able to identify the victims and their origins, in most cases the women remain nameless, which means that their bodies will be thrown into a mass grave: “No tenía papeles que facilitaran su identificación y nadie acudió a reclamar el cadáver, por lo que su cuerpo fue enterrado ... en la fosa común” (630-31). Bolaño demonstrates how the female worker is already wasted away while producing maximum value for the maquiladora, which later throws her body to the margins of society because they have no communities to go back to. In this way, *2666* seems to expose what Wright describes as



the twofold murder of the maquila working women, because a victim of femicide who is already wasted away by producing wealth is actually killed twice: first as a worker, then as a woman. This twofold murder resonates in Jason Moore's concept of the appropriation of unpaid labor, especially women's work, that is central to commodity production but occurs outside of it ("The Value" 251).

The working women's first death occurs when their body becomes just a tool of production, that is, dead labor in the manufacturing process. In other words, through the process of manufacturing and assembling parts, the maquiladoras convert the women workers into laboring bodies, built of assorted parts, which are expected to function as machines on the assembly line. These laboring bodies are always subjected to disassembly and reassembly, dislocation and relocation in other factories in the same ways as factories that can be quickly disassembled and reassembled in another location depending on production needs.<sup>23</sup> The second death, in turn, occurs when the women workers, once transformed into this dead laboring body, into a mechanical force of production, becomes the subject of patriarchal violence, at which point her body is actually killed and converted into waste in the landfill. In other words, the first death comes with labor exploitation, and the second one with the appropriation of her body and unpaid labor.

We could locate the intersection of both murders in the many cases of rape followed by murder that the novel includes without sparing the reader from the macabre details. In one particular passage, one of the detectives explains the different ways to rape a woman.

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<sup>23</sup> The documentary *Maquilapolis* (2010), based on the experiences of female workers in maquiladoras in Tijuana, shows this conjunction between manufacturing and mechanization of the female body through choreographies of the women workers that replicate the assembly line, projecting themselves onscreen as commodities and industrial machinery. Similarly, *2666* represents the embodiment of labor exploitation, the transformation of the body into a site of accumulation, through the lack of community ties, names, and origins of the women workers at the maquiladoras—a condition of surplus population that prepares them for the second death.

Many of the murdered women are raped through the two traditional conduits, others are raped through three, but others are raped through even more: ears, eyes, and even the navel (502). The disturbing vocabulary points out how the woman's body becomes this disposable manufactured object with holes to be filled with phallogentric contents—a sort of “body without organs” in the process of un-becoming, or becoming undone, like disassembled assemblages, at the intersections between patriarchy and capitalism (see Deleuze and Guattari).

As Rita Segato argues, rape is the ultimate expropriation of the victim's space-body, and in that sense emerges as a sovereign act: “un control legislador sobre un territorio y sobre el cuerpo del otro como anexo a ese territorio” (“La escritura” 20). Furthermore, the expropriation of territory and body shows how the violence of killing and raping in Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez is directly linked to labor exploitation and resource extraction. In this sense, the two deaths of the maquiladora working women represent the transformation of the female body into both dead labor and living power, which becomes not only a site of capital accumulation but a commodity itself that can be used for profit as well as for violence. This coincides with one of the features of gore capitalism, which according to Sayak Valencia characterizes the conversion of the commodification of labor into the commodification of death (16). As such, the murders of women in Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez are not just the result of the degradation, exhaustion, or discarding of the women—these are, in fact, conditions of their killing—but of their conversion into commodities, which reveals once again how necropolitics is nothing but the reverse of the biopolitical.

### *Seeing Beyond the Un-world*

The twofold death of the murdered women of the maquiladora industry transforms the landscapes of Santa Teresa into a world inhabited by the living dead. In fact, Santa Teresa can be taken as an iteration of the concentration camp; that is, the place identified by Giorgio Agamben as the quintessential form of the state of exception where the bodies are reduced to bare life and circulate as living dead among the others (95-97). As Camelia Raghinaru argues, Santa Teresa and the maquila industry in Bolaño's *2666* represent the extreme exceptionality of the law of neoliberalism, in which the workforce, and especially poor, indigenous women are stripped of citizenship, subjectivity, even bodily life, and thus "reduced to the bare life of their biological material nakedness" (157). In other words, "unworlded beings" (157) that are at the same time integral to capital accumulation. But the very reduction of the workforce to bare life, the living dead condition of the working women, opens up the possibility, in *2666*, of seeing them as beings from another dimension, which sheds lights on why Bolaño's novel blurs the distinction between the real and the unreal during the description of the murders, despite the cold forensic tone of the narrative.

The notion that Santa Teresa is located in another dimension and populated by the living dead repeats throughout the novel. This coincides with the view of the border as a purgatory for "lost souls in transition to the US," as José Revueltas noticed as early as 1943 in Nogales, Sonora (qtd. in Trujillo Muñoz 17). The idea of immigrants as lost souls is particularly significant in neoliberalism, which characterizes for the looming scarcity of work and the growing number of jobless people in pursuit of work. As Comaroff and Comaroff have explored in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, where the figure of

the alien zombie emerges as a way to articulate the crisis of labor in neoliberalism, immigrants are transformed more and more into wanderers “whose proper place is always elsewhere” (“Alien-Nation” 779-80). Instead of citizens of the world, they seem more like pariahs of the global order, treated as disposable subjects. Moreover, for the immigrants in search of labor, borders don’t represent geopolitical barriers, but frontiers between different spatiotemporal dimensions, even between life and death.

Bolaño’s *2666* describes in these very terms the migrant women who travel to work at the maquiladora and whose bodies are found in the landfills nearby: “Úrsula González Rojo, de veinte o veintiún años, sin familia, y aposentada, en los últimos tres años, en la ciudad de Zacatecas. Hacía tres días que había llegado a Santa Teresa cuando fue secuestrada y luego asesinada” (764-65). Many of the wandering women that migrate to Santa Teresa hope to find economic redemption, but during the process of achieving their goal, they become exploited as workforce and exposed to patriarchal violence as female. This converts the border between the US and Mexico into one of the hotspots of “millennial capitalism,” which Comaroff and Comaroff define “not just as capitalism at the millennium, but capitalism invested with salvific force; with intense faith in its capacity, if rightly harnessed, wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered” (“Alien-Nation” 785). It is precisely this seemingly salvific force of capitalism that makes the working women of the maquiladora like the living dead, zombies that transit from one place to another, from different social relations of production and reproduction, and from one world to another without control over their own body and soul.

The presence of the zombie goes beyond the immigrants and the working women in *2666*. After they arrive in Santa Teresa, the critics Amalfitano and Fate also become

sleepless wanderers and automata, relentlessly absorbed by television shows and their own paranoia. Similarly, in the fourth part, not just the factory workers but the detectives, journalists, and prisoners are all like living dead, unresponsive to the violent environment they live in. Furthermore, through dreams, evocations, and visions we see specters, vampires, mummies, and zombies appearing and fading in the different parts of the novel, usually linked to ruins, catacombs, abandoned buildings, and especially the barren landscape of the border. Drawing also on Comaroff and Comaroff's notion of millennial capitalism, Deckard identifies in these Gothic figures an archaic force in 2666 that breaks with reality to convey the fractured social relations of the periphery ("Peripheral Realism". In other words, the alien, the zombie, the vampire and other figures of supernaturalism are "vectors of affective engagement," as Comaroff and Comaroff ("Alien-Nation" 796) put it, historically linked to the abrupt transformation of traditional relations of production and reproduction, particularly to the brutal conditions of exploitation in "the factory, the plantation, the market, the mine" (796). In neoliberalism, specifically, the zombie represents "the ultimate nonstandard worker" and "the loss of control over the terms in which people alienate their labor power" (798). Consequently, we should think of the novel's postapocalyptic nature as conveying both the human and environmental costs of intensified capitalist production on the border between Mexico and the US, which should also be understood as a threshold between the periphery and the center, and as a twilight zone between life and death.

I propose, then, that the figure of the living dead can be read as a means to express the afterlives of the murdered women, their capacity to continue living after death, not as workforce anymore, or as citizens, subjects, nor even as bodies, but as mirages with

religious connotations. Bolaño hints at this in the descriptions of the murders. In the first murder of the book, for instance, the police find two women “con la cabeza cubierta, arrodilladas entre la maleza, rezando. ... Delante de ellas yacía el cadáver.” One of the policemen asks them if they know the dead woman: “No, señor ... Nunca la habíamos visto. Esta criatura no es de aquí” (443). Later, an unnamed girl is violently murdered after being mutilated and raped, so her body remains unclaimed. She has no family or identity, “como si la niña hubiera llegado sola a Santa Teresa y hubiera vivido allí de forma invisible hasta que el asesino o los asesinos se fijaron en ella y la mataron” (584). At some point the narrator inquires with a theological tone: “¿Qué hacía allí? ¿Cómo había llegado allí?” (584). The same inquiry appears in other parts of the novel, but the answer is inconclusive: “Eso no está nada claro. Desaparecen. Se evaporan en el aire, visto y no visto. Y al cabo de un tiempo aparecen sus cuerpos en el desierto” (363).

Bolaño’s telling of the murders is overwhelmingly detailed, forensic, and terrestrial, but this kind of language also transforms the death of the women into an otherworldly event. In other words, the unknown origins of the murdered women, their invisibility and sudden visibility, apart from evidencing the wandering path of the immigrant in pursuit of work and redemption, conveys a sort of extraterrestrial origin that makes the murder of the women the result of a magical act. As a result, *2666* also expresses the impossibility of reducing these murdered women to the narratives of the police—*2666* largely narrates the failure of the police to solve the crimes and thus the failure of the detective genre—or the State, which has now been voided of sovereignty, which makes these victims of femicide beings from another dimension, and thus entities beyond the violence inflicted by the capitalist system on their bodies.

The resistance of the murdered women to dying or to being exhausted makes their death extraterrestrial but also makes the act of the murderer a futile act. Jean Copjec, analyzing torture in Pasolini's *Saló*, discovers how the tortured bodies, as they lose form, become more beautiful, preventing the torturer from finishing them off completely. Beauty empowers the victim, which resists torture beyond form: "The body of the victim ... resists through its lack of form" (206). For Copjec, this explains why there is no such thing as a "final solution" of the *other* in the concentration camp. The *other* always stands up against their death and thus against the murderers, if not as a body, then as a signature in the space. 2666 narrates the emergence of this signature of the body of the murdered working women; that is, what remains of them, the waste of the waste that is irreducible to commodification and the necropolitics of production.

Mark Anderson has posed a similar interpretation of the dead body in regards to the death of 43 students of the Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa, who were kidnapped by the police and then killed by an enforcer gang in Iguala, Guerrero in 2014. The massacre has been considered one of the worst in recent Mexican history and yet another proof of the Mexican State's lack of control over territory and security for the rural population. Anderson argues that during the process of commemoration and denunciation of the massacre, political agency is given only to the killer, "who is seen extracting sovereign power through the enactment of objectifying violence" over the victims, while the victims are "portrayed as an object entirely voided of any political agency of its own, silenced absolutely and definitively in the political event that is the killing itself" (218). However, the bodies of the deceased exhibit a reserve of power through their resistance to being monumentalized and fetishized, which are forms of commodification and inclusion in the

market and administrative spheres. In their silence and unproductiveness, the bodies of the victims become irreducible to capital: an antieconomy that counters the commodification of death in neoliberalism. Here Bolaño captures the same power contained in dead bodies that Patricio Guzmán underlines in *Nostalgia de la luz*, where the bones of the disappeared become the counterpoint to extractive capitalism and its economies of political violence. In the case of *2666*, the bodies of the femicide victims stand as residues that resist being completely exhausted thanks to the desert's capacity to store, to preserve, and to reinstate the signs of violence that guide the history of development in the periphery.

I believe that the irreducibility of the femicide victims is Bolaño's ultimate goal in *2666*. His novel seeks to imagine a form of life beyond death where the bodies of the women of the maquiladora, despite the violence of which they are victims, despite the multiple deaths to which they are subjected, stand beyond capitalism and thus are able, if not to stop, to interrupt the extractive process. After all, as one character claims in the novel, "Los jodidos asesinatos son como una huelga, amigo, una jodida huelga salvaje" (362). I connect this image of the "strike" with the desert as the space where the landscape form stops being landscape and becomes a sign of the ruins of capitalism, the moment when commodity production, circulation, and appropriation of new frontiers of extraction collapse onto themselves.

### ***Conclusions***

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how Bolaño's hypernovel *2666* shows the bodies of women as another site of extraction in the periphery where the resources extracted are their energy for commodity production, and their sexual identity in the black markets.



In this sense, the women of the maquiladora whose history of migration, labor, and violence is told in *2666*, become both precarious workforce as well as territory where transnational capital, with its arrangement of legal and illegal economies, inscribes itself as sovereign power by way of appropriating resources.

The integration of working women into global capital is a central economic and social process in neoliberal Latin America. This integration took place in Mexico in different ways and at different speeds, but the case of Ciudad Juárez stands as a unique experience of industrialization and equalization of the workforce on the border with the US, precisely where transnational capital coincides with narco-trafficking and patriarchal violence, among other monstrous arrangements.

*2666* explores the mutilated reality of the periphery during its conversion into a hotspot of production and circulation of commodities by positing itself as a global novel. The text discovers the Mexican periphery from the European centers, confronting intellectual and manual labor as well as liberal values with archaic forces that border on the supernatural. As a consequence, the novel's inscription in world literature, as the critics have highlighted, exposes the irreconcilable contradictions between center and peripheries in the world system, where the violence that shapes the production process on the border cannot be assimilated by the market. This also results in the desecration of the literary institution altogether.

This chapter shows how the process of integration of indigenous and rural women into the world system does not start with industrialization. It first requires the transformation of the labor force into surplus population by displacing rural communities, regarding these populations as disposable, and confronting them with forms of radical

violence. It requires, in other words, a process of primitive accumulation of territory and population where neocolonialism, transnational capital, and sexism organize to expand in the spaces left abandoned by the State. In this way, world system and world literature are put into question by emergent logics of power that dismantle the organization of the world in centers and peripheries, to create instead a monstrous picture of the world to come.

I believe that this monstrous picture is conveyed in the novel through the landscape of the desert as a repository of bodies and residues from the maquiladora. The desert of the border thus works not just as a setting for another history of exploitation, but as the space where all the residues from the manufacturing industry ultimately go, including the exhausted bodies of the working women. Through this conversion into waste, Bolaño exposes how the dead bodies of the working women become yet another frontier of commodification. This also shows the expansive force of extractive capitalism, which has the capacity to go beyond the literal extraction of resources to integrate other aspects of social and material life into the process of accumulation, including death. At the same time, I show how Bolaño, by combining the real with the unreal, the naturalistic with the supernatural, transforms the dead bodies of the working women into residues and landscapes themselves, giving them the chance to resist and to exist in nonhuman, even geological, time. As Andermann puts it, “el inmundo y sus voces en el desierto nos devuelven hoy a las zonas de exclusión/extracción donde ya tiene, incesantemente y de mil maneras, el evento del fin del mundo (pero no del ‘Mundo’) y donde, por ende, también se están forjando técnicas y lenguajes de sobre-vida” (5). Accordingly, the desecration of literature transcends the negativity of the content to stand as a residual form of expression.

By exposing the surplus lifetime of the surplus population in the landscape, *2666* attests to the afterlives of the victims of femicide, and thus the residual life of literary language.

**CHAPTER 3. SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE NECROPOLITICS OF  
AGRIBUSINESS IN LINA MERUANE’S *FRUTA PODRIDA* AND SAMANTA  
SCHWEBLIN’S *DISTANCIA DE RESCATE***

In “Toxic Discourse” (1998), ecocritic Lawrence Buell analyzes the fear of living in a poisoned world in contemporary American fiction. Examining the tropes of what he calls “toxic rhetoric,” Buell claims that books like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) convey the uncertainty and inability to calculate the consequences of scientific and technological alteration of everyday life in the industrialized world. At the time Buell wrote this essay, several toxic disasters had occurred—Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, Exxon Valdez—all of which contributed to the perception that we live in a world without refuge from toxic penetration. Buell argues that fiction illustrates the impossibility of escaping from toxic disaster by means of gothic narratives that express our uncertainty concerning the future. Along the same lines, Cynthia Deitering studies the role of toxic landscapes in contemporary fiction as a metaphor for the pollution of the natural world, contending that contamination transmogrifies one’s experience of the Earth by means of speculative, conspiracy, and gothic narratives. Focusing on novels like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), for example, Deitering claims there is a new “toxic consciousness” in fiction that reflects a fundamental shift to a culture defined by waste rather than production, and where we see ourselves as accomplices of the production of toxic ecosystems.

Whereas these essays and novels focus on nuclear disasters and chemical spills, one of the main sources of toxicity in the present does not come from alarming industrial

accidents, but from something as quotidian as food. Since the years of the Green Revolution, the automatization of productive processes, the genetic modification of seeds, the use of pesticides, and the corporatization of agricultural labor, which laid the groundwork for the globalization of food production, have transformed food into a commodity abounding in biological risks and sociopolitical conflicts (Kimura). In a nutshell, the globalization of food production means the commercialization of agricultural knowledge and the production of cash crops for world markets, a process that generates precarization of the labor process, food inequality and insecurity, and the deepening of the “metabolic rift” due to water and air pollution, degradation of soils, and the interruption of natural carbon cycles (Shiva, *Monocultures*; Petras et al.; McMichael). These consequences are particularly serious in Latin America, where the agribusiness model is provoking a crisis of the socioecological conditions of rural populations. This can be seen in the propagation of zones of sacrifice, water scarcity, and pesticide poisoning, together with the precarization of the lives of temporary workers, in the case of Chile, or the large displacement of peasants to poor urban areas, in the case of Argentina.<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze in comparative terms Lina Meruane’s *Fruta podrida* (2007) and Samanta Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate* (2014), two novels about women—and their children—immersed in fruit and soybean plantations on the rural peripheries of Chile and Argentina, respectively. I argue that, by focusing on the health risks associated with the use of pesticides, these novels expose how agribusiness interferes in social

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<sup>24</sup> In the case of Chile, a retrograde hacienda-based agriculture relying on bonded labor (*inquilinaje*) for the better part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which ended with the land reform of 1962-1973 (Salazar); in Argentina, a much more dynamic export-based agriculture, where we encounter a large agrarian social structure of large landowners and small- and midscale producers with great political power but highly dependent on State subsidies and foreign capital (Barsky and Gelman).

reproduction through immunization as well as poisoning of human bodies and food, which increases the levels of production while destroying human lives and the environment. First, I explore in the novels how agribusiness creates a regime of production of cheaper food through corporatization of labor, intense use of pesticides for immunization, and genetic modification of agricultural produce. This biopolitical regime of control of bodies and labor, even though it is designed to increase productivity, generates a parallel economy of death that puts at risk the conditions for the social reproduction of life. In other words, I contend that agribusiness, while it facilitates capitalism's ongoing profit-making despite the generalized precarization of life and the environment, also imposes a limit on capitalist profit by affecting primarily the bodies of women and children through poisonous food and polluted air and water. In Meruane's novel, this is evident in the correlation between the farming of transgenic fruit and the farming of children for the organ industry in the plantation, where *temporeras*, seasonal female workers, are not only disciplined through wages and violence to keep up with the demands of the global farm, but also biotechnologically coerced to do so. In the case of Schweblin's novel, in turn, agribusiness emerges as an unfathomable background that reveals the profound separation between human beings and food in current times, where the use of pesticides to preserve and improve the life of crops creates a chemical regime of living, damaging the ecological conditions of vulnerable subjects. At the same time, both novels reveal how the politics of care of the bourgeois family is perverted by the immunization regime of agribusiness, and thus becomes essentially insufficient to counteract the violence of capital.

### *Agribusiness and the Crisis of Social Reproduction*

*Fruta podrida* and *Distancia de rescate*, as I mentioned earlier, are two novels situated in the rural peripheries where the changes experienced in agricultural production as a result of the neoliberal economy are intensely felt. In the case of *Fruta podrida*, the novel shows the transformation of the rural economy into an export-based fruit agribusiness based on temporary labor, while *Distancia de rescate* illustrates the crisis precipitated by export-based soy agribusiness for oil and biodiesel over production of food for national consumption. For this reason, these two novels must be read within the recent shift to the rural in literary and cinematic production from both Chile and Argentina, particularly concerning the effects of the Global Farm on the life of local populations and the environment. Many of these novels, films, and poems have opened a new fictional discourse about the countryside, criticizing the national and patriarchal imaginaries traditionally linked to the representation of the rural interiors, which are presented, rather, as global spaces crowded with transgenic plantations and asymmetric relations of power between capital and people (Leone). Furthermore, these texts narrate the radical alteration of the social relations that organized the countryside by focusing on the experience of displacement, disruption, and pollution as a result of neoliberal agriculture. In this way, these texts reveal the biopolitical strategies of agribusiness for the production of food and the reproduction of precarious life through regimes of immunity and toxicity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, in *La luz mala dentro de mí* (Mariano Quirós, 2016), the countryside and the province are the stage of despicable masculine values, family disruption and animal cruelty rather than identity. In *El viento que arrasa* (Selva Almada, 2012), the interior serves to confront two single fathers with their frustrated masculinities and their children with their solitude in a context of religious conservatism and precarious economies. *La inauguración* (María Inés Krimer, 2011) deals with women trafficked in a *pampa* filled with soybean plantations and containers as well as rural homelessness produced by precarious economies. In the book of poetry *Un pequeño mundo enfermo*, Cristián Molina (2014) focuses on the mutations and illnesses due to the use of pesticides and the decomposition of his family due to laboring on the soybean and cereals plantations. In the case of Samanta Schweblin, we see the conflict for reproduction in stories like “En la

The intervention of agribusiness in the process of production and reproduction enables an interpretation of Meruane's and Schweblin's novels in terms of the theory of social reproduction—broadly understood as the conditions of reproduction of the labor force. This is particularly important in the case of plantation capitalism, which was conceived as both a mode of production and reproduction that molds not only labor relations, but also the domestic sphere where the reproduction of the workforce takes place. In neoliberalism, of course, we find a different model of exploitation based on the privatization of health and the outsourcing of the tasks of care and reproduction to impoverished and gendered communities, but this has similar results in terms of providing permanent reserves of labor for low-wage commodity production. Rather than the State or the family, it is therefore the market which now negotiates the conditions involved in the production and maintenance of people, which results in the work of social reproduction being unequally redistributed (Arat-Koç 2006).

According to Nancy Fraser, in neoliberalism, social reproduction functions according to global financial capital, which

has relocated manufacturing to low-wage regions, recruited women into the paid workforce, and promoted state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare. Externalizing carework onto families and communities, it has simultaneously diminished their capacity to perform it. The result, amid rising inequality, is a dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot. (104)

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pampa” and “Conservas” as well as in the novel *Distancia de rescate*.



The result of the privatization of carework, to put it in another way, generates a crisis in social reproduction in terms of preventing workers from reproducing in sustainable conditions, which forces them to enter into debt relations with the financial system, or to migrate and be displaced to the black market. This is readily observed in the fruit industry in Chile, which has been analyzed as a “semi-feudal” regime that relies on debt relations in order to have “continuous access to a reserve army of cheap labour” (Murray 652). This view confirms the fact that rural-extractive economies in Latin America, from the colonial *encomienda* to the rubber boom, always heavily relied on debt peonage and other forms of “primitive accumulation” to coerce people into labor.

At the same time, the emphasis on social reproduction in this chapter aims to restore the importance of examining the relations of women’s exploitation to understand how the institutions of power in a capitalist society control their bodies and their sexuality as conditions to appropriate the product of their labor. By analyzing *Fruta podrida* and *Distancia de rescate* in terms of social reproduction, my goal is thus to see the intersections between the biopolitical regulation of life and the commodification of the tasks of care and biological reproduction in neoliberalism. This is not to say that social reproduction is only located in women, even if the main characters of both novels are female, but that the strategy of letting live of the biopolitical regime for productivity, which always relates to the sovereign right to kill, and which continues through new forms of corporate and state violence in agribusiness, is fundamentally attached to processes of accumulation and dispossession of women’s labor. In this way, my focus on social reproduction seeks to expose, as the work of feminist Marxism has been doing since the 1960s, the forms of work that are unrecognized or disavowed by capital, which only recognizes certain sites of

production, such as the factory, as valid sites of value, depreciating women's labor. Concomitant to this goal is to disclose the "technologies involved in the production of gendered subjects, sexed bodies, and in the regulation of sexuality" (Katsarova), and how these are related to the extractive process.

Social reproduction, as I mentioned earlier, is understood in the encompassing sense of the conditions for the reproduction of the labor force. Therefore, I consider socioecological conditions such as housing, health care, clean water, and even affect as crucial aspects of social reproduction, which happens primarily in the body as the site of biological reproduction, sexual regulation, and accumulation. The contradictions between food and health in *Fruta podrida* and *Distancia de rescate*, in this sense, allow me to analyze the effects of agribusiness, one of the integral economic areas of neoliberalism, in women's bodies in terms of both labor and sexual exploitation, and to explore the role of global capital trading in the commodification of biological processes, including reproductive labor. The reason for such emphasis on global trade is that the state, the school, the factory, the family, and the hospital are institutions that appear in both novels as completely privatized, colonized, or even destroyed by capital, which leaves women subjected to the transnational powers and commercial chains based on international divisions of labor, and hierarchies of nature, race, and gender.

In *Fruta podrida*, the contradictions between capital and social reproduction are readily observed in the privatization of reproductive labor by the "Hospital" of the town of El Ojo Seco, an urban-rural town completely organized around fruit production. This town could be taken as an example of Chile's integration into global capital since the 1970s as an important supplier of fresh, counter-seasonal fruit for the world-markets. In Meruane's

novel, the fruit is packed at the Galpón, a former factory of sockets where we can already see the major shift generated in Chile by neoliberalism from national industry to agroexport, and the destruction of national economies by global trade. In this new regime, women's labor is exploited without securing the conditions for social reproduction, leading the *temporeras* into indebtedness and precariousness (Tinsman). The novel complicates the issue of the *temporeras* by inserting a new type of industry in town: the farming of children for the international trade of organs and tissues. The Hospital hires the *temporeras* to produce the children, imitating the biological intervention for the production of cheaper fruit in the reproduction of cheaper children that can supply the demand for organs from the North. In this way, *Fruta podrida* also points to the transnational nature of carework in neoliberalism, and the importance of technology and science in the regulation of women's bodies and the process of accumulation.

In *Distancia de rescate*, we don't find the same representation of labor exploitation, or even a clear portrayal, as in Meruane's novel, of the workers of the soybean plantations. However, the novel aims at the center of debates on social reproduction by looking at the crisis of maternity in the context of the dissolution of the bourgeois family and the institution of the State within neoliberalism, which tends to privatize the tasks of reproduction and care to third-party services. Social reproduction—particularly care, mothering, and nurturing—is conceived in opposition to the sublime condition of reproduction, and in complete subordination to the institutional powers that regulate social reproduction for capital accumulation. These institutional powers are directly linked to agribusiness, which has converted Argentina into the capital of soybean plantations in South America, degrading the socioecological conditions of the countryside and producing

the massive displacement of people to the marginal areas of the main cities. *Distancia de rescate* explores this issue by narrating the separation between mother and son as a metaphor for the separation between people and nature, where production and reproduction have been appropriated and altered by capitalism and biotechnology. My analysis of these novels thus demonstrates how transgenic agro-capitalism seeks not only to intervene in nature through biotechnology, but also to reorganize the social reproduction of life in order to speculate on the future of the species, profiting even from the threat of toxic times to come.

***Of Fruits, Organs, and Sick Bodies: Lina Meruane's Fruta Podrida***

Lina Meruane's *Fruta podrida* tells the story of María and Zoila, two half-sisters who live in El Ojo Seco, a rural town harshly transformed by the farming of fruits and human organs for export to the North. After Zoila is diagnosed with a rare form of diabetes due to the high levels of sugar in the transgenic fruit produced at the Fruit Company that she consumes compulsively, her sister María gets a job at the Hospital of El Ojo Seco to produce children for the organ-transplant industry in order to pay for Zoila's treatment. María's constant pregnancies interfere with her work as a supervisor at the Fruit Company, where she neglects an invasion of fruit flies that destroys the crop and causes an economic crisis with international repercussions. Simultaneously, the rest of the *temporeras* initiate a strike, interrupting the farming of fruits as well as organs, and partaking in the struggle between capital accumulation and social reproduction. María is punished and sent to jail for her unforgivable damage to "the nation," which motivates Zoila to fly to the North to destroy the export system as revenge. While Zoila's plan proves to be impossible, it shows

that the novel is explicitly situated within a world-system perspective, where the difference between periphery and center is based on divisions of labor as well as of nature. Furthermore, the symbolic yet also material crossings between Zoila and the fruit, especially in relation to the negative effects of transgenic food on health, point to the downsides of agribusiness in the periphery as well as the capacity of waste, illness, and poison to become a strategy of resistance against plantation capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Fruta podrida* starts by exploring the creed of productivity and immunity represented by María, who is responsible for killing the pests that could damage the fruit “inflada con hormonas” that is harvested and exported to the North by the Fruit Company. María studied “agroquímica” so she can become pest supervisor, and perceives her body as a factory, “una máquina perfecta” (25) designed to work and produce fruit but not children. In fact, María is disgusted by “el rumor y la pestilencia a sudor y a sangre menstrual de las temporeras” (28) at the picking and packing sections of the plant. Her work is to administer “los químicos que aniquilarán las futuras y presentes plagas” to secure the production of better and more sterile fruit, eliminating “la fruta dañada, la fruta picada por los pájaros o mordida hasta el hueso por implacables gusanos.” She does her work with total dedication, always consulting the “manual de pesticidas” to certify that the system of production is working perfectly, immune from any disruptive element, especially the fruit fly that grows inside the seeds and threatens to contaminate the whole plantation. Thus, we find her working extra hours to make sure that “la cosecha estaba siendo despachada. Ya los zorzales espantados, y los guarenes. Ya los gusanos exterminados, las hormigas aturdidas” (13). More than a dedicated employee, she embodies what Foucault identified in his lessons on biopolitics as the *homo economicus*, or the conception of subject

itself as capital, which stands as a central strategy of neoliberalism. At the same time, the use of pesticides for the production/consumption of genetically modified food indicates a sort of biological internalization of the discipline of neoliberalism in María's body. In this fashion, *Fruta podrida* portrays the intersectionality of politics, economy, and biology that characterizes the ideology of neoliberalism in ways that also expose the necropolitical side of any biopolitical regime.

El Ojo Seco, the town where the novel takes place, also emerges as an example of the intersection between biology and politics for the process of production and reproduction. The city is depicted in the novel as a homogenous landscape of “hectáreas sembradas, segadas e inmunizadas contra la peste,” “viñas convertidas en sucesivos listones,” “fábricas e industrias ... modernos galpones y gigantescas tinajas metálicas donde lentamente fermenta el vino exportable” (25). In the center, we find the Fruit Company, where genetically manipulated fruit is disinfected of pests, picked up from the harvest, selected, and then packed by women for export to the North. Near the Fruit Company is the Hospital, a factory of organs and tissues that are also exported to the North for the transplant industry. These organs and tissues are harvested from the children produced by the *temporeras* of the fruit industry, who are hired by the Hospital to continually get pregnant and provide new children as raw materials. Hence, the novel explicitly links agribusiness and the Fruit Company with medicine and the Hospital. While the fruit is improved to last longer than it should, one of the Hospital's main purposes is to preserve life at all costs. In fact, the director of the hospital explains that “el cuerpo ni tiene por qué acabarse en estos tiempos de la reproducción biológica ... El cuerpo puede reciclarse.” Furthermore, in the laboratories of the Hospital there are “relucientes órganos

embotellados, tan perfectos que ... parecían frutos en conserva. Fruta perfecta como las que estaba produciendo cada temporera en el campo” (22-23). El Ojo Seco emerges, therefore, as a place entirely organized for the extraction of value, where nature and people are there to produce value, and the market ideology has penetrated even into the reproduction of human lives. Moreover, as some critics have noted, El Ojo Seco allegorically represents Chile’s transformation after the dictatorship into a highly organized and productive country, where the market, violently imposed and protected by the State, is able to pervert nutrition, health, and even reproduction for profit. In other words, El Ojo Seco summons Chile’s obsession with market success and political hygiene, especially in relation to the export economy of fruits that have been hyper-cleaned of undesirable elements that became a symbol of the country’s rapid integration with global capital (Friedman 545).

Despite the hegemony of this economic order that, through biotechnological intervention and political coercion, penetrates all spheres of life for the production and reproduction of value, *Fruta podrida* introduces different moments of disruption that reveal the self-destructive dimension of agroculturalism. These moments are expressed through María’s half-sister Zoila, a lazy worker at the fruit plant addicted to sugar who suffers from an immunological illness. She is described by her sister María as a “bad apple” that contaminates everything and has to be removed from the “perfect machine” of production before it spreads to the whole political and economic body. In fact, through her illness and careless behavior, Zoila “plants the seed” for a series of events that lead to the fruit fly invasion and the workers’ strike, which generate a major economic crisis in the national and international order.

The novel presents Zoila's addiction to sugar as an indication of the unproductive side of the biopolitics of neoliberalism, and to show how agribusiness, through the use of pesticides and genetically modified seeds, has negative effects too in terms of diseases and undesirable subjects. While María is focused on her task of disinfection to increase productivity at the fruit plant, Zoila lies at home, refusing to go to work, completely stoned by the ingestion of sweets. Instead of producing, the younger sister only consumes, unable to control her desire for sugar: "Mientras ella produce fruta perfecta allá en el campo yo produzco azúcar en mi cuerpo" (42). Her dependency on sugar highlights the stimulating property of this substance, as well as the relationship between consumption and addiction in late capitalism, where the desire for commodities is not just an expression of the religion for sensual appetites, as Marx understood commodity fetishism, but also a clinical condition: "mis neuronas piden desesperadamente azúcar, azúcar, una y muchas veces azúcar ... azúcar azúcar azúcar azúcar" (15). This is particularly symbolic in relation to sugar itself, a fundamental stimulant exported from the colonial peripheries to feed the workers from the North during the process of industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but which itself relied on enslaved labor.

Zoila's addiction is diagnosed by the Médico at the Hospital as an immunological disease affecting insulin production. However, such a diagnosis overlooks the effects of the high level of sugar and pesticides present in the fruit produced at the plant. In other words, the origin of the disease is not just internal, but the result of plantation capitalism itself, which structurally separates production from consumption and thus alienates food. The immunological dimension of Zoila's illness is therefore a metaphor for the internal perversion of the plantation, which commodifies food production and leaves the producer



only with the residues or, in the case of El Ojo Seco, just sugar to nourish and replenish. In this way, the novel presents a double alienation of the worker as both worker and consumer of genetically modified food. This double alienation is operated by equating Zoila's body with a fruit, that is, by fusing the biological body with the economic body, and is illustrated through Zoila's transformation into a round, fermenting fruit whose urine smells like "sidra," her veins are full of "sangre dulce," and her body releases "líquidos extraños"—a transformation that, in a way, reminds us of the indeterminacy of a woman's body during pregnancy and birth (Braidotti 1997).

The threat of subversion in the regime of accumulation posed by Zoila's ill body and decomposing language generates a severe reaction from the institutions of power. As Roberto Esposito (2004) claims in relation to the immunological dimension of the biopolitical regime, "lo que hoy asusta no es la contaminación en cuanto tal -se la considera inevitable desde hace tiempo, sino su ramificación descontrolada e incontenible por todos los ganglios productivos de la vida" (11). For this reason, María's immediate reaction after discovering Zoila's immunological disease, which means having "una enfermedad metida dentro de su propia casa," is to eradicate the illness by any means necessary. Unfortunately for María, Zoila's disease does not present "bacterias ... virus ... amebas ni menos hongos que pudieran ser rociados una noche desde el cielo, con avionetas." According to the Médico, the director of the Hospital that specializes in the farming of organs, in the case of Zoila's illness "el propio cuerpo se rebela contra sí, el cuerpo hace de sí su propio enemigo ... es como si ese sistema hubiera sufrido ... un golpe de Estado" (25). To reverse Zoila's illness and anomic behavior, the Médico prescribes a strong immunological treatment based on drugs and a strict diet, which María imposes through a rigid chain of command

(“una jerarquizada cadena de mando” [40]), organizing her sister’s nutrition, hiding fruits and cookies in the kitchen, even threatening her: “Como vuelva a robar comida de la cocina [te arranco los dientes].” In this sense, the novel explicitly connects María’s and the Medico’s reactions, who represent the ideology of neoliberalism in agribusiness and the health system respectively, to the doctrine of the internal enemy that served as the ideological platform for the imposition of neoliberal reforms during the dictatorship in Chile, pointing once again to the necropolitical side of the biopolitical regime.

### ***Women’s Work and Social Reproduction***

Apart from exploring the biopolitics and necropolitics of agribusiness and its various discontents, *Fruta podrida* explores the particular conditions of labor that enabled both production and reproduction to become radically alienated by market ideology. As I have already mentioned, the Hospital and the Fruit Company share similar procedures for commodity production. The women of El Ojo Seco work at the Fruit Plant as *temporeras*, picking, selecting, and packing transgenic fruit for export to the North. Simultaneously, the Hospital hires the *temporeras* to produce equally transgenic children—fed with hormones and supplements—to supply the demand for “órganos para trasplantes” from the North. The goal is for the *temporeras* to have children to sell to the medical industry (“tener hijos para extraer sus órganos, venderlos a la medicina”). The novel therefore combines the farming of fruit with the farming of children, and in so doing reduces food to agribusiness and motherhood to the production of raw materials. The amalgamation between biotechnology, politics, and economics for the production of better fruits and better bodies within a world-system perspective thus rests upon control of the female body and the

imposition of figures of production and reproduction on women from the periphery. In this way, *Fruta podrida* exposes the commodification of reproductive labor under capitalism, transforming social reproduction from an unrecognized condition of capitalist production into another way of extracting value on a global scale—and which itself illustrates how capital expands the frontier of extraction beyond raw materials to life itself.

The material contradictions generated by this perverse system of exploitation of women as workers, consumers, and mothers are evidenced in the novel through María, who becomes one of the “providers of children” to the Hospital to pay for Zoila’s treatment after she is diagnosed with this rare form of diabetes. María goes on to work in the three industries of El Ojo Seco by mothering, controlling the production of fruits, and providing organs for the international transplant trade. For María, the work of mothering is not terribly different from the work of producing fruit at the Company. Both, for instance, are seasonal jobs: “un trabajo transitorio, pensó, el trabajo de ser madre también debía serlo” (26). Furthermore, as the demand for organs grows, she sees it as an opportunity to earn more money for “sus riesgosos nueve meses de trabajo” (26) The issue is that the constant pregnancies interfere with María’s performance at the fruit plant, where she neglects the immunization of the harvest, opening the door to the outbreak of the fruit fly infestation. María realizes, in other words, that it is not physically possible to perform well in her job at the Fruit Company and at the same time take care of her sister: “lo que no calculé es que cuidar es un verbo elástico, una palabra de consecuencias impredecibles que superaba mis posibilidades” (27) This reveals how the fruit industry is not sufficient to protect the labor force, especially women whose bodies have been transformed into a site of accumulation.

Moreover, this exposes how the appropriation of both production and reproduction by neoliberalism can only bring about the collapse of the market itself at some point in history.

The major crisis caused by the hypercommodification of women comes with the fruit fly invasion, which occurs following the same pattern as Zoila's immunological disease: as an enemy created from without, but which emerges from within. In other words, a plague created by the external conditions represented by monocrop agribusiness and its regime of biological intervention and chemical immunization, on the one hand, and on the other, by the capacity of biological organisms to create new forms of life, even toxic ones, in unexpected, unpredictable ways. Indeed, *Ceratitis capitata*, the fruit fly, is an insect originally from Africa that has spread around the world, especially in export-oriented countries such as Chile, thanks to the circulation of fruit in the global markets. At the same time, this insect grows from inside the fruits: "Inserta sus larvas dentro de manzanas, ciruelas, uvas que la nutren ... pudriendo la fruta," "acelerando su oxidación y manchando la cáscara" (68). The consequences of the fruit fly scourge in El Ojo Seco are disastrous: "Hay campos enteros por el suelo. Esta es una emergencia que podría acabar con la [industria de la] fruta." As a response, María deploys a powerful chemical counterattack which consists of "pegajosas trampas con incentivos sexuales, la esterilización total de los machos ... poderosas mezclas del veneno almacenado en el subterráneo ... Regará el campo de pesticida, aniquilará a la mosca. A como dé lugar va a deshacerse de ella." However, her decision to use cyanide to kill the plague proves to be even more destructive as the fruit crops, now above the levels of cyanide allowed, is rejected by the world markets due to health concerns for the population, leading to the cancellation of all exports: "manzanas contaminadas con cianuro en los contenedores ... miles de cajas envenenadas

por ... un veneno que atenta contra la seguridad del mundo ... siembra el terror entre los ciudadanos ... y desesperación entre los exportadores” (105). In other words, the biopolitical regime of agribusiness, which intervenes in biological processes to secure commodity production, becomes the cause of poisoning the products of capitalism, which prefers once again to destroy its source of profits rather than pause its extractive drive.<sup>26</sup>

With the fruit fly, *Fruta podrida* introduces the issue of population by attributing the outbreak to *Drosophila melanogaster*, also known as the “vinager fly,” rather than *C. capitata*, which is the exact species of the *Tephritidae* family that can affect fruit plantations in this way. However erroneous, Meruane’s choice is meaningful because it shows how the regime of accumulation posed by agribusiness through biotechnology works on population, which is also the preferred realm of biopolitics. In fact, *D. melanogaster* is a species of fly that has been fundamental as a model organism for biological research in genetics, particularly for the development of transgenesis and the sequencing of DNA. As Michelle Murphy explains in *The Economization of Life*, *Drosophila* has been crucial for the economization of life, especially since Raymond Pearl’s experiments in the 1920s with fruit flies that led to his claims that populations grew in economic rather than biological terms. As a result of such experiments, reproduction is now conceived mostly in relation to capital, which is ultimately the motor for the “politics

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<sup>26</sup> The outbreak of the fruit fly infestation in the novel has historical as well as political resonances. As Mónica Barrientos details, a fruit fly invasion took place in Chile in 1989, when the export of Chilean grapes was stopped due to the presence of cyanide, leading to an economic breakdown. The military government accused the Communist Party of creating the “Plan Fruta” to cause instability during the political transition, terminating hundreds of workers from their jobs. Moreover, since 1995 Chile is the only country in the Americas to be declared “libre de mosca de la fruta (*Familia Tephritidae*) [*sic*],” which constitutes a “ventaja comparativa para la industria exportadora de productos hortofrutícolas frescos.” This “advantage,” however, suggests how nature and the social body are immunized and disciplined on the periphery to satisfy the demands of global capital for transgenic, always available food in the metropolitan centers.

of life” behind the genetic manipulation of seeds and other biochemical processes that seek to transform food, nature, and people into commodities on a planetary scale.

### ***The Resistance of Bacteria***

As the poisonousness of agribusiness, and thus the destructive nature of an economic model where social reproduction is commodified through a regime of chemical violence, is exposed, the *temporeras* collectively decide to strike at the Fruit Company after their wages are reduced in response to the crisis provoked by the fruit fly invasion. The *temporeras* use menstruation to disrupt the farming of children and to contaminate the production of fruit: “de golpe, todas juntas, misteriosamente sincronizadas por las hormonas [evacuando] la sangre que no paraba de correr entre sus piernas, todos esos fluidos saturados de bacterias que podían infectar el recinto.” Then they stop production altogether:

las temporeras ... dejaron de envasar mecánicamente la fruta en los cajones y empezaron a lanzarla como peñacos contra las ventanas ... saltaron sobre la cinta ... que les pagaran al menos el suelo mínimo, que les pusieran sillas porque tenían destrozadas las rodillas, que instalaran hélices en los techos para que de veras circulara la brisa de la patria” ... No sólo pedían sino que exigían, aseguraban que ganaban la mitad porque no eran hombres, porque eran jóvenes, porque estaban desesperadas. (90)

María is called in by the Company to be the “pesticida de la empresa” and implement radical measures to dismantle the *temporeras*’ strike by taking advantage of the fact that “las temporeras no estaban afiliadas, no tenían contrato,” and by making “ofertas individuales ... sin compromiso verdadero de parte de la Empresa ... que solo iban a

dividir las y a romper la huelga” (94). Given the *temporeras*’ resistance, however, the plant is taken by the military and the strike is smashed, replicating the authoritarian narrative of the dictatorship, and thus revealing how State violence is not a thing of the past, but a politics that continues through new forms of repression directly linked to market ideology.

In the last part of the novel, after María is taken to jail for contaminating the fruit and her incapacity to control the strike, Zoila decides to dismantle the system of exploitation, extraction, and export by travelling to the City of the North and infect, in a suicide mission, the centers of consumption of fruits and organs, thus becoming a terrorist in the name of the “Resistencia de las bacterias”. As Mary L. Friedman has noted, “what Zoila has resolved to attack is the healthcare industry, which she sees as an international for-profit enterprise akin to the fruit company, which trades in organs and, claiming to value life, treats bodies as collections of recyclable parts” (548). Moreover, Zoila’s journey has the specific goal of appropriating the bodies and wealth stolen from the women of the South and accumulated in the North. It is worth noting, in this sense, that the City of the North has been identified by Lina Meruane as New York, which suggests that the “bad apple” Zoila is seeking to infect the Big Apple as a center of consumption of food as well as of bodies from the Global South (González Torres).<sup>27</sup>

The fourth part of the novel is narrated almost entirely by Enfermera, a nurse of the Gran Hospital of the City of the North whose voice appears in italics. In the same way as

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<sup>27</sup> “La novela de la fruta podrida debía terminar, casi por lógica, en la Gran Manzana; la ciudad se cruzaba con los ejes de sentido que yo me proponía examinar. El tema de la novela es el de la producción capitalista, desaforada, implacable, y su objeto de deseo y de desesperación es la fruta —el deseo de producir fruta perfecta, exportable, vendible, el de producir cuerpos que se ajusten a normas estéticas y protocolos de pureza y sanidad, y a su vez la imposibilidad de detener los procesos de putrefacción, etc. En esa relación se cruzan el sur como espacio agrícola, del que se extrae históricamente la materia prima, ese sur sometido (a veces voluntariamente) a las normas impuestas por el capitalismo, y el norte vampiro que en este caso remite a Nueva York, a su voraz bolsa de comercio; su apelativo de ‘gran manzana’ cerraba la idea tanto en la novela como en la obra, la cerraba en un nudo terrible y perfecto” (González Torres).

María, she has been completely colonized by the discourse of productivity, including the social reproduction of life. She appears as another obedient, immunized body of production: “No puedo permitirme el lujo de enfermarme. Si contraigo una gripe me quedo sin sueldo: es así de fácil” (141). According to her, the attacks carried out by Zoila at the Hospital are “subversive acts” done by “una mujer cesante y resentida, una mujer improductiva además de frustada, una que no pudo ser madre, una abortista, una lesbiana radical disfrazada de un hombre, una feminista más que una terrorista” (157). Despite their differences, however, the Enfermera sympathizes with Zoila when the latter is forced to go to the hospital after her body begins to rot as a result of the diabetes, and for this reason the Enfermera will be questioned by the police as an accomplice in the attacks. In the last pages of the novel, as Zoila decomposes and the Enfermera fades, both become one single body and voice trying to resist the exploitation of women by lamenting and finally going completely silent. This is evident at the very end, when all the bodies disappear from the text and become just voices, or sonic symptoms of an alienating medical and agricultural regime: “Ay, dónde termina ese cuerpo, dónde está el punto final de esta mujer. Quizás ella o cualquiera por favor me lo diga, y quizás entonces pueda por fin callarme” (185). This suggests that Zoila has become the language of the novel itself, bringing the narrative mimesis of the text into collapse.

In conclusion, through the story of different women whose bodies become the object of brutal violence from a regime of food production that also seeks to colonize the reproduction of life, *Fruta podrida* makes clear that the major victims of the unjust deal of neoliberal agribusiness in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chile are the women, especially rural, poor, and indigenous women, who are forced to work for the fruit industry and even for the organ



industry in order to survive. In this way, *Fruta podrida* poses labor and pregnancy as both the condition of possibility of the regime of accumulation as well as its internal collapse. This is particularly noticeable in the novel's obsession with the capacity of language and the body to decay, to corrupt, to infect. The collapse of capitalism thus becomes something imaginable since the subsumption of nature by the capitalist economy is not necessarily able to capture life entirely. Life, as Murphy puts it, is always in excess of the "infrastructures of its management and valuation" (*Economization* 140-41). In other words, the politics of life and the economies of death promoted by the Fruit Plant and the Hospital proved to be ultimately mutually destructive. Biotechnology, then, constitutes merely a "horizon of expectation" that experiments with and intervenes in life but could never achieve full control. By juxtaposing the illnesses of the body with the plagues of fruit production, *Fruta podrida* shows that the commodification of both life and nature in neoliberalism transforms bodies and fruits into poisonous waste, but as waste, as illness, as poverty, as death, life remains elusive to the forms of control that economic science imposes upon it, and always finds a way to disrupt from within the process of accumulation.

***Distancia de rescate: Monster Children, Maternal Blindness, and Soybean Backgrounds***

Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* tells the story of Amanda, a woman lying deeply ill in a rural hospital after being poisoned by polluted water in the house she is renting in a small town surrounded by soybean fields near Buenos Aires. Amanda and her daughter Nina are in the countryside to spend the summer, however, the signals of pollution in the landscape and the strange behavior of their neighbors, Carla and her son David,

discourage them from staying. They hear about dead animals near the soy plantations and see how the local population struggle against chronic diseases provoked by the pesticides, especially children “extraños” and “deformes”, “sin pestañas, ni cejas”, with the skin “muy colorada, y escamosa” (108).

The novel unfolds through a febrile dialogue between the dying Amanda and David, Carla’s strange son who got poisoned by toxic water years before. The dialogue is guided through David’s voice, who relentlessly asks questions to Amanda to discover the origin of her illness, or as the child puts it, “el punto exacto en el que nacen los gusanos” (11). The dialogue leads to the narration of two different pasts: first, the recent past, when Amanda and her daughter Nina meet their neighbors Carla and David, and the moment when David, after getting seriously sick years back, was taken to “la mujer de la casa verde” (22), a witch who saved the child through a technique called “migration” consisting of transferring the spirit of the affected person to another body. Thus, we discover that when Amanda and Nina decide to leave the countryside a day ago, they fall fatally ill after getting wetted with contaminated water in the grass, and while Nina is saved thanks to another migration practiced by “la mujer de la casa verde”, Amanda inevitably dies without the chance to avoid the split of her daughter’s soul.

*Distancia de rescate* has been the object of a number of readings thanks to its unusual structure of a dialogue where neither the narrator nor the reader know with certainty what is happening in the novel. However, the critics coincide in the capacity of the novel to tackle on the unknown consequences of chemical pesticides and transgenic crops in our bodies. As Heffes puts it, the novel represents the large scale effects of global environmental changes in our life, concretely “la violencia ecológica y su incidencia

homicida sobre los cuerpos y las vidas de las personas en sus estrechas relaciones con el medio ambiente”. The novel portrays the profound transformation of the Argentinian countryside into a space of contagion as a result of the expansion of transgenic agro-capitalism, which imposes -through biotechnology- a politics of death over human life (Leone). Following Michelle Murphy (“Chemical”), one could say that *Distancia de rescate* depicts the emergence of a chemical regime of living in late capitalism, in which human and nonhuman organisms are progressively exposed to low-level accumulation of toxic synthetic chemicals. In this fashion, the novel uncovers the slow violence of transgenic agro-capitalism, focusing in subjects and spaces usually invisible in corporate media, such as children and women from small rural communities affected by the pesticides used in large scale monocrops.

The urgency to narrate the ecological violence of transgenic agro-capitalism is particularly crucial in Argentina, which after the neoliberal reforms of the 90s shifted to a corporate agricultural model based on large scale transgenic soy monocrops, using systematically toxic agrochemicals such as glyphosate to secure the production of soy. This type of pesticides is used to fumigate plantations through aerial spray, killing weeds and plant bugs but also contaminating air and water streams, threatening rainforest and wildlife, and producing adverse effects on humans such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, skin problems, increase risk of miscarriage, birth problems, or death by intoxication. Schweblin explores these toxic effects of the pesticides by portraying the case of two families, thus approaching the ecological crisis provoked by transgenic agro-capitalism in a more intimate way. This intimacy is explored through the concept of *distancia de rescate*, which is defined as the space/time relation to save our children from an imminent danger. Despite

Amanda's obsession with calculating such rescue distance to save her daughter of possible dangers, ironically in the moment of need she is incapable of seeing these dangers, leaving Nina fatally exposed to the pesticides. *Distancia de rescate* transforms both motherhood and the narration itself as spaces of crisis where it is impossible to either rescue our loved ones or stop the narrative to understand what is going on around us. In this way, the novel explores the industrial effects of toxic chemicals at a local, more human level, where knowledge and power to change or resist are both limited.

As we can see, *Distancia de rescate*, rather than "distancia", shows the *nearness* of the global ecological catastrophe in our daily life. Schweblin explores this moving towards a possible ecological catastrophe through the treatment of children as the first victims of the historical realization of the Anthropocene. "Bajo tierra", a short story by Schweblin, illustrate this play between the scales of global and local crisis that characterizes her narrative: "Supongo que cada padre por su cuenta había pensado alguna vez que algo malo podía pasarle a su hijo. Un chico trepado a un paredón puede caerse y abrirse la cabeza en un segundo. Puede ahogarse en el estanque jugando con otro a hundirse entre sí, puede atorársele en la garganta un carozo, una piedra, cualquier cosa, y morir ahí nomás. ¿Pero qué fatalidad podía borrarlos a todos de la tierra?" (*Pájaros* 105). In addition, Schweblin explores out the politics of health and care that could defy the inexorable pace of this catastrophe. This demonstrates the capacity of literature to disrupt the phenomenological distance of such concepts as Anthropocene, understood sometimes as a hyperobject, through the immediacy of the ecological effects in our bodies and the need to privilege human lives over crops.

One of the focuses of this section is to examine how the novel conveys the nearness of the global ecological catastrophe in our daily life through the effects of pesticides and transgenic monocrops on our bodies. This leads me to analyze, in the first part, how the novel questions ideal notions of motherhood and childhood that shape traditional family through the figure of the monster child, which makes manifest the terrible effects of agro-toxicity in the most vulnerable subjects but also produces fear in the people around. I argue that the novel promotes a politics of health in the context of ecological crisis that transcends standards of beauty and recognizes the need for social care beyond the model of the bourgeois family. In the final section, I contend that the novel uses literary language to complicate the process of awareness, revealing our incapacity to see not only the dangers in our surroundings, but also the socioecological conditions that produce such dangers. In other words, rather than making manifest the hidden causes of illness, *Distancia de rescate* explores our inability to see them. My final claim is that the novel purposefully fails to portray adequately the milieu in which the story takes place, rendering invisible the corporate model of agribusiness as well as the transformation of the Argentinian countryside into a space of horror.

### ***Monster Children and Maternal Fears***

“La primera vez que me lo dieron para sostenerlo me angustié muchísimo. Estaba convencida de que le faltaba un dedo” (16). These words, voiced by Carla about her son David, outlines the maternal fears that *Distancia de rescate* makes manifest. The primary fear is disability, giving birth to a deformed body, a monster: “hasta que no conté otra vez

los diez dedos de las manos no me convencí de que todo había salido bien” (16).<sup>28</sup> This conversion of the child into a monster will be more important after the *migration* practiced by the witch, but it is already visible in this lines how the newborn appears to the eyes of her mother as a disturbing object. In this sense, the novel expresses from the beginning the “dual and alien space” of maternity posed for Kristeva (1980) to describe how in human species motherhood does not appears just as a natural phenomenon, therefore never destined only to insure the reproduction of the species, but as a culturally produced discourse about the female body that places motherhood over subjectivity, denying women’s individuality and independence from their children. The fear of disability, in this regard, is not just about producing something abnormal, but also the fear of having to taking care of a dependent child, in other words, motherhood as a burden for the female subject.

Carla’s maternal fear of giving birth an abnormal body becomes real after David’s intoxication when she runs after a valuable stallion which escaped from the country house. She is at “rescue distance” from David but couldn’t stop him from drinking water from the same contaminated stream as the stallion. The animal gets deeply sick and dies, so when the first symptoms in David’s body appear, Carla decides to take him to *la mujer de la casa verde* to practice a “migration” of his infected soul in order to preserve the body. David recovers from the intoxication, but after this day he won’t be the same anymore. He behaves strangely, speaks as an adult, his eyes are constantly red, exhibits “manchas blancas” in the skin, and the animals that go near him die soon after. Carla comments to Amanda they day the meet, “este es mi nuevo David. Este monstruo” (34). He is David

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<sup>28</sup> In short stories “La estepa”, “Conservas”, and “Pájaros en la boca”, for instance, maternity also appears as alienating. Moreover, in the short story “La estepa”, we also see operating the trope of indistinction we see in *Distancia de rescate*. For example, the characters look for “aquello”, something indistinguishable from human or animal that moves around the bushes during night.

physically speaking, but his soul wanders looking for a new body to inhabit, infecting others in its path. Carla claims she does not feel safe around him anymore. He doesn't call her "mama", and she "has" to take care of him, but she does not feel love for him: "Era mío. Ahora ya no. [...] Ya no me pertenece" (15). Similarly, David's father rejects his child: "decía cosas feas sobre David. Que no le parecía un chico normal. Que tenerlo en la casa lo hacía sentir incómodo. No quería sentarse a la mesa con él" (80).

According to his mother, David's conversion into a monster is the result of the "migration" performed by *la mujer de la casa verde*, the local healer/witch who divides David's infected soul to preserve the good part and get rid of the bad part. The downside of the operation is that the bad part will migrate to another body, infecting it with the same poison. This is what happens to Nina, after she is poisoned by contaminated water and taken to same witch. The presence of this woman in a highly industrialized country represents a weird turn of the novel to express the perverted social relations of nature in a place where the soybean plantations are more important than human lives. The operation performed by the witch is not really a cure for the infected soul and body, but a way to preserve both lives in precarious conditions. In this way, *la mujer de la casa verde* reproduces the biopolitics of neoliberalism, which is always looking for ways to let live and to produce life even if this means to reduce life to bare life, but in a way that reminds the "baroque" productions of the neoliberalism "from below" described by Gago (*La razón neoliberal*).

As a result of the "migration", David becomes the monster that Carla describes. Such conversion into a monster child activates a gothic dimension of the novel, which follows the motif of the creature that turns against its creator, in this case, the child against

the mother. The gothic is defined in literary terms as a narrative of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy space, or a “sinister, grotesque, or claustrophobic atmosphere” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). As I explore below, in the case of *Distancia de rescate* the country appears precisely as a claustrophobic space that prevent the characters to see beyond the soybean crops that fill the space. Focusing on the child for now, the story of the of the creature that turns against its creator is linked to another classic example of a gothic novel: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Here the child appears as an uncanny entity, half-way between the animal and the human, that can be the object of infantilizing as well as of demonization from the parents (Eagleton, *On evil*). David in Schweblin's novel embodies such type of child in an extremely eerie manner. His words are mysterious and his behavior, strange. One night, for instance, David is locked by his parents in his room, but he manages to get out anyway. They find him in the stable, where all the horses are gone except a foal who lies ill. On another day, he mesmerizes a duck in the plantation until it dies, proceeding to bury the animal after. According to Carla, there are 28 animals buried in tombs dug by David in the garden. David draws pictures of this animals before they die, announcing the events of the future: “Acá estoy yo con los patos, el perro y los caballos, este es mi dibujo” (77). *Distancia de rescate* follows here horror films based on unnerving children as *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and particularly *Children of the Corn* (Fritz Kiersch, 1984), where a group of children kill all the adults of a town in Nebraska and establish a fundamentalist religious community that worships corn.

*Distancia de rescate* uses a variation of the motif of the child as a monster to explore a more intricate narrative the politics of motherhood and care in the context of neoliberal country. On the one hand, the novel exposes the fear of giving birth to deformed and



incapable bodies shifts to the fear of the unmanageable child that disturbs contemporary parenthood, and the angst provoked by the lack of access to medical care. On the other hand, it points at the social disruptions provoked by agribusiness in the country, where cash-crops colonize the space, the economy, and domestic life through commodification of labor and pollution of the environment. In this way, *Distancia de rescate* is an adaptation of the language of the Gothic to express the fears and perversities of neoliberal globalization. This literary device, named by Botting and Edwards as *globalgothic*, is an attempt to convey the “world changes that impinge diversely and relentlessly on different locales and peoples” (*Theorising globalgothic* 13). This new world order is “marked by new terrors that often take the shape of old Gothic tropes such as vampires, monsters, ghosts, witches, and zombies” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). In consequence, we should see the witch that practices the migration in David as a channel to express the perversion of the politics of care, the dismantle of public health, and the pollution of the environment in Argentina’s rural peripheries.

After the migration, and together with his conversion into a monster child, David emerges as an infecting soul that produces sickness and death around him. This is why Amanda is afraid that David’s infecting presence can turn Nina into a monster too. As the days go by, Amanda notices some symptoms: “Nina se mira las manos. – Me pican mucho, mami – dice – me arden” (79), she complains. Nina’s behavior also becomes strange. One night, for instance, she is found in the middle of the kitchen taking out cans of food from the cabinet. Amanda asks what she is doing, but she does not respond to her name. “No soy Nina”, she says, putting a can of green peas in front of her mom. “¿De dónde salió esa lata, Nina?”, but the girl responds: “Soy David” (55-56). In this passage, we see how the

second transmutation is taking place, as David gets into Nina's body. At the end of the novel, moreover, when Nina's father arrived to the countryside to take care of his daughter, David gets into the car, exhibiting the same posture, ways, and looks of Nina: "Entonces mi marido te ve. Estás sentado en el asiento trasero. [...] Erguido contra el asiento, lo mirás a los ojos, como rogándole. Veo a través de mi marido, veo en tus ojos esos otros ojos. El cinturón puesto, las piernas cruzadas sobre el asiento" (123). At this point, the "migration" of David's soul into Nina's body is complete, producing a sort of exchange of souls between the two children.

The uncanny dimension of the novel generated by the figure of the monster child and the infecting soul is enhanced by the disorientating effect of the dialogue between David and Amanda. The hallucinating conversation between both tells the same story of poisoning but from different angles and temporalities, puzzling the reader and creating a sense of suspense and confusion as the novel progresses. The reader does not know with certainty the difference between the present and the past, or who in reality David is, or whether the story actually took place. "Ni siquiera sé si esto realmente está sucediendo" (35), claims Amanda, whose body is febrile: "Me parece que tengo fiebre, ¿es por eso que todo es tan confuso?" (78). Moreover, Amanda emerges at the end of the novel as a corpse, so some of the events are actually voiced from the death. Despite the confusion, David tries to determine the moment of intoxication, making this the core of the dialogue. His infectious presence has the ability to cross the frontiers between reality and unreality, operating as the connecting voice of the narration. He appears as an adult, an analyst who knows how to read the symptoms and builds the history, determining what has value in the narration or, as he puts it, "el punto exacto en el que nacen los gusanos" (11). This "punto

exacto” is the exact moment when Amanda and Nina are infected by the contaminated water. Thus, thanks to David’s relentless questions to Amanda, we understand that before returning to Buenos Aires, they stop by to Carla’s house to say goodbye. They sit in the grass and both Nina and Amanda get wet with what they think is dew. “Esto es lo importante”, the child argues, pointing to a group of men unloading barrels from a truck nearby Carla’s house. “Algo se cae, algo plástico y pesado”, Amanda observes pushed by David. “Este es el momento”, he insists (63-64). David helps Amanda to understand that the dew came instead from the barrels of water mixed with pesticide for use in the soybean plantations that surround the town. “Esto es lo importante”, he repeats. Schweblin explores in this way the capacity of literature to examine “the effects of the spread of toxic chemicals at a global scale” while experimenting with the ways in which “persistent pollutants affect our perception of reality”.

As we can see, the chemically contaminated water is the constant source of intoxication in the novel. Carla complains on the water’s odd flavor to Amanda. The horse dies and David falls sick after drinking water from the contaminated stream. Amanda and Nina are intoxicated with water leaking from a broken barrel. The water is thus the vital element that transforms the atmosphere of the countryside into a tale of horror. As de Leone has put it, “en vez de resultar un espacio disponible para el ocio, el disfrute al aire libre o un punto de mira de un paisaje de horizonte sin fin”, the rural landscape “se convierte en un escenario posutópico (...) irrespirable (...) menos proclive a la producción y previsión de vida que al peligro, la contaminación y la muerte” (66). In this context, motherhood and the labor of care become increasingly difficult and dangerous, as the can of green peas that Nina –who is in process of hosting David’s soul- puts in front of her mother exemplifies:

“Es una lata de arvejas de una marca que no compro (...) un tipo de arveja mucho más duro, rústico y económico. Un producto que jamás elegiría para alimentar a mi familia” (55). This can of peas, without the alimentary standards to protect the family, demonstrates how the countryside infects the domestic space, shattering the maternal layers of care through class hierarchies based on dietary differences. Furthermore, motherhood is held responsible for eating toxically before giving birth to genetically ill children: “No todos sufrieron intoxicaciones. Algunos ya nacieron envenenados, por algo que sus madres aspiraron en el aire, por algo que comieron o tocaron” (104), or for the inability to take care of them: “Es difícil cuidar de nosotros en las casas, algunos padres ni siquiera saben cómo hacerlo” (107).

### ***Background and Insight***

As we can see from the first part of this analysis, Schweblin strips off the landscape of any idealistic content, uncovering the toxicity to which the bodies are exposed in this region. Rather than explain, however, the novel emphasizes the visual dimension of the monstrous children affected by toxic waste: “*Los ves por la calle, cuando aprendés a reconocerlos te sorprende la cantidad que hay*” (70, my italics). The encounter in a local store of Nina with Abigail, a girl of her own age born with deformity, shows how the novel emphasizes seeing as a form of awareness that language itself cannot produce: “renguea tanto que parece un mono [...] tiene una de las piernas muy corta, como si apenas se extendiera por debajo de la rodilla, pero aun así tuviera un pie. Cuando levanta la cabeza para *mirarnos vemos* la frente, una frente enorme que ocupa más de la mitad de la cabeza” (42). Amanda thinks that its fine that “Nina *vea esto* (...) está bien que *sepa* que no todos

nacemos iguales”. Seeing the *monstrosity* of these vulnerable others activates the etymological roots of the word *monster*, which comes from the Latin *mostrare*, meaning to show or to demonstrate (*mostrar* in Spanish) both in the sense of make visible as well as turn into spectacle. Following the same argument, Ana María Mutis (2019) claims that the monster in *Distancia de rescate* has the double function of showing and warning about hidden and invisible threats. To need to make visible the negative effects of agrotoxicity is particularly crucial in the context of agribusiness, which stands for the invisible threat it entails to the population through the use of unrecognizable components in food or pesticides that not only act on the crops, but also merge with the water and the air, impregnating the houses, the schools, the lives of people marginalized to sacrifice zones.<sup>29</sup>

The capacity of *Distancia de rescate* to expose how agrochemicals affect our daily life, especially the life of such vulnerable subjects as children and women from the rural peripheries, is perhaps one of the main merits of the novel. Indeed, for Óscar Pérez (2019) *Distancia de rescate*'s most notable achievement “is precisely its ability to translate the complexities of a poisoned world into the stories of two families affected by toxic chemicals; to take us (...) from the global scale of industrial and agricultural capitalist practices, to the human scale of sick bodies” (159). Pérez speaks of embodied cognition to highlight the physical experience of intoxication that *Distancia de rescate* conveys at the level of human scale, underscoring the chemical tragic consciousness represented by Amanda, who reaches an “exalted state” as a result of the “sudden and vicious chemical poisoning caused by toxic substances released into the environment” (150). In seeing

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<sup>29</sup> Natacha Pisarenko's impressive visual work *Potencial effects of agrochemicals in Argentina* (2013) underlines precisely the powerful dispersion of pesticides in the communities of the rural peripheries, using photography to show as well as warn about the negative effects of these agrochemicals.

“fever as awareness”, continues Pérez, the disorienting effect of the language of the novel generates an affective response in the reader, who can translate fiction to reality and become aware of the vulnerability of others through a somatic experience of reading.

In this section, however, I claim that along with focusing on what the novel successfully makes possible, that is, to reveal the agro-toxicity of the country through affect and infection, we need to focus also on what the novel still conceals from the eyes of the readers, because that can provide a way to understand how monocrop agribusiness has appropriated the country as a totality. As I will demonstrate, there are many instances in which the novel expresses an incapacity to see how the neoliberal works by avoiding to describe adequately the socioecological conditions where the events take place through ellipsis and interruption, pushing these conditions to a background of soybean fields in which human and non-human subjects are enclosed and threatened. The novel ends in fact with Nina’s father leaving town without being able to see “lo importante” –the infinite fields of soybean, the dry soil, the protests in the road, “la plaga a punto de irritarse” (124), but I contend that this as much a call to see more clearly the causes of the intoxication as to see how the co-productive relation between nature and people has been perverted by capitalism. In this way, apart from denouncing the fear and indifference to look at the toxic country, the novel hints at the commodification of food and the transformation of nature into a monstrous presence.

The novel avoids to directly convey the socioecological conditions of the story through the narrator-protagonist’s incapacity to see exactly what is going on in the soybean plantations that surround her. The few references to the soybean monocrops we find in the novel are always provided by characters encircled by the plantation: “Estamos en un campo

rodeado de sembrados” (70), says Carla to Amanda during their first encounter. Amanda tries to describe the landscape of the town, but she sees only “el campo se abre inmenso hacia los lados y que todo queda a kilómetros de distancia” (88). The background of the story is always the soybean fields, but these are always *there*, around the character’s bodies: “los lotes alargados se extienden hacia el fondo (...) casi todos con soja” (45). The limits of these fields are also indistinguishable: “se abren hacia atrás, indefinibles”. Similarly, when Amanda and Carla walk through the soy fields, they feel how “la soja se inclina ahora hacia nosotras” (84), as it were a carnivorous plant. The soybean fields resemble thus an independent world coming alive, extending “más allá de los primeros sembrados” (60), while the world of the characters appears enclosed by the plantations, without being able to access or escape them: “Frente a mí (...) el gran campo de soja recién cortada”, Carla observes during her visit to “la mujer de la casa verde” (31). In this way, the background expresses the inability of the novel to describe the field of production in contemporary agro-capitalism, where transgenic plants grow almost without the intervention of people. Humans, on the other hand, only feel the adverse effects of the crops: “la tierra que pisan, desde el camino de entrada hasta el riachuelo, está seca y dura” (122).

The novel’s abstract, if not vague description of the soybean fields reflects their incapability to ultimately see “the important” in the background. For this reason, the causes of intoxication are not mentioned explicitly in the novel. The word *glifosato* does not appear in the book. Instead, the characters look only for indexical elements: soy field monocrops, barrels that break, men that unload a truck, a hospital filled with children sick or dead as a result of the toxic waste. As I mentioned above, this is particularly recognizable in the last paragraph of the novel, when Nina and his father leave the rural town. Nina’s

father doesn't see "los campos de soja, los riachuelos entretejiendo las tierras secas, los kilómetros de campo abierto sin ganado, las villas y las fábricas. No repara que el tránsito está estancado, paralizado desde hace horas, humeando efervescente. No ve lo importante: el hilo finalmente suelto (...) la plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse" (124). The father's blindness offers one of the few distant views of the space where the novel takes place, showing essential aspects of a new phase in agro-capitalism in contemporary Argentina. Cattle have been replaced by soybean monocrops, leaving behind a dry, uniform space where the catastrophe – "la plaga inmóvil" (124)- is about to start. The reference to the 2008 lock-out -the roads blocked with barricades-, in turn, points at the shift in the relations of power in the countryside, where corporate agribusiness in alliance with old agrarian powers are able to question the sovereignty of the State.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, the novel tells even more when neither the subject nor the body can really describe the functioning of the system that supports the agribusiness, a system that actually depends on secrecy around the substances used to exterminate other forms of life for food production.<sup>31</sup>

The inability to see "lo importante", rather than being revealed at the end of the novel, remains thus symbolically locked. In this way, *Distancia de rescate* operates the same trope of Poe's purloined letter, where the letter is always in plain sight (for the reader who wants to see it), and remains invisible to the character –in this case, Amanda- suffering its lethal effect. The symbolic absence of "lo importante", the principle of signification, is also what makes possible the "migration" as a means to heal the children by dividing their

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<sup>30</sup> The 2008 lock-out organized by soybean and cereal exporters against the 125/2008 Resolution proposed by Cristina Fernández to tax exports according to their price in the international market, which apart from collect more when the prices were high, would lessen the impact on the internal prices.

<sup>31</sup> As Fernanda Sánchez argues in her remarkable *La Argentina fumigada*, "el sistema entero fue diseñado para el secreto. Para la opacidad. Para que termináramos como estamos hoy: comiendo sin saber" (8).



soul: the children are not actually cured, but they are turned into transgenic entities that are able to consume a poisonous food. “La mujer de la casa verde”, rather than an archaic force in the novel, is thus the force of a capitalist system that has transformed food and children into alien entities. I believe that this is the true meaning of *distance* in the text, which represents a space of crisis in both the connection between mother and child as well as in the narrative itself, which cannot access the hidden layer that constitutes the background of soybean fields –the layers of extractive capitalism and its consequences in the reproduction of life. These inaccessible layers refer not to the poison that originates the intoxication, which is at the surface of the narration, but to the role of biotechnology and agrochemicals in the process of production of transgenic food for the world market, which regulate which lives are preservable and which are just disposable. The lack of medical attention in a town where the cases of intoxication multiply illustrates such system of inclusion and exclusion operated by agribusiness in the novel, where the productivity and health of cultivable lands is directly proportional to the expendability of their inhabitants. The radical separation between commodified nature and people in the novel therefore conveys thus the spatial exclusion of human life in agribusiness, a surplus life abandoned to the effects of agrochemicals.

The separation between crops and people we see in *Distancia de rescate*, in ultimate terms, must be understood as a new dislocation generated by the metabolic rift between capital and nature. Nature appears as the result of biotechnological intervention, a monstrous creation expanding through cultivable as well as inhabitable lands, while people appear as disposable population, exposed to pesticides. In this way, that novel does advocate for “a continuity in the material world between human and nonhuman bodies”,

understanding nature as “a human-nonhuman assemblage of vibrant materiality that through collective action express their agency” (Pérez). At the same time, the intoxicating interactions between human and non-human entities, between people and agrochemicals, conveys the immunological and necropolitical drive that constitutes monocrop agribusiness. As Esposito puts it, the immunological politics that characterizes late capitalism entails a negative form of the community. *Distancia de rescate*, in this regard, utters the perverted co-production between the local communities and the neoliberalization of food production, generating in a poisonous body that remains outside of any form of ontological unity, almost like the abject child resulting from the alienated relation between nature and society.

### ***Conclusions***

*Fruta podrida* and *Distancia de rescate* are two ways of representing the alarming effects of the transgenic plantation –as the dominant form of agribusiness in contemporary times- on the body. They both focus on food –fruit or soybean- to emphasize the omnipresence of transgenic seeds or pesticides in our daily life as well as their deleterious impact on human relationships, especially at the level of the family. One common aspect of both novels is the incapacity of the characters, at least at some level, to recognize the dangers of the expanding transgenic plantations in the environment as well as to react to the growing dominance of agricultural corporations in our social life. Furthermore, the characters of both novels seem to be unconsciously part of a system of production and reproduction that discipline subjects within the normative of neoliberal economy. One possible explanation to this unawareness or incapability to realize and react can be found

in the vulnerability in which the characters live. In *Fruta podrida*, for instance, the two half-sisters depend absolutely on themselves and actually understand their familial relationship as a matter of debt and calculation rather than affection or cooperation. In *Distancia de rescate*, on the other hand, the characters are women and children exposed to the effect of the agrochemicals without any sort of protection from the community or social institutions. This reveals how the vulnerability of specific territories and populations is the condition of possibility of economic subjects irremediably exposed not only to agro-toxicity, but also to the global financial market and the speculative maneuvers of neoliberal state.

Another common aspect of both novels is that health institutions are in the business of the organ trade, as in Meruane's novel, or are openly insufficient to solve the health crisis in the case of Schweblin's novel. The inexistence of a social institution, including the family itself as a space of reproduction outside of capitalist relationships, designates a major issue in late capitalism, in which the political structure is invisible or absent and all the social relations are colonized by profit. The novels present this absence by exposing the technification of labor at the plantation, where the landowner has ceased to exist, yielding the power to the Ingeniero, in the case of Meruane's novel. Thus, apart from living in a world without a political structure that can secure social reproduction beyond capital, they are exposed to the adverse action of corporate power, which determines people's lives according to technical decisions made by technical employees. In this regard, *Fruta podrida* offers a different approach to the technification of labor as *Distancia de rescate*, in which the plantations grow almost without human intervention, becoming thus an indefinite background separated from society. In Meruane's novel, in turn, the *temporeras*,

the women workers that harvest, select, and pack the fruit for export to the world markets, they materialize in the narration, organizing and stopping even the fruit plant operations. Despite that the *temporeras* are quickly undermined by corporate antiunion practices and finally smashed by the military, they show the persistence of human labor, which has been only displaced by agribusiness to the background of the plantation. Meruane displays the ghostly presence of human labor in the food we consume and produce through bodily manifestations such as menstrual blood, urine or physical changes –something that Schweblin might be doing as well through the monstrous appearance of the children victims of agrochemicals. In this regard, the novels explicitly represent the social conditions of transgenic agro-capitalism through symptoms of decay, decomposition, vulnerability, and even death in the body instead of describing in detail the role of laborpower in agricultural corporations.

The narrative strategies of these two novels, which approach to agribusiness through symptoms in the body, that is, through what is ultimately abject in the social structure, make us wonder about what is left outside or remains ineffable in the narration. Thus, while I agree with the argument that *Distancia de rescate* is a metafictional reflection about “what is important in the narration that can provide thickness to a new rural narrative” (de Leone 63), I contend that the novel has to be framed in the opposite way by asking *literally* what is “disposable”, that is, what is it openly left out in the story. As Amanda affirms in her dialogue with David, the poison “Está en todas partes... Siempre estuvo el veneno” (116). This means that the story was always there. The author had to disorganize the chronological order to reveal the real causes of the symptoms. Schweblin operates in this way a deconstruction of the cause/effect logic, in which the effects of the

poisoning are felt by the subject before knowing the cause. In this way, symptomatic narratives and affective readings should reconstruct the real by revealing how capitalist modes production interferes with processes of social reproduction and ecological sustainability, rather than merely posing the fears of apocalyptic signals. In other words, I claim for a reading of these two novels that emphasizes the symptom and its indexical relations to biotechnology and agrochemicals in order to reveal the secret logic of agribusiness, which is no other than the secret of extractive capitalism in general.

**CHAPTER 4. SOLASTALGIA, THE PLANTATIONOCENE, AND THE  
RETURN OF NATURE IN JUAN CÁRDENAS'S *EL DIABLO DE LAS  
PROVINCIAS***

In *El diablo de las provincias* (2017), as well as in his previous *Los estratos* (2014), contemporary Colombian writer Juan Cárdenas focuses on displaced subjects or subjects in crisis who wander in the peripheries of the Cauca Valley and the Pacific Coast. In both novels, the characters initiate difficult journeys towards the rural and urban borders, attending to the twisted forms of globalization in the periphery, where colonial ruins coexist with industrial sites, slums, oil palm plantations, paramilitary groups, drug cartels, and born-again Christians. His novels thus attempt to reconstruct the conflicting modernization of the Cauca Valley in the neoliberal period, where economic development was based on an ecopolitical arrangement between the corporate–state–military apparatus and local communities to recognize and protect their identity and ecologies while promoting the expropriation of agricultural lands and the displacement of rural groups for extractive projects.

The collapse of the division between centers and peripheries in the Cauca Valley is also an important aspect in Cárdenas's fiction about this region. In his first novel, *Zumbido* (2010), for instance, a man in mourning after his sister's death tries to run away from a chaotic city without ever being able to leave it. Passing through endless suburbs, warehouses, and industrial ruins, he realizes that the countryside has become the outskirts of the city and vice versa, blurring the boundaries between the rural and the urban. At the same time, the persistent buzz (*zumbido*) of the jungle, which sometimes merges with the

noise of the city, represents a sort of exterior impossible to achieve but which stands, nonetheless, as an “outside” of the dominating urbanized landscape. The journey to the interior of the Southwest of Colombia is already a crucial component of his previous novel, *Los estratos*. The novel tells the story of a young, upper-class man with mental issues who sets out for the Pacific coast looking for the sitter who kidnapped him as a child. The journey makes him traverse the economic and racial strata of Colombian society from top to bottom, discovering how between his upper-class suburban house, the business park of his company and its adjacent slums, the coast’s postindustrial landscape, and the rural villages of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities located in the Pacific rainforest, there is a geographical continuum based on profound labor and racial divisions.

The collapse between city and countryside, which is also a major theme in *El diablo de las provincias*, is particularly significant in the case of the Cauca Valley and the Pacific Coast, which represent isolated areas between mountain chains and rainforests that were historically difficult to connect with global capital. This is one of the central topics of Jorge Isaacs’s *María* (1867), the canonical nineteenth-century novel set in the Cauca Valley around the 1840s, which, according to Ericka Beckman, rather than being just a romantic representation of the *hacienda* through the love story of two cousins who can’t be together due to physical distance, describes instead the difficult task of linking “remote locales such as the Cauca Valley to imperial centers of accumulation such as London” (727). Cárdenas’s novels, conversely, represent the culmination of the process of amalgamation between city and country that Isaacs first portrayed in *María*, and that Karl Marx called capitalism’s “annihilation of space by time” (538). At the same time, Cárdenas represents the profound contradictions of the Cauca Valley’s process of integration into

global capital, where racial and social hierarchies from colonial capitalism remain present, and even enhanced, in the neoliberal period—what Claudia Leal calls the “racialized landscapes” of the Colombian Southwest, which segregates indigenous, black, and “white” peoples according to divisions of labor determined by extractive economies with a critical impact on the environment.<sup>32</sup>

Cárdenas focuses on such racial and social structures of Colombian society, even though his writing style avoids any identification with conventional forms of realism. Instead, his novels are structured around nameless characters and landscapes that carry a heavy past of violence and head towards a catastrophic future controlled by social as well as geological forces. In this way, his texts simultaneously conceal and reveal the social reality of the Cauca Valley, combining fiction and essay, oral and written, and human and natural history in order to formally experiment with literary representation. Furthermore, his novels function as assemblages of human and nonhuman forces that overlap the social, the political, and the economic with the animal, the vegetable, and even the atmospheric. In *Los estratos*, for example, this is evident in the power of the weather over the mental state of the main character, who is confronted with his traumatic past—and thus the violent history of the Cauca Valley—in the midst of a heavy storm that produces floods and landslides on the peripheries of the city. In *El diablo de las provincias*, in turn, the main character’s gloomy mood is explicitly linked to the negative changes in the environment. In other words, Cárdenas’s novels articulate the personal with the environmental and even

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<sup>32</sup> In her fascinating study *Landscapes of Freedom* (2018), Leal defines the idea of “racialized landscapes” as the “production of rural and urban landscapes in an ideological context that tampered the principle of equality by legitimating black’s alleged inferiority” (15). Centering around the system of relations between the inter-Andean zone of the Cauca Valley and the Pacific Coast, Leal describes the division of labor between the *hacienda*, the forest, and the coast in terms of farming, extraction, and global exchange, as well as a racial segregation between whites and mestizos, indigenous and black people, respectively, claiming that these “spatial dimensions of the division of labor led to spatialized manifestations of racial prejudice” (15).



the geological to account for the forces that shape the social. For this reason, I contend that his narrative can be understood as an expression of what Kathryn Yusoff (2019), based on the work of Elizabeth Grosz, calls “geological realism,” which can be defined as a way of thinking about the intersection between the social and the geological and of addressing the power that derives from geological forces that exceed, but also build, the social field.

The material and symbolic relationships between the subject and the landscape are key to understanding the geological dimension of Cárdenas’s fiction. In *Los estratos*, for example, the landscape appears as a blurred continuum between the city and the jungle where the main character, a wealthy white *criollo*, becomes a radical other—native, black, dog, lizard, plant, flood, even mud. In *El diablo de las provincias*, the main character’s personal crisis is the reflection of a landscape drastically colonized by monocultures of African palm, which destroy the biodiversity and old natural sights. The landscape thus constitutes the main referent of a “geological writing,” as Cristina Rivera Garza (2019) affirms about his narrative. Focusing on the story “Cerro” included in Cárdenas’s recent volume of short stories, *Volver a comer del árbol de la ciencia* (2019), Rivera Garza affirms that the language used in this story articulates a “non-anthropocentric narrative” in which “the land also has the word”. In other words, the environment precedes and exceeds the characters in the story, connecting the human with the nonhuman.

The notions of geological realism and geological writing to interpret Cárdenas’s literary style are especially significant in a time when geomorphic agency is attributed to man, and the capitalist system, activating a geological subjectivity, is marked by tectonic movements, natural disasters, and new political-material configurations. In this vein, the novel *Los estratos* is perhaps the main example of his geological realism. As the title

indicates, the geological strata that divide the sedimentary rocks work as a metaphor of the main topic of the novel—the class and racial divisions of Colombian society in ecological terms. Moreover, the novel is structured in three parts that also refer to geological phenomena: “Falla,” “Sedimento,” and “Temblor,” which respectively point at the processes of fracture, erosion, sliding, and movement in the story and the different scales and durations of the language of the novel. It is thus constructed by means of a sedimentary writing, which unfolds according to tectonic movements and meteorological phenomena that remove the material and symbolic boundaries between the subject and the planet.

As we can see, Cárdenas’s writing draws on a very critical form of geological realism that aim to portray the social and racial structures of capitalism on the periphery, while simultaneously commenting on the negative impact of extractive projects on local ecologies, which actually transcends the local to be planetary in scope. In this way, his stories can also be understood as instances of a climate change poetics, which, according to Timothy Clark, is characterized as upscaling the personal and the social to the geological. I would like to use this framework provided by Cárdenas’s previous texts to analyze in detail *El diablo de las provincias*, a novel that explores not just the effects of climate change in our daily life, but also the causes of the ecological crisis we are living through at the present time.

### ***Solastalgia and the Plantationocene***

I want to situate *El diablo de las provincias* in the context of the return of plantation capitalism and the emergence of the Plantationocene in contemporary Colombia. However, I am not interested in analyzing just the continuity of the plantation as a mode of

production, or as a space where human beings and the environment are subjected to persistent social and environmental violence. My goal is also to translate some of the critical disruptions in the language of the novel caused by the global transformations of human and extra human natures in plantation capitalism, which I associate with the feelings of environmental distress known as solastalgia. In this way, we will be able to observe not just the return of the plantation as a return of the same, but also as the emergence of the new in the context of planetary destruction.

The concept of solastalgia was coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht et al. from the Latin Word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *algia* (pain, suffering, sickness) to refer to the “pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment.” This feeling of grief and estrangement creates a “new form of psychoterratic illness” (96) that is provoked by the degradation of local environments and the certainty that a loved place has irrevocably changed for the worse. Instead of feeling sadness over physical separation from one’s home, which is the cause of nostalgia, solastalgia points to landscape-sickness, or feeling homesick even when one is at home: “It is the ‘lived experience’ of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home’” (Albrecht 45).

The experience of solastalgia can also be associated with the difficulty of adapting to new environments or drastic changes in the environment. Solastalgia describes the grief caused by drastic environmental destruction associated with long histories of displacement

and injustice, as in indigenous communities that experience the loss of familiar landscapes and the loss of “their sense of place, their identity, their physical and mental health, and their general wellbeing” (Albrecht et al. 96). Furthermore, solastalgia is described as a “sense of powerlessness” to influence “the outcome of the change process even as they also have a great sense of the injustices being perpetrated against them” (Albrecht 44), particularly when corporate power is involved in the destruction of the environment. Solastalgia is not a universal feeling, however, and actually emerges according to the specific issues of endangerment, extinction, habitat loss, enclosure, and privatization that characterize the processes of accumulation by dispossession, particularly in the Global South (Richards 279). For this reason, solastalgia is directly connected to forms of environmental justice, and even if it does not encourage people to mobilize, it is an opportunity to organize against negative environmental change.

Solastalgia has also been linked to the sense of anxiety and mourning in the Anthropocene, or the geological epoch of our own making. Indeed, the “new abnormal” of the Anthropocene is “characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, chaos, relentless change, and deep distress caused by a changing climate, erratic weather, and species extinction” (276). In fact, as Andreas Malm indicates in *The Progress of This Storm*, the unpredictability of weather emerges as one of the main manifestations of climate change. Malm associates the unpredictability of the weather with storms and hurricanes such as Katrina, Sandy, and María, which ravaged the North Atlantic coasts and destroyed vast areas of the Caribbean and the United States. Furthermore, Malm argues that the constant threat of “bad weather” constitutes one of the central aspects of the “warming condition” of our historical present, which he defines as the moment when “our psychic experience,

our cultural responses, even our politics show signs of being sucked back by planetary forces” (33-34). In a similar vein, E. Ann Kaplan affirms that human culture is defined today by fear of a future marked by natural disasters. This is reflected in the vast number of narratives—particularly visual ones—about catastrophic scenarios that humanity is facing or will soon face. As a result, humanity lives in a “pre-traumatic” state, anxious and alert for an “uncertain future and an unreliable natural environment” (xix).

One of the main causes of solastalgia in Latin America is the overwhelming expansion of plantations of monocrops such as oil palm, soybean, eucalyptus, avocado, and berries, as well as illegal crops such as poppy and coca, which have huge negative effects on the environment, from loss of biodiversity, ecological complexity, and local ecological knowledge, to wildfires, droughts, and displacement of indigenous communities. The huge power accumulated by corporate agribusiness has resulted in these businesses’ explicit intervention in internal politics and territorial organization, as can be seen recently in the fishing industry’s influence on legislation in Chile—and which itself is an example of the expansion of plantation capitalism to the sea. All this points towards the fact that the Plantationocene is a palpable reality in Latin America. The notion of Plantationocene, rather than an iteration of the Anthropocene, seeks to criticize the generality and universality of the latter by focusing on the effects of extractivism, monocrop agribusiness, and coercive labor structures on a planetary scale. Moreover, the Plantationocene exposes how agribusiness, and capitalism in general, is always embedded in imperialist practices that operate processes of accumulation and dispossession. As Jean-Francois Bissonnette has put it, from a historical perspective the plantation “epitomizes, perhaps more than any other mass-scale environmental changes, the cold and often

dehumanizing logic of capital accumulation, and its corollary principles of securitization and mobility” (2). In this sense, the plantation, as a productive machine, tends to appropriate and organize more and more space, causing more and more people to experience solastalgia as a result of displacement from, or loss of, local habitat.

Not only Chile and Argentina, as I showed in Chapter 3, but also Colombia has been radically transformed by the expansion of monocrop agribusiness after the neoliberal adjustments initiated by the State in 1990 in a new context of low-intensity warfare supported by the United States through Plan Colombia, which resulted in a schizophrenic combination of extractive practices, paramilitary power, and conservationist policies. On the one hand, the reforms allowed the wide-ranging expansion of the agricultural and mining industries, particularly for the extraction of metal ore and the production of palm oil, with vast negative effects on the environment and the social structure (Lindsay-Poland; Osorio Pérez; Arboleda, *Spaces*). On the other hand, as Arturo Escobar has explained, the reforms were based on “discourses and strategies of biodiversity conservation” which “constitutes a novel internalization of production conditions,” but does not “take nature and places outside the dominant forms of the [capitalist] economy” (*Territories* 48). Accordingly, the Cauca and Pacific regions have been immersed since the beginning of the 21st century in a contradictory relationship between development and conservationism that has only facilitated the intervention of private capital and paramilitary forces, causing “merciless capitalist expansion, and massive displacement that has affected black and indigenous communities and the environment with particular virulence” (4).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For the cultural, economic and racial history of the Pacific South of Colombia, see Escobar (“Desplazamientos”; *Territories*) and Peter Wade. For the history of the armed conflict in Colombia, with emphasis on the South, see Carlos Rosero; Ulrich Oslender; Óscar Almarío.

The palm oil industry—paramilitaries and landowners often call it “the new sugar”—is a main case in point of the Plantationocene in Colombia. Colombia is currently the world's third largest producer of this type of palm and plans to have three million hectares cultivated by 2020. Palm oil is used in so many products, from food to cosmetics, biodiesel and pharmaceuticals, that our lives are irrecusably determined by this plant. As Michael Taussig (*Palma Africana*) puts it, human beings “are becoming palms” (1). Even though the planting of oil palm goes back to the first half of the century, when the United Fruit Company introduced the species in combination with banana plantations, the real expansion of oil palm plantations took place in the aftermath of the armed conflict. Thanks to the incentive and subsidy policies supported by the World Bank, the Pastrana and Uribe governments<sup>34</sup> consolidated mono-cropping as the agrarian axis of the national economy, emphasizing their apparent environmental benefits in the production of clean energy and conservation of local nature.<sup>35</sup> However, the expansion of the oil palm monocrop has implied catastrophic levels of dispossession of rural communities and their lands, as well as loss of vital natural resources such as rivers and forests that put native flora and fauna at risk, refuting the conservationist policies of the State. In fact, oil palm plantations were used as a “contention wall” for the guerrilla and as a front for drugs cartels. Moreover, the policies launched by the government promoting agribusiness generated a violent transition

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<sup>34</sup> The oil palm industry was particularly stimulated through government aid such as Agroingreso Seguro (AIS), a program of nonrefundable credits that has been widely questioned because the majority of beneficiaries are big landowners. Such a distribution of credits facilitates resources for oil palm plantation and industrialization.

<sup>35</sup> Originally, the monocrop plantation of edible crops such as oil palm, corn, soybeans, and sugarcane to make plant-based transportation fuels known as biofuels was considered ecologically sustainable, since they replace fossil fuels, “thereby cutting emissions of carbon dioxide, a major contributor to global warming” (Rogers 9). However, oil palm monocrops turned out to be equally destructive in other realms, for example, by consolidating the mass commodification of nature within global technocapitalist regimes, as well reducing biodiversity and destroying the habitat of endangered species. Moreover, the expansion of edible crops for biofuel has been a factor in the growing food crisis, confirming Anna Tsing’s description of plantation science as a “hegemonic, extinction-oriented creed” (19).

from traditional banana and sugar plantations to oil palm that led to unemployment and lack of food, forcing peasants to either integrate into the new plantation regime or to migrate. On the other hand, acts of land grabbing and displacement of people are usually executed by paramilitary groups funded by company owners by way of extortion (Osorio Pérez; Escobar, *El final*; Goebertus; Jaramillo et al.).

### ***The Return Home and Climate Change: El diablo de las provincias***

In *El diablo de las provincias*, a biologist returns to his hometown, a small, conservative town halfway between modernity and the colonial past located somewhere in the Cauca Valley, after fifteen years of studying the biology of the Andean bear in Europe. The biologist, who has divorced his wife and been expelled from the academic machine in neoliberal Europe, is skeptical at first of reconstructing his life in this city, but childhood memories of family trips to the countryside, in which he found his vocation as a naturalist, as well as reconnecting with landscapes, fruits, colors, sounds, and friends he believed forgotten or extinct, persuades him “to adapt” again to the conditions of the place he left so many years ago. After a more careful look, however, the biologist detects something strange in the landscape. Highways, supermarkets, shopping malls, and real estate developments are profoundly transforming the city and its surroundings, where large-scale agricultural, mining, and oil companies have been established. Furthermore, a Pentecostal church known as El Caballero de la Fe has infiltrated the politics, the economy, and almost every aspect of social life in town, spreading fanatical enthusiasm for progress and denial of climate change, whose effects are slowly becoming visible in the environment.



The first part of the novel is articulated around the tension between past reserves of nature in the process of disappearing and the new ecological and economic regime that reorganizes the whole territory for large-scale capitalist exploitation. One crucial example is the family farm outside the city, in which the biologist's uncle used to plant "papas, lulos, tomates, guayabos, guamos y varias especies de pasiflora [donde] llegaban bichos voladores, aves, insectos, murciélagos, colibríes y vencejos" (52). The biologist and his brother used to stare at this garden, stunned by the symphony of sounds, forms, and colors, while listening to their uncle's ideas about the mysteries of American nature. His uncle's farm, however, as with many others in the area, had been "colonized" by "nuevos bloques de vivienda social [que se alzaban] como cualquier otro monocultivo" (49). In other words, instead of landscape, the biologist experiences a process of "despaisamiento" of the environment. This concept, recovered by Jens Andermann from Bernardo Canal Feijoo's reflections on environmental degradation in northwestern Argentina during the 1930s and 40s, refers to the loss of national landscape as a result of the "inserción disfuncional, colonial-extractiva, de la frontera silvestre en la economía capitalista" (177). In *El diablo de las provincias*, examples of "despaisamiento" repeat throughout the novel, showing the loss of landscapes as a result of monocrop agribusiness, and thus leading to the alienation of the biologist from the home environment—alienation that is itself the result of capitalism's reorganization of the nature–society relationship in terms of profit.

The evidence of the environment's radical transformation induces a melancholic state in the biologist, who observes the loss of native species everywhere, like the *chontaduro*, an endemic type of peach palm that the plagues of the oil palm plantations are infecting, or the Andean bear itself, which is at risk of extinction due to deforestation. For

the biologist, those directly responsible are the oil palm plantations, which generate deforestation, soil desertification, and destruction of natural habitats. Furthermore, in one of his classes at the boarding school for girls where he found a job as a substitute teacher, he calls the human species “a plague” that is destroying the planet by ceaselessly extracting resources. The biologist, who returned to the city feeling like a stranger, thus feels even more alienated by the negative effects of the oil palm monocrops and the impossibility of stopping the deterioration of the environment, a feeling that can be better understood as *solastalgia*, or the anxiety and impotence generated by the withering of nature in our surroundings.

As the biologist becomes alienated from nature, he feels everything that happens around him is the result of a secret force impossible to reveal, “una trama secreta” that controls all the movements of nature but which “no podemos ver” (53). Furthermore, the biologist feels himself to be the object of a sort of conspiracy orchestrated by religious and economic powers, and executed by colleagues, friends, and family members, to find a way for him to contribute to the development of the oil palm industry. Although “al biólogo no le gustaban las teorías de la conspiración” because they were “poco elegantes, muy farragosas y, en últimas, destinadas a a favorecer explicaciones simplonas”, the biologist acknowledges that they could provide “esquemas de inteligibilidad en contextos donde lo irracional amenaza con desdibujarlo todo” (107). This viewpoint coincides with Fredric Jameson’s argument that despite the apparent senselessness of conspiracy theories, these allow us to map out the relationships between us and the global system, especially in a historical period in which the subject is incapable of understanding the discontinuous forces of capitalism (“Cognitive Mapping”). Moreover, as Ricardo Piglia contends in his

*Teoría del complot*, the conspiracy's narratives, thanks to their games with reality and fiction, allow us to visualize "las fuerzas oscuras (...) que construyen maquinaciones que definen el funcionamiento secreto de lo real" (Piglia5), but which the subject is unable to understand. In this regard, the biologist's suspicion of conspiracy allows us to distinguish the power relations in the oil palm industry that dominates the economy of the "ciudad-enana".

The spread of conservative ideas about progress and the effect of capitalism on the environment alerts the biologist to the political and economic force of the religious group known as El Caballero de la Fe. The biologist encounters such ideas, for instance, during a conversation with a powerful politician during a party, who mentions a report about the alleged discovery of a pyramid in the Antarctic as a result of the melting of polar ice ("una pirámide recién descubierta en la Antártida gracias al deshielo de los polos"). The biologist intervenes, saying that the important part of the report was not so much the discovery of the pyramid, but that the polar ice was melting due to climate change, to which the woman replied that "lo del cambio climático es pura historia ... terrorismo científico ... La obra de Dios es perfecta y el planeta tiene un termostato, que sabe cómo regular la temperatura" (69). Thus, what for the biologist is the effect of human action, for the woman is the expression of a divine intelligence. Along the same lines, during a class on evolution theory at the boarding school, a student asks the biologist "si Dios había hecho que cada animal y planta tuviera una tarea propia" (17). The biologist replies that there were things in evolution "que parecían contra toda razón, todo diseño" (17) and exemplifies with the avocado, a fruit that was originally food for a type of elephant from the Miocene known as "gonfotéridos." After the extinction of this species, the avocado remained thousands of

years without a function until humans turned it back into food: “La naturaleza no deja de inventar cosas, pero buena parte de lo que inventa es inútil durante milenios y no es raro que una adaptación se estropee,” (18) the biologist concludes. Despite the example given by the professor, however, the student answers that “Dios tiene un plan para todos ... también para el aguacate” (19). The student conveys, therefore, a religious view of nature that attributes evolution and climate change to an external will, which enables the justification of the uncontrolled exploitation of resources as an iteration of such will. However, rather than merely an expression of creationism, the student’s words may represent the alienation of human beings from nature and the natural world as a result of capitalist appropriation. The reference to the avocado, in this way, could not be more significant. This fruit, currently known in Latin America as “oro verde,” has become a large-scale export monocrop for world markets, and its effects on the environment are disastrous, as the community of Petorca, Chile can attest after years of experiencing systemic drought due to large avocado plantations. Thus, even though the transformation of the avocado from food to commodity is explained by the student as the result of a superior intelligence (“el monocultivo es la voluntad de Dios en la tierra”, 89) the truth is that it is the result of the systematic alienation of food and land that constitutes capitalist agriculture.

The biologist’s major moment of realization about the dark forces that control the economy of the “ciudad-enana” comes during a party in a hacienda famous from the time of the sugar plantations, which serves now as the setting for a soap opera about the history of slavery in the Cauca Valley. The biologist experiences the journey to the hacienda, which emerges as an overwhelming symbol of patriarchy and productivity, as a journey to

a parallel spatiotemporal dimension where there is no clear distinction between being asleep or awake, between the past and the present. During the party, the biologist is “ambushed” by a former girlfriend, who offers him a job at an oil palm company plagued by a red weevil infestation that was an “auténtico dolor de cabeza para la economía del sector agrícola” (85). The red weevil, a beetle originally from Asia whose larvae feed on the heart of the oil palm, was causing “pérdidas millonarias” to the oil palm industry. The method of capture consisted of putting “trampas con feromonas” to attract the weevil, but these had become ineffective as “las hembras estaban modulando las frecuencias químicas de sus llamadas sexuales” (85). The job of the biologist, who was an expert in Andean bear reproduction, would be to find a formula to turn the pheromones back into traps. “Te necesitamos como experto en bioquímica. No hay muchos por aquí, como te podrás imaginar” (86).

Although the biologist accepts the offer enthusiastically at first, the real purpose of the job is revealed to him in a dream the next day, in which the biologist follows two black men into the sugar plantations that surround the hacienda, where he gets lost. Inside the sugarcane plantation, the biologist realizes how human time, the time of history, is cancelled by “el tiempo inhumano de las plantas que desean prescindir de todas las demás plantas” (89). Moreover, the biologist realizes that monocrops such as sugarcane, bananas, oil palm, even the “nazi grass” (89; “el pasto nacional-socialista”), which humans have cultivated for centuries while conquering territories and enslaving other human beings, have actually been used to colonize every territory with the same kind of species and exterminate those who oppose to their expansion. Human beings, even “las corporaciones, que fingen actuar en nombre del capitalismo” in reality are “esclavos” of “las plantas del

fin de todos los tiempos ... para apoderarse del mundo” (90). In other words, by accepting the job at the oil palm company, the biologist will become just another agent in the service of the “plan maestro” of the monocrop “para dominar el mundo” (90).

This passage where the biologist seems to decipher the political, economic, and religious forces that control the town through the theory of a vegetal plot to take over the world is central to understanding how the novel represents the return of the plantation as a mode of production in contemporary monocrop agribusiness. The biologist becomes aware of the expansive tendencies of the monocrop inside the hacienda, which works as a gateway to the past where reality breaks and human time vanishes to set free the time of the monocrop. At the same time, the presence of black men in the sugarcane plantation reveals the structures of enslaved and racialized labor that constitute the power of the hacienda as a political and economic center in plantation capitalism, even if it is organized according to the corporate model of transgenic agriculture. In other words, the biologist visualizes the return of the plantation in agribusiness as a historical space of exploitation of human and nonhuman bodies through paranoid images of vegetal conspiracies and fundamentalist groups that disrupt the logic of reality inside. Cárdenas’s novel seems to reach a symbolic limit at this point that follows a similar pattern encountered by Sylvia Wynter in plantation societies, which live between the reality of the plot and the unreality of the plantation, transitioning time and time again from history to the fictions of capital. In other words, Cárdenas’s break with realism becomes a way to narrate the new arrangements of life and labor on the plantation, and to provide a better understanding of the profound crisis in the social relations of nature within contemporary agribusiness. Furthermore, disruptive images of reality can be understood as moments of intense realization of the ecological

imbalance caused by human intervention in the environment, which is itself the expression of a breakdown in the dominant order to maintain the ecological conditions for capitalist accumulation.

Now if the theory of a vegetal plot provides any form of clarity for understanding the fiction of capital of agribusiness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this can be only done by breaking with the anthropocentric gaze and revealing that nature is both internal and external to capitalist processes. This takes to a whole other level the idea, proposed by Jason W. Moore (*Capitalism*) and others, that capitalism is not just an economic system, but a way of organizing nature that changes according to constant crises of accumulation. Whereas for Moore the point is analyzing how nature is put to work by capital in different regimes of power, for Cárdenas it is to understand how humans can be instruments of the plantation. *El diablo de las provincias* explores, in this way, not only how human and extra human natures have become alienated by the plantation, but also how we ended up working for the monocrop, transforming ourselves into part of the agricultural infrastructure. In this regard, *El diablo de las provincias* attests not only to the return of the plantation, but also the return of capitalist nature as an active and conspiratorial reality.<sup>36</sup> The plot theory proposed by Cárdenas therefore puts into crisis the reductive view of nature as resources waiting to be exploited by human beings to fuel their fantasies of development and progress (Moore, *Capitalism*). In other words, by seeing plants as conspiratorial species, this allows

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<sup>36</sup> This inverts the notion, propagated since classical times by Plato and Aristotle, that plants are immobile and unintentional species located below the animal and the human in the order of nature. In fact, both Plato and Aristotle consider plants to be the lowest form of the soul due to their inability to move and reason. In the *Timaeus*, for example, Plato points out that plants are passive beings tied to a single space and whose ultimate function is to serve as food for animals and humans (Platón). In his treatise on the soul, on the other hand, Aristotle affirms that plants inhabit an intermediate zone between the animate and the inanimate and present the simplest forms of life (nutrition, growth, reproduction), while animals possess movement and humans reasoning. This situates plants in the lowest place in the hierarchy of souls (Aristóteles).

us to open up a non-anthropocentric perspective on the world and, at the same time, to dismantle some fundamental categories of our problematic relationship with nature in the capitalist system.

### *Conclusions*

In the last part of the novel, the biologist finds himself in the predicament of choosing whether or not to work for the oil company. The biologist thinks that “trabajar para los palmicultores no me hace mucha gracia ... [por] cómo creció ese negocio, a punta de tierras robadas, deforestación salvaje y muertos por todo el país” (136). However, one day he is kidnapped by a paramilitary group that threatens him with death if he doesn’t accept the job at the company, thus showing that the biologist’s fears of conspiracy weren’t unjustified at all. In this sense, the fiction of capital appears in the novel directly linked to the realism of violence. We can call it paramilitary realism because, as Michael Taussig (*Palma*) argues, African palm monocultures and paramilitary groups form an inseparable war machine (31). Paramilitary groups are something like monoculture shock forces to quell possible disruptions to the movement of capital. Thus, just as with his brother years ago, the biologist is forced to collaborate with the investigation into the red weevil plague, that is, to fulfill the mandate of the monocrop and the plantation. Furthermore, according to the leader of the paramilitary group, there is no point in opening the book of nature to ask questions about the order of things. The biologist and the kidnapper are just technicians who must ensure that this order remains stable.

When the biologist is released shortly afterwards in a pine plantation, he decides to accept the job, resign himself to the order of the “ciudad-pueblo” and satisfy the mandate



of the monocrop, which is none other than the mandate of the return of the plantation. In this way, the novel points to one of the essential aspects of the plantation system, which is its tendency to violently take human and extra human natures to destroy other forms of life and exclude any future other than that of the capitalist regime. At the same time, with this, Cárdenas exposes the fundamental paradox of the plantation as a mode of production, which is to condition our subsistence on the extinction of our own species. This is expressed at the end of the novel through a catastrophic image of nature in the “ciudad-pueblo”: “olía a verano prematuro y de pronto alguien tiritaba por un frío inexplicable que soplaba desde las profundidades de un infierno de hielo desconocido hasta ahora para la ciencia ... Los nuevos paisajes nacían y morían precozmente alrededor de las retroexcavadoras. El clima era delicioso, catastrófico y perfecto” (176-77).

## CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation began as a way to understand the extractive unconscious of the process of capital accumulation, especially in the neoliberal period. In other words, it started as an exploration of the material side—in the sense of raw materials—of financial capitalism and the system of debt, credit, and illegal economies that characterize neoliberalism in Latin America (Gago *La razón neoliberal*). The corpus analyzed, from Patricio Guzmán's documentary films to Juan Cárdenas's novels, illustrates the intimate relationship that neoliberalism, as a political, economic, and social institution, holds with resource extraction, and extractive operations of capital in general. This revelation is brought to the surface of the texts through archaeological practices of extraction from the imaginaries of the landscapes, which tell histories of resource and labor exploitation, indigenous displacement, ecological deterioration, and even reduction of the body to bare life. In this way, these works reproduce the extractivist subjectivity that sees the landscape as a separate realm from where we can take meanings and resources—an artistic operation that puts them on the same path of degradation of the environment that they fail to represent because it has been dismantled by the power of extractive capitalism.

As we can see, if the extractive unconscious is the point of departure of my analysis of these works, the point of arrival is the worsening and even irrevocability of the crisis of the environmental conditions they expose. Indeed, my analysis of these different literary and cinematic works shows how nature undergoes a radical process of degradation in capitalism, and especially in the neoliberal period, because of the upscaling and automatization of extractive processes. The works of Lina Meruane and Samanta

Schweblin, particularly, show how the twofold crisis of our historical epoch interferes with the social and biological reproduction of life, reducing the possibilities of sustainable futures. For this reason, I argue that extinction must be considered the unconscious of extraction itself, and thus of capitalism as a process of accumulation based on the extraction and commodification of nature as raw materials. This corresponds to the realization that necropolitics is the flip side of biopolitics and of commodity production, a parallel that is also largely considered in my analysis.

As a repressed layer of the process of accumulation, extraction and extinction expose themselves through the imaginaries of the desert that shape the representation of landscapes in the films and novels I study. In fact, the imaginary of the desert transcends the narratives of mineral extraction, becoming also the unavoidable reality of the territories colonized by monocrop agribusiness today, which are rapidly becoming green deserts. The desert thus appears less as an ecosystem than a specter of desertification, of socioenvironmental deterioration, and historical desolation deeply intertwined with the materiality of the social and natural worlds. This is particularly visible in chapters 1 and 2, where the desert emerges as a space of ruins, as a repository for the debris of history.

Chapter 2, in which I explore the imaginary of the desert in Bolaño's *2666* as a "sacrificial zone" for bodies of racially and economically segregated women who come to Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico–US border to die in the name of global capitalism, complements as well as distorts the analysis of the imaginary of the desert in Guzmán's films in Chapter 1. On the one hand, Bolaño replicates Guzmán's view of the desert as a space where we find the residues of capitalism and social violence—that is, the desert as a cemetery, or even a garbage dump, for the bones of the workers discarded from the

manufacturing process. On the other hand, Guzmán's representation of nature as an abstract object from which an external subject can "extract" meanings as well as resources is brutally dismantled in Bolaño's novel. In *2666* the desert is not just a residual space of manufacturing, but the space where the world turns into the un-world. In this way, rather than being a metaphor for a lifeless planet, or an anticipated memory of human extinction, the desert in *2666* signifies a space where the real reveals itself in all its horror, that is, a space where labor exploitation, patriarchal violence, and ecological deterioration work simultaneously through bodies and landscapes.

The specter of the desert appears in chapters 3 and 4 as well, despite the focus on agribusiness and plantation capitalism. In this case, the specter of the desert is derived from the erosive effects of the monocrop plantations and deforestation of the territory, which generates the sensation of impossibility of escape from the control of agribusiness, and the intervention of biotechnology in our daily life, especially in our food, medicine, and reproductive labor. In this regard, extractivism unfolds again as a hidden structure through the unpaid work that is so instrumental for the expansion of capital. However, the hopelessness and even resignation conveyed by Meruane's *Fruta podrida*, Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate*, and Cárdenas's *El diablo de las provincias* can be interpreted as indeterminate signals of awareness, despite all of their pessimism, of the historical moment we live in. Not seeing the capitalist plantation at all, in the case of Schweblin, or seeing it too much, to the point that it is considered the true order of nature, in the case of Cárdenas, may be critical approaches to the apocalyptic claims that govern ecological writing in general and that are responsible for its desperate but also ahistorical relation to the present. In other words, instead of moving the narrative towards ecological collapse, these novels

assert the need to see better, to see more clearly, and to disrupt the doomsday ideology of contemporary ecocritical writing.

The cunning and ingenuity of these works in criticizing the trope of ecocatastrophe can be read as a way to stress the importance of Marxist ecocriticism in the analysis of the crisis we experience in planetary terms. According to Medovoi (“The Biopolitical Unconscious”), the trope of ecocatastrophe that characterizes ecocriticism “serves as a mechanism for insisting upon biopolitical reform, calculated change to the environment (and/or to the population) before it is too late.” As a consequence of this, “the motif of ecocatastrophe facilitates some kind of regulatory transition between accumulation regimes,” rendering ecocriticism a call “to ‘green’ our relationship to the environment in order to make capitalism more sustainable” (136). In this way,

what we must recognize, rather, is that climate change is not going to happen because capitalism has ignored the environment or because nobody cares about nature. On the contrary, the point is to stress just how much the environment has mattered to capitalism throughout its history ... precisely because “environmentality” is the mechanism through which the milieus of life are assessed and transformed, and rendered more productive. (137)

Following Medovoi’s claim that the “political goal of a properly Marxist ecocriticism will not be to save the environment. It will be to abolish it” (137), this dissertation is an attempt to show that it is not too late to alter the historical path of ecocatastrophe. In other words, given the state of natural conditions today, while environmental problems which are the result of anthropic processes related to extractivism—such as climate change, global warming, and even the current pandemic—

are certainly endangering human existence, I argue that resistance, survival, and change are possible if we identify and question the hidden connections between extractivism and neoliberalism, that is, between resource exploitation, environmental destruction, and debt. In this regard, even though the corpus analyzed does not present major ways of artistic or political resistance, “las mujeres de Calama,” the working women of the maquiladora, and the *temporeras* of agribusiness all represent a gendered opposition to extractivism that aims to take back the process of production as well as reproduction for collective purposes. Furthermore, the attempt to recuperate the bones of the disappeared in *Nostalgia de la luz* and to denounce the disposability of women workers in *2666* shows how the struggle against capital is actually a struggle for recovering the body as the primary site for both production and social reproduction. This is particularly significant in a time when the priority of living conditions over commodity production has become self-evident, and when patriarchal capitalism proved to be another cause of the structural crisis between society and nature. In this way, the kind of resistance posed by women in the different works analyzed shows that extinction is not irrevocable at all, but a slow process that needs to be opposed actively by a collective understanding of nature as a social relation.

The argument about resistance from a gender perspective goes against the assumption, derived from the discourse about the Anthropocene, that by acquiring geological agency we concede our inability to make history. On the contrary, I claim that by abolishing nature as a separate and productive realm of society, we become able to reconstruct history beyond extraction. The Anthropocene, despite its usefulness for addressing issues of globalization in ecological terms, and for inserting a planetary perspective that enabled me to situate historical processes in larger temporal frames and to

include connecting discourses from the social and natural sciences,<sup>37</sup> becomes at the same time insufficient for understanding the experience of the ecological crisis in the periphery. This is partly because of the uneven structure of capitalist development, which is observed in the divisions of labor as well as of nature that define Latin America's position in the world system. In this way, my dissertation coincides with Jason W. Moore's claim that the Capitalocene, which is an alternative, more critical name for the Anthropocene, originated in the colonial expansion of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century rather than in the Industrial Revolution or the 1945 nuclear bomb drop (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*). Such historical inscription of the ecological crisis allows me to visualize the continuance of colonial and imperialist layers in the constitution of extractive economies, as well as to identify the distinctive propagation of extractivism in all social spheres. Furthermore, the Capitalocene can be used to address the commodification of the Anthropocene itself in the cultural field, as well as its transformation into a visual technology that universalizes geographically differentiated processes of extinction and environmental degradation (Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*).

Simultaneously, I am skeptical of a conception of nature as somewhat indistinguishable from social processes. Indeed, Moore's world-ecology, despite its comprehensive analysis of how capitalism constantly degrades and appropriates nature in its process of expansion, tends to collapse nature and capital into one ontological realm that reduces the possibility of dialectically analyzing the clash between them that is the cause of environmental imbalances. This is particularly visible in Moore's statement that

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<sup>37</sup> For Elizabeth Povinelli, the Anthropocene has "a dramatic impact on the organization of critical thought, cultural politics, and geopolitical governance in and across the global north and south," as well as on the focus of the "humanities and humanistic social sciences and the quantitative social sciences and natural sciences" (14).

“Capitalism makes nature. Nature makes capitalism” (Moore, *Capitalism* 6). According to Andreas Malm, “neither of those propositions is true. Capitalism emphatically does not make nature; nature most definitely does not make capitalism. It is the utter disharmony between the two that needs to be accounted for, and it is that which the theory of the metabolic rift has so consistently foregrounded” (199). In this sense, I propose to stick with the concept of crisis to emphasize the dialectical contradiction between the metabolic processes of society and nature in capitalism, opening it to address both capitalist and noncapitalist forms of social relations with nature. I believe that in this fashion we will be able to see and situate the ecological crisis in relation to particular imaginaries of extraction and extinction on the periphery of global capital.

Finally, this dissertation must be considered an attempt to restore the physical conditions of capitalist production, and to restore history itself, through the analysis of the literary and visual representation of the ecological crisis. Even though I am interested in the posthumanist collapse between the natural and social worlds, my main goal here has been to rediscover the distinction between human and nonhuman processes within the artistic representation of the crisis between capital, labor, and nature, and to understand that the separation between society and nature is dialectically necessary to grasp the true dimensions of the ecological crisis. I believe that only in this way we will be able to stand against the alleged irrevocability of the metabolic rift, and write a tangible future where production and reproduction of life is under our control. The main stake of our time is not to care so much about the preservation of both real and imaginary landscapes, a concept, after all, that is so instrumental to extractivism, but to destroy the landscapes of capital.



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