Seeds of a Revolution: Land Reform and Literary Ecologies in Modern Latin American Literature.

Adriana Kolijn

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Doctorate in Philosophy

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

©Adriana Kolijn, Ottawa, Canada, 2025

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to establish the connections between ecological and socio-political well-being in the context of contemporary Latin America. It investigates the ecological aspirations of calls for land reform in many of the revolutions rocking the continent in the 20th century. Questions concerning land management came to the fore, and the policies developed in answer to these problems continue to have long lasting impacts still felt today. Ever since the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1917, Mexican governments have hailed it as a success. However, the short story collection *El llano en llamas* (1953) by Juan Rulfo and the novel *Temporada de huracanes* (2017) by Fernanda Melchor portray a very different reality faced by rural populations and landscapes. I argue that these texts explore how the failure of revolutionary policies, in particular the Agrarian Reform, marginalize the human and natural world. In their portrayal of rural Mexico, Rulfo's short stories and Melchor's novel critique the Mexican State and show how poor policy design affects both local societies as well as ecologies. In Guatemala, the October Revolution (1944-1954) provided the country with ten years of democratic rule. Published in this time, *Hombres de maíz* (1949) by Miguel Ángel Asturias presented a hopeful and critical reflection on the beginnings of the so-called ten years of Spring. Seven decades later, *El país de Toó* (2018) by Rodrigo Rey Rosa shows that dreams of a revolution reawaken in the face of ongoing corruption and impunity. Reading these two texts together through an ecocritical framework, I explore how both texts engage with the Mayan cosmovision and signal the importance of ecological and social reconciliation in order to heal a country's society and environment. Finally, in Nicaragua, the victory of the Sandinista Revolution (1979-1990) culminated in the ousting of American sponsored dictator Anastasio Somoza. The decisive and complete victory of the Sandinistas provided Nicaraguan intellectuals and its followers with a unique opportunity to forge a new national identity, affirm national sovereignty and create

policies responsive to the needs of the ordinary Nicaraguan. The two authors Ernesto Cardenal and Gioconda Belli participated in this project both as revolutionary leaders and literary visionaries. My analysis of Cardenal's *Cántico cósmico* (1989) and Belli's *Waslala* (1996) explores the connections between social and environmental issues as well as how their shared utopian impulse can inspire future generations and remind readers of how this initial moment formed the social, ecological and political laboratory that was the Sandinista Revolution.

Acknowledgements

Every writer is informed and inspired by so many factors. My family's stories and wide variety of experiences from the Indonesian archipelago to the Dutch polder to the Australian outback to the Canadian Rockies and extensive wanderings through Latin America remained with me throughout the writing of this dissertation. Primarily, I send my love to my grandmothers, who through their stories about war and survival showed me that nature can be a source of emotional resilience, inspiration, and gratitude. I would also like to thank my parents, Eveline and Cornelis Kolijn, for their continued support throughout the project. As I continued my writing process, I realized that their passion for the environment became an undercurrent in my thoughts; from my father's enthusiasm for the landscape of the Rockies (with its geological folds and thrusts) to my mother's art work where print media and visual art meets science in an effort to inform audiences about climate change and our relationship with the world.

Secondly, I would like to thank my husband Jamie and my daughter Amelia for supporting me through the entire process as I disappeared into my office at various intervals over the course of many years. Furthermore, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Jorge Carlos Guerrero who thoughtfully guided me with very insightful feedback and enthusiastic discussions on a variety of topics. Thank you Jorge Carlos for giving me opportunities to teach some wonderful classes and for pushing me to become engaged in a variety of different academic activities.

No dissertation is written in an island of isolation, I also have to thank my many writing mentors and companions including my dear friend Karenza Sutton, who inspired me to begin my PhD, my dear friend Luigi De Angelis-Soriano with whom I have shared the experience of

writing two dissertations and my friends and colleagues Emma Bider, Daniel Ruiz Quintero and Andrea Olivares Beltrán. A special thank you to May Morpaw who read every single one of my drafts and whose feedback has pushed me to become a better writer. I would also like to thank my committee who took the time to read my dissertation and provide very useful feedback.

Finally, during such an extensive project as writing a dissertation, life continues bringing many changes personal and global. While I worked on my thesis, we lived through a pandemic, turning to a virtual world in search for connection. I married my lovely husband in the middle of a park and we welcomed our daughter Amelia into our family. We also had to say a painful premature farewell to our second daughter Eva who left us much to soon. I think of you as another star in the heavens, always with me but simply in a different way. I will think of you always.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS V

INTRODUCTION 1

Conceptualizations of Nature 3

An Overview of the Ecocritical Field and Latin America 8

Revolutions and Land Reform 13

My Corpus and Methodology 25

Chapter Outline and Justification of my Corpus 27

CHAPTER ONE: FROM VERNACULAR TO RESIDUAL LANDSCAPES IN *EL LLANO EN LLAMAS* BY JUAN RULFO AND *TEMPORADA DE HURACANES* BY FERNANDA MELCHOR 35

Historical Overview: The Evolution of the Agrarian Reform 40

El llano en llamas: Representing the Plight of the Rural Mexican Peasant and Landscape 46

Vernacular Landscapes and Sense of Place in *El llano en llamas* 51

Official Landscape: How *El llano en llamas* Represents the Mexican State's Imprint on the Land 59

Slow Violence: A Mexican History in Environmental Degradation 65

The Modernization of Agriculture and Degradation of Rural Communities and Landscapes 71

Melchor: Portraitist of Neoliberal Rural Mexico 74

A Vernacular Landscape Transformed: From Self-Sustaining Agriculture to Consumerism 80

Residual Landscapes and Ruins 90

Official Landscape in *Temporada de huracanes* 97

CHAPTER TWO: GUATEMALA'S ROAD TO RESTORATION THROUGH HOLISTIC RECONCILIATION IN *HOMBRES DE MAÍZ* BY MIGUEL ÁNGEL ASTURIAS AND *EL PAÍS DE TOÓ* BY RODRIGO REY ROSA 103

Guatemala's History Concerning Land Management, Revolution, and the CIA 107

Asturias: From Conventional Law Student to Advocate for Mayan Culture 114

Developing a New Literary Style and the Complicated Literary Legacy of Asturias 118

Ecological Agencies in *Hombres de maíz* 123

Holistic Reconciliation and the Nawal as Reconciliation's Agent 132

Guatemala's Civil War and Reconciliation Processes 144

Rodrigo Rey Rosa: Cosmopolitan Author and Lover of the Guatemalan Wild 147
Setting the Garbage Scene: The Anthropocene in *El país de Toó* 150
Resistance and Indigeneity as a Force 157
Holistic Reconciliation and World-making in the Western Guatemalan Highlands 166

CHAPTER THREE: SOCIO-ECOLOGIAL UTOPIAN WRITING FROM NICARAGUA'S REVOLUTIONARY PAST AND AUTHORITARIAN PRESENT: ERNESTO CARDENAL AND GIOCONDA BELLI'S INTERTWINED VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE...177

Methodology: Where Two Sandinistas Meet 178
Utopian Imaginaries and Revolution in Latin America 180
The Makings of a Poet: The Development of *Exteriorismo* and Composition of *Cántico cósmico* 192
Spiritual Ecology 195
Unity/Plurality and Interconnection.. 201
Conscious Cells.. 205
Cosmological and Divine Forces evolving towards a Cosmic Utopia 211
The End of the Revolution 219
Gioconda Belli: Her Life and Literary Vision.. 221
Waslala, a Utopia within a Dystopia 225
Contact Zones: The Beginning of Empire 230
The Environmental Cost of Empire and the Creation of Sacrifice Zones.............................. 233
Cardenal and Belli: Two Revolutionaries Dreaming of a Utopia 242
Dreaming of Solentiname: Waslala’s Revolutionary Precursor 244

CONCLUSION...252

WORKS CITED..259

Introduction

When asked to picture a corn field, one might envision orderly rows with corn stalks neatly pointing towards a blue sky. One might imagine the bounty of the earth at harvest time and tired farmers enjoying the fruits of their labour with their communities. However, the reality depicted by modern and contemporary Latin American literature tells a different story. In the context of 20th century Mexico and Central America, depending on who tended the fields, corn plants might be interspersed with beans and squash. Plots of land might be small, surrounding a small village, or vast, if they surround the local hacienda. Dense forests at the edges of the fields might still be burning as land is cleared to plant more crops or the field might be barren, eroded as a result of intensive agricultural activity producing monocultures such as cotton or sugar cane. The *campesinos* and their families might be destitute, clinging onto life, or they might band together forming a strong collective to protect their lands from outside forces. These scenes found throughout the texts studied in this dissertation tell the story of an interconnected existence, where the human and natural world, or more conceptually precise the more-than-human, engage in a constant dialogue created through the planting of a seed, its sprouting and tending until harvest time.[1] It is a narrative of care which at times is successful and nourishes while at other times it withers, leaving behind disillusionment and hunger. Today, a common view considers nature and culture as two separate entities, but my chosen corpus reminds us that this is an

[1] The term more-than-human signifies all elements of the natural world, both biotic (animals, plants) and abiotic (fire, wind, rain). I use the term more-than-human instead of nonhuman to avoid creating more binary structures. As noted by Katherine Huber, the term more-than-human resists the "binary logics [and] avoids implicitly centering the human through its negation." In my use of the term more-than-human, my dissertation seeks to "emphasize the embeddedness of humans within larger earth systems and ongoing relations among agential beings that collectively enable human existence" (np).

imagined dichotomy. Challenging binary thinking, the studied literary works depict a complex reality where the state of the land affects not only local inhabitants but influences political decision making, both national and international, and brings up questions around the kind of relationships humans form with each other and with the more-than-human world.

In the 20th century, a series of revolutions swept through Latin America, with people demanding better living conditions. A common denominator behind these events was the need for agrarian reform and alternative methods of land management. The Mexican (1910-1917), Guatemalan (1944-1954) and Nicaraguan Revolutions (1979-1990), all focused on political and agrarian reform. These political movements, in their victories and failures, bring attention to the interconnection between social and ecological well-being. For people to be well, their environment needs to be well. Writing in the mid 20th century, the Mexican Juan Rulfo, Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias and Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal brought to the forefront the environmental ramifications of political decision making. Their texts underscore the interrelationships between nature and society, depicting rural communities and local ecosystems struggling or flourishing as their respective nations adjust to increased levels of industrialization and urbanization. Written several decades later, the works of Mexican Fernanda Melchor, Guatemalan Rodrigo Rey Rosa and Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli show a continuation of trends and themes established by the canonical authors.[2] Although each country experienced profound changes in the second half of the 20th century and into the new millennium, similar concerns around land management, poverty and inequality remain. In fact, one could argue some initial issues signalled by the canonical authors, such as the degradation of ecosystems, marginalization

---

[2] I use the term canonical to describe the earlier works studied in my dissertation. *El llano en llamas, Hombres de maíz* and *Cántico cósmico* are all well-established texts in Latin American literature, considered important contributors to the development of the Latin American literary traditions and culture and frequently referenced and studied by literary critics and intellectuals.

of rural populations and fragmenting relationships between the human and more-than-human, have become more pressing in light of the current climate crisis. In a comparative reading between these canonical authors and contemporary writers, my objective is three-fold. First, my thesis aims to examine how my selected corpus presents the long-term consequences of the revolutions on human and more-than-human beings. Secondly, I will analyze how the texts function as a creative space critiquing political decisions while also exploring alternative solutions to ongoing problems. Finally, I will study the ways in which the texts depict the current state of their respective nations and how they envision a better future for their countries.

Over the course of this dissertation, I address the following questions through the analysis of the selected corpus. What kind of relationship between land and people is established in the works? How do they respond to their historical milieu, specifically the agrarian reforms proposed by each revolution and subsequent forms of land management? How do they portray the impact and the outcomes of land reforms on both the human and more-than-human world? What creative solutions do they offer to the historical impasses generated in Latin America by the colonial and neocolonial legacies which the revolutions tried to address? What do these solutions look like in times of globalization and the proliferation of neoliberal ideologies? Finally, how is literary form employed to convey the ecologically informed critique of historical processes and their impact on the populations and their environment?

Conceptualizations of Nature

Central to all these questions is the concept of nature and how it inhabits the collective imagination. In her book *What is Nature* (2000), Kate Soper explores the complexity of the concept of nature in Western culture and history. The word nature inspires such a wide range of

images, from pristine wilderness to humanity's essence or human nature. In her description of the many meanings of the term, Soper writes that one of the most common uses of the word is to "refer to everything that is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity. Thus 'nature' is opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order to humanity" (15). This understanding of nature creates a binary where anything that is not human falls into the category of nature. The nature/culture binary has informed many western philosophies and technological advancements over the course of the last few centuries. Its roots can be found in "la concepción medieval de la naturaleza [que] considera que Dios ha creado el universo por el hombre" (Serna Arnaiz 252). These notions informed the way the first European explorers viewed the Americas as an Edenic paradise.

Descriptions of pristine wilderness and scenes of natural bounty proliferated in the travel logs, journals and accounts known generally as the *Crónicas de Indias* (Chronicles of the Indies) of the early Spanish explorers. For example, images of lush greenery feature prominently in Christopher Columbus's letters to the Spanish monarchs in the 15th century. He writes,

> vide muchos árboles muy disformes de los nuestros, y dellos muchos que tenían los ramos de muchas maneras y todo en un pie, y un ramito es de una manera y otro de otra, y tan disforme, que es la mayor maravilla del mundo cuánta es la diversidad de una manera á la otra, verbi gracia, un ramo tenía las fojas á manera de cañas y otro de manera de lentisco; y así en un solo árbol de cinco o seis de estas maneras; y todos tan diversos. (33-34)

Clearly, the natural beauty of the continent –regardless of whether he believed it was India until his final days-- left a deep impression on Columbus although it also gave rise to contradictory

feelings. On the one hand, Columbus considers the lush scenery as proof that he has found the garden of Eden –located according to Medieval One World Theory somewhere near the Indus River-- but on the other, he also describes the trees as "disformes," implying that the trees are found wanting when compared to their European counterparts. Even after the continent is acknowledged as a separate geographical mass thanks to Amerigo Vespucci, these contradictions and tensions repeat themselves throughout European accounts of Latin America's flora and fauna and inhabitants, creating discourses centred on binaries such as nature/culture, barbarism/civilization and backwardness/progress.

Thus, Europeans projected both their desires and fears on the Latin American landscape, which depending on the situation was either a lush paradise or a barbarous jungle needing to be tamed. Upon gaining independence, environmental imaginaries played a prominent role in the construction of national identities. For example, in the poem "Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida" (1826), Venezuelan poet Andrés Bello describes his country as an agricultural paradise, ready to be exploited and to fuel progress. A few decades later, Argentinian statesman, Domingo F. Sarmiento wrote the essay *Facundo* (1845), where he sketched the life of the Argentinian gaucho and portrayed the pampa as a barbarous place that needed to be civilized. However, as the young Latin American republics established themselves, colonialism quietly morphed into neocolonialism with England and later the US appropriating many of Spanish America's resources to fuel their industrial revolution in the 19th century. The increased resource extraction supported growing industries in the new nations whose leaders encouraged economic development. In her book, *Nature, Neo-colonialism and Spanish American Regional Writers* (2005), French argues that "the foundational discourses of Spanish America are for good reason dominated by the rhetoric of nature" (13), as the availability of raw materials is inextricably

linked to the economic well-being and development of the nation. On the other hand, the commodification of nature and its environmental consequences were noticed by several writers who took up their pen in protest. They came to be known as regionalist writers because of "their attention to local or regional themes and their rejection of European literary forms. Early criticism of the regionalist writers celebrated the nativism of their work as a mark of authenticity and a significant step toward cultural liberation" (French 28). These works known as *novelas de la tierra* (land novels) or *novelas de la selva* (jungle novels) oftentimes critiqued extractive industries and humanity's overall impact on the environment. The regionalist writers also developed natural imaginaries where landscapes function as allegories for the newly formed nations and where nature gains agency in terrifying and violent ways. For instance, in *La vorágine* (1924) by Colombian José Eustasio Rivera, the protagonists are swallowed up by the jungle, and in *Cuentos de la selva* (1918) by Uruguayan author Horacio Quiroga nature often violently dominates humanity. As a result, in striving to create a unique national literature, these works depict a more multi-faceted understanding of the environment and the role it plays in the construction of the new nations while, on the other hand, exploring humanity's complex relationship with its surroundings.

As the 20th century progressed, increased industrialization and use of intensive agriculture brought further changes to the landscape and conceptualizations of nature. In the name of progress, political leaders and governing elites strove to modernize their countries. In *Identity and Modernity in Latin America* (2000), Jorge Larrain explains that when "finally political and economic modernity began to be implemented in practice during the twentieth century, cultural doubts began to emerge as to whether Latin America could adequately modernize, or whether it was good to modernize by following European and North American

patterns" (2). Intellectuals and politicians wondered whether their nations should imitate the United States or Europe in the design of new policies; or if they should develop their own systems, accommodating the national political and economic context. There was also the desire to join developed nations on the global stage as political equals. These questions, accompanied by a series of socioeconomic crises culminating in revolutions that swept through the region, led to a reconceptualization of the nation state and the role nature plays within it. Agrarian reform became the crux of the revolutions because the rural poor, who mainly practiced subsistence agriculture, were losing their lands to wealthy landowners or estates growing monocultures for export. Many peasant families were forced to move to the cities where they ended up in urban slums. Thus, some of the main questions revolved around how land should be distributed, how much each stakeholder or family should have and how it should be worked.

Concurrently, intellectuals and writers reframed national imaginaries to better encapsulate the everyday realities of ordinary citizens. These imaginaries include a more complex conceptualization of the relationship between the human and the more-than-human, where nature ceases to be a passive entity, transforming into an active agent in the thematic development of literary works. These visions were influential because, as Jorge C. Castañeda explains in *Utopia unarmed* (1993), in a "region where a vacuum has been generated by the chronically weak institutions of civil society, the figure of 'the intellectual'- writer, priest, journalist, academic, artist, activist- has often played a key role. The intellectual frequently articulates the perceived national, social and democratic demands of the region's people through the press, academia, government, and from abroad" (20-21). Due to a lack of robust civil institutions, intellectuals frequently took on the role as voice for the populace or government depending on the sociopolitical context. The authors of my chosen corpus inhabit this role, using their writings to

critique current situations or envision alternative paths for the nation. In particular, I posit that their texts develop an imaginary of nature that runs counter to official imaginaries of government policies or market principles; their texts critically assess the relationships between the human and more-than-human that underlined economic or political ideologies predicated on modernity, progress, sovereignty and even democracy. Rather than depicting the environment as a canvas upon which humanity projects its desires or fears, these works conceive of nature as a necessary partner in the building of a resilient sovereign nation.

An Overview of the Ecocritical Field and Latin America

The reconceptualization of nature and its relationship with humanity lies at the heart of the field of ecocriticism, which has been expanding rapidly since it first came on the scene in the 1980s. Ecocriticism arose from an overall preoccupation with the state of the environment and the realization that literature provided a valuable discursive space to reflect on current environmental realities and to experiment with climate futures. Ecocritic Lawrence Buell developed the metaphor of the wave to describe the early development of the ecocritical field; the first wave, also known as the "Nature First" wave, focused on American nature writing in the 1800's. Popular texts analyzed by this first wave were *Walden* (1854) by Henry Thoreau and the transcendental writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lawrence Buell is considered the leading scholar in this wave with his seminal work, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), where he analyzes Thoreau's work, developing concepts such as place, space, and the pastoral ideology in American fiction. In his introduction, Buell describes the current environmental crisis as not only a scientific or technological one, but also as a crisis of the imagination. He explains that "if, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the

imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). Buell advocates for the western world to re-examine its relationship with nature and how it conceives of the natural world. Several decades later, Amitav Ghosh would echo this sentiment in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), where he asks why cultural imaginaries still associate climate change with science fiction and points out that societies currently lack the capacity to imagine the magnitude of change we are experiencing. Thus, Ghosh's observation shows that humanity has not resolved how to confront climate change and that much work remains to be done.

Shortly after Buell's book, the *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) made an important contribution to the field in providing it with a concrete definition and by including a wider range of texts. In the introduction, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism, writing that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it" (xix). Ecocritics continue to draw on this definition with its emphasis on linking literary studies to material experiences outside of the text. Thus, ecocriticism challenges postmodern thought, which had focused on cultural constructs and meaning-making purely within the human sphere, detached from the physical environment. Ecocriticism strives to adopt a holistic perspective revealing the interlinkages between all fields of human knowledge and nature, reminding the audience of the physical environment that surrounds us.

Inherently interdisciplinary, ecocriticism strives to bring to the fore the interconnection between the human and more-than-human, going against the grain of compartmentalized thinking where each entity is seen as separate from another. In *Ecocriticism* (2012), Greg Garrard explains that the nature of the climate crisis requires an interdisciplinary approach. He writes that the current state of environmental degradation needs "analysis in cultural as well as scientific

terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection." (16). This interdisciplinary ethos of ecocriticism becomes more apparent in the second wave; critics began to study the interaction between rural and urban settings. As Buell explains, second-wave ecocriticism included "public health environmentalism, whose geographic gaze was directed more at landscapes of urban and/or industrial transformation rather than at country or wilderness, and whose environmental ethics and politics were sociocentric rather than ecocentric" ("Ecocriticism" 94). Second-wave ecocriticism considers issues of environmental degradation and its impacts on society, thus gaining an activist edge, embracing the environmental justice movement.

Finally, the third wave in ecocritical studies acquires a global dimension, including investigations of world literature. In "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline" (2010), Scott Slovic explains that "global concepts of place are being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales; strong comparatist impulses raising questions about the possibility of post-national and post-ethnic visions of human experience of the environment, while some consider the importance of retaining ethnic identities" (7). In the third wave, ecocriticism thereby develops ideas about the impact of globalization on both local and global environments. The third wave includes studies in new "material" ecofeminism, animal studies and green queer studies. Another important element in this wave is that it endeavoured to include a wider range of literary texts from around the globe. This effort sprang from the initial concern that ecocriticism mainly focused on texts within the anglophone literary tradition (Kane 1). During this time, ecocriticism also made its first advances in investigating Latin American literature.

Although ecocritical readings of Latin American texts are still in their early stages, the field has been expanding rapidly since the early 2000s. Editors Jorge Paredes and Benjamin McLean published a special edition dedicated to ecocriticism in the journal *Ixquic* in 2000. Later in 2010, Mauricio Ostria González published the article "Globalización, ecología y literatura: aproximación ecocrítica a textos literarios latinoamericanos" in the journal *Kipus* followed by another issue dedicated to ecocriticism by the *Revista de la crítica literaria latinoamericana* in 2014, edited by Gisela Heffes with contributions from both American and Latin American scholars. *Nature, Neo-colonialism and Spanish American Regional Writers* by Jennifer French, mentioned earlier in the introduction, greatly influenced the expansion of ecocritical analysis in the continent. Her book is particularly relevant to this dissertation as French connected economics with politics and environmental issues. Her book was followed by the collection of essays *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings* (2010), edited by Adrian Kane, examining the intersections between nature, historical discourse, utopias and marginalized communities. The essays in the volume strive to expand the ecocritical field, mainly focusing on regionalist and contemporary literature, plus *Cien años de soledad* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez as a representative text from the *boom.*

In 2011, Laura Barbas-Rhoden published *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction*, where she demonstrates that "texts of ecological imagination use a rhetoric of nature to expose and critique human power structures" (2). Her book continues in the line of Jennifer French's work, showing that the nature-first agenda present in early ecocriticism is not effective in Latin America, where nature has always been linked to economic concerns and power struggles. Ecocriticism in Latin American Studies seems to be congruous with the second wave, if not a precursor to the third wave. In *Políticas de la destrucción/Poéticas de la preservación:*

Apuntes para una lectura (eco) crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina (2013), Gisela Heffes expands the field by studying the relationship between urban and rural environments. Furthermore, in *A History of Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature* (2013), Scott M. DeVries provides a historical overview of literature from the 19th century until the 90's, beginning with *Facundo* (1845) and its central theme of civilization versus barbarity right up to the dystopian world presented by *Waslala.* Through this extensive overview, DeVries illustrates that nature in different forms has remained a central preoccupation throughout Latin American history and narrative.

More recently, Victoria Saramago returned to analyzing the canon in her book *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America* (2020) where she studies how literary texts influence social imaginaries of nature and how they have contributed to political debate and policies. Other recent ecocritical readings of Latin American literature examine and develop the influence of the indigenous cosmovision in written texts. In *The Latin American Ecocultural Reader* (2022), co-editors Gisela Heffes and Jennifer French gathered excerpts of Latin American literary texts from pre-colonial times to present, providing a historical overview of how nature has been depicted in Latin American culture. They also ensured to include excerpts of indigenous texts such as *Popol Vuh*, a sacred Mayan text. Furthermore, in a collection of essays in *Estéticas de la tierra en América Latina: Literatura, cine, arte* (2024), scholars explore how indigenous cosmovisions, current extractivist models and the continued asymmetries in geopolitical relationships affect the way one thinks of the earth. Lastly, in *Planetary Longings* (2022), Mary Louise Pratt reflects on a shift in thinking that has

occurred since the millennium, moving from a global to a planetary perspective.[3] Given the current economic and environmental crises, Pratt proposes the need of reconceiving concepts as forces. Concepts fit in a rigid structure which resists change while forces are more versatile, adapting to the increasingly rapid changes that the planet is experiencing in terms of technological advancements and climate change. For example, Pratt envisions indigeneity, or the social and ecological activism promoted by indigenous groups, as a force driving the conversation around climate in new directions. I will return to Pratt's ideas in more detail throughout my thesis because her work, like mine, crosses disciplines to show the interlinkages between geopolitical power structures, economics and the environment while also striving to provide ideas as to how one can address the many crises we are faced with today.

Revolutions and Land Reform

The variety in the scholarly texts described above demonstrates the expansive analytical reach of ecocritical studies; investigating works from an ecocritical perspective often leads to considering the intersections between historical, geopolitical, social and economic factors. My thesis occupies this space, investigating the interconnections between revolutions, the initial impetus behind the need to reenvision land management and how this affected the fate of the rural poor and environments in the future. The studies mentioned above often touch on the revolutions or examine unequal power relationships between the marginalized populations, the environment and the governing elite. There are, however, few comparative studies that analyze how contemporary texts respond to dilemmas posited by canonical texts, developing quandaries

[3] Although one could argue that this idea is receiving considerable pushback in policies promoted by the current Trump administration, resulting in countries around the world shifting their focus to domestic industries and boosting national modes of production and manufacturing. Concurrently, this changing mindset affects existing notions of the world and how humanity choses to inhabit it.

and themes initially introduced several decades earlier. By bringing the novels of my chosen corpus into conversation with each other, several saliant themes come to the fore. Namely, how social and ecological well-being are interconnected and the need for nations 1) to consider how the human and more-than-human interact when conceiving and crafting policies, 2) to embrace – in a post-colonial spirit-- forms of knowledge of all communities in the nation, and notably those traditionally marginalized, and 3) to engage with holistic considerations that transcend traditional dichotomies between rural and urban, society and territory, and national and international communities.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of my project, it is important to consider the history of the region and how the politics and economics developed in the post-independence period continue to influence the area today. In 1821, Mexico and Central America gained independence from Spain. Quickly, the creole elite split into two factions, the conservatives and the liberals. Conservatives mainly wanted to preserve the colonial social order and systems, defending the role of the church in society and as landowner. Liberals in turn "sought to overturn the colonial caste system and its legal intermediaries in order to exert direct state control over the population. Liberals were also committed to the idea of progress based on foreign investment and the development of an export economy" (Chomsky 22). A continuous switching between conservative and liberal governments caused a series of conflicts and civil wars. The shifting mandates also greatly influenced who controlled the land and how much. In the mid 1800s in Mexico, the church "owned about half the best farmland in Mexico…Especially in central and southern Mexico, rural society was organized around agricultural villages, and each of these around a church" (Chasteen 167). Liberals viewed this with concern because they felt it hindered Mexico's ability to progress and modernize. For liberals, progress meant following Western

economic and political models which promoted individual rights and technological development. In Mexico, a series of liberal governments tried to overhaul colonial systems in the 19th century. This period, known as the Reform, began in the 1850s and brought forth numerous decrees including land reform. “The reform credo enshrined individual effort, property, and responsibility” (Chasteen 169) and thus collective land holdings were abolished. This particular reform known as the Lerdo Law (1855) was mainly aimed at the church but had as a secondary effect that many indigenous villages lost control over their communal lands. Wealthy landowners, or *hacendados,* would swoop in and acquire the land, leaving many peasants landless.

Over the course of the 19th century, increasing amounts of land were owned by a few wealthy families, while peasants depended on meager wages or had a plot of land too small to sustain their family. From the moment Mexico became independent from Spain (1808-1821), questions about land ownership plagued political leaders. This would culminate in the period know as the Porfiriato, named after the Dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), who governed Mexico with an iron fist. He welcomed foreign investment and sold off large swaths of public land which ended up in the hands of speculators or landowners. In “Grading a Revolution: 100 Years of Mexican Land Reform,” William Signet explains that by 1910, “much of the populace had become alarmed if not disgusted by the extreme concentration of landholding and the retrograde social conditions it fostered. But different opinions were held as to the possible solutions” (496). Tensions between different factions eventually boiled over and led to the outburst of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1919).

Central America became independent as part of Mexico. However, the region quickly splintered off as provinces and later as the Federal Republic of Central America. In 1838, further

divisions led to the countries' current configuration. Liberal and conservative factions also formed in Central America. In Guatemala, a large indigenous population had maintained levels of autonomous rule during the colonial period. However, after independence this rapidly changed with the new leaders seeking to more tightly control their nations, including the indigenous populations. They also looked for new sources of income and heavily invested in plantation agriculture, from indigo to coffee and bananas. In developing a plantation economy, demand for more land and a workforce grew. Indigenous communities and lands were absorbed by large estates or, in the case of the Maya population who lived in the highlands, labour was acquired through systems of debt peonage. The elite justified these land and labour grabs arguing that "Indians were backward, relics of the past, racially inferior. Their institutions were communistic and must be destroyed in the interests of progress. They used their land inefficiently and retarded the national economy" (Chomsky 42). Similar to Mexico, the liberal elite believed in Progress and thought that the indigenous people were holding their nation back from modernizing. When Guatemalan liberal dictator Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) came to power he introduced a vagrancy law that, as Chomsky explains, "required all men who did not own property to labor in public work or private plantations for 100 to 150 days a year. Both debt peonage and vagrancy laws mirrored those implemented in the US. South after the abolitions of slavery, except in Central America both applied almost exclusively to Indians" (26). Thus, many people were forced into working on plantations and Mayans from the highlands often left their villages for half the year to pick coffee, only to return to their milpas and hope their own crops had survived their absence.

Eventually, a group of military officers, backed by popular support, rebelled and successfully ousted Ubico. Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951), an educator, won the first democratic elections. The democratic period, also known as the 10 Years of Spring, saw much positive

change in Guatemala with the democratically elected administrations genuinely striving to improve the lives of the ordinary Guatemalan. However, during this time, the reforms were based on Western economic models, and the Mayan voice was absent. Fueled by progressive liberal ideologies, the governments promoted a more equal distribution of wealth, attempting to decrease poverty and illiteracy rates. Arévalo was followed by Jacobo Árbenz (1951-1954), whose major goal was extensive agrarian reform. In *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala 1944-1955* (1994), Jim Handy explains that "for Árbenz, agrarian reform meant primarily that Guatemalan agriculture, suffering from a 'feudal' attitude on the part of large landowners, needed to be turned into a capitalist venture" (39). Árbenz believed that a capitalist system would lead to a fairer distribution of wealth and land. Farmers would have more direct control over their lands and consequently production would increase. This increase would translate into an accumulation of individual wealth and economic growth. However, the agrarian reform had many critics, the most powerful being the United Fruit Company. The Company complained to Washington about the taxes they were now forced to pay and through a campaign convinced the US government that Guatemala was a communist hotbed. The Cold War had just begun and with the CIA coup that overthrew the Árbenz government, Guatemala was the first of many Central American countries who would directly feel the impact of Cold War politics. Nicaragua, which would become the site of the last major revolution in Central America, also experienced US intervention, a fact many Nicaraguans were used to. Historically, the US had a large influence in Nicaragua because they wanted to control and develop the cross-continental route of river systems and lakes connecting the Atlantic and Pacific coast for commerce. In the mid-19th century, for example, mercenary William Walker arrived in Nicaragua and made himself president in 1856. He enjoyed some support from the Nicaraguan

elite but was eventually ousted. In the 20th century, again with the help of the US, the Somoza dynasty, headed by Anastasio Somoza García, came to power in 1937. The Somozas would maintain control until 1979 when the Sandinistas took over the country.

Similarly to Mexico and Guatemala, the Sandinista Revolution was motivated in part by the need for agrarian reform as enormous inequalities in land ownership and poor land management meant that peasants lived in extreme poverty. According to Skidmore, "[o]nce in power, the Sandinistas proclaimed two broad policy goals. One called for implementation of an 'independent and nonaligned' foreign policy, which meant no further submission to the United States. The other envisioned the creation of a 'mixed economy' in order to achieve socio economic justice" (376). The independent and nonaligned foreign policy was important not only to claim independence from US intervention but also to distance themselves from other communist regimes. The Sandinistas wanted to create their own economic policy with an emphasis on promoting a more equal society. This included a progressive environmental policy and a series of reforms, including agrarian reform. In "La liberación del medio ambiente: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Ecology in Nicaragua, 1979-1999" (1999), Daniel Faber explains how the Sandinistas initiated environmental and social programs. Faber observes that these policies were some of the "most comprehensive governmental efforts to protect nature and to raise the quality of life for its people ever seen in Latin America" (45). The Sandinistas promoted social and environmental justice, national sovereignty, sustainable development, and ecological democracy (46). However, shortly after the Sandinistas gained power, Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) won the elections in the US. He maintained an aggressive anti-communist policy and sponsored the Contra War (1981-1990) which strove to overthrow the Sandinista Government.

One recurring theme that comes to the fore in the series of conflicts and revolutions described above is the ongoing concern about land control and management. Predominantly set in rural areas, my corpus contains a critical discourse concerning these ideas about land management, the interaction between nature and culture, and explores the tensions between global and local communities. The texts studied in this dissertation uncover how preconceived notions regarding nature and land are interwoven and influence the kinds of decisions local, national and global actors made. They also portray how the human and more-than-human world coexist and engage with each other on a spatial and temporal plane. To develop these ideas, my dissertation analyses and expands on notions of space and place, temporality and the interrelationship between the human and more-than-human world.

In order to develop a critical discourse regarding land management, I engage with theories that allow for an analysis of landscape and how human and more-than-human characters navigate these spaces and places. Timothy Morton has argued that we should do away with the concept of nature because it restricts ecological thought (*Ecology without Nature* 14). However, the concept of nature is necessary in my analysis. This is because ideas surrounding the definition of nature underly policies of land management and decisions made about how to divide and cultivate the land. Although from a capitalist perspective, agricultural land is seen as a space mainly for food production, the human and more-than-human beings who inhabit these spaces experience it differently. For rural inhabitants, agricultural lands are not spaces but places they need both materially and emotionally for everyday life. These differing needs lead to a clash between official landscapes, propagated by government policy, and vernacular landscapes shaped through coexisting communities and ecosystems. Over the course of the 20th century, I furthermore argue that the clash between these two landscapes has created another space, a

residual landscape. This concept, employed by photographer Edward Burtynsky, explores the footprint left behind by industry in the form of removed earth, abandoned infrastructure, and industrial waste. I apply Burtynsky's concept to further think about how literary texts visualize these spaces in their narrative and how human and more-than-human beings inhabit these spaces (Campbell 2008). Through the interaction between these different kinds of landscapes, my dissertation reflects on how policy decisions affect the land and by extension the ecological and social well-being of its inhabitants.

Furthermore, my chosen texts show that these tensions and interactions occur not only on a local and national level but include global networks and power dynamics. To acknowledge the impact of global power structures, I engage with Pratt's idea of contact zones in *Planetary Longings*. Contact zones describe spaces established in the colonial period where colonizers and local populations meet, generating new cultures and languages. Additionally, these encounters had a profound impact on local environments as colonial powers sought to dominate them and mold them to fit their purposes. With the passing of time and a shift from the modern era into our current moment characterized by neoliberal policies, I posit that these zones have transformed into sacrifice zones, areas deemed convenient for the use of the developed world to extract desired resources or conversely dump unwanted goods. The excess consumer items, characteristic of late capitalism, flood environments deemed superfluous by the centre, thus propagating power structures and dynamics established in the initial stages of the colonial project.

The concepts of contact and sacrifice zones also point to temporal elements at play. Land is not a static, unchanging place but experiences constant change brought about by geological, environmental, and human factors. Studying texts from an ecocritical perspective brings to the

fore how, according to Buell, the "nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (*The Environmental Imagination* 7). Buell's observation indicates that the environment is an active rather than a passive entity and points to the continuous interaction between human and natural history, the one influencing the other and vice versa. This counters a commonly held perception that nature is ahistorical, a notion I expand on by engaging with the idea of slow violence. This concept, developed by Robert Nixon, broadens the "notion of violence from its instantaneous and immediately visible guises to incremental ones that expand in time and space, transcend our humanly imaginable time frames, and broaden clearly demarcated geographical areas into regions that are much less clearly delineated" (Kressner et al. 4). Rather than thinking of violence as a single rapid event, slow violence permeates the environment over lengthy periods of time. Due to the incremental nature of this violence, Nixon argues that literature is a perfect space to visualize these processes.

In *Ecofictions, Ecorealities and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World* (2020), Kressner observes that Latin America "faces a wide variety of environmental problems that can be described as forms of slow violence on human societies and nonhuman nature. Rapid deforestation, soil erosion and depletion, water contamination, air and water pollution in urban centres, melting glaciers, declining biodiversity, and loss of natural areas due to mining, industrialized monoculture, and tourism are some of the environmental challenges faced by the region" (10). My selected works portray almost all of these elements listed above, from deforestation and mining to the human and more-than-human contending with eroding soils and increasing levels of toxic pollution. By placing my analysis in a historical context, I endeavour to

show how policy decisions around land management contributed, in part, to these processes of slow violence.

Concurrently, after the Second World War, human activity has reached such high levels that it is altering the geological processes of the planet. This new geological epoch is known as the Anthropocene. The term has become increasingly controversial, with some geologists distancing themselves from the concept, concerned that its use in the broader discourse is not scientifically accurate.[4] However, in my study, the term remains important because it allows me to investigate how humanity impacts its surroundings and reflect on the temporal dimension, where a political, social or economical decision made today has both social and ecological repercussions far into the future. Furthermore, the concept of the Anthropocene reminds us that humanity is not a separate entity from the environment, bringing into focus the interrelationships between the human and more-than-human world.

The ecological awareness present in my texts comes to the fore in its portrayal of the interconnected human and more-than-human world. In varying degrees each work reflects on land, how human and more-than-human beings inhabit this land and the kinds of relationships they maintain with it. To further explore these dynamics, I engage with Morton's concept of the mesh. In his book *Ecology without Nature* (2009), Morton describes the *mesh* as "an infinite web of mutual interdependence where there is no boundary or center" (23). The mesh is like a fabric, eliminating distance between the human and more-than-human world. This metaphysical concept deconstructs and transcends hierarchies that historically placed humanity apart from the rest of

---

[4] An article in *The Guardian,* "Geologists reject declaration of Anthropocene epoch," explains that some geologists objected to the term because of "a much longer history of human impacts on Earth, including the dawn of agriculture and the industrial revolution, and unease about including a new unit in the geological timescale with a span of less than… a single human lifetime, it said. Most units span thousands or millions of years".

the world. Considering the mesh in this context underscores the positive element of interconnectedness as a mode of being that leads to the creation or maintenance of a harmonious whole. However, given that my novels are placed in the historical and cultural context of Latin America, it is important to recognize the consequences of increased connectivity. Isabel Hoving reflects on this and explains that "the romantic or spiritual longing for a harmonious reconnection with nature, which animates much traditional (predominantly U.S.) ecocriticism, is not very helpful when it comes to the analysis of the much less harmonious interconnectedness of globalization" (8-9). My study is cognizant of the reverberating consequences of the colonial project and the negative impact of increased political and economic connectivity, as shown in my discussion of slow violence. On the other hand, I understand Morton's idea of the mesh as something that plays out on a biological level rather than the political and economic interconnectedness mentioned by Hoving. By employing the concept of the mesh in my study, I show how my texts advocate for a renewed appreciation for the natural world as well as a more balanced reconnection between the human and more-than-human world.

Conceiving of interrelationships in this context contributes to the formation of ecological thought, another concept developed by Morton. Ecological thought embraces the interrelationships between all beings in the world and invites us to think about coexistence and existence. By thinking ecologically, one recognizes the continuous flux and changing interdependencies that make up the web of life. Morton furthermore writes that "the *form* of the ecological thought is at least as important as its *content.* It's not simply a matter of *what* you're thinking about. It's also a matter of *how* you think" (4). It is not simply a matter of writing about nature or uncovering connections between the human and more-than-human world in a literary text. What literary forms do the authors engage with to open up and critically examine the

interconnected nature of existence? To further explore this question, my dissertation includes a wide variety of literary forms and styles to reflect on how each form portrays landscapes and the beings who inhabit it. A multidimensional panorama emerges in the analysis of the short stories by Rulfo, the novels by Asturias, Melchor, Rey Rosa and Belli and, finally, the epic poem composed by Cardenal. Each literary form brings a different quality to the fore, and each author, in creating their own styles --from a terse, colloquial tone to the blurring of boundaries permitted by magical realism to epic exteriorist poetry-- presents different ways of conceiving how one dwells in the world and ultimately the cosmos.

All the theoretical concepts explored above invariably touch on how the human and more-than-human dwell in the world. To better understand the multitude of ways through which we experience living on the planet and existing in the cosmos, I acknowledge the diverse worldviews presented by my corpus. Several of my works engage with indigenous cosmovisions, in particular that of the Maya, to counter western ideologies promoted by the ruling elite. To explore the role of indigenous communities and indigenous-led resistance to the status quo, I employ Pratt's concepts of worldmaking and her idea that indigeneity acts as a force. In *Planetary Longings* Pratt posits that contemporary indigenous thinkers share their worldview with the global community to rethink our place on the planet and to create a collective effort in addressing the current climate crisis (9). A call to the collective is also present in spiritual ecology where thinkers promote a more holistic response to climate crisis by urging people to consider the interrelationship between religion, spirituality and the environment and how these intersections inform how we perceive the world. Finally, the idea of ecological utopias continues in this same vein in envisioning an alternative way to living on and off the land. Ecological utopias promote a sustainable lifestyle, more in harmony with the landscape than current models.

These worldviews all ask for collective action, fuel resistance and create the possibility for holistic reconciliation. I propose the term holistic reconciliation to describe a healing process that includes both social and ecological elements. Oftentimes conflict not only severely damages society but also the environment. Thus, for communities to fully heal, their environments also need to be restored. Given our current moment of severe ecological degradation, it is imperative that humanity engages on all levels, from local to global, with ideas that promote a kinder way of being in the world. Considering all these elements then, I posit that my corpus not only critiques current modes of being and governance but also develops a narrative of care that includes and treats human and more-than-human beings as equals in a delicate and continuous balancing act.

My Corpus and Methodology

Rooted in the historical, political and theoretical framework outlined above, my methodological approach strives to intertwine all the factors in the reading and analysis of my selected corpus aiming to describe and discern how the texts constitute responses to their historical circumstances. Through this approach, my aim is to show how each literary work advances a holistic perspective concerning land reforms proposed by the revolutionary movements of the time and later the government policies of the present. My texts construct worlds which re-imagine the kind of relationships humanity should form with the natural world, especially during a time when the social contract and the nation's future were under critical scrutiny. In my view, *El llano en llamas, Temporada de huracanes, Hombres de maíz, El país de Toó, Cántico cósmico* and *Waslala* contain different ecological visions for their respective countries. The devastated landscapes constructed in *El llano en llamas* speak to the broken promises of land reform in Mexico. The short stories reveal the slow violence continuously committed against rural populations and their land by post-revolutionary governments, thus

betraying the demands for a new natural and social contract made by agrarian revolutionary leaders like Emiliano Zapata. In turn, *Hombres de maíz* is an experimental novel striving to embody the Mayan cosmovision, thus imagining an alternative perspective to the solutions developed by the Guatemalan government. The novel warns of tensions between the progressive western-based ideologies, which inspired the proposed reforms, versus the indigenous cosmovision. Finally, *Cántico cósmico* imagines a cosmic utopic future. Cardenal, in constructing his own ideal community and later through his involvement in the Sandinista government, strove to rebuild his country after decades of official or informal neocolonial rule by the United States. His epic poem embodies a holistic vision promoting complete harmony between the human and more-than-human world.

The contemporary works continue the conversation begun by the canonical texts. In Melchor's *Temporada de huracanes,* the reader encounters an environment and society in further stages of decay, affirming the ongoing failures of the Mexican State. In its presentation of a national amnesia around the Revolution's promises and Mexico's adoption of neoliberal policies, the novel depicts the ongoing abandonment of rural populations and their landscapes. In *El país de Toó*, Rey Rosa continues to find inspiration in the Mayan cosmovision, presenting detailed descriptions of Mayan communities and how their governing and legal structure nourish a more holistic conceptualization of the environment leading to a healthy community and environment. Finally, Belli's novel, although dystopic, explores how utopian imaginaries inspire communities in times of crisis. *Waslala*, set in the near future and informed by trends of globalization and the domination of free market capitalism, presents the Utopic community of Waslala as the fictional embodiment of Cardenal's own community and thereby shows, how even in dystopic times, the revolutionary dream of a more just society and sustainable future endures. In adopting a

comparative approach between canonical and contemporary texts, my analysis brings several common themes to the fore, mainly the continuing struggle for social and ecological equality and the connection between social and ecological well-being. Brought into conversation, all works affirm a series of deepening environmental and social crises and contend that solutions to these issues require a holistic approach to humanity's relationship with nature.

Chapter Outline and Justification of my Corpus

Although, as mentioned previously, my selected corpus contains an ecological awareness, there are few scholarly studies which incorporate this view. Oftentimes, scholars explore how the novels, short stories and poem critique the status quo from a political or social perspective. Many scholars also examine and deconstruct the narrative style presented by the texts. For example, most scholarship on *El llano en llamas* has remarked on the directness in literary style, the portrait of the Mexican peasant, and the scenes of violence present in the short stories. Yet few critics have analyzed the landscapes constructed in the text and linked them to the inept land policies proposed by postrevolutionary governments. A commonly held perspective sees the landscapes as a reflection of the existential crisis of the Mexican peasant. This perspective limits the role of nature, confining it to the background of the story. The few studies on *Temporada de huracanes* also focus on the oral quality of the text and explore themes around gender and violence.

In the case of *Hombres de maíz,* critics have studied the novel's innovative style and its contribution to what would eventually be known as magic realism. Yet few studies have explored how this literary style naturally lends itself to the blurring of boundaries between the human and more-than-human world and therefore produces a more ecocentric vision of the world.

Furthermore, while everyone acknowledges the Mayan roots of the novel and mentions the environmental messaging, few academics have performed a more detailed analysis. Previous studies, such as René Prieto's *The Archeological Return of Miguel Angel Asturias* (1993), have explored the connections between Asturias's work and indigenous cosmovision, analyzing the linkages between characters and Mayan cosmology, number systems, and symbolism. The critical edition of *Hombres de maíz* (1994) by Gerald Martin continues in this vein, revealing through copious notes and accompanying essays, how Asturias brought Mayan culture to the modern world stage. However, both scholars do not incorporate an in-depth ecological consideration of Asturias's work. Rey Rosa's novel, being a recent text, has as yet received little critical attention. Interviews with the author focus on his portrayal of Mayan communities, the role of violence in modern day Guatemala and his own personal journey as a writer. Yet both novels have much to say about land management, how communities dwell in the land, and how the Mayan cosmovision continues to fuel resistance against early and late capitalist systems.

Finally, much has been written about Cardenal's epic poem *Cántico cósmico.* Critics have commented on the interdisciplinary nature of the text, its political messaging and its spiritual vision of the world. There have been some ecocritical analyses of Cardenal's verses with a focus on the interstices between politics and ecology. Yet my link between the poem, ecological spirituality and the influence of the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has not been explored. By incorporating a reading of Teilhard de Chardin's presence in the poem, my study reveals new cosmic and scientific elements in this work. Above all, it brings to the fore how Cardenal linked the political terrestrial movement of the Sandinista Revolution with processes of evolution and an ever-expanding cosmos. This cosmological vision connects with notions of a utopic society, an idea that resurfaces in *Waslala.* Belli's text has often been read through a

feminist lens. While there have also been a series of articles positing that *Waslala* contains an ecofeminist vision, I focus more on the presentation of the utopic community of Waslala itself and how it is a fictional representation of Cardenal's own religious commune Solentiname. The portrayal of the ecological utopia in the novel furthermore develops ideas about how a community can inhabit a landscape in a more sustainable way, leading to a healthier society and environment.

My first chapter explores how the failings of a revolution affect a nation's society and ecology. Both texts analyzed in this chapter show different stages of social and ecological decay as the governing elite abandons the promises of the revolution and embrace capitalist systems oriented towards the free market. Rulfo wrote *El llano en llamas* in the wake of the Mexican Revolution when many people felt betrayed by the broken promises of the postrevolutionary governments. The short story collection illustrates how the revolutionaries failed to deliver on the promise of agrarian reform. Processes of industrialization and loss of communal lands forced many people to abandon their land and move to the city. The short stories thus present the reader with dreary landscapes of fallow fields and phantasmal rural communities. In particular, I contend that the landscapes in the short stories such as "Nos han dado la tierra," "La cuesta de las comadres," "Luvina," and "Es que somos muy pobres" make visible the slow violence committed to the land through decades of poor management and intensive agriculture, resulting in soil erosion and environmental degradation. In this analysis, I explore how the short stories portray tensions between the official and vernacular landscapes. In each of these stories, characters struggle against antagonistic forces presented by desolate landscapes and unsympathetic government officials. Together, they construct a devastated natural world and

impoverished peasantry whose fate has not been improved by the revolution. Instead, they seem to be forgotten in the fervour of industrialization and urbanization.

Published seven decades later, *Temporada de huracanes* depicts an increasingly desperate situation in rural Mexico where communities continue to be plagued by violence, both social and ecological. After an analysis of how the stories and novel intersect stylistically, I develop how *Temporada de huracanes* illustrates social and ecological violence. My focus again is on the land and how the characters inhabit their environment. Set in Veracruz, *Temporada de huracanes* recounts a murder in the hamlet of La Matosa. As the story unfolds, each chapter provides a nuanced portrait of a different character, offering the reader an idea of what could lead people to commit such a terrible and violent act. The emerging picture shows a community disconnected from their surroundings and each other. An eroding environment, represented by dusty sugar cane fields, is reflected in a disintegrating society. Whereas *El llano en llamas* contained remnants of a vernacular landscape, Melchor's work depicts residual landscapes, areas profoundly impacted by years of intensive agricultural and industrial projects. These places are characterized by depleted soils, lack of employment opportunities for the local workforce and a sense of abandonment as business and government leave the region to its own fate. In this context, business and organized crime in the form of Narco gangs take over the official landscape. A dysfunctional union plagued by clientelism is all that remains of the revolution's promise to the rural poor. Mexico slides from a failing to a failed state, where a cohesive vision of a healthy society and environment remain a distant dream.

In the second chapter, the Guatemalan novels *Hombres de maíz* by Asturias and *El país de Toó* by Rey Rosa develop a more hopeful narrative, presenting different conceptualizations of how the human and more-than-human world should interact and coexist. These ideas, rooted in

the Mayan cosmovision, are inherently ecological because they revolve around the reciprocal relationship the Mayan culture maintains with corn. As a result, both novels explore all-encompassing approaches to the ways in which a collective can create a more resilient society and bring about holistic reconciliation. I propose this last term to describe a healing process that comprises of both social and ecological reconstruction. Ideas around reconciliation frequently focus on social recovery but I posit that, for a society to heal, environmental injustices and degradation must be addressed as well. The heart of the novel deals with the reciprocal relationship between corn and humanity; the prosperity of one depends on that of the other. The novel explores the possible consequences in the breaking of this sacred bond, with indigenous communities confronting the *maiceros* who cultivate corn for financial gain. In the end, the characters who embrace the traditional teachings are successful in rebuilding their community. Conversely, the *maiceros* who ignore this wisdom, are left homeless as their agricultural practices cause soil erosion and environmental degradation. Thus, the collective, a gathering of human and more-than-human forces, defeats the individual *maicero*. I propose that the positioning of the collective versus the individual in *Hombres de maíz* represents a potential clash that Asturias foresaw in the plans drafted by the Guatemalan government. He warns of a confrontation between indigenous understanding founded in the collective versus western ideologies founded in the individual. In embracing indigenous views, I suggest that the book represents an alternative proposal to land distribution and cultivation.

Thematically, Rey Rosa's *El país de Toó* continues in the same vein as *Hombres de maíz,* portraying a resilient Mayan community who continues its fight in protecting its own territory from a Canadian mining company seeking to exploit the area. The narrative follows three ladino characters who, after facing death, find redemption and the opportunity to begin anew. The new

beginning brings them to the fictional community of Toó where indigenous and western legal systems coexist. The novel's in-depth description of Toó, based on the existing county of Totonicapán located in the Guatemalan highlands, allows for the reader to see the force of indigeneity and their worldmaking at work. These concepts, developed by Mary Louise Pratt in her book *Planetary Longings* (2022), signal an empowered indigenous community, actively participating in local and global issues. Pratt also reflects on this development in the context of the Anthropocene. *El país de Toó*¸ through its thematic development as well as description of the negative effects of consumerism on the landscape, critically examines the consequences of the Anthropocene. I suggest that in its portrayal of Toó, the novel illustrates the need for a more holistic approach to life in order to create a healthier environment and a more just society. By including Pratt's concepts in my analysis, I show the important role Mayan communities play in the fight against environmental injustices. In the context of the novel, they also help the ladino characters reconcile with themselves by working in the community and safeguarding the health of the local ecosystem. Thus, holistic reconciliation is a vital component in fighting the climate emergency.

The last chapter delves into the role utopias play in reimagining society and its relationship with nature. *Cántico cósmico,* written during the Sandinista Revolution, and *Waslala,* published at a time when Nicaragua was once again slipping into authoritarian rule, both employ the utopian imaginary to conceptualize a better future for their country. I posit that Cardenal's epic poem contains an ecological spirituality in his vision of a cosmic Utopia where all parts of creation come together in a harmonious whole. Although Belli's novel is dystopic, it also engages with the idea of Utopia, employing it to remind the reader of the connections between environmental and social well-being. Through a comparative reading, the texts serve as

a testament to the Sandinista Revolution and the utopian impulse that drove the revolutionary project in reenvisioning a more just society and healthier environment. Furthermore, the revolution was a personal experience for both authors who became heavily involved in the Sandinista movement.

Waslala was published in a dramatically altered world with the defeat of the Sandinista Revolution in 1990, the end of the Cold War, and the beginning stages of globalization. Within this context, the novel critiques the ongoing existence of power structures where the Global North continues to dominate the Global South. Through an ecocritical analysis, the environmental message in this critique comes to the fore as the narrative describes a dystopian world where the developing countries become corrupt garbage dumps and providers of oxygen for the prosperous North. Following the adventures of the protagonist Melisandra and her search for the utopian community Waslala in the fictional country of Faguas, based on Nicaragua, the text furthermore explores how utopian dreams fuel resistance and eventually the opportunity to rebuild a more just society and healthier environment. My analysis is guided by Pratt's concept of the contact zones, areas where colonizers encounter the local populations and the new cultures that arise from this meeting. I argue that in the context of neocolonial late capitalism, these regions become sacrifice zones used by the developed world as dumping grounds and convenient areas for resource extraction. I furthermore contend that the novel finds inspiration in Cardenal's religious commune Solentiname to create Waslala, an ecological utopia (a term used by Marius de Geus), which counters the status quo and represents an alternative to the global reality.

In this moment of climate crisis with increasing loss of biodiversity and soil fertility, it is more urgent than ever to rethink how we inhabit and work the land, how we coexist with the more-than-human world and how to take action. This thesis is an effort in reimagining policies

and their effects, both positive and negative, on the lands they seek to control. I argue that literary texts play an important role in this reimagination as they provide a creative and experimental space for authors and thinkers to explore ideas and potential outcomes. My other objective is to show the role literary texts can play in political dialogue and decision-making as well as the profound need to include all voices as we strive to design policies more aligned with local communities and the ecological needs of the day.

From Vernacular to Residual Landscapes in *El llano en llamas* by Juan Rulfo and *Temporada de huracanes* by Fernanda Melchor

Haggard people traversing barren plains attempting to eke out a meager existence from an eroded landscape characterize Juan Rulfo's short story collection *El llano en llamas* (1953). This literary representation of the struggles of the rural poor provides a stark contrast to the official political narrative still celebrating the victorious Revolution in mid-twentieth century Mexico. The skepticism reflected in Rulfo's stories persists in the depiction of contemporary rural areas in the novel *Temporada de huracanes* (2017) by Fernanda Melchor, a novel in which sugar cane bends in the dusty breeze with a defunct ejido, or communal land, no longer providing sustenance to the local community. In the revolutionary constitution of 1917, a shaken and well-intentioned revolutionary elite promised the Mexican people a series of major reforms, including an extensive Agrarian Reform. Land redistribution was desperately needed since the last dictator, José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), had awarded large quantities of land to already wealthy landowners, leaving many *campesinos* without sufficient arable land to sustain their families. The Constitution of 1917 intended to rectify this unequal distribution by re-establishing ejidos previously abolished through the Lerdo Laws, the liberal land policies of the government of Benito Juárez (1858-1872). The Constitution of 1917 aimed to increase self-sustaining communities while simultaneously encouraging more farmers to become individual property owners. Nonetheless, implementing these policies proved to be plagued by clientelism and corruption. In my view, the degraded environments in *El llano en llamas* warn of the negative consequences of poorly executed public policy, where exhausted soil and lack of resources force many *campesinos* to abandon their fields for a life in the city. *Temporada de Huracanes*, set seventy years later in the neoliberal Mexico of the new millennium, would seem to suggest that the revolution continues to haunt rural communities in the form of an obsolete ejido system and a

corrupt workers' union. The structure of the ejido, conceived during a time of subsistence agriculture, is no longer compatible with a modern economic system that favours the development of industrial monocultures. Thus, the novel illustrates how Mexico's political elite abandoned the promises made in the Mexican Revolution, neglecting the well-being of both rural communities and environments. Concurrently, in this novel the workers' union, meant to serve the local community, engages in blatant nepotism and cronyism, only hiring people with personal connections. These political and social failures also represent an ecological failure, as the local inhabitants live alienated from their natural surroundings in a polluted environment devoid of resources. Thus, I argue that these texts invite a comparative ecocritical reading focused on their respective poetics of political failure on land policies: while *El llano en llamas* announces the imminent failure of the lofty promises made by leaders in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, *Temporada de huracanes* not only corroborates it, but also suggests the absent and even present failure of the once all powerful Mexican State.

In my analysis, I adopt an ecocritical lens to underscore the ecological awareness present in both texts. I contend that, taken together, the two works reveal the social and ecological consequences of dysfunctional policies and a failing state. The seventeen stories in Rulfo's collection mainly take place in Jalisco and depict people living in dismal conditions, in the middle of arid and eroded landscapes. The *campesino* figures, prominent in each story as either the narrator or protagonist, relegate authority figures to the background. Importantly, the narrator's tone is neutral, and the speaker passes no judgement on the violent events that occur in the story. The text endeavours to focus on the plight of marginalized populations and environments at face value without making claims to a moral message, although the straightforward portrayal of the bleak situation the *campesinos* face certainly condemns the

status quo. My textual analysis of Rulfo's short stories and Melchor's novel is guided by Rob Nixon's seminal work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), engaging with his notions of vernacular and official landscapes as well as the concept of slow violence. Vernacular landscapes, namely environments shaped by decades—if not centuries--of human habitation and its close interrelationship with the surrounding more-than-human community, are disrupted by the imposition of official landscapes, environments shaped through scientific data and official state discourse. The disconnect between the abstract official landscapes and the on-the-ground concrete reality of vernacular landscapes enables slow violence to run its course. Slow violence is a destructive process that occurs in protracted periods of time, causing soil erosion and environmental degradation. *El llano en llamas* reveals how mismanaged land distribution marginalizes rural populations as well as their surroundings. The stories depict how the official landscape in the form of government officials and political elite intrude the vernacular landscape, descending on the reticent *campesinos* who are primarily concerned with tending to their livestock and fields. While vicious acts of violence such as murder and betrayal mark the text, the slow violence presents itself as an undercurrent in the portrayal of unforgiving hillsides, barren plains, and a harsh climate. I will explore how the text emphasizes the betrayal of revolutionary promises by the governing elite, questioning whether the revolution has made any difference in the lives of ordinary *campesinos*. I will then extrapolate this analysis in my reading of *Temporada de huracanes*, a text inscribed in Rulfo's poetics of the land and people, examining how the shift towards neoliberal policies, the introduction of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and an enfeebled ejido, as well as the encroachment of criminality in a society threatened by the absence of the state, further deteriorate the social and ecological fabric of rural communities.

Over the course of the remaining decades of the twentieth century, the gradual adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies by the Mexican State alters the vernacular and official landscapes. As governments increasingly distance themselves from core revolutionary ideologies and the state reduces, through liberalization, its role in major economic and socio-political spheres, institutions such as the ejido and the workers' union decrease in importance, directly affecting the existence of the vernacular landscape. Concurrently, the ongoing corruption, incremental power of the business sector and the increased activity of organized crime further undermine the power of the weakening state, breaking up the official landscape. The novel depicts a deteriorating situation with impoverished and marginalized people living in abject poverty and in polluted environments strewn with plastic waste blown into the Veracruz village of La Matosa from the newly constructed highway. *Temporada de huracanes* recounts the story of a gruesome murder, each chapter told from the perspective of a different character, and structurally mimics a hurricane in its increasingly furious revelation of events and ultimately the devastating truth. Like *El llano en llamas,* the novel does not judge the characters and their actions, leaving it to the reader to reach the final verdict.

Concurrently, landscapes feature prominently in the novel, not only setting the tone but also providing room for social and environmental critique. While the vernacular landscape in *El llano en llamas* was shaped by decades of subsistence agriculture, it has disappeared in the novel, buried under the increased industrial activity of the sugarcane fields and oil wells. In my view, the environment resembles a residual landscape, a concept developed by Edward Burtynsky, who photographs industrialized areas, exploring the impact of the technological processes needed to maintain current urban lifestyles. Residual landscapes are marginalized spaces, characterized by the long-term effects of industry and what it leaves behind. In

Temporada de huracanes, these residual landscapes take form in the sugarcane fields, oil wells, and enormous volumes of trash left behind by a consumer society. This desolation and neglect results in feelings of alienation, illustrated by most characters in Melchor's novel, who are either unemployed or in exceedingly precarious jobs, and unable to sustain healthy relationships with each other and the environment. The official landscape, constructed by the state in *El llano en llamas,* now intersects with the residual landscape, shaped by the needs of the sugar and oil industries. Hence, the local community, unable to work the land productively, becomes increasingly alienated from its environment while industry considers the fields a commodity that needs to produce high crop yields. Meanwhile, all characters suffer from dysfunctional personal relationships and yearn for a rootedness that is denied to them by the precarious conditions of modernity where stable employment and a strong sense of identity remain elusive. In addition, violence plagues the community in the form of organized crime and Narco gangs continuously fighting to control the area of their plazas to move their product, terrorizing locals.

I propose that, read together, *El llano en llamas* and *Temporada de huracanes* intersect on several levels. First, both authors have intimate connections with the regions featured in their writing. Rulfo was a native of Jalisco and Melchor currently resides in Veracruz. Their texts emerge from a combination of close observation and intimate knowledge of their respective areas. For example, several of Rulfo's stories feature existing natural landmarks such as the hill described in "La Cuesta de las Comadres" and the barren plain depicted in "Nos han dado la tierra." Furthermore, "El llano en llamas" features historical facts such as the burning of the San Pedro hacienda, property of Rulfo's family, by the bandit Pedro Zamora in the 1920s (Vital 97). A violent murder reported by local media inspired Melchor to write her novel, elaborating on the scant information combined with her thorough knowledge of the area as a journalist. Secondly,

the short stories and the novel openly depict violent events, unafraid to show the darker side of human nature. This frank portrayal is accompanied by the characters directly addressing the reader due to a nearly absent narrator, allowing for the characters to speak directly in their own vernacular filled with slang and curse words.

Finally, with the shared focus on marginalized communities and environments, both texts show Mexico transitioning from a failing to a failed state. The comparative analysis examines the interrelated connections between social and ecological well-being, indicating that the shortcomings of the policies designed by the political and business elites often arise due to series of factors: the geographical distance between the urban elite and rural populations, the invalidation of traditional and local knowledge by the educated classes, and a capitalist system that, in favouring the market and monetary profits, undermines traditional and subsistence agricultural societies that function outside of these political and economical structures. With rural communities barely surviving, maintaining healthy relationships with people as well as the earth becomes impossible. The two works underscore how a dysfunctional reform and a corrupt system continue to fester, disrupting the interrelationships between people and their local ecosystems.

Historical Overview: The Evolution of the Agrarian Reform

After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, the newly created Republic of Mexico was faced with the formidable responsibility of nation building. The Mexican elite, mainly comprised of the governing classes and wealthy business owners, considered Europe and the United States of America as important examples to follow, given the rapid modernization experienced in those parts of the world. In their desire to imitate both Europe and the US, they

overlooked the impact of 300 years of Spanish colonialism. In terms of land management, Mexico was a patchwork of systems where precolonial communal lands maintained by Indian villagers existed alongside large estates, or haciendas, and small independent land holdings. The Catholic church also held many lands, owning some of Mexico's most extensive haciendas. Over the course of the next century, this complex reality would frustrate many attempts at land redistribution as each stakeholder voiced their own set of demands. In the mid-nineteenth century, a group of politicians known as the reformers and led by President Benito Juárez (1858-1872) promoted sweeping reforms, working on establishing laws that would bring Mexico into the 19th century. William Signet explains:

> The Reformers represented the arrival in Mexico of Nineteenth Century liberal and bourgeois economic and political ideas. In the political sphere, it meant the adoption of democratic and republican systems of government, especially as formulated in the United States. In the economic sphere, it meant freer markets, freedom to contract, and laissez-faire. In the social sphere, it largely meant the eradication of the privileges and entrenched power and influence of the old elites, in particular, the Roman Catholic Church. (487)

No political leader disputed the need for agrarian reform, yet how and to what degree the reform should be executed was extensively debated. Governments and political leaders would attempt to bring it about, inspired by liberal ideas of a free market and individual property rights. Nonetheless, each leader had different ideas on how to make the necessary changes. In 1865, the Lerdo Law came into force, abolishing collective landholdings. The main goal was to force the Catholic church to sell off its vast properties. The government would then reallocate the property to landless peasants, increasing arable land for cultivating crops. However, as John Chasteen

explains, the Lerdo Law had an unanticipated secondary effect that jeopardized "the communal lands of indigenous villages… According to the liberals, distributing village lands to individual families as private property would motivate each family to work harder because of the selfishness inherent in human nature" (169). Thus, while the intention behind the law was to promote and increase private ownership, the outcome was quite different. Many peasants were unable to pay for the land they were allocated, and as a result lost their plots to wealthy landowners whose estates grew rapidly throughout the latter half of the 19th century. This trend accelerated under the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876 -1911) whose government favoured wealthy business owners and foreign investment. While his 31 years in power are remembered as a time of stability and growth, peasants saw little improvement in their quality of life. Inequality rapidly increased and many families, pressured by government policies, struggled to grow crops for the export sector while still having enough to feed themselves. This situation escalated into a crisis and more equitable land distribution became one of the main demands of the Mexican Revolution.

Although these events took place about a hundred years before Rulfo would write his short story collection, his work illustrates that the problems of land ownership had not been resolved and that the measures instead contributed to the continuing degradation of rural areas. After a hundred years of borders being drawn and redrawn and peasants losing and regaining land, the physical landscape became as fragmented as the political one.[5] During the Mexican Revolution, the leader Emiliano Zapata championed the peasants' cause with his slogan, "¡Tierra y Libertad!" However, upon his assassination, his Plan de Ayala (1911), which demanded

---

[5] In the story "¡Diles que no me maten!" the cattle belonging to the protagonist Juvencio Nava is starving due to the lack of food and water. In an act of desperation, Nava cuts his neighbour's fence and lets his cattle graze in the neighbouring pasture, thus altering the physical lay-out of the land.

agrarian reform, was quietly pushed aside[6]. It was not until 1917, when the revolution was drawing to its end, that some renewed attempts at reform were made. Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917 set out the Agrarian Reform Program. The commission in charge of the document states in its preamble that "[h]ace más de un siglo se ha venido palpando en el país el inconveniente de la distribución exageradamente desigual de la propiedad privada, y aún espera solución el problema agrario." The document continues by acknowledging that land in Mexico is "casi la única fuente de riqueza y estando acaparada en pocas manos, los dueños de ella adquieren un poder formidable y constituyen, como lo demuestra la historia, un estorbo constante para el desarrollo progresivo de la Nación" (Silva Herzog 249). The government officially recognized that the inequality in land distribution was a key element, hindering Mexico's ability to become a modern nation. The opening statement of Article 27 reads: "La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas dentro de los límites del territorio nacional, corresponde originariamente a la Nación, la cual, ha tenido y tiene el derecho de transmitir el dominio de ellas a los particulares, constituyendo la propiedad privada" (Silva Herzog 250). This demonstrates that Article 27 was designed with the intent of reasserting control over the latifundistas, or property owners, who had become increasingly powerful under the regime of Porfirio Díaz. The Article supports the belief that active state intervention would remedy the situation.

In this context, the will of the government clashed with the interests of the *hacendados*, who unsurprisingly, were not keen to forfeit their lands. In *Forsaken Harvests: Haciendas and Agrarian Reform in Jalisco, Mexico: 1915-1940* (2013), Luis G. Cueva describes how *hacendados* repeatedly stall the Agrarian Reform. For example, in 1920 in Jalisco, landowners

---

[6] In his Plan de Ayala, Zapata demands a redistribution of land from Haciendas to *campesinos*.

formed the Sindicato de Agricultores de Jalisco (The Jaliscan agricultural union), opposing the Agrarian Reform program and aiming to defend "private property and the rights of commercial agriculturalists whenever threatened by laws, government authorities, or the agraristas" (41). Relations between the government and landowners were strained and frequently antagonistic. Furthermore, the administrative systems developed to redistribute land were often highly inefficient and easily manipulated. *Hacendados* easily found ways to keep the most fertile lands as part of their property. The complex administrative structure led to a "poorly functioning system for soliciting lands beset with time-consuming legal procedures. The bureaucratic nature of the Agrarian Reform encourages a penchant for paperwork among government officials that often hindered and delayed the process of land redistribution" (Cueva 98). Although peasants could request land from the government, the process could take years due to the intervention of the *hacendados* or the unwieldy nature of the bureaucratic systems, with an official continuously asking for more documents throughout the process.

In 1934, when Lázaro Cárdenas began his six-year term as president succeeding Abelardo L. Rodríguez, he focused on the task of agrarian reform. Historians still consider the dramatic increase in the amount of land redistributed under his administration an impressive feat. In his address to the nation on November 30, 1936, Cárdenas confirmed his commitment to agrarian reform. In describing his vision for Mexico he explains that:

> la institución ejidal tiene hoy doble responsabilidad sobre sí: como régimen social, y por cuanto que libra al trabajador del campo de la explotación de que fue objeto lo mismo en el régimen feudal que en el individual; y como sistema de producción agrícola, por cuanto que pesa sobre el ejido, en grado eminente, la necesidad de proveer a la alimentación del país. (Silva Herzog 409)

Cárdenas thus regarded the land reform and the reinstatement of the ejidos as pivotal in improving the condition of Mexico's rural residents. [7] He also reaffirmed his belief that this would end the presence of feudal structures since peasants would have more access to monetary funds and could thereby increase their own wealth. There is no doubt that Cárdenas was sincere in his vision and that his administration worked hard to make it a reality.

However, years of political corruption in addition to a flawed bureaucratic system continued to hinder the process. Furthermore, one problematic factor in the redistribution of land was the poor soil quality. Jesús Silva Herzog explains in his study *El agrarismo mexicano y la reforma agraria* (1964) that:

> A primera vista, el dato de 10 hectáreas por ejidatario bien puede parecer suficiente para el sostenimiento de la familia campesina y aun para su adelanto así económico como cultural; mas el optimismo desaparece cuando se sabe que la mayor parte de las tierras entregadas eran de temporal, sujetas a la irregularidad de las lluvias y, no pocas veces de segunda y tercera clase, o para la cría de ganado. Sólo unos pocos labradores tuvieron la suerte de recibir terrenos de riego o de humedad. (322)

The land awarded to peasants often proved useless or insufficient to support them and their families. From this historical overview it is clear that, while political leaders recognized the need for reform, political and economic factors obstructed the path to concrete change. Political debates dealt with rural populations and lands in abstract terms, thus ignoring, or ignorant of, if not indifferent to, the concrete reality rural populations faced. The disconnect between the

---

[7] Ejidos, or communal lands, originated in Aztec times where each village had access to these lands. After the conquest, the Spanish left these structures in place or the church took over the land but let the community work it. Not much would change until after Mexico's independence in 1821.

official abstract narrative and the material circumstances of the Mexican countryside translated into a reform that failed the population and the land it was designed to help. Several decades later this would be further compounded by the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992. I will return to this point of history in the second part of the chapter during my analysis of Melchor's novel.

In this chapter, my objective is to carefully examine, through an ecocritical prism, how Rulfo's stories illustrate the social and ecological consequences of inconsistent and inadequate reform, where the political game, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalized rural populations and environments. I contend that Melchor's novel in turn demonstrates how, decades later, the reduced presence of the state in rural Mexico limits itself to connections with the oil and agricultural industry, who through their corrupt hiring processes, do not provide employment to the local community. Narco gangs have become more prominent in the area, their violent activity dominating quotidian life. The agrarian society, largely engaged in subsistence agriculture still visible in *El llano,* has transformed into industrial agriculture with monocultures altering the physical landscape, contributing to the ongoing process of social and ecological alienation. The social state promoted by Cárdenas, while tenuously present in *El llano en llamas,* has completely disappeared in the globalized Mexico of *Temporada de huracanes*.

***El llano en llamas*: Representing the Plight of the Rural Mexican Peasant and Landscape**

Rulfo's first short story, "Nos han dado la tierra," appeared in the literary *Pan* magazine in 1945, and is highly critical of the agrarian reform. In it four peasants travel to their allocated land and find that the desolate plain, now theirs, is eroded and impossible to cultivate. Another 14 stories were added to form the collection *El llano en llamas,* first published in 1953. A second

edition, with two more stories added, was published in 1970. The stories unfold in rural settings, specifically in fictional towns scattered across the states of Jalisco and Oaxaca and portray *campesinos* struggling to survive in isolated villages located in desolate landscapes. Recurring themes touch on fragmenting rural societies in barren landscapes, violence, and the failures of the Mexican Revolution. These themes are reflected in a writing style characterised by sparse language and lack of details, forcing the reader to actively engage in constructing a coherent story line. The popular speech of the characters further emphasizes that the stories portray an illiterate society based in oral story telling traditions. In *A Companion to Juan Rulfo* (2016), Steve Boldy explains that the seeming absence of a narrator creates a high degree of ambiguity in the stories. As a result, the reader is "immediately immersed in a very concrete space and is put at the mercy of a voice very distant from his or her own experience. The reader is disconcerted by the lack of a guiding presence and is all the more grateful, shocked and aesthetically exhilarated when key information is sometimes quietly, sometimes dramatically released" (45). This lack of narrator guidance is obvious in the story "El hombre." Beginning *in medias res,* the story describes a man running away. The reader does not discover from whom or what, and only at the very end does it become clear, through the explanation given by another character, a shepherd. He tells the police that he saw the man murder a family in their sleep. The narrator remains difficult to detect. This same technique reappears in *Temporada de huracanes* with the voices of the townspeople directing the story as they recount their version of events revolving around the murder of the Witch. Overall, with *El llano en llamas,* Rulfo endeavoured to bring the focus on the ordinary *campesino* forgotten by the governing elite and Melchor seems to strive for the same effect, portraying how rural landscapes and characters are negatively impacted by decades of neoliberal policies in the hands of a dysfunctional state.

Scholarly studies of *El llano en llamas* and Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* tend to focus on the representations of rural Mexico, impoverished peasants, and the brusque narrative style. Numerous studies have analyzed notions of Mexican identity and reflected on the effects of Rulfo's work on Latin American literature. Gabriel García Márquez, for example, famously claimed that *Pedro Páramo* inspired him to create the town of Macondo and write his novel *Cien años de soledad.* Later, Angel Rama, in his seminal text, *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America* (1982), wrote that Rulfo's work is a clear demonstration of transculturation where his text occupies a space between tradition and modernity due to its highly innovative narrative style, respecting the rural oral story tradition (74). [8] Another common view of Rulfo's work is found in Carlos Blanco Aguinaga's essay, "Realidad y estilo de Juan Rulfo." Aguinaga writes:

> Rulfo nos ha llevado su visión de la realidad del campo mexicano, realidad en que, por fuera, parece que no pasa casi nada y cuando pasa, ello es mecánicamente, por ley, por costumbre de estallido violento que acaba siempre por recogerse en la sombría quietud de ese mundo en que los personajes son como la naturaleza que él siente: grises, difusos, sin vida auténtica hacia fuera, símbolos mudos. (25)

According to Blanco Aguinaga, rural Mexico is suspended in time and the peasant is stuck in a violent, atemporal reality. Several scholars echo this idea, e.g. Carlos Fuentes, who analyzes the mythical quality of Rulfo's work. In *La jaula de la melancolía* (1987), Roger Bartra explores how these images of a static violent countryside are perpetuated by the Mexican elite who, in their writings and policies, combine these elements to create a particular form of national

[8] Transculturation is "the creative interaction between two cultures, resulting in a new culture" (Chasteen A22).

Mexican identity. Critical of these ideas, Bartra signals that this top-down construction of a national identity is out of touch with popular culture while simultaneously paralyzing and preventing it from evolving along with the material realities of a modernizing nation. He includes an analysis of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* to support his hypothesis.

While I agree with Bartra about the existing disconnect between the intellectual elite and the rural popular world, I do not agree with his inclusion of Rulfo in his analysis. Rulfo was himself an outsider, the son of a hacendado who, despite his best efforts, never attended university. Although his work was quickly included in the Mexican literary canon, he always remained on the margins of intellectual circles during his lifetime. Boldy explains that "Rulfo was clearly self-conscious about his limited formal education and …aggressively asserted that he was not an intellectual" (19). I contend that this outsider status, however, contributes to the unique quality of his work with its focus on both the *campo* and *campesino* at a time when most Mexican literature concentrated on urban city life. Rulfo's biographer Alberto Vital Díaz describes the writer's childhood, where a young Juan

> se percató de un vaivén permanente de la vida agrícola entre dos extremos temibles: la sequía y las tormentas en efecto, desde muy pequeño sintió el peso de las circunstancias climáticas para el argumento de las humildes vidas en el campo; aquéllas dejaron despué́s de ser solo eso, circunstancias, y adquirieron una dimensión literaria en *El llano en llamas*, cuyo mundo oscila entre la sequía devastadora de "Nos han dado la tierra" y las lluvias no menos decisivas de "Es que somos muy pobres." (82)

These first impressions of the surrounding landscapes would later be reinforced by his experience as a traveling tire salesman with Goodrich Euzkadi co., requiring Rulfo to visit remote regions for weeks at a time. Boldy also explains that Rulfo was an avid hiker and

photographer (11). His landscape photography reveals the gaze of someone who pays close attention to natural textures, beautifully captures the sweeping lines of mountains, and unflinchingly brings stark drought-stricken plains into view. He does not shy away from portraying both the beautiful and terrible realities of Jalisco's campo. Furthermore, during his travels, Rulfo always enjoyed conversing with the local campesinos, learning about the area and its stories. Thus, both his photography and his texts show a deep appreciation and knowledge of both the local people as well as its flora and fauna.

There are few ecocritical studies available on Rulfo's fiction. Lucy Bell comments on this in "Viscous Porosity: Interactions between Human and Environment in Juan Rulfo's *El llano en llamas*." She observes that ecocritical studies have mainly ignored his work to date. However, she argues that "nature is not merely used by Rulfo as a symbol. Rather, his fiction reveals the complex interactions between human activities, belief systems, socio-political structures and the environment" (391). Bell recognizes that the relationship between humanity and nature presented in *El llano en llamas* is not confined to a symbolic purpose, a position in line with my aforementioned criticism of Carlos Fuentes. Through an analysis of two of the stories, "Es que somos muy pobres" and "Diles que no me maten," her article demonstrates how the environment affects the socioeconomic status of the characters. In his article, "Nature, Postmodernity, and the real Marvelous," Mark Frisch includes a brief analysis of *Pedro Páramo* and explains that nature "becomes an extension of human consciousness, mirroring the corruption and passions that destroyed the village" (80). According to Frisch, nature is a physical representation of the psychological torment experienced by the residents of Comala. Recently, Victoria Saramago offered a critical counterpoint between *Pedro Páramo* and the early successes of the Green Revolution in *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin*

America (2021). She analyzes how Rulfo's work is sceptical of modern development at a time when most people saw the Green Revolution as a Mexican miracle. My critical examination builds on these perspectives by engaging in a close reading informed by historical context; I explore how the landscapes created in the stories reveal the underlying connections and tensions between political decision-making, social structures, land management, and how these elements influence the environment. As explained in the historical overview, political leaders and thinkers were preoccupied by the state of rural Mexico. Yet, their solutions were often inadequate or did not take into account the complex reality of many rural communities. On the other hand, the rapidly changing political situation, with each leader introducing their own version of land reform, indirectly marginalized and silenced those who needed it most. My contention is that the eroding plains and hillsides in *El llano en llamas* illustrate the material consequences for people and their environments when reform does not result in palpable change. I will begin my analysis exploring the importance of place and how the imposition of the state's official landscape on the vernacular landscape of rural communities contributes to the processes of slow violence.

Vernacular Landscapes and Sense of Place in *El llano en llamas*

The local rural landscape features prominently in *El llano en llamas*. A beautiful and tranquil example is found in the opening of the short story "En la madrugada." The text describes the dawning of a new day in the Town of San Gabriel. San Gabriel

> sale de la niebla húmedo de rocío. Las nubes de la noche durmieron sobre el pueblo buscando el calor de la gente. Ahora está por salir el sol y la niebla se levanta despacio, enrollando su sábana, dejando hebras blancas encima de los tejados…Las luces se

> apagaron. Entonces una mancha como de tierra envolvió al pueblo que siguió roncando un poco más, adormecido en el color del amanecer. (144)

The town, nestled in the quiet of the early dawn, is tenderly wrapped by sleeping clouds who protect the people "roncando un poco más." The passage personifies the clouds, creating an image of harmonious coexistence between the community and its environment. The image of the mist "enrollando su sábana" emphasizes the idea of the local environment protecting its inhabitants. Oftentimes, critics focus on the violent component of Rulfo's short stories. However, in this example, the reader discovers a different kind of text filled with tenderness. I suggest this lighter tone is partly because Rulfo had a personal connection with the town. His family used to have a *hacienda* in San Gabriel and Rulfo himself spent much of his early childhood there. Although he lived in Mexico City for most of his life, Rulfo always felt more connected to rural Jalisco. His childhood memories combined with his profound knowledge of the natural landscape come to the fore in many different ways throughout the short stories.

Due to Rulfo's profound knowledge of Jalisco, his short stories represent a vernacular landscape, product of an enduring relationship between a community and its environment. Nixon writes that a vernacular landscape is "shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community" (Nixon 17). The vernacular landscape organically grows over time as communities establish themselves and work within the local ecosystem. Gradually, both people and the surrounding landscape change, living in and with each other. During this process, people form emotional

attachments to the area, recognizing the rhythms of the land in the form of seasons and identifying with their surroundings.

I contend that Rulfo's narrative creates a vernacular landscape in the intricate detail his texts provide. As Cristina Rivera Garza writes in *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué* (2016), "[t]anto en la Comala de *Pedro Páramo* como en los llanos de sus cuentos hay … una abundancia de detalles precisos, de datos comprobables, acerca de la flora y fauna, la arquitectura y el clima, que alcanzan a convertirse en verdaderas fotografías de los paisajes de su natal Jalisco y de los muchos otros que conoció en vida" (82). Rivera Garza comments on the photographic quality of Rulfo's work. This quality is achieved by the description of specific features in the landscape and frequent mentions of flora and fauna unique to the area such as the chicalote ("Luvina"), a species of poppy, the madroño tree ("¡Diles que no me maten!") and the huizache tree ("Nos han dado la tierra"). Additionally, although town names are fictional, there is no doubt that the short stories unfold in central Mexico, specifically in the states of Jalisco and Oaxaca. Characters also often comment on landmarks, weather conditions and villages inspired by locations throughout the high planes of Jalisco and Oaxaca. These elements contribute to the strong regional character of the text, leading many critics to suggest that the collection portrays the essential rural Mexican identity.[9] In addition, I posit that these details in the text create an intimate sense of place, bringing the reader to the location of each story.

Lawrence Buell has written at length about the concept of place from an ecocritical perspective. He defines it as "a spatial location" that has meaning ascribed to it because places are "centres of felt value … in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located

---

[9] See *La jaula de la melancolía* by Roger Bartra, "Juan Rulfo, el tiempo del mito" by Carlos Fuentes, "Realidad y estilo de Juan Rulfo" by Carlos Blanco Aguinaga and *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America* by Angel Rama.

and with which people can identify" (*The Future* 63). Thus, a specific area acquires value through a process where people develop relationships with each other and their environment. This process leads to the formation of identities interconnected with physical surroundings. In addition, Buell argues that "the more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation or even the possibility of violation" (*Writing* 56). Buell proposes that humans reassess their emotional attachment to their surroundings.[10] The emphasis on attachment to place links Buell's concept to the idea of sense of place described in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016) by Marie-Laure Ryan et al., who explain that there is a close relationship between place and sense of place, with the latter referring to the "affective, emotive bonds and attachments people develop or experience in particular places and environments on a variety of scales, from the microscale of the home … to the neighbourhood, city, state, or nation" (7). The concept of sense of place emphasizes a personal connection to the immediate environment. In Rulfo's work, necessity as well as an emotional bond with the land contribute to the attachment characters feel to their surroundings. Connecting with nature is a physical and affective need where a balanced reciprocal relationship favours the survival of both the people and the landscape that they inhabit. Importantly, a healthy relationship with the land contributes to a growing rootedness and development of a stable cultural as well as personal identity.

El llano en llamas explicitly and implicitly establishes these interrelations between people and their local environments. In particular, in "La Cuesta de las Comadres," the narrator speaks affectionately of his land. The story, set in a hillside hamlet, is recounted by one of its last

---

[10] Buell grounds the exploration of place within a conservationist context, hoping to inspire readers to become more active in protecting the environment and combatting climate change.

inhabitants who talks about his friends, the Torrico brothers. They are the owners of the majority of the village lands and also turn out to be local bandits. In a plot twist, the story ends with the murder of Remigio Torrico at the hands of the protagonist. This event comes as a shock, particularly because the narrator claimed to be friends with the brothers. Furthermore, in the opening paragraphs, the character strikes the reader as sympathetic through his description of the little village and his own piece of land. He tells the reader, "me gustaba el terrenito de la Cuesta… El lugar no era feo; pero la tierra se hacía pegajosa desde que comenzaba a llover, y luego había un desparramadero de piedras duras y filosas como troncones que parecían crecer con el tiempo. Sin embargo, el maíz se pegaba bien y los elotes que allí se daban eran muy dulces" (117). The narrator's emotional attachment to the land comes to the fore with his use of the endearing diminutive suffix "-ito" in "terrenito," and with his proud description of being able to produce sweet corn from difficult land. This land, with its jagged stones thrusting out of the earth seems to have a life of its own. Yet the narrator has learned how to work it due to a respectful relationship that he has developed with his land. His referential regard for the land is further evidenced by the humble tone of the passage. I would also suggest that the brutal murder at the end of the story implies that the narrator has a higher regard for his land than its human inhabitants.

The relationship between *campesino* and land is a returning theme throughout the short stories. For example, faced by the inevitability of his own death in "¡Diles que no me maten!," the protagonist, Juvencio Nava, reflects on determining events in his life. A common factor underlying these events is his responsibility for the more-than-human and his connection to the earth. The story begins *in medias res*, with Nava's capture by the son whose father Nava killed in a land dispute. At the time, drought plagued the area and Nava watches as his cattle dies one by

one. In desperation to save his animals and his livelihood, he cuts down the fence of his neighbour, Don Lupe, to let his cows graze on the land. Don Lupe discovers that Nava is trespassing and confronts Nava, who kills Don Lupe and flees. Thirty-five years later, Don Lupe's son, now a coronel, comes in search of Nava. Again, the protagonist prioritizes his fields over his own safety. When the men in search for Nava trample the young corn, he comes out of his hiding spot. The text reads, "[p]udo haberse escondido, caminar unas cuantas horas por el cerro mientras ellos se iban y después volver a bajar. Al fin y al cabo la milpa no se lograría de ningún modo. Ya era tiempo de que hubieran venido las aguas y las aguas no aparecían y la milpa comenzaba a marchitarse" (193). With the use of free indirect discourse, the text welcomes the reader into the Nava's mind and dramatizes the painful decision process of the character. He could have continued to hide, but a feeling of responsibility for his field forces him to take a different course of action. Although the cornfield withered due to insufficient rainfall, Nava moves forward to prevent his pursuers from destroying his crop, sacrificing his life for the sake of his land. As Nava feels his death becoming a certainty, he reflects on his life and time spent on earth, "[a]llí en la tierra estaba toda su vida. Sesenta años de vivir sobre ella, de encerrarla entre sus manos, de haberla probado como se prueba el sabor de la carne" (193). Nava developed a connection with his fields over the course of a lifetime: he identifies so closely with the earth that he not only senses it but has internalized its taste. He works the land, sustaining it, and in return the land sustains him. The story ends ironically because his death means the death of his *milpa*. Corn left untended inevitably dies, unable to grow without human assistance. The stories cited above depict how close relationships based on respect and a feeling of profound belonging to the land create vernacular landscapes. The narrative style of the text adds another layer to this.

The connection between people and landscape is not only demonstrated through their actions but also their speech. Vernacular by itself means "the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people of a country or region" (*Oxford Dictionary* 1026). In this sense, there is a linkage between the landscape and the spoken word. Previous analyses of *El llano* comment on the work's oral quality, examining the connections between the text and spoken word embedded in storytelling traditions. For instance, Fabio Jurado Valencia writes:

> La oralidad se incrusta en el fondo de una escritura que … produce el efecto de ser escuchada y no leída. Por eso, los discursos de los narradores y de los personajes se mimetizan entre sí o se funden; unas y otras voces se fusionan en la prevalencia de unos tonos que hacen sentir la oralidad de quienes conversan y recuerdan, o rememoran sus tragedias. (78)

The narrative style contains an oral quality, and through the use of free indirect speech, the text creates the illusion that the narrator is directly addressing the reader, or the reader might feel that they are overhearing a conversation. This technique is repeatedly used in the collection: a schoolteacher tells his tale in "Luvina" to a faceless listener, two men recount a landslide and the governor's visit in "El día del derrumbe," and in "Acuérdate" a father speaks to his son. Rama explains that the "features of this popular speech are, roughly, a simplified lexicon that cautiously admits dialectal and regional forms; a concise syntax, with apt use of set phrases; a tendency toward the laconic, even the elliptical, in the linguistic message" (75). The use of popular speech emphasizes that these stories unfold in rural communities far removed from urban centres. Additionally, Vital observes that the oral quality of Rulfo's writing arises from a family tradition. The father of Juan Rulfo, Juan Nepomuceno Pérez, maintained a steady correspondence with his own father, recounting business issues as well family matters. These

"documentos posean un sabor peculiar, entre oral y escrito, como si el tono que hoy llamamos rulfiano hubiera ido gestándose poco a poco en la sangre y la tinta de los dos antepasados varones más cercanos" (Vital 44). Vital suggests that the style, later becoming known as Rulfo's own, has its origins in the letters exchanged between the family patriarch and his dutiful son. This family tradition, formed in rural communities, returns in *El llano en llamas.* As such, the popular speech featured in the text can be considered a combination of Rulfo's own literary style, his family tradition and the local dialect Rulfo heard as a child and young adult. The local dialect emerges from the Jaliscan highlands, and in the context of *El llano en llamas,* reflects the barren plains in its sparseness.

While the protagonist in "La Cuesta de las Comadres" and Juvencio Nava in "Diles que no me maten" spoke tenderly of their land, showing their deep connection with the local ecosystem, the majority of characters in the short stories are taciturn and appear to be disconnected from each other as well as their surroundings. For example, in "Nos han dado la tierra," four peasants, Melitón, Faustino, Esteban and the nameless narrator, cross an empty plain to reach the land promised them by the government. They speak sparingly: "Son como las cuatro de la tarde…. Puede que llueva" (110). Their speech is as flat and barren as the plain itself. In addition, the use of repetition, a common characteristic in storytelling, emphasizes the inhospitable nature of some of the landscapes. In "Luvina" the narrator says, "Allá llueve poco…" and later at the beginning of the paragraph he repeats, "…Sí, llueve poco" (199). Similarly, in the story "Es que somos muy pobres," the landscape of a village is dramatically changed by a flooding river washing away several structures, a tamarind tree and the cow that was to save a young girl, Tacha, from poverty. Tacha begins to cry when she realizes that the cow is lost, "[d]e su boca sale un ruido semejante al que se arrastra por las orillas del río, que la hace

temblar y sacudirse todita" (132). Absorbing her crying, the river blots out her human voice. The tears running down Tacha's face mirrors the current of the river while her shaking body imitates the violent movement of the water. Merging human emotion with natural force, the text suggests the reciprocal relationship between the two. William Rowe argues that the destruction is such that the characters are unable to put their anguish into words as "the river destroys language" (72). In this story then, nature's force washes away language completely. Characters are thereby deeply embedded in their landscapes. Additionally, I suggest that the break down in language and communication accompanies the erosion in the vernacular landscape. Many factors cause the degradation of the vernacular landscape and the communities embedded within it. In particular, the text shows how the imposition of the official landscape as well as the forces of slow violence bring about social and ecological deterioration.

Official Landscape: How *El llano en llamas* Represents the Mexican State's Imprint on the Land

In *El llano en llamas*, the Agrarian Reform epitomizes the official landscape. In "La Cuesta de las Comadres," the narrator casually mentions the Agrarian Reform, "el reparto" (116) which initially seems to have little effect on his community, isolated from the rest of the country. However, "Nos han dado la tierra," exposes a broad range of consequences of the Agrarian Reform with a dysfunctional bureaucratic system disconnected from the needs of the people it is meant to serve. An official landscape is designed by the state and "writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental" (Nixon 17). Governments and political leaders far removed from the sites of resource extraction, create official landscapes, deepening the fissure between the authorities and the people who live in the vernacular landscape. While vernacular landscapes are inhabited by *campesinos* and local

flora and fauna, political leaders, government officials and agronomists find their home in the official landscape. Anthony Giddens analyzes this divide in *Consequences of modernity*. He observes that in

> conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature. (19)

According to Giddens, socioeconomic processes of modernization cause a disconnect between concrete events in a specific area and the decisions geographically distant entities make about it, often ignorant of the local realities.

In this historical context, the fissure between vernacular and official landscapes comes to the foreground in one of President Cárdenas's speeches. On September 1, 1937, Cárdenas speaks to the Congreso de la Unión, reporting on the progress made by the Agrarian Reform. He reports that:

> El Departamento Agrario substanció, de septiembre de 1936 a agosto de 1937, 2,693 expedientes de dotación definitiva, otorgándose 5.186,973 hectáreas para 275,879 ejidatarios. Durante los 33 meses transcurridos de la actual administración se han despachado 5,956 dotaciones con 9.764,140 hectáreas para 565,216 campesinos, que con los 4,675 expedientes despachados hasta noviembre de 1934, hacen un total de 10,631 dotaciones con 17.914,982 hectáreas para 1.324,759 campesinos beneficiados hasta hoy. (Silva Herzog 414)

The numbers paint an impressive official landscape with millions of hectares being allocated to landless peasants. Cárdenas wants to show a proactive government working diligently to meet their goals. However, these numbers construct a very abstract picture, eschewing reality. They create a narrative of success incongruent with the bleak landscape depicted in "Nos han dado la tierra," where the vast barren plain proves the numbers to be empty signifiers. In the story, an apathetic government official awards a group of peasants, Melitón, Faustino, Esteban and the narrator, land impossible to cultivate. The narrator quickly realizes the much-desired land is useless. He protests, trying to explain to the official that the land is not fit for cultivation. However, his protests fall on deaf ears, "[e]l delegado no venía para conversar con nosotros. Nos puso los papeles en la mano y nos dijo: -No se vayan a asustar por tener tanto terreno para ustedes solos" (112). The government official ignores the peasant's protest and responds with a dismissive tone conveniently hiding behind dysfunctional government policy.

Cueva explains that during the reform:

> agrarian officials designed a rating system to compensate poorer quality with greater quantities of the land to compose the ejido communities. They applied scientific calculations in formulating a system of soil quality ratings. These calculations were used in procedures for determining the acreage size of the ejido grants. Officials devised a formula for evaluating and rating the fertility and productivity of arable lands. Land quality was determined by quantifying potential crop yields that a particular parcel would render from one hectoliter of planted seed. (129)

It was common practice to compensate for poor soil quality by giving more land. However, the story reminds the reader that more land does not solve the problem when it cannot support life of any kind. I contend that these poorly designed solutions only compound the existing problems by

not taking all stake holders (leaders, *campesinos* and the environment) into account. Contributing to the failure of these policies was the paternalistic attitude of the post-revolutionary government as well as ongoing corruption and clientelism. Consequently, rural societies and ecologies experienced further marginalization.

The resulting dysfunction indicates a failing democracy where systems supposedly designed for the people do not meet their needs. Aehécatl Muñoz Gonzalez remarks on these shortcomings, noting that "[a]sí, ellos [los campesinos] solo son receptores de las políticas de un gobierno que estaría definiéndose como democrático, pero que en la realidad no está escuchando las quejas y problemas de los campesinos" (13). Importantly, the discrepancy between the policies on paper and the reality emerges from conflicting perspectives and interests between the representatives of the State and rural populations.

The divide between *campesinos* and the political elite is thoroughly examined in *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880- 2002* (2003) by Joseph Cotter. In his historical exploration of Mexican agriculture, Cotter identifies the disconnect between government supported *agrónomos* and *campesinos* as one of the fundamental problems withholding Mexico's development. Cotter explains that agronomists and agro-bureaucrats regularly "invalidated the *campesinos* agricultural knowledge" (8), and that state officials who carried out new agricultural projects "did not take the *campesinos*' agendas, cultural values, and economic situation into account, but rather tried to impose their own definition of modern agriculture, based on economic and political objectives, foreign textbooks, and imported technologies" (7). Cotter highlights the struggle between two worldviews anchored in different ways of knowing: traditional knowledge versus modern know-how. *Agrónomos,* first influenced by French theories and later agricultural technologies developed in the United States, held

contempt for the *hacendados, campesinos* and *ejidatarios* (people, mainly indigenous, who worked communal lands). They considered *campesino* culture as backward while farmers distrusted the officials and *agrónomos* who often came from urban middle- and upper-class backgrounds. The struggle created resentment among rural populations with farmers feeling that their knowledge was not taken seriously, and their authority was undermined, which in effect it was.

These tensions become apparent in "Nos han dado la tierra" in the interaction between the *campesinos* and the government official. The dismissive response of the official to the narrator's protest underscores the irony of the situation, where a policy that is supposed to help small communities instead marginalizes them by not providing land with the fertile soil needed to improve their circumstances. The bureaucratic system, supported by the official landscape, exacerbates the crisis faced by inhabitants of the vernacular landscape. The exchange also demonstrates the uneven power relationship between the parties. The official, supported by the state, is only interested in following the rules, expressing no sympathy for the peasants' plight. He uses the system as a convenient tool to rid himself of the peasants. He tells them that if they have any complaints, "[e]s al latifundio al que tienen que atacar, no al Gobierno que les da la tierra" (113), aware that the peasants are most likely illiterate and therefore unable or unlikely to lodge a formal appeal to the government. Boldy describes how the voice of authority in the text is "often muffled, reflected, unlocatable or disembodied" and that "the effect of the voice of power is devastatingly alienating" (47). In "Nos han dado la tierra" the voice hides behind bureaucratic systems and amplifies the sense of alienation by ignoring the deeper knowledge of the narrator who protests, "[l]a tierra está deslavada" (112). It is also worth noting the subtle irony of a title with biblical undertones; the impersonal subject implicit in "Nos han dado la

tierra" suggests a vertical relationship between an all-powerful state – God-like in its power— and its subjects blessed by its magnanimity. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the official's inaction silences the narrator and the land because the physical reality of the human and more-than-human are ignored in favour of abstract rules designed by the central government.

The environment thus undergoes the same marginalization as the *campesino.* An additional hurdle presents itself within this power dynamic because the environment lacks the capacity to advocate for itself, incapable of responding to human decision making in human language. Buell comments on the communication barrier between the human and more-than-human world. He observes that the most we can do is "attempt to speak from the standpoint of understanding humans to be part of what Aldo Leopold called 'the biotic community'-attempt, that is, to speak in cognizance of human being as ecologically or environmentally embedded" (8). Humanity cannot speak as the environment and vice versa. Yet an attempt needs to be made to close the communicative distance if we are to better understand our ecological role and thereby gain insight into the current climate emergency. Part of this attempt should include more serious efforts made at recognizing the knowledge people close to nature possess; people such as subsistence farmers and rural indigenous communities. The pervasive idea of human exceptionality, a notion that emerged in the Renaissance with the rise of humanism, continues to influence the way we see our place in the world, hindering this process. Christopher Manes remarks that the result is that "[n]ature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (339). Manes first brings to our attention that the human ability to speak contributes to our sense of superiority. However, this line of reasoning ignores the ways in which other organisms also possess skills that we lack. Thomas Nagel reminds the reader of this fact in

"What is it like to be a bat?," when he observes that bats have sonar, but people do not. Bats thereby have access to perceiving the world in a way that is completely foreign to humanity. Secondly, Manes's comment underscores an important distinction between literate and illiterate societies, suggesting that literate societies are even farther removed from nature due to literacy.

This power dynamic frequently manifests itself in *El llano en llamas.* Ultimately, the illiterate farmers are equalled to the land, both entities rendered powerless in their inability to communicate through the written word. Furthermore, this inability discredits the knowledge of both entities, revealing the shortcomings of the Agrarian Reform and the people who enact it, and who, through this series of assumptions and class snobbery ultimately fail the two entities, rural communities and land, it is supposed to help. Thus, the *campesinos* and the empty barren plain are silenced. "Hace ya tiempo que se nos acabaron las ganas de hablar … Uno platica aquí y las palabras se calientan en la boca con el calor de afuera, y se le resecan a unos en la lengua hasta que acaban con el resuello" (110), says the narrator. Exhausted, the *campesinos* become as mute and neglected as the lands they traverse. Through a combination of preconceived notions regarding nature and the people who work it along with existing power imbalances, the official landscape successfully oppresses the vernacular landscape. This violent oppression materializes in a double marginalization and silencing of *campesinos* and their lands. However, this violence does not instantly become visible but manifests itself slowly over long periods of time.

Slow Violence: A Mexican History in Environmental Degradation

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the sense of time portrayed in the short stories. Most critics observe that the text suspends everything and everybody in a space where time seems to have come to a halt. This goes against the grain of modernity "which envisages time as an

irresistible, irreversible forward movement" (70). Some conclusions drawn by critics, such as Blanco Aguinaga who I quoted above, is that the stories therefore depict the complete backward state of the Mexican *campesino*. However, I would like to propose that the temporal movement in the stories is located on a different plane. The eroded landscapes in the stories show a geological passing of time occurring on a different level, mostly outside of the awareness of the daily events marking human life. This different unfolding of time and its accompanying revelations in terms of environmental degradation are discussed by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). He develops the concept of slow violence as a force "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). This violence is therefore delayed in its perceived effects, "its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). In these terms, destruction is a process that unfolds over the course of decades, even centuries. The stories in *El llano en llamas* explore a spectrum of violence from the historical fast violence (prevalent in most literary critiques of Rulfo) and the slow violence I will analyze now.

As slow violence develops over extended periods of time, I argue that Rulfo's stories capture how it works its way like an undercurrent, registering its pervasive presence in the eroding landscapes. In the stories, this destructive process is caused by a dysfunctional bureaucratic system and failed land reform, unresponsive to the complex ecological realities faced by rural communities in terms of soil fertility and irrigation, or lack thereof in addition to the cultural nature of rural societies. The landscapes in the short stories such as "Nos han dado la tierra," "La Cuesta de las Comadres," and "Luvina," emphasize how arbitrarily adopted agricultural policies, poor land management and power inequalities lead to environmental

degradation. The desolate plain in “Nos han dado la tierra” is so dry that it is described as “el duro pellejo de vaca” (109) and “costra de tepetate” (112). During the journey across the plain, the narrator observes that “no se podría encontrar nada al otro lado, al final de esta llanura rejada de grietas y de arroyos secos” (109). The earth is scoured by “grietas” and “arroyos secos,” signs of intensive agriculture and overgrazing that have afflicted the environment in Jalisco for centuries.

Deeply interested in history and the chronicles of the Indies, Rulfo often spoke about the lasting impact of the Spanish conquest in his home state of Jalisco. In an interview with Joseph Sommers he said:

> Yo soy de una zona donde la conquista española fue demasiada ruda. Los conquistadores ahí no dejaron ser viviente. Entraron a saco, destruyeron la población indígena, y se establecieron. Toda la región fue colonizada nuevamente por agricultores españoles. Pero el hecho de haber exterminado a la población indígena les trajo una característica muy especial, esa actitud criolla que hasta cierto punto es reaccionaria, conservadora de sus intereses creados. (520)

This summary of Jalisco’s history points to several important factors that would culminate in major social and ecological changes. First, the Spanish Conquest of the indigenous peoples explains why Jalisco has a predominantly mestizo population. Secondly, the conquest marked a dramatic change in land use. Spanish conquistadors and farmers imported livestock from the Iberian Peninsula and implemented their agricultural practices unaware of how they would affect Mexico’s ecosystems. In fact, the descriptions of the landscapes in *El llano en llamas* are sufficiently detailed to support what scientific studies are currently discovering; the eroded soils are a product of processes that have been at play for longer than the land reforms that took place

during and after the Mexican Revolution. Recent scientific studies conclude that inadequate land reform is not the sole cause for soil exhaustion and erosion. The arid landscapes are an outcome of 300 years of colonization. In *A Plague of Sheep* (1997), Elinor G.K. Melville outlines how the introduction of livestock such as cattle and sheep completely altered Mexico's landscape in the early days after the conquest. The Valle del Mezquital, north of Mexico City, known for its desert, was once a fertile and densely populated region. However, when sheep were brought into the area, plant density and biodiversity quickly decreased, turning the valley into an arid desert. By the 1570s, large areas of the valley had been grazed, forcing sheep farmers to move "their flocks to summer pastures in Michoacán west of Guadalajara" (154). Sheep owners were continually looking for more grasslands to feed their flock and the spread of livestock outwards began to impact larger territories in the early colonial period until the sheep population collapsed due to overpopulation and lack of food. The damage at this point was permanent, transforming the rich grasslands of what is now Jalisco into more arid ecosystems. Together, these historical factors demonstrate how the imposition of foreign agricultural techniques and knowledges can harm the environment. However, due to colonial discourses that deemed European ways of knowing and doing as superior, local opposition and local knowledge was undermined. These patterns established in the colonial period persist until this day, as will later become evident in my analysis of *Temporada de huracanes.*

In *El llano en llamas,* these ecological non-places consist of barren plains, abandoned villages and destroyed landscapes created through decades of poor land management or other forms of violence. "Nos han dado la tierra" presents the reader with a stark landscape with a plain so empty that the peasants are unable to find "ni una sombra de árbol, ni una semilla de árbol, ni una raíz de nada" (109). The lack of any landmarks emphasized by the repetition of the

word “ni,” accentuates the complete futility of the peasants’ journey to their new lands where they will find nothing to sustain them. Later, the group of travelers finds “una que otra manchita de zacate con las hojas enroscadas; a no ser eso, no hay nada” (111). The trek across this empty desolate plain encompasses several layers of irony. First, as can be deduced from the attitude of the official, the peasants should consider themselves lucky in having received land, even if it is worthless. On the other hand, the government expects that this ecological non-place will be transformed into a productive corn field. Finally, receiving this land in a non-place condemns the peasants to continued poverty instead of improving their economic circumstances.

The town of Luvina provides another example of an ecological non-place. In the story by the same name, the reader follows the conversation between the narrator and a silent listener. The narrator, sent to Luvina by the government to teach there, recounts his time in the village. Filled with aspirations, the narrator is quickly dissapointed when he finds the place impoverished and the people mistrustful of his intentions. The village is surrounded by steep hillsides and parched earth. The narrator emphasizes the extreme dryness of the earth, “[a]demás de estar reseca y achicada como cuero viejo, se ha llenado de rajaduras y de esa cosa que allí llaman ‘pasojos de agua’ que no son sino terrones endurecidos como piedras filosas, que se clavan a los pies de uno al caminar” (199). The earth is filled with “rajaduras,” a sign of erosion, and hardened; “reseca y achicada.” Fertile topsoil, blown or washed away by the elements, is followed by younger generations, who abandon the town in search of work elsewhere. The elderly men and women, too old to leave, stay behind in the village. The women “con su cántaro al hombro, con el rebozo colgado de su cabeza y sus figuras negras sobre el negro fondo de la noche” (203), blend with the night in their black mourning garb. They are indistinguishable from their surroundings to the

point where the narrator himself does not notice them until later during his stay in Luvina. The village withers along with the surrounding wilting vegetation:

> esas plantitas tristes que apenas si pueden vivir un poco untadas en la tierra, agarradas con todas sus manos al despeñadero de los montes. Sólo a veces, allí donde hay un poco de sombra, escondido entre las piedras, florece el chicalote con sus amapolas blancas. Pero el chicalote pronto se marchita. Entonces uno lo oye rasguñando el aire con sus ramas espinosas, haciendo un ruido como el de un cuchillo sobre una piedra de afilar. (197)

The dulcamara, a poisonous plant whose name means bittersweet, grows precariously on a cliffside while the chicalote, a variant of wild poppy, withers away as soon as it has bloomed. The spiny branches sharpen the wind like a knife, giving the surroundings of Luvina a phantasmagoric quality. The eroded landscape, slowly stripped of life mourns along with the village. This ghostly ecological non-place anticipates the village of Comala in Rulfo's canonical novel *Pedro Páramo*, where a tyrannical hacendado transforms his town into a living hell, condemning the townspeople to wander the site long after their physical death.[11] Through this portrayal of the town, Rulfo continues to explore power relationships and their repercussions on people and the natural world.

Ecological non-places lack all the physical elements needed to maintain long-lasting relationships and sustain a vernacular landscape. Peasants who find their landscapes crumbling into ecological non-places have no choice but to uproot and resettle in the city. *El llano en llamas*

---

[11] Alternatively, in "The 'Monstrous Head' and the 'Mouth of Hell': The Gothic Ecologies of the 'Mexican Miracle,'" Kerstin Oloff argues that reading *Pedro Páramo* through a gothic lens reveals the devastating socio-ecological consequences of the Green Revolution beginning in 1945 and introducing industrial farming methods to Mexico.

is filled with images of people traveling through empty landscapes, in search of a better place. Among the numerous examples in the collection, “Nos han dado la tierra” comes to mind as the four peasants search for their promised land. In this case, the irony is that the place given to them is a non-place where no roots physically or metaphorically can take hold in the eroded earth. Other stories continue in the same vein. For instance, in “Paso del norte,” the narrator is unable to sustain his family raising pigs and travels to the US hoping to find work; in “La Cuesta de las Comadres,” the narrator is one of the last habitants left in the hamlet, everyone else has moved to the city in search of work. A combination of incomplete agricultural reforms and the recurring violence perpetrated by human actors denies the *campesinos* the stability and security they need to prosper. The ecological non-places portrayed in the text are physical manifestations of failed projects on several levels; a dysfunctional agricultural policy, a corrupt bureaucratic system, and a disconnect between the ideas developed by the agronomists working for the government versus the traditional knowledge of the local farming communities.

The Modernization of Agriculture and Degradation of Rural Communities and Landscapes

Over the course of the following decades, the inequality between the wealthy classes and the rural poor would increase. In the 1950s, around the time that Rulfo published his work, the Green Revolution came to Mexico. This scientific revolution, sponsored by the US government and the Rockefeller Foundation in an effort to combat communism, strove to increase crop yield and prevent food scarcity and hunger. The Green Revolution came in the form of educational programs, new agricultural technologies such as industrial farm equipment, agrochemicals, and GMO crops. Agronomists, mainly educated in American universities, returned to Mexico and promoted the use of hybrid seeds and new pesticides to local farmers. Concurrently, agricultural policy shifted “from supporting both commercial and collective farming to favoring

agribusiness" and increasingly focused on supporting large-scale farming versus small family-owned properties (Sonnenfeld 31). Initially, production increased dramatically, leading people to call the Green Revolution the Mexican Miracle. However, the miracle was short-lived. Many of the small landholders could not afford to buy the new seeds or pesticides and were left out of the initial increases in crop yields. In addition, the Green Revolution had focused on solving technical and scientific problems but ignored addressing social problems and deep-seated classism and racism where rural farmers did not trust the predominantly urban agronomists while agronomists dismissed farmers as ignorant. On the other hand, after several years of intense pesticide application, fields were beginning to show signs of increased erosion and pests were plaguing the harvests. Adding insult to injury, the country was dealing with a series of droughts (Sonnenfeld 30). Several of the GMO crops developed in the United States proved unsuitable for the Mexican climate and soil, leading to failed harvests (Cotter 256-257). By the 1970s, Mexico struggled to feed its own people, relying on the importation of corn. In response to a slowing economy, the Mexican government abandoned their Import-substitution Industrialization (ISI) policies which had mainly focused on creating a self-sustaining nation, looking to international markets to boost the economy.[12]

Beginning in the 1980s, governments embraced neoliberal policies in an effort to combat slumping oil prices, increasing inflation rates and soaring debt levels. This meant that the government greatly decreased its presence in industry by privatizing many public institutions and

[12] Import-substitution Industrialization (ISI) was a policy developed throughout Latin America in the 1930s in response to the world-wide depression. The main idea behind these policies was that "by building its own industry, Latin America would be less dependent on Europe and the United States for manufactured goods. By producing industrial as well as agricultural and mineral goods, the Latin American economies would become more integrated and more self-sufficient. And, as a result, they would be less vulnerable to the kinds of shocks brought on by the worldwide depression" (Skidmore 53). ISI initially brought about economic growth and the emergence of a new urban working class. However, by the end of the 1960s with stagnating economies, decline in demand and decreasing prices for export products (coffee, wheat, copper), governments gradually abandoned ISI policies.

by opening up the economy with a reduction in tariffs on imported goods (Skidmore 70-71). The push to give more power to the market culminated in the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed and ratified by Canada, Mexico and the United States in 1994. This agreement would "promote the free flow of goods among the member countries by eliminating duties, tariffs, and trade barriers over a period of fifteen years" (Skidmore 288). Mexico hoped that with NAFTA more investors would be interested in Mexico and thus boost employment. Leading up to NAFTA, the Mexican government implemented several changes to existing laws. This included a relaxation in the regulations of *ejidos*, making it easier to privatize land and decreasing corn subsidies. However, the promised prosperity did not materialize, and Mexico still struggles with high rates of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. Increased violence in the form of organized crime and drug cartels have not helped matters. Over the course of the last few decades, these changes in policy meant that the Mexican government gradually drifted away from the revolutionary ideals where "land ownership was seen as the main engine of economic prosperity" (Signet 487). With the focus on developing markets and business, the matter of land redistribution and tenure quietly faded to the background. Agrarian reform, the initial impetus of the Revolution, no longer seems to preoccupy governments to the same degree as a hundred years ago. Today, the main source of wealth is no longer found in the ownership of arable land but rather in the business sector and the tourist industry (Signet 522-523). Furthermore, the forces of globalization combined with neoliberal policies have contributed to the government shifting their focus to increasing trade between foreign partners instead of concentrating on promoting local production for national consumption.

Rulfo's work underscored the failures of the Mexican Revolution, actively countering the optimistic discourse produced by the state. At a time of increased industrialization and urban

development, *El llano en llamas* focused on those left behind in the nation's rural backwaters. Through this portrayal, the text questions the cost of development and critiques the post-revolutionary government's approach to land reform. As shown by the analysis above, agricultural policies perpetuated the mechanisms of slow violence evident in eroded and exhausted soils, consequently foiling hopes of increased prosperity. In the decades that followed, few authors paid attention to rural Mexico. Agustín Yáñez, also from Jalisco, and Elena Garro produced novels about small rural towns but concentrated their efforts on depicting rural societies, bypassing environmental concerns. Rosario Castellanos wrote several novels about her home state of Chiapas, examining tensions between indigenous and mestizo communities. By the time the 1960s drew to a close, most authors were writing about the rapid urbanization of Mexico, exploring social and cosmopolitan themes. In some ways literature followed the interests of the state. In *Autobiografía del algodón* (2022), Cristina Rivera Garza remarks on this change as she traces her family's journey in the early 20th century from the mines in central Mexico to the cotton fields in the northern border regions where the state promised them a prosperous future. However, this ambitious experiment failed, leaving labourers and farmers destitute. Simultaneously, by the mid-twentieth century the "Reforma Agraria no era ya una prioridad de un país que apostaba a la industrialización y a la urbanización como sus cartas fuertes para el futuro" (273). The agrarian promises of the Revolution were forgotten as Mexico shifted its focus, placing its hope for prosperity in other areas of the economy. Melchor's novel, however, draws the reader's attention back to rural Mexico in its portrayal of the small rural community of La Matosa and its environs in the State of Veracruz.

Melchor: Portraitist of Neoliberal Rural Mexico

Melchor, born and raised in Veracruz, went to the Universidad Veracruzana to study journalism. In an interview she explains that she was initially drawn to journalism because she enjoyed gathering all the information until it formed a coherent whole, "me parece muy emocionante ese momento en que todas las claves, todas las pistas que has ido investigando, finalmente se unen en una trama que le dará sentido a la historia que quieres contar" (Torres 88). In another interview, she mentions that she maintains a file of news stories for inspiration, calling herself a story collector. She tells the interviewer that, "[a] lot of what I do is go to Veracruz and listen to what people are saying. There are a million things worth writing just based on that" (Pearl 70). She then transforms these stories into fiction. Her fascination with local stories connects her work with that of Rulfo, both in subject matter and tone. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rulfo also collected stories and enjoyed listening to the tales he heard on his travels through the Mexican countryside.[13] Thematically, both Rulfo and Melchor's texts explore violence and the marginalization of the rural population, and they analyze the socioeconomic deterioration of rural Mexico. Rulfo's texts reveal the initial shortcomings of the Revolution's promises, hinting at the eventual abandonment of revolutionary ideals. Several decades later, Melchor's novel confirms this trend, depicting the outcomes of ongoing political corruption and a gradual distancing by the government from the foundational revolutionary ideology focused on land. *El llano en llamas* and *Temporada de huracanes* connect as well on a stylistic level. Melchor names Rulfo as an important reference in a 2017 interview ("Entrevista a Fernanda Melchor," Oscar Alarcón) in the writing of her novel, following in the author's stylistic footsteps with a prose that strives to show, not tell. Both the short stories as well as the novel have an oral

---

[13] Furthermore, while Rulfo's fiction consists of only two works, he produced many non-fiction texts such as a travel guide of Mexico when he still worked for Goodrich-Euzkadi and later he wrote and edited anthropological texts when he was part of the Commission of Papaloapan in the 1960s and at INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista).

quality, where the characters' speech is riddled by crude colloquialisms and a nearly absent narrator allows the reader to feel as if they are inhabiting the characters. Finally, I contend that in Rulfo's as well as Melchor's texts, the portrayal of eroded landscape mirrors the economic and social failure of the Mexican Revolution.

Upon reading a story about a murder in the *nota roja* (Mexico's tabloids), Melchor was intrigued by the victim and people involved in the crime. However, since it is dangerous for a woman to travel alone and investigate such stories, she decided to explore the story from a fictional viewpoint and wrote what would become *Temporada de huracanes* (Torres 87). The novel begins with the discovery of a corpse in an irrigation canal just outside of the town of La Matosa. The corpse turns out to be that of la Bruja, or the Witch, a social outcast and healer who regularly helped the women of the town, curing their ills and listening to their woes. The narrative however does not dwell on discovering who committed the murder. Instead, the story focuses on how precarious socioeconomic circumstances push people to making desperate decisions as well as committing acts of violence. With a nearly absent narrator, each of the 8 chapters is told from the perspective of a different character, gradually building a comprehensive picture of the town and its inhabitants. Run-on sentences, sometimes more than a page long, drive the story, bringing the reader closer to the murderer and the victim. The novel explores a range of themes including homophobia, corruption, narcotrafficking, the increased violence experienced by rural populations and local ecosystems as well as the degradation of the Mexican nation. Due to the detailed description of the local ecosystem, I would like to argue that the novel also brings the ecological conditions to the forefront. In her review of the novel, Julie Ward makes the connection between the eroded landscape and community, observing that the "environmental degradation that has led to the loss of the mountainside goes hand in hand with

the destruction of the social fabric" (n.p.). Here, Ward refers to the landslide described in the beginning of the novel and to which I will return later in my analysis. Thus, similar to *El llano en llamas,* Melchor's text connects social with ecological marginalization in its imagery and thematic development.

Although the Mexican government continued to engage in the rhetoric of a victorious Revolution, its promises to the rural populations were forgotten as the ruling elite shifted their focus to urbanization and industrialization.[14] Slowly the state embraced neoliberal policies: promoting a free market, supporting industrial agriculture and reducing the role individuals play in their own communities regarding land management and the methods used in tending the fields. This meant that industry silenced the *campesino* and their intimate knowledge of the land; rural areas and ecosystems lost their advocate. In addition, industrial agriculture and its monoculture denied a community and environment diversity, impacting social and ecological resilience. The sugarcane fields surrounding La Matosa, for example, eliminate biodiversity and reduce the variety of jobs available to the local workforce. The novel confirms this because although La Matosa is surrounded by fields, the main characters live a life completely disconnected from their natural environment. None of them, apart from the Witch, work the land or engage with nature in any other way. The stories in *El llano en llamas* still depict an agrarian society with *campesinos* speaking about and for their land, indicating an intimate physical and emotional interdependence with the environment as well as a deep knowledge of the agricultural needs of the land. Conversely, *Temporada de huracanes* portrays a society at the margins of an extractive economy and intensive agriculture focused on integrating its yield into the global

[14] The government, for example, declared 2019 the year of Emiliano Zapata, celebrating and commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the death of the revolutionary peasant hero.

market. In this context, the vernacular landscape crumbles while the official landscape is taken over by business as well as narcotraffickers, blurring the lines between legal and illegal activity. What is left over for the local population is a residual landscape characterised by eroded lands littered with garbage.

Although the initial focus of the novel is the murder with the discovery of the Witch's corpse in an irrigation canal, the narrative quickly delves deeper into the reasons why such a grotesque act occurred. Francesco di Bernardo comments on this aspect of the novel in his article "Capitalismo global y petroficción en *Temporada de huracanes*," suggesting that the main focus of the novel is not the murder but the "condiciones sociales que se producen en el área geográfica en la que los eventos tienen lugar y en donde se mueven los protagonistas" (84). Additionally, he contends that while the novel

> no mencione directamente la estructura socioeconómica e industrial, los efectos del modelo socioeconómico dominante en Veracruz y de la industria extractiva forman lo que Jameson denomina el "inconsciente político" de la novela. Según la teoría de Jameson, la literatura, en cuanto acto simbólico social, es influenciada por la totalidad histórica y los síntomas de una precisa condición sociohistórica se revelan a nivel del inconsciente. (86-87)

Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious, di Bernardo argues that while the novel never explicitly links the current socioeconomic and industrial structures to the

appalling state of rural communities such as La Matosa, it clearly shows how these structures cause the inequality and poverty experienced by the characters. [15]

Additionally, I contend that the political unconscious of the novel contains an environmental message in the connections the narrative draws between a rural disintegrating community and landscape with a government that has abandoned them both. Similarly, Rivera Garza outlines the process of changing economic and political policy and its detrimental effects on rural societies and environments. She writes in the context of the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico, which upon the failure of the cotton experiment in the early to mid-twentieth century, experience subsequent transformations. The monocultures of cotton and sorghum are followed by the

> llegada de las maquiladoras, en auge sobre todo después de la firma del Tratado de Libre Comercio que selló la negligencia del régimen respecto a la vida rural de México. Cuando todo eso llegó a su fin, cuando los recursos terrestres y humanos se acabaron, llegó, imperial, ya desnuda de todo tapujo, ya toda ella misma y sin más, la violencia…Y luego…el uso de tecnología de fracturación hidráulica para sacarle al fondo de la tierra lo que ya habían extraído de su superficie: la ganancia. (293-294).

Monocultures are succeeded by factories and later the discovery of other natural resources such as oil. Accompanied with these shifts is the political abandonment of the rural poor and a focus on generating business profits, Rivera Garza further posits that these policies lead to “terricidio” meaning “ese daño infligido sobre las superficies vivas de la tierra en nombre de la ganancia”

---

[15] In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (1981) Jameson develops the concept of the political unconscious arguing that narrative always contains an implicit (or unconscious) political dimension even if it does not appear so on the surface level of the text.

(290). In the neoliberal state, financial gain has become the most important factor in political decision making to the detriment of marginalized rural populations and regions.

A Vernacular Landscape Transformed: From Self-Sustaining Agriculture to Consumerism

The dynamics laid out by Rivera Garza are depicted in *Temporada de huracanes*: the inhabitants of La Matosa are abandoned by the state and left at the mercy of whatever money might trickle down from the booming business of the oil fields located just north of the town. Initially, the inhabitants of La Matosa feel certain that the discovery of oil will provide the community with a more stable source of employment and prosperity. However, the jobs never materialize, and corrupt systems ensure the persistence of high levels of insecurity and social inequality. Simultaneously, the vernacular landscape experiences decline due to increased pollution and intensive agricultural practices replacing traditional agrarian practices and institutions. Plastic waste blows into town from the newly constructed highway, clogging the irrigation canals feeding the sugarcane fields. Fundamental revolutionary institutions, such as the *ejido*, still visible in *El llano en llamas*, have completely disappeared from the landscape sketched in the novel, with extensive sugarcane fields swallowing up all the land around La Matosa, preventing the townsfolk from tending their own pieces of land and supporting themselves. The *ejido*, a crucial product of the Revolution, is no longer the backbone of rural communities as the NAFTA agreement and globalization generally undermine domestic markets and prices. The role of the *sindicato*, or trade union, has also decreased, no longer playing its once important role in providing employment to the local workforce. Decades of ongoing corruption, plus the haphazard adoption of neoliberal policies in an effort to feed a booming population and to forestall inflation, contribute to the demise of these revolutionary institutions. Consequently, as industrial agriculture takes over the physical landscape, the local inhabitants

lose their ability to sustain themselves, becoming alienated from their natural surroundings. At the same time, the environment loses its biodiversity, making it more vulnerable to invasive species and environmental disasters.

Although the short stories and the novel share a similar setting in their portrayal of rural Mexico, it is obvious that the landscape has experienced a profound change in the intermittent decades. The vernacular landscapes presented in Rulfo's text arose from a collaborative coexistence between human and more-than-human beings established over the course of generations. The characters studied in "¡Diles que no me maten!" and "La Cuesta de las Comadres" maintained interdependent relationships with their fields, cognizant that the tending of their crops guaranteed mutual survival. However, in *Temporada de huracanes,* the vernacular landscape as defined by Nixon has disappeared. Rural communities no longer develop alongside their natural surroundings. Instead, I argue that pressures, in the form of increased industrialization and large-scale farming, lead to an erasure of vernacular landscapes. As these landscapes fade into obscurity, the self-sustaining capacity of local communities diminishes. In turn, the kind of relationship inhabitants maintain with their local ecosystem changes from a mutual one to a transactional one, creating a further sense of isolation and estrangement. Moreover, a natural disaster in the form of a hurricane ravages the vernacular landscape around La Matosa. The narrator recounts how in "[el] año setenta y ocho, cuando el huracán azotó contra la costa con furia y encono y relámpagos estentóreos tupieron de agua el cielo durante días enteros, anegando los campos y pudriéndolo todo…cuando el cerro se desgajó y se vino abajo con un fragor de tocas y encinos desenraizados y un lodo negro que arrasó con todo hasta derramarse sobre la costa" (24). The hurricane unleashes its fury, leaving behind complete destruction; the mudslide, caused by the saturation of an eroded earth, buries the town

completely. It takes many years before the community is rebuilt in the form of "chozas y tendejones levantados sobre los huesos de los que quedaron enterrados bajo el cerro" (25). The erasure of La Matosa through a natural disaster evokes Macondo's destruction at the end of *Cien años de soledad*, where a hurricane ends a family saga and dreams of modernity betrayed by political excess and turmoil. Perhaps, the rebuilding of La Matosa could be considered a continuation of where *Cien años de soledad* leaves off. With its equally complex modern history, La Matosa is rebuilt on top of bodies never recovered and the place seems to be permeated by death and despair. But the violence of the hurricane and landslide only foreshadow the violent events that characterize the rest of the narrative.

In a place marked by such violence and desolation, language is also affected. Stylistically, the text focuses on creating a unique voice for each character in each chapter. The main chapters follow the perspectives of Yesenia, Munra, Norma and Brando, bringing to the fore their voices with heavy usage of slang, curse words and colloquialisms. In their own way, their speech confirms the character's feeling of alienation and reflects social breakdown. Melchor's writing, like Rulfo's, contains an oral quality with characters directly addressing the reader in their own colloquial expression. However, whereas the vernacular speech of the *campesinos* in *El llano en llamas* coalesces with the vernacular landscape, demonstrating a profound connection with the land (as evidenced by the stories "Diles que no me maten," "En la madrugada," "Es que somos muy pobres," and "La Cuesta de las Comadres"), the characters in *Temporada de huracanes* are estranged from their surrounding landscape. They never speak of the land and when they speak of their town, they use degrading language. For example, Chabela, a prostitute, explains that she came to La Matosa hoping to benefit from the riches of the oil wells discovered nearby. Yet, upon arriving she realizes that "este pueblo estaba todavía más culero" (140) than the place she

left behind. Her speech, along with that of the other characters is littered with curses, verbally reflecting back the physical and emotional violence they all endure. Furthermore, this broken up speech becomes a physical representation on the page of the fragmentation of rural societies and a loss of social cohesion. The dysfunctional relationships that all characters experience with one another and with the local environment reflect this fragmentation and processes of alienation. No-one addresses the land or speaks of it in the way the *campesinos* in Rulfo's text do. This is partly because their survival no longer depends on what they take from the land. None of them tend their own plot of land or work for the Sindicato del Ingenio (Sugar Mill Union) on the sugarcane fields. Instead, all characters are unemployed or work in precarious jobs. Consequently, they are detached from the main economic activities of the town and from the local ecosystem.

Apart from the individual voices of the main characters, the novel also engages with the collective voice. The collective voice, representing the women of La Matosa, frames the narrative. The second chapter, for instance, begins with the phrase, "[l]e decían la Bruja" (13) and is followed by a character sketch of the victim from the townspeople's perspective. This technique is reminiscent of *El llano en llamas* where speakers throughout the stories often invoke the collective voice with the phrase "dicen que" in the telling of their story. In "El chisme como representación histórica de la ausencia en *Temporada de huracanes* de Fernanda Melchor," Jafte Dilean Robles Lomelt argues that this use of the collective voice, and in particular the role of gossip, is a way for marginalized peoples to attain some level of agency: "El único poder que ostentan estos personajes (por ejemplo: el homosexual, el transgénero o la prostituta) es el chisme, al hablar de los otros se apropian de sí mismos, del territorio y de sus circunstancias, recuperando el control que la misma sociedad les ha arrebatado" (438). Gossip provides a

medium through which the disempowered express themselves. Through the chatter, the reader obtains access to a world silenced – or unacknowledged- by official discourse, enabling them to hear the voice of the disenfranchised. On the other hand, I contend that gossip is a feeble weapon because of its superficiality, its fleeting nature and its frequent distortion of the truth. In chapter three, the reader follows Yesenia and gets the first version of events leading up to the murder of the Witch. She tells the reader about her role as caregiver to her ailing grandmother, sisters and cousin Luismi. She then tells the reader about how her grandmother first heard of Luismi taking in a girl from outside of town by the name of Norma, "quién sabe cómo se había enterado del chisme, si nomás cuando le convenía era sorda y seguramente había escuchado a las argüenderas de las Güeras contar que el chamaco se había juntado con una muchacha de fuera y que se le había llevado a vivir al jacal ese que había levantado detrás de la casa de su chingada madre" (36). Yesenia's grandmother, who dotes on Luismi, discovers the latest development and plagues her granddaughter for details. Yesenia in turn is deeply annoyed because she sees Luismi as worthless and only a source of more work for her. Through the whispers in town, the news quickly spreads about Luismi and his new girlfriend. However, while the people are speculating about the relationship between Luismi and Norma, the stories never touch on the personal trauma behind Norma's arrival.

The gossip drowns out the true and painful story of each individual character. Only because of the use of free indirect speech, does the reader uncover the truth as the narrative progresses and follows different perspectives in each chapter. Chapter five is told from Norma's perspective and thereby explains how she ended up in La Matosa. Thirteen-year-old Norma, sexually abused by her stepfather, has run away from home upon discovering that she is pregnant with his child. Her shame combined with a difficult relationship with her mother make her feel

unable to tell anyone about her predicament. Yet, at various points she wants to tell people what happened to her. Upon arriving in La Matosa, she wonders if she should call her mother. She almost crosses the street to a hotel to make "una sola llamada, y entonces se comunicaría con su madre allá en Ciudad del Valle y le diría dónde estaba y por qué había huido; le contaría todo y su madre seguramente le colgaría el teléfono y Norma no tendría más opción que volver caminando a la carretera y pedir un aventón hasta el Puerto, para llevar a cabo su plan original" (116-117). Her original plan was to travel to the port and commit suicide by jumping into the sea. Norma imagines her mother's angry response, demonstrating a broken relationship and inability to communicate. This breakdown of language, accompanied by a lack of honesty, characterizes many relationships in this novel, where most characters feel lost and abandoned by those who are supposed to love them: mothers, absent fathers, and estranged family members. Only by reading the internal dialogues does the reader gain access to these personal struggles and cruel truths. As the story unfolds, showing how Luismi ends up killing the Witch, the characters are swept away in a wave of violence, just like the landslide swept away La Matosa several decades earlier.

In their narrative style, Rulfo's and Melchor's works make a serious attempt at representing the voice of marginalized populations, and while the oral quality of Rulfo's writing echoes in Melchor's novel, the content of the conversations has undergone a dramatic transformation. As demonstrated earlier in the chapter, the discourse of the *campesinos* in *El llano en llamas* contained profound environmental knowledge and expressed concern for the condition of the natural landscape. *Campesinos* are aware that their survival depends on weather conditions, the state of the land, and their capacity to effectively work the land. Thus, the land can be seen as a respected working partner. However, this awareness is completely absent in *Temporada de huracanes.* People live parallel to their surroundings, disconnected from their

environment since their wellbeing and survival no longer depend on cultivated produce but a crumbling social infrastructure and a state failing to provide the security and stability people need to be successful. The topics of conversation revolve around social and economic concerns such as their relationships with other people, the phantasmal wealth of the oil wells, as well as the increased violence from corrupt police and drug cartels. Although surrounded by sugarcane fields, the inhabitants of La Matosa are mentally far removed from that world and as incapable of communicating with the natural world as with each other. The voice of nature, silenced in *El llano en llamas* by the official landscape, has now simply become absent, leaving people feeling alienated from their natural surroundings.

Although industry and market pressures cause the vernacular landscape to fade to the background, one representative of the landscape remains: the Witch. The Witch is the only character who maintains a close relationship with the land, venturing into the hills in search for herbs used in her potions. While describing these excursions the novel reveals the many historical layers present within the landscape:

> había unas yerbas que crecían en el cerro, casi en la punta, entre las viejas ruinas que según los del gobierno eran las tumbas de los antiguos, los que habitaron antes estas tierras, los que llegaron primero, antes incluso que los gachupines, que desde sus barcos vieron todo aquello y dijeron matanga, estas tierras son de nosotros y del reino de Castilla, y los antiguos, los pocos que quedaban, tuvieron que agarrar pa´ la sierra y lo perdieron todo. (15)

Nature is described as both physically and temporarily distant. “Los antiguos” are none other than the first peoples who lived in the area. However, from the tone of the passage it can be deduced that this knowledge is lost to the local population. In the narration, they rely on what

"los del gobierno" told them about the ruins found in the hills located beyond the horizon of the sugarcane fields. Overall, this description speaks of loss: loss of land, culture, and autonomy. Tracing the history from precontact America to today, one sees how the current monotonous sugarcane fields erase the comings and goings of previous peoples, and most importantly, how they obscure the roots of the culture that once flourished there. The inhabitants of La Matosa, severed from this historical awareness and alienated from their natural surroundings, thus live like strangers in their own homes.

Interestingly, in this context, the Witch, as outsider to the community, maintains a tight bond with the natural environment. The reader is told that, "la tal Bruja, que se daba los grandes aires de señora pero no era más que una güila que don Manolo sacó de un bohío en la selva para tener con quién desahogar sus más bajos instintos en la soledad de la llanura" (15). With the use of the word "bohío," a Taíno word signifying a hut made from reeds and palm leaves, the text alludes to the Caribbean origins of the Witch and the rural traditional knowledge that she carries with her. Additionally, the text implies that her meeting with Don Manolo was a violent encounter. Don Manolo, following his "más bajos instintos," dragged her out of the jungle to become his lover, thereby committing an act of sexual and environmental violence. A lack of further details shrouds the Witch in mystery, and because of her wild origins in an exotic rainforest far away and her knowledge of natural herbs, the townspeople equate her with the wilderness.

Upon the death of her husband, the Witch uses her traditional knowledge as healer to help the poor women of La Matosa. Her presence quietly pervades the life of the town through gossip and her remedies. A physical reminder of her work is found in Sarajuana's roadside bar, a dive where truckers stop for a meal and to dance the night away. The text describes the bar with

> el chirrido del ventilador sobre el techo, rajando con esfuerzo la calina que sus cuerpos despedían y la grabadora, *za-ca-ti-to pal conjeo*, tronando sola junto a la candela, *tiernito-verde voy a cortar*, frente a la estampa de Martín Caballero, *pa llevarle al conejtio,* la sábila atada con el listón empapado en agua bendita, *que ya-empiezá desesperar, sí señor, cómo no,* y aguardiente de caña, pa conjurar las envidias, explicaba la Bruja, pa devolver el mal a quien lo merece, a quien lo envía. (22)

A popular love song filled with sexual inuendo plays in the background, with a fan trying to bring some relief to the sweating bodies below. The bar's décor displays a mix of cultures common to the area; from the image of the Catholic patron saint of innkeepers, Martín Caballero, to the aloe vera sprinkled with holy water and the local moonshine made of sugarcane to ward off evil. The aloe vera is prepared by the Witch who explains to Sarajuana that it exorcises jealousy and returns evil to those who deserve it. Unfortunately, all these tokens are insufficient at keeping evil at bay. Although the Witch provides the community with invaluable services, since many cannot afford the doctor in the next town, her role as a traditional healer and her connection to the natural world raise suspicions. In this aspect, the novel reveals a contradiction where the community, disconnected from and distrustful of its natural environment and heritage, simultaneously relies on it through the Witch's potions. After the landslide, the Witch disappears, but her role is taken over by her daughter, la Bruja chica, whose identity quickly morphs into that of her mother. The townspeople reserve an equal amount of suspicion for the daughter because she does not adhere to the social norms, nor does she earn a living in a conventional way. In their article, "De torcidos y embrujos: Temporada de huracanes de Fernanda Melchor," Gloria Luz Godínez Rivas and Luis Román Nieto suggest that this suspicion and subsequent marginalization arises from the fact that the Witch does not participate in a society dominated by capitalist

conceptions of work and whose system "rechaza a las personas, particularmente a las mujeres, que pueden sanar animales, curar vecinos, asistir partos o evitar embarazos sin título ni salario" (62). Women who practice a profession not sanctioned by capitalist structures are avoided and mistrusted. Thus, the Witch, who lacks an official title and education, is viewed as suspect. Additionally, the reader discovers that the Witch is queer, a factor further compounding her rejection by the village. In chapter four, the reader follows the perspective of Munra, Luismi's stepfather, and discovers that the Witch is a biological man. Munra whispers to himself:

> nadie le había dicho que la tal Bruja era en realidad un hombre, un señor como de cuarenta o cuarenta y cinco años de edad en aquel entonces, vestido con ropas negras de mujer, y las uñas bien largas y pintadas también de negro, espantosas, y aunque llevaba puesta una cosa como velo que le tapaba la cara nomás con escucharle la voz y verle las manos uno se daba cuenta de que se trataba de un homosexual… (92)

Munra's immediate reaction is one of revulsion and disgust. Despite all the gossip and chatter, the phrase, "nadie le había dicho" points to a truth left unspoken, once again reminding the reader of the incomplete nature of the collective voice. Furthermore, this description detailing the Witch's appearance gives the reader some clues to her identity. The use of the veil suggests a person who, while striking an unusual figure, tries to hide from the world. Insecure, the Witch retreats to her crumbling mansion and has the world come seeking for help; in her domain she can control and dictate the terms. These elements come to the fore in chapter five told from Brando's perspective; he describes the raucous parties thrown by the Witch. Yet, the reader never gets closer to the murder victim, relying fully on what the narrator and characters say about her.

Doubly marginalized, the narrative silences the Witch by denying her a voice. While the story unfolds around the Witch's murder, placing her at the novel's centre, the reader never hears her speak. Rivas and Nieto explain that:

> la protagonista de esta suerte de novela negra, un cuerpo inerte en la mayoría de las páginas, nunca se expresa en primera persona, no tiene voz ni nombre, es la Bruja, un personaje que se halla en los márgenes de lo social, no sólo por su condición identitaria, sino también por la región esotérica que habita. La Bruja se convierte en la síntesis y el reflejo de un entorno decadente, caótico y gore. (68)

In their article, Nieto and Rivas argue that the Witch is violently murdered because of her precarious outsider status in society, a society that is becoming increasingly violent and corrupt. Additionally, I contend that the murder of the Witch signifies a further severing from the environment and loss of traditional knowledge. With the Witch's death, the townspeople lose the last person through whose presence they maintained a connection with the surrounding landscape. As soon as the community learns about the murder, they descend on the decrepit mansion. The collective voice tells the reader, "[d]icen que muchos se metieron a esa casa a buscar el tesoro después de su muerte. Que nomás se enteraron de quién era el cuerpo que apareció flotando en el canal de riego para lanzarse con palas y picos y marros con los que partieron el suelo y las paredes y cavaron verdaderas trincheras, buscando puertas falsas, cámaras secretas" (215). The mansion is destroyed, leaving only a shell with gaping holes where the windows used to be. The vernacular landscape disintegrates as the people who could speak to the composition of the local ecosystem either leave or, in the case of the Witch, are killed.

Residual Landscapes and Ruins

The Witch's house, in its various stages of decay, is reminiscent of the ghost town of Comala in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. In both texts the ruins signal the loss and abandonment felt by the local communities, although a difference between these two texts is that while only ghosts occupy Comala, La Matosa with its decaying buildings and in particular the Witch's mansion, is still inhabited. I contend that this changed landscape could be called a residual landscape. This term, coined by Canadian photographer, Edward Burtynsky, indicates a landscape dramatically altered by industry, leading to a complete erasure of previously existing land contours or vegetation. A residual landscape is a marginalized one where:

> industrial process…has transformed a primal landscape, and then once forgotten, it begins to turn into something between the natural landscape and a man-imprinted landscape. They become the leftovers after the banquet, residual territories; not quite dead, as they regenerate, they begin to generate a new life, but it is a compromised life. (Campbell 42)

The sugarcane fields surrounding La Matosa testify to this process; remnants of a colonial industry now converted into expansive monoculture fields, they obliterate any other landscape features. The small village, rebuilt after the landslide, expanded to the newly constructed highway with a series of:

> cantinas, posadas, congales y puteros en donde los choferes y los operadores y los comerciantes de paso y los jornaleros se detenían para escapar un rato de la monotonía de aquella carretera flanqueada de cañas, kilómetros y kilómetros de cañas y pastos y carrizos que tupían la tierra, desde el borde mismo del asfalto hasta las faldas de la sierra al oeste, o hasta la costa abrupta del mar siempre furioso en aquel punto, al este. (25)

The fields spread out for miles and miles, covering the whole area from the coast to the foot of the mountain range. Despite the large scale of the outstretched fields, the image is oppressive in the monotony it describes, as if there is no room for any variation while the monocultures compact the earth, not leaving any room for air. This oppressive atmosphere is later reinforced by the frequent descriptions of the suffocating heat that builds as the story continues, leading up to explosive event of the murder itself. I posit that this homogenous landscape, apart from the obvious ecological repercussions such as soil compaction and loss of biodiversity, translates into a change in the kind of relationship people maintain with the land.

The social implications of industrial agriculture reveal themselves in the novel's description of the sugarcane harvest and the construction of the new highway connecting the oil wells to the coast. The sugarcane harvest is performed by wage labourers who, right after the last harvest, "enfundaban el machete sin siquiera enjugarlo y corrían hasta el borde de la carretera a quemar el dinero ganado con el sudor y las fibras de sus cuerpos exhaustos" (27) in Sarajuana's roadside bar. The young men working the fields abandon their work as soon as possible, drowning their misery in the tepid beer served at Sarajuana's. Any profound relationship with the environment is absent here, complicated by the low wages, monotonous work and lack of agency of the workers themselves. Under these conditions, the relationship maintained with the land is strictly transactional. Meanwhile, the highway constructed to connect the oil wells with the port on the coast further cuts up the landscape, bringing with it unprecedented levels of pollution, another side-effect of the ongoing processes of modernization. Initially, the inhabitants of La Matosa hoped that the increased industrial activity would mean increased chances of stable employment and more monetary wealth. However, these hopes are quickly dashed and replaced by another type of residue, garbage both human and more-than-human.

Therefore, a residual landscape alludes to deep levels of social and ecological inequality produced by current capitalist systems. Ecologically, inequality manifests itself in the existence of sacrifice zones; areas deemed acceptable to sacrifice and subject to damaging extractive processes. These areas are places far removed from the centres of power, such as La Matosa. They are geographically distant from important metropolitan areas and as such are deemed as disposable. This attitude impacts social inequality, visible in the lack of investment and healthy infrastructure. In the novel, the result is the sorry collection of shacks that makes up La Matosa, "un pueblo rascuache" (21), a place that must make do with the few scraps that are given to them. Despite the obstacles, people try to create a sense of place and maintain some agency in constructing a place they can call home. For example, Luismi scrounges together materials to build a one-room shack with a roof made of corrugated steel, affectionately calling it his *casita*. When Norma first sees it she decsribes it as a "caseta de madera que él presumió haber construido con sus propias manos, un refugio" (121). Norma, fleeing from her home and abuse, sees this little shack as a safe space and Luismi himself is very proud of having his own place, although it is poorly suited to the environment and always sweltering hot inside. Chabela, Luismi's mother, is also proud of her house built with her earnings and stuffed with an expansive wardrobe of cheap dresses. Their efforts speak to a need for certainty and a need for rootedness which the possession of a house symbolizes. Yet, I contend that the alienation from their surroundings along with lack of social support from the state undermine their efforts. The houses, in their decrepit state, mock the stability mother and son hope to obtain. Moreover, other characters in the novel describe Luismi's house in pejorative terms, breaking down what Luismi is trying to build within his limited capacity. Yesenia calls it a "jacal" (36) and Brando, who suppresses his homosexuality and secretly has a crush on Luismi, calls it a "choza mugrienta"

(188). These clashing perspectives demonstrate a community in continuous strife; its social cohesion is torn to tatters as people cling to the little they have while verbally tearing down the possessions and personalities of others.

Garbage and cheap consumer elements also crowd out the vernacular landscape. The residue of a consumerist society infiltrates every living space in La Matosa from the cheap plastic figurines that litter Brando's mother's house to the bags upon bags of waste strewn around the Witch's decrepit mansion described as:

> un cuchitril lleno de cachivaches y cajas de cartón ya podridos, y bolsas de basura llenas de papeles y trapos y rafia y olotes y bolas de pelo caspiento y polvo y cartones de leche y botellas de plástico vacías, pura pinche basura, puras pinches porquerías que los abusadores aquellos pisoteaban y rompían en su intento por abrir la puerta…. (32)

The absolute squalor of the Witch's house, buried in the midst of monoculture sugarcane fields, physically manifests the profound neglect suffered by the inhabitants of La Matosa on the part of the Mexican State. The imagery of trash includes the people who live in residual landscapes, pointing to a general commodification of life. The narrative repeatedly compares the townspeople to the garbage that surrounds them. For example, the young women arriving in La Matosa searching for work are "muchachas gastadas antes del tiempo, arrancadas desde quién sabe dónde por el mismo viento que enredaba las bolsas de plástico en los cañales" (30). The description objectifies the girls, equating them to the plastic bags blown into town from the highway.

This depreciation and objectification of life in all its forms is a direct consequence of the processes of neoliberal modernization. Gisela Heffes observes that modernization in Latin

America has led to a “desdiferenciación entre los bordes y fronteras que separan lo humano de lo no humano, el sujeto del objeto y… entre vida y muerte” (79). An erasure between people as subject and object makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Especially, if they are unable to contribute to the economy in ways the system approves, they are cast aside. Thus, in the context of the novel, with the majority of the characters unemployed or situated outside capitalist structures, the system considers them as useless as the junk they own. Capitalist systems, by placing such importance on productivity and monetary value, objectify all entities -- both human and more-than-human beings-- that participate in the market.

Within this context, both the State and industry ignore marginalized populations, casting them aside along with the garbage. Zygmunt Bauman describes how the phenomenon of disposable humans comes about:

> The production of human waste, or more correctly, wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of order building … and of economic progress. (5)

Bauman argues that modernization, with its goal of creating order out of chaos, has given rise to a category of people who do not fit within social norms. Consequently, they become superfluous and are cast out, transformed into human waste. A system that values economic progress above all else, inevitably begins to attach monetary value to everything and everybody. Those who are not productive, in that they do not contribute to the generating of monetary wealth, have no value in this system and are cast out. The unemployed, social outcasts and people working precarious jobs all form part of the human waste created by the modern project. In this transactional society,

genuine loving relationships are absent and dysfunctional ones abound. Norma is at the mercy of an abusive stepfather, Luismi and Chabela maintain their distance from one another and although Brando and Luismi are supposed to be friends, Brando fantasizes about killing Luismi. This is further exemplified by the continuous abusive language characters use to describe each other. Munra calls his stepson "el pinche Luismi" (63) and Chabela, his mother, also refers to him in the same terms (145). At the end of the novel, filled with hatred, Brando calls his friend "el hijo de su puta madre maricón de mierda de Luismi" (213), betraying their supposed friendship. These characters treat those that they are supposed to support as trash, making a loving and caring relationship impossible. The destruction of family bonds and negation of friendship translate into a complete inability to construct any sort of nourishing connections that allow a person to grow. Instead, relationships --just like nature-- are commodified and purely transactional.

The socioeconomic instability surrounding La Matosa instills the inhabitants with fear. However, the text underlines the irony of their misplaced distrust. While they gossip about the Witch, they do not question authority figures. For example, Munra, Chabela's unemployed and disabled husband, proudly recounts his recent role in a local election campaign. He receives money for every person that he is able to bring to political rallies, and his image is included on a campaign billboard. It shows the candidate, Pérez Prieto, pushing Munra in a wheelchair, highlighting his disability. The campaign slogan is "Pérez Prieto sí cumple," and Munra in fact believes that Prieto "de hecho había cumplido porque la silla de ruedas se la regalaron después de tomar la foto" (73). He is oblivious to the fact that the campaign took advantage of his disability to make Prieto look good, not to help Munra who is now once again unemployed but the beneficiary of the wheelchair. Meanwhile, Luismi happily believes his lover, an engineer

who works for the oil wells, in his promises to provide Luismi with a good job. The job never materializes, leaving Luismi clinging to the hope of obtaining stable employment. On the other hand, despite all the vulgar things said about the Witch, this figure repeatedly helps out people in desperate need and often doesn't charge the women who cannot afford to pay for her services. Yet, with the Witch's status as an outcast and her connections with the supernatural, people continue to treat her with suspicion. By exploring these tensions, the novel uncovers how people feeling alienated within their community and environment become easy targets to authority figures who use their credentials to exploit marginalized populations and spaces.

Official Landscape in *Temporada de huracanes*

At the same time, the official landscape fades from view, destabilized under a combination of factors from internal corruption to growing organized crime. Above, I argued that the stories in *El llano en llamas* clearly connect the official landscape with the vision of the State. However, several decades later, this vision is undermined by new forces fragmenting the landscape and accompanying power dynamic. While remnants of the official landscape continue to leave their mark on rural communities and ecosystems, they no longer hold the power once ascribed to them. As seen above, industrial byproducts emerging as residual landscapes dominate. Furthermore, the union, before a cornerstone in the ideology of revolutionary Mexico, now plays a limited socioeconomic role, undermined by corruption. [16] Although the novel depicts a sugarcane mill union slowly acquiring more land, physically dominating the area through their expansive fields, the union itself holds very little value for the local population. The mill

[16] Cárdenas organized the unions which continued to be a key component supported by subsequent PRI governments. Only in the 80s, as the Mexican government slowly moved away from Mexico's revolutionary ideology, did the power of the unions begin to decline.

employs none of the characters or their families, nor does it invest in the social or physical infrastructure of the village. The text only mentions that the union pays Don Manolo, and later the Witch, to rent their lands. Ultimately, the union plays a purely symbolic role in the community, representing Mexico's revolutionary past. Since then, other powers are infiltrating the landscape, thwarting the power of the state.

The new official landscape is controlled by forces largely invisible to the populace of La Matosa. Industry has a phantasmal presence, influencing the life of the community from afar. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh writes about fiction's inability to portray the accelerating climate crisis. In a section dedicated to fossil fuel extraction, he writes, "[f]or the arts, oil is inscrutable in a way that coal never was: the energy that petrol generates is easy to aestheticize— as in images and narratives of roads and cars— but the substance itself is not. Its sources are mainly hidden from sight, veiled by technology, and its workers are hard to mythologize, being largely invisible" (74-75). Oil, a substance traveling through pipes, remains hidden from view, and although this invisibility is problematic when trying to create a harrowing tale around climate change, its phantasmal quality is crucial in *Temporada de huracanes* because it translates directly into how the local population experiences the presence of oil near their town as a non-event. The novel repeatedly emphasizes how the wealth generated in the fields never translates into material improvements for the surrounding communities. The only sign of change is the construction of the new highway allowing quicker access to the oil field.[17] La Matosa itself is "plenamente invadido de fulanas y pirujas venidas desde quién sabe dónde, atraídas por

[17] The building of this infrastructure reminds one of the railways that were constructed at great speed throughout remote areas of Central and South America to transport raw materials to seaside ports for export. It is also reminiscent of the isolated town of Macondo in *Cien años de soledad* suddenly receiving a railroad that later becomes the site of the banana massacre. This fictional episode alludes to an historic event in Colombia where in 1928 the Colombian army killed striking workers of the American United Fruit Company.

el rastro de billetes que las pipas del petróleo dejaban caer a su paso por la carretera" (30). Opportunists and people desperate to improve their living conditions flock to the town, attracted by the "rastro de billetes." Unfortunately, the wealth is only a "rastro" and the townspeople have to contend with the increasing violence invading their community. The people working in the oil fields exploit the local population. For example, the engineer with whom Luismi was so infatuated, meets Brando and together they get drunk. Brando then recounts how "el pinche ruco maricón lanzó un suspiro y se volvió hacia Brando y le pidió, con una sonrisa coqueta, que si por favor se bajaba los pantalones porque tenía ganas de mamarle el culo" (190). The engineer forces himself on Brando, who in response punches him in the face. Sexual violence morphs into physical violence and is further reflected in the hostile landscape surrounding the town, where the heat scorches the sugarcane fields.

These fields, initially a product of the official landscape, reveal the social and political tensions lurking beneath the monotonous view. The fields are surrounded by

> matas y matas y matorrales achaparrados cubiertos de enredaderas que en la época de lluvias crecían a velocidades escabrosas, que amenazaban con tragarse las casas y los cultivos y que los hombres mantenían a raya a punta de machete, encorvados a las orillas de la carretera, en los márgenes del río, entre los surcos de la labor. (26)

Wild weeds, in their voracious growth, threaten to swallow both the sugarcane and the town, becoming an ecological reflection of a fragmenting landscape, threatened by external forces. Like Hamlet's weedy garden, alluding to the perverted state of affairs in the Kingdom of Denmark, these weed infested fields indicate the compromised nature of the Mexican State unable to properly support its citizens and ecosystems. The image, in its violence, foreshadows

the harrowing events, which like the weeds, occur at "velocidades escabrosas," threatening La Matosa and its surroundings.

With an absent State and a corrupt police force, another presence moves into the region vying for power: namely, the Narcos. These illegal criminal organizations further undermine the power of the State, leaving local communities at the mercy of their violence. At various points the narrative describes the building of a storm, hinting at the violence to come. After the murder of the Witch, events further escalate as the narrator recounts how two Narco gangs, known as Grupo Sombra and Raza Nueva, clash, struggling to gain control over the area. The collective voice takes over the narrative, as people in La Matosa speculate about what will happen next:

> Dicen que la plaza anda caliente, que ya no tardan en mandar a los marinos a poner orden en la comarca. Dicen que el calor está volviendo loca a la gente, que cómo es posible que a estas alturas de mayo no haya llovido una sola gota. Que la temporada de huracanes se viene fuerte. Que las malas vibras son las culpables de tanta desgracia: decapitados, descuartizados, encobijados, embolsados que aparecen en los recodos de los caminos o en fosas cavadas con prisa en los terrenos que rodean las comunidades. (216-217)

Ironically *plaza* is the public square, an area supposedly subject to state surveillance for the benefit of society. But in the context of the novel, the word *plaza* means a region controlled by a Narco gang, and the narrative's use of the word points to the fact that the government no longer has authority in this area now taken over by illegal criminal organizations. Meanwhile, the suffocatingly hot weather, accompanied by drought, drives people crazy and augments the violence experienced by everyone, both human and more-than-human. Thus, the novel shows how the degradation of both the vernacular and official landscape result in worsening chaos with marginalized populations and landscapes paying the highest price with a loss of stability and

security. I would also suggest that while the official landscape is hindered by corruption and ineffective policies, the novel shows that the complete absence of one results in worsening chaos, signalling a need for local (vernacular landscape) and national (official landscape) stakeholders to work together to ensure the best outcome for both the human and more-than-human world.

To conclude, it has now been well over a century since the end of the Mexican Revolution. While the official state narrative maintains a victorious revolutionary discourse, *El llano en llamas* and *Temporada de huracanes* illustrate a contradicting reality. I have argued that their portrayal of rural Mexico uncovers a failing revolution, neglecting its original promises to the populace and thereby leaving communities struggling for survival. In addition, I posited that the texts connect society's failings with an eroding landscape, underscoring the interrelationships between the human and more-than-human. This is evident in the stories of *El llano en llamas* with characters traversing devastated landscapes or attempting to cultivate crops on eroded hillsides, trying to maintain a vernacular landscape. However, the official landscape designed by state bureaucrats disconnected from the local realities faced by the *campesinos,* fragments the vernacular landscape. Moreover, the processes of slow violence begun centuries earlier as an indirect consequence of the Spanish conquest, run as an undercurrent throughout the land, wearing away at the farmland. Although *Temporada de huracanes* is set decades later, it's narrative style and thematic development run parallel to those established in Rulfo's short stories. In the intermittent time, the signing of the NAFTA agreement and globalization would supposedly bring more wealth to all. However, the novel shows how neoliberal policies further marginalize rural populations and landscapes. The vernacular landscape still existing in *El llano en llamas* is almost indiscernible in Melchor's text portraying a gradual transformation into a residual landscape. The absent State has left a power vacuum, occupied by a phantasmal business

presence and slowly taken over by narco gangs. Despite the flaws of the official landscape as shown by the short stories, the novel suggests that the complete absence of the state can lead to a worsening situation for both the human and more-than-human world. Surrounded by violence, abandoned by the government and trapped in their own poverty, the characters are completely alienated from each other and their natural surroundings. Given the growing climate crisis and the increasing fragility of farmland after decades of modern agriculture, this analysis confirms the need for serious and urgent reconsideration on several fronts: first, the serious repercussions of ineffective policy fueled by the disconnect between rural and urban populations; second, the social and ecological implications of political decision making; and third, an investigation into the kind of relationship needed to sustain a healthy humanity and environment.

Guatemala's Road to Restoration through Holistic Reconciliation in *Hombres de maíz* by Miguel Ángel Asturias and *El país de Toó* by Rodrigo Rey Rosa

Scenes of densely forested misty mountains with milpas at their feet recur throughout the novels *Hombres de maíz* (1949) by Miguel Ángel Asturias and *El país de Toó* (2018) by Rodrigo Rey Rosa. Both texts portray the western highlands of Guatemala, delving into the social and ecological world of the Mayan communities. These isolated communities resisted the Spanish conquest for centuries, first through armed conflict and eventually through the creation of a syncretic culture and society where the Mayan cosmovision continues to thrive alongside Catholic institutions and capitalist systems. When the Guatemalan Revolution (1944-1954) brought ten years of democratic rule to the country, political leaders strove to transform Guatemala into a modern progressive nation along the lines of the United States of America and other western democratic nations. In their efforts to modernize the country, leaders dismissed or ignored the indigenous practices and belief systems, focusing on fighting economic poverty by implementing western style policies. The most controversial piece of new legislation, the Agrarian Reform (1950), caused significant domestic and international turmoil, leading to the intervention of the US through a CIA coup, bringing the revolution to an end. Subsequent decades saw increasing violence and to this day the country struggles with high level of poverty, corruption, and impunity.

In their works Asturias and Rey Rosa seek to acknowledge the Mayan communities, recognizing that the cultural bedrock of the nation lies in the indigenous population, which, while marginalized, greatly shapes the cultural fabric of Guatemala. Deeply knowledgeable about Mayan culture through the study of the *Popol Wuj,* Asturias was excited by the potential of the revolution to effect change but also realized that the approach taken by presidents Juan José

Arévalo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Árbenz (1951-1954) would conflict with the traditional ways of life in rural communities. I suggest that the thematic development and style of *Hombres de maíz* reflect the author's concerns with the repercussions of free market economics on rural societies and environments. In broad terms, the novel tells a tale of resistance and reconciliation; resistance against capitalist systems favoured by the governmental administration and a holistic reconciliation recognizing the roles culture and ecology play in securing and sustaining cosmological equilibrium. It calls into question the validity of capitalist systems where the sacred entity of corn is turned into a commodity, thus alienating people from their land and culture. The novel, divided into six seemingly separate parts united through a thematic development following the sowing and harvesting of corn, takes place in an unnamed country clearly based on Guatemala. The first part begins in the mid 1800s and the story ends in its present day, the 1940s. In each part, an omniscient narrator follows a different protagonist until all story lines come together in the final meeting of the main characters, namely the blind pedlar Goyo Yic, his wife María Tecún and the Postman Nicho Aquino.

Decades later, similar themes echo in *El país de Toó.* The neocolonial period, which served as a backdrop to *Hombres de maíz,* paved the way for neoliberal systems and the beginning of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where humanity becomes an emerging geological force. These dramatic changes necessitate a cultural and socioeconomic transformation as the current systems degrade ecosystems at an accelerated pace. Set in a fictional Central American Republic in the early 2000s, once again clearly based on Guatemala, the Rey Rosa novel argues for resisting the status quo and the need for social and ecological reconciliation in order to restore fractured relationships. The main characters, all *ladino,* undergo a near death experience and decide to unite with the indigenous community of Toó in its fight

against foreign resource extraction companies.[18] In each chapter, an omniscient narrator follows a different person, allowing the narrative to delve into character development while exploring the political and social context of each personage. Through this varied panorama, where the narrator enters the minds of corrupt politicians, activists and innocent bystanders, the novel provides a detailed portrait of peoples' motivations and the factors leading to a successful resistance against corruption and impunity.

In my analysis of *Hombres de maíz* and *El país de Toó,* I will bring the two novels into dialogue with each other, exploring the thematic and stylistic interplay between the texts while also evaluating how certain plot elements in *El país de Toó* can be seen as a contemporary expansion of ideas already present in *Hombres de maíz*; mainly the role indigenous communities play in guiding their country toward social and ecological reconciliation. Furthermore, both texts protest the abuses of the capitalist system on a local and international level, clamouring for Guatemala to maintain its sovereignty for the benefit of its people and ecosystems. This protest is anchored in the Mayan cosmovision with the *Popol Wuj* serving as a foundational text. Interestingly, both novels are also set in the same geographical area of Guatemala. Although neither text explicitly mentions the country, place names clearly indicate that the stories unfold in the Western Guatemalan highlands. The sacred place, the María Tecún ridge, where the character Nicho Aquino, the postman, undergoes a dramatic transformation features prominently throughout *Hombres de maíz*. This ridge is located north of Lake Atitlán and slightly to the east of where most of the action happens in *El país de Toó.*

---

[18] *Ladino* is a term used in Guatemala to describe a person of mixed ancestry who lives in the city versus their indigenous counterpart who lives in the countryside. Historically, *ladinos* formed part of the urban middle class and saw themselves as superior to indigenous peoples.

Through a comparative reading, situated in the historical context of each work, I demonstrate how many of the preoccupations and ideas present in *Hombres de maíz* are reinforced in *El país de Toó.* The former foresees problems that re-emerge in the latter in terms of the continued exploitation of indigenous peoples and their lands, causing further deterioration of ecological and social rights as well as the physical degradation of ecosystems. The fight against capitalist systems initiated in *Hombres de maíz* still rages in *El país de Toó.* Adopting an ecocritical perspective, my analysis underscores the linkages between social and ecological well-being, investigating how true reconciliation can only occur when both the human and more-than-human are embedded in the process. In my analysis of *Hombres de maíz,* I engage with the concept of ecological thought and the mesh, terms proposed by ecocritic Timothy Morton, to explore how the novel is structurally and thematically ecocritical, allowing marginalized human and more-than-human beings to become active participants. Connecting these factors, I discuss how the magical realist mode of the novel facilitates the breaking down of barriers between nature and culture, allowing the environment to become an active force in the plot. *El país de Toó* is initially realist in tone until it acquires fable-like overtones in its conclusion, with a clear distinction between good and evil. Furthermore, through detailed descriptions of degraded environments and pollution, the novel places itself in the Anthropocene. By exploring how the novel represents the Anthropocene, I argue that the need for inclusion of different perspectives outside of western ideologies has become more urgent. Harnessing the concept of indigeneity and world-making described by Mary Louise Pratt, I explore how Rey Rosa's text forms part of a movement advocating for indigenous communities to claim their rightful place in national and international debates on climate change and the future of the planet. I posit that the novel presents alternative ways through which communities can organize themselves in its portrayal of

parallel governing systems, Mayan and Western. This organization facilitates processes of social and ecological reconciliation or, as I will call it, holistic reconciliation. Reading the two novels together, one can see that concerns raised by Asturias have only become more acute and that both works urge the reader to question commonly held assumptions around the role of nature and rural societies in capitalist and neoliberal systems. Despite being written in different eras, I argue that the novels arrive at the same conclusion that destructive capitalist systems need to be replaced by more empathetic ways of being and living in the world as indigenous peoples around the world have been advocating for decades.

Guatemala's History Concerning Land Management, Revolution, and the CIA

In pre-contact central America, Mayan communities mainly managed their lands communally. In his book *La reforma agraria de Arbenz en Guatemala* (1992), Jesús García Añoveros explains that,

> [l]a casi totalidad de la tierra era poseída comunalmente por los linajes de los vasallos, que comprendían la mayoría absoluta de la población. Los linajes, que estaban formados por grupos de personas vinculadas jerárquicamente por razones de parentesco con un jefe como cabeza, integraban los Calpules, que poseían un determinado espacio de tierra, en una especie de copropiedad. La tierra se dividía en parcelas y era entregada a cada una de las familias del linaje para su usufructo y cultivo personal. (12)

Land was organized according to family lineages and worked collectively. During harvest season part of the crop was allocated to tribute and the rest kept for the family to consume or trade. After the conquest, the Laws of the Indies (1542) continued to provide some protection for these

communal lands.[19] However, from the moment of conquest until now this system of land management has been under repeated attack.

After the conquest, conquistadors acquired land under the *encomienda* system, a system developed to reward them for their services to the Spanish Crown. This led to the seizure of vast tracts of indigenous lands which were then grouped into large estates. Over the centuries, this system led to *latifundismo*, whereby a small number of landowners owned most of the arable land. *Latifundismo* increased dramatically with the liberal reforms of the late 1800s. Independence from Spain in 1821 meant that the indigenous communities lost their key protector, the Crown, who through the Laws of the Indies had been legally bound to protect their land rights. Keen to develop the land and increase agricultural exports, the liberal elite viewed indigenous ways of land tenure as backward and unprofitable. The new liberal regime rolled out a series of reforms resulting in a dramatic increase of large estates focused on producing monoculture crops, such as coffee and cotton, for export. The indigenous communities in turn were pushed farther into rural areas with poor soil quality, far away from urban centres. García Añoveros affirms that the "gran perdedora de la reforma liberal fue la propiedad comunitaria indígena a favor de la propiedad privada" (43), consequentially making it more difficult for indigenous people to sustain themselves. García Añoveros also explains that from this moment forward tensions between Indians and *ladinos* begin to increase, transforming into growing levels of racial segregation which continue to plague the country (47). The distrust between the *ladinos* and indigenous populations grew, as competition for arable land increased. These tense

---

[19] These laws came about in an effort to regulate the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Spanish Crown. According to the Laws of the Indies, Indigenous peoples were subjects to the Spanish Crown and could therefore not be enslaved. Furthermore, the laws recognized the communal lands held by Indigenous communities.

relationships would play a major role in the civil war in the 80s and continue to plague the country to this day.

In *Gift of the Devil* (1984), Jim Handy explains how, in the face of continuous pressure, communities found ways to resist complete assimilation by external forces. Despite the horrific impact of the conquest where Indian communities were almost wiped off the map by disease and violence, the survivors came together to create a new society combining religion with a political and social system that promoted group solidarity against outside forces (30). Furthermore, despite the Catholic Church's best efforts at evangelization, the religious fervour eventually wore off and a scarcity of priests in the more isolated villages allowed,

> pre-conquest Mayan religious practices to creep back into the religious ceremonies of the village. A complex syncretism of Mayan and Catholic religious custom eventually dominated most villages in the highlands. The *cofradía* - a body of followers in charge of caring for and organizing celebrations honoring each important village saint - became an integral part of religious organization. (30)

Since the highlands were remote and difficult to access, the Maya had the relative freedom to maintain their traditions and develop a religious system, including Mayan and Catholic rituals. Today, Mayan spirituality continues to thrive, and it is not uncommon for people to go to a shrine one day and a church the next.

The core of Mayan spirituality revolves around a few key elements such as keeping track of the sacred 260-day calendar, understanding humanity's connection to the cosmos and, most importantly, understanding that God is present in every part of the cosmos, both animate and inanimate. Thomas Hart explains that according to the Maya, "God can be found on hilltops, at

the water's edge, at the mouth of caves, in the air, in the lightning, in the planets, in the plants, and in everything that is in Nature" (27). Since every part of the cosmos is suffused by a sacred spirit, every object should be treated with respect. For example, people offer a prayer to the land before working it, explaining their need and the reason why they injure the earth (30). In this way, the Mayan belief system is inextricably linked to the land and, therefore, inherently ecological.

However, the liberal regime in the 19th century held very different views concerning land management and cultivation compared to those held by indigenous communities. In their desire to modernize the country, the liberals found their inspiration in the ideas of the European Enlightenment. They advocated for equality and justice for all, "all" meaning their fellow elite. The average Mayan peasant, indigenous and illiterate, did not experience any significant change in daily life. As time passed, the liberals shifted their view towards Positivism as developed by French mathematician-philosopher Auguste Comte.[20] Handy writes that Comte rejected the "unbridled freedoms championed by earlier French philosophers linked to the French revolution, [and argued for order and progress] … Embellishing Comte's approach with ideas taken from English philosopher Herbert Spencer and the worst aspects of Social Darwinism, Guatemalan positivists developed their own concept of society" (61). Although the Guatemalan government did become more organized, positivist ideas contributed to the elite increasingly considering any indigenous person as a blight on society, withholding the country from progressing and becoming a modern nation. These ideas also greatly influenced a young Asturias when he wrote

[20]John Charles Chasteen describes positivism as a "French social doctrine that prescribed authoritarian medicine to achieve order and progress and made European norms into universal standards" (206-207). A common positivist slogan was "Order and Progress" promoting increased state control and material progress in the form of export growth.

his master's thesis in law, *El problema social del indio,* in 1923, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

By the end of the Second World War, Guatemala was in crisis. With an explosion in population growth accompanied by increasing poverty and hunger, the country's economic development was hindered by its outdated economic system, heavily reliant on the export of agricultural products. The small middle class in Guatemala realized that their country needed a dramatic change in political and economic structures. Led by the middle class, the uprising of October 22, 1944, managed to overthrow Ubico Castañeda and his regime and hold democratic elections. Juan José Arévalo, a former university professor, gained power in December 1945 and immediately set to work. He had grand plans for Guatemala and wanted to bring about what he called spiritual socialism. This entailed giving every Guatemalan citizen the "fundamental right to live in peace with his own conscience, with his family, with his property and his destiny" (Schlesinger and Kinzer 39). Arévalo was primarily inspired by policies such as the New Deal developed in the US by Franklin Roosevelt; his political discourse revealed him as a "modern liberal of socialist bent who believed that government could play a vital role in improving the lives of people" (32). He believed that it was the government's responsibility to enable the citizen to achieve a stable level of prosperity. In a recent novel, *Tiempos recios* (2017), Mario Vargas Llosa recreates Arévalo's liberal vision for Guatemala followed by Árbenz's more radical ideas and denounces the American-led coup that, under the false charge of communism, put an end to his government, and initiated the Cold War in Latin America. The coup came about in reaction to the Guatemalan government's transformative Agrarian Reform (1950).

As the Guatemalan economy struggled in the mid-20th century, there was a general consensus that land needed to be redistributed, and that economic and social restructuring should

form part of the Agrarian reform (García Añoveros 159). To better understand the situation concerning land ownership and management, President Árbenz and his government carried out a census on land distribution revealing that "*Ladinos* made up 12 percent of the farm operators and controlled 66 percent of the land" (*Revolution in the Countryside* 13). Meanwhile, the plots of land owned by indigenous people were significantly smaller and their cultivation of their lands was interrupted by seasonal work growing coffee or cotton. Many of them would work their own land for half of the year and labour on the large estates from April to September to supplement their income. In order to tackle these problems, the Agrarian Reform strove to redistribute land and facilitate investment of new capital in agriculture while also introducing new cultivation methods to peasants. The Agrarian Reform was at heart capitalist, focusing on the

> prevailing preoccupation of the administration to attack "feudalism" in the countryside and to inspire both more productive and more equitable agricultural enterprises. The law abolished all forms of *servidumbre* … and the latifundia with the essential objectives of developing the "capitalist peasant economy and the capitalist agricultural economy in general". (*Revolution in the Countryside* 89-90)

The Arévalo and Árbenz governments sought to create an economic model based on that of the US with more individuals owning and working their own property, generating more individual wealth. Unfortunately, these policies were received with various levels of opposition. First, internally, the reform did not take into account cultural differences between the urban elite and rural peasants.

The government developed their policies with the desire to increase agricultural production for both domestic use and export, while also promoting equal distribution of

monetary wealth among the classes. The idea was that, with this approach, everyone would have access to the commodities of a modern life and prosper. Handy explains that

> most of the young politicians involved in the two administrations between 1944 and 1954 had little understanding of rural Guatemala and the conflicts buried there. They were intense nationalists with an eager desire for national integration. Their vision of a new Guatemala had little space for an Indian culture or an Indian worldview if it differed fundamentally from their own. (*Revolution in the Countryside* 48)

Due to the racial segregation in Guatemalan society as well as the geographical distance between the urban elite and the rural poor, there was a disconnect on several levels. While the government clearly understood the socioeconomic challenges, it lacked the cultural understanding required to make successful changes. In this context, Asturias with his knowledge of the Mayan world was unique as he was one of the few people in the capital who had any level of understanding concerning the Mayan cosmovision. I will return to this in the next section. However, the Árbenz government did not only face internal opposition but also managed to anger the powerful United Fruit Company, which, at this point in time, owned large swaths of land in Guatemala for their banana plantations. Infuriated by the fact that they would have to start paying more taxes, the United Fruit Co. convinced the US government that Guatemala was under the threat of becoming communist. This sparked a military coup sponsored by the CIA in 1954, putting a definitive halt to the Agrarian Reform. The fall of the Árbenz government led to years of political turmoil and eventually a civil war that exacerbated in the 80s, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Asturias: From Conventional Law Student to Advocate for Mayan Culture

Born in 1899, Asturias grew up in a middle-class family. His father was a lawyer and judge and his mother a schoolteacher. During the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1857-1924), Asturias's father clashed with the regime and eventually the family was forced to leave Guatemala City. In 1905, they moved to Salamá, a small town in Baja Verapaz, where Asturias first came in touch with the Mayan cosmovision through the stories told him by his indigenous nanny. Eventually, the family returned to Guatemala City and Asturias began studying medicine. During his time as a student, he formed several student associations who would eventually play a major role in overthrowing the Estrada Cabrera dictatorship. These experiences later influenced Asturias in writing his first novel, *El Señor Presidente* (1946). Asturias switched to a degree in law and wrote *El problema social del indio* (1923). This thesis investigated the problematic conditions of the indigenous populations in Guatemala and was the first research project of this kind in Guatemala. Asturias's thesis demonstrated the common attitude of the *ladino* class toward the indigenous population in Guatemala. *Ladinos* considered indigenous people to be lazy, behind the times and responsible for their own poverty. In *Ideología y lenguaje en Hombres de maíz,* Arturo Arias observes that Asturias's thesis

> se caracteriza por una ausencia de un análisis de los mecanismos de explotación del indio. Al estar ausente dicho análisis, Asturias no logra percibir que en el desequilibrio de la propiedad agraria y en la explotación forzada de la mano de obra radica la esencia del mal llamado "problemas indígenas." Asturias se queda por lo tanto, en la visión superficial del fenómeno, señalando consecuencias tales como la desnutrición, el alcoholismo, las enfermedades, etc., pero sin determinar su verdadera causa. (156)

Lacking a deep understanding of the historical and social circumstances of the indigenous population, the young Asturias was unable to offer serious recommendations, merely observing surface level problems without recognizing root causes. The young author concluded that assimilation into the *ladino* culture would enable indigenous people to progress and prosper. Many critics have condemned Asturias for his law thesis while others have tried to soften the racist tones that permeate the text. However, in *Assuming the Light,* Stephen Henighan argues that these critics do "Asturias a disservice by obscuring the full racist thrust of *El problema social del indio*. Despite the traceable continuities in his intellectual make-up, the gap between the student who wrote the law thesis and the mature novelist of *Hombres de maíz* (1949) is wider than their various analyses will admit; Asturias deserves immense credit for crossing this gulf" (23). While Asturias's law thesis complicates his literary legacy, as Henighan has noted, the author experienced a dramatic transformation in his attitudes and ideas.

The backdrop to this radical change was 1920s Paris, where the young Asturias began to work with ethnologist Georges Raynaud at the Sorbonne and where he became enchanted by the surrealist style in vogue at the time. During his decade in the city, he would come to see his country in a whole new light. Critics have argued that the change can be partly ascribed to Asturias's position as a foreigner in Parisian society, especially since he came from the little-known region of Central America. In "Race, Space, and the Problem of Guatemala in Miguel Ángel Asturias's Early Work" (2016), Joel Wainwright and Joshua Lund describe Asturias's position as a Guatemalan in Paris.

> To be a Latin American in Paris in the 1920s meant recognizing oneself as an alienated self; the anxious advocate for a national culture that was elsewhere and, moreover, even the oracle of the very margins of that other culture. This confrontation with the

> unconscious generated his disciplinary breakthrough: a literary form applied to a national return… Asturias became convinced that the authentic hue of his Guatemala was *Maya.* (106)

The tables had indeed turned. In Guatemala, the Indian was considered "the other" but in Paris, Asturias himself became that other. The shift in perspective gave him a new appreciation of his country's cultural heritage.

Accompanying this realization was his discovery of the sacred Mayan text, *Popol Vuh* (or *Popol Wuj*).[21] Under the guidance of Raynaud, Asturias and Mexican scholar José María Mendoza worked together on a translation of the text from French into Spanish. The *Popol Wuj* recounts the origins of the world and of the Maya K'iche' people. The first part of the story outlines the formation of the world and the cosmos. The second part follows the twin brothers Xbalanque and Hunahpu who wake up the Lords of Xibalba with their noisy ball game. Angry, the Lords invite the twins into the Underworld to undergo a series of trials. The twins succeed in every case until they finally defeat the lords and transform into the Moon and Sun, signalling the beginning of a new era. The third part of the text tells of the creation of humanity. After several failed attempts the Gods succeed when they decide to shape humanity from cornmeal. As a result, corn sustains humanity, and through its cultivation humanity sustains corn.

Since the *Popol Wuj* was most likely transcribed shortly after the conquest, around 1554, the text gives the reader unique insights into pre-contact Mesoamerica. In "Untranslation: The *Popol Wuj* and Comparative Methodology" (2020), Nathan C. Henne explains that the "poetics

---

[21] Older sources spell the title of the sacred Mayan text as *Popol Vuh* but current sources have adopted the spelling *Popol Wuj.* In my thesis, I will follow contemporary scholarship and use the new spelling. However, quotations from older sources will still use the old spelling.

of the *Popol Wuj* offers a remarkable opportunity to analyze the process of meaning-making from within a system still largely outside of Western language and logic" (109). Asturias recognized this feature of the text and its importance in the shaping of a holistic Guatemalan identity; an identity which looked beyond the conquest and embraced its indigenous heritage. He therefore no longer considered the indigenous people of Guatemala a force withholding his country from progress. Instead, he saw Mayan culture as the cornerstone of Guatemala's national identity. In Guatemalan literature and society, the *Popol Wuj* continues to resonate. For example, quotes from the text serve as paratext preceding several chapters in *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983). Contemporary authors such as Luis de Lión and Rey Rosa also incorporate themes and characters of the text into their own works. In my analysis of *Hombres de maiz* and *El país de Toó*, I will highlight the linkages between each of them and the sacred text.

The discovery of *Popol Wuj* reverberated through Asturias's thought in many ways. His exploration of the sacred Mayan text coincided with his ideas around the formation of an "alma nacional." Asturias's law thesis, despite all its flaws, already shows a preoccupation for Guatemalan society and in particular asks how the indigenous poor can become fully contributing members. Arias writes that Asturias "[d]escubre… que el peso que la manera de ser indígena tiene en la sociedad guatemalteca no se puede medir verdaderamente; está en todas partes, es la esencia misma del país... El 'alma nacional,' por lo tanto, tiene que ser indígena, tiene que estar enraizada en el espíritu maya" (158). For the rest of his life, the Guatemalan writer pursued the idea of the "alma nacional," emphasizing that Guatemala has a unique identity found in its indigenous past and present. Rooted in Mayan cosmology, the "alma nacional" as conceived by Asturias is inherently ecological, valuing communal ways of being and tending the

land. According to Asturias, a robust "alma nacional" would also serve as a counterbalance to foreign interference as represented by international corporations such as the United Fruit Co. and other capitalist ventures. However, after Asturias's return to Guatemala in 1933, these ideas would lie dormant for a few years because the country was once again in the grip of a dictator and all written texts were heavily censored; this time the authoritarian leader was Jorge Ubico Castañeda (1931-1944). They would only resurface when he published *Hombres de maíz* in 1949 during the Guatemalan Revolution.

Developing a New Literary Style and the Complicated Literary Legacy of Asturias

In recent years, most critics have focused on Asturias's complicated literary legacy. *Hombres de maíz* was progressive for its time and one of the first novels in modern Guatemalan literature to place Mayan culture front and centre. However, this progressive stance, formed in a time of general ignorance and deep-seated racism towards indigenous peoples, has since been complicated as society has undergone a dramatic shift in its view of indigenous identity and of the question who has the authority to speak of indigenous culture. As mentioned before, many critics struggle with Asturias's literary legacy. Arias's writings perfectly illustrate the conundrum faced by any critic when analyzing and studying the author's work. He reflects on the ideological change experienced by Asturias, who at first had proposed indigenous peoples be completely assimilated into the mestizo culture but after his stay in Paris was calling for the preservation of the Mayan culture, acknowledging its richness and importance to his home country in the construction and maintenance of the "alma nacional" (*Ensayos Asturianos* 69). Arias adds that *Hombres de maíz* is unique in its development of the "mundo ladino guatemalteco, desde la perspectiva del maya, el conflicto social maya/ladino; por primera vez, se valoriza positivamente la cultura maya, se la coloca en el centro del ser guatemalteco. Se percibe su perduración y

triunfo último por encima de los 'valores comerciales'" (78). The critic celebrates Asturias's work, enthusiastically pointing out the protagonism and multifaceted representation of the Mayan world. This came at a time when other genres such as the *indigenista* tradition, while sympathetic to indigenous people, often portrayed them as passive victims. Asturias's novel differs in that it shows indigenous people with agency and the capacity to resolve problems on their own, without the help of the *ladino* world. Furthermore, in the political climate of the October Revolution, Asturias held a unique position as a scholar of the *Popol Wuj* and the Books of *Chilam Balam.* His studies gave him a glimpse into Mayan culture, at a time when few people were aware of Guatemala's rich cultural inheritance left by the Mayan civilizations, flourishing in 200-900 CE, and whose cities were at the time still mostly covered by jungle. The different cosmovision presented to the author granted him a unique perspective outside of the mainstream in the early 20th century.

On the other hand, Arias reflects on the complicated identity of the author in *Taking their Word* (2007), where he comments on Asturias's assumed role as a

> representative of a "Central American experience" that encompassed Mayas, he thus homogenized Guatemalan experience and conflated it with Maya experience as "Central American," which was, of course, a profound misrecognition. The next result was that, stylistic efforts notwithstanding, he was also guilty of relegating Mayaness to a subaltern role. Maya culture provides symbolic icons for his conception of a nationality. Nevertheless, the subaltern voice was expressed exclusively by the mestizo *letrado*… Asturias named the Mayan community, spoke for it, and also spoke in its defense. But he did not speak *with* it. (55)

Asturias, in assuming the role of spokesperson for his country, and in particular the Maya, obscured the potential for the community to speak for itself. Today, enlightened by processes of reconciliation, the position of a *ladino* author writing about indigenous communities continues to be problematic.[22] Therefore, when publishing his novel *El país de Toó* several decades later, Rey Rosa makes a point of mentioning that he consulted a Mayan friend while writing the novel. I would, however, like to point out that when *Hombres de maíz* was published, the Mayan movement had not yet been born. It wasn't until the 1960s that indigenous peoples began to gain more access to universities and until the 1980s that they organized themselves. Emerging indigenous scholars undertook the painstaking work of creating dictionaries and standardizing the writing of their respective languages before founding institutions offering language instruction such as the Academia de las lenguas Mayas in 1990. Today, it is common to find bilingual editions published in a Mayan language and Spanish.

Asturias's stay in Paris combined with his discovery of the *Popol Wuj* also influenced the writer's literary style. Giuseppe Bellini describes the narrative style in *Hombres de maíz* as follows: "Asturias recrea un ámbito mágico partiendo de la técnica del *Popol Vuh*, recurriendo a la iteración, al paralelismo, en una expresión sintética que se sirve de la repetición para profundizar en las dimensiones ocultas y los conceptos, mientras la narración es diálogo y descripción al mismo tiempo" (50). Bellini emphasizes how the narrative in its use of repetition, the structure of its descriptions and dialogue echo the rhythms found in *Popol Wuj.* This development in writing style coincided with Asturias's discovery of surrealism, the artistic

---

[22] At the same time, in his introduction to his *Ensayos Asturianos,* Arias confesses that, "[l]o impresionante es que hoy, en pleno siglo veintiuno, el Asturias de 1929 es bastante más progresista que la mayoría de miembros actuales del ladinaje guatemalteco" (14).

movement in vogue in 1920's Paris. Arias argues that surrealism, in its blurring of reality with the fantastic, presented the novelist with a convenient tool, allowing him to approach the Mayan world only accessible to him through childhood memory and research. He writes,

> Asturias piensa que el surrealismo abre una puerta a través de la cual puede salir un mensaje interno, inconsciente, que surge de las profundidades mismas del ser. Descubre que la libertad de crear que ofrecen métodos como el de la "escritura automática" producen una especie de dualidad entre sueño y realidad. Según él mismo, esta dualidad, este gesto surrealista, es el que poseen textos indígenas tales como el *Popol Wuj* o los *Anales de los Xahil*. Por lo tanto, allí establece un puente entre el mundo indígena y su propia escritura: al mundo indígena hay que llegarle por medio de una escritura que produzca la mencionada dualidad entre sueño y realidad, que sea "una especie de sueño, de irrealidad, que al contarse con todo detalle parece más real que la realidad misma." Es este tipo de fenómeno el que él mismo bautizó con el nombre de "realismo mágico." (*Ensayos Asturianos* 71)

Asturias used surrealist techniques such as automatic writing and the mixing of dreams with reality to create a bridge between indigenous culture and his own imagination. As his style evolved into what is now known as magical realism, he also created a space for the more-than-human world.

Asturias's early writings already prominently feature the natural world. For example, detailed descriptions of the landscape emerge in an early piece for the Guatemalan newspaper, *El Imparcial*, called "Por esos caminos de Dios" (1924). Henighan describes the article as a "long nature sketch, relating a trip through rural Guatemala, [which] is remarkable for its near-obliviousness to the presence of human life. The lyrically overblown descriptive passages are

permeated with religious and Romantic banalities" (*Assuming the Light* 13). While the text might not be refined nor original, the author's telluric interest clearly rises from the page. This interest would become a mainstay in his literature, present in *Leyendas de Guatemala, Hombres de maíz* and his later work in the Banana Trilogy. In an interview with Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, Asturias reflects on the role of landscape in his work. He says, "[t]he characters of the book are never alone, but always surrounded by the great voices of nature, the voices of the rivers, of the mountains. The background is no longer mere theatrical scenery as it was, for instance, in the romantic novel. The landscape has become dynamic; it has a life of its own" (426). Thus, nature is a perceptible and active participant in the plot and interacts with the characters. Asturias also showcases his knowledge of the natural world in the wide variety of flora and fauna named in his books. Through the numerous descriptions of nature, the author demonstrates Guatemala's richness in cultural and ecological diversity. I argue that *Hombres de maíz* is not only an attempt to enter the indigenous world but also the natural world guided by the new emerging literary style of magical realism with its fluidity between surreal and real imagery, enabling the more-than-human to gain a voice.

As a literary style, magical realism naturally suits themes developed in environmental literature. Ben Holgate outlines several elements fundamental to the magical realist style. He argues that the genre helps authors "develop new kinds of expression and language in order to portray ideas and ways of seeing the world that counter dominant ontologies and epistemologies," such as ideas promoted by the European Enlightenment where humans were considered as separate entities from their environment. Furthermore, Holgate explains that magical realism allows for a biocentric perspective because all beings, whether human or more-than- human, are given a voice in the text, thus emphasizing the interconnections between all

levels of existence. Finally, Holgate writes that "magical realism and environmental literature share a transgressive nature that dismantles binaries, such as human and non-human, and animate and inanimate" (3). *Hombres de maíz* contains all these features where the nonexistent boundary between the real and the surreal allow the natural world to gain its own voice within the text, thus challenging commonplace assumptions about more-than-human entities and once again pointing to the intertwined nature of existence on a planetary and cosmological level. Extrapolating from these observations, I argue that Asturias's work naturally lends itself to the ecocritical framework. Yet few critics have undertaken any extensive analysis of the author's work using this critical approach. Several critics mention the ecological message within the work in passing and connect it to the political message Asturias wanted to communicate to his readers.[23] In my analysis, I expand on these existing claims and demonstrate how the novel, ecological in structure, invites the reader to reconsider nature's agency as an inextricable part of the reconciliation process.

Ecological Agencies in *Hombres de maíz*

Hombres de maíz begins in the land of the Mayan Cacique Gaspar Ilóm, who fights against the *maiceros* (corn growers). The *maiceros* invade his territory, claiming land to increase crop yields and profits. Ilóm's resistance is successful until his betrayal and subsequent murder. The conspirators, Colonel Godoy, Don Tomás Machojón and his wife la Vaca Manuela, poison Ilóm. Ilóm's wife Piojosa Grande, also known as María the Rain, escapes, turning into a standing stone, sparking the María Tecún legend where runaway wives abandon their husbands. The

---

[23] For example, Christopher Warnes in *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (2009), Gerald Martin in his introduction to the critical edition of *Hombres de maíz*(1991), Erik Camayd Freixas in his article "Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Hombres de maíz:* Como lectura surrealista de la escritura mayense" and Ilse Bussing-Lopez in her chapter, "Maize, Coyotes, and Fireflies: Transformation and Nagualism in *Hombres de maíz*" (2019).

firefly wizards curse the conspirators who all meet a violent end, engulfed in flames or killed silently in the night. Meanwhile, the characters Goyo Yic, a blind pedlar, and Nicho Aquino, the postman, are searching for their lost wives. During their search, they both undergo a transformation. Taking on the shape of their *nawals*, they connect with cosmological forces, working together to restore the sacred bond with corn. [24] Told in six parts, each with a different protagonist and set in a different time period, the novel ends with Goyo Yic's reunion with his wife, María Tecún. Together, they return to Pisigüilito, where they restore their community and their relationship with the land. Lacking a clear chronological plot, the novel's progression occurs through the development of themes and metaphors rooted in the Mayan cosmovision.

Many scholars have explored the thematic and structural presence of the *Popol Wuj* in Asturias's work. In his introduction to the critical edition of *Hombres de maíz,* Gerald Martin reminds the reader that Asturias drew on many "[n]ative Middle American sources, Maya and Aztec, form the backbone of the work - above all, the *Popol Vuh,* the *Book of Chilam Balam,* the *Legend of the Suns,* and the *Sacred Hymns of the Nahuas*" (xxiv). Asturias combined many indigenous texts and sources to shape the world depicted in the novel. By engaging with such a wide variety of source material, the novel represents Asturias's idea of the "alma nacional" and promotes a new unifying discourse in the face of foreign interference and capitalist ideologies (Camayd-Freixas 210). Asturias, inspired by both the content and the form of the pre-Columbian texts, felt that they would give him the tools he needed to voice the many problems faced by his home country. From it arose a new vision, searingly anti-capitalist and radical in its embrace of the Mayan cosmovision. In *Miguel Angel Asturias's Archeology of Return* (1983), René Prieto

---

[24] Since this is a Mayan word there are several spellings. Older scholarly texts will use the spelling *nahual* or *nagual.* I will use the spelling *nawal,* adopted by contemporary scholars.

states that the novel *Hombres de maíz* "offers an encouraging social model and emphatically postulates a revolutionary course of action that brings the men of maize from chaos to stability pointing out the intrinsic relationship that exists between human beings and the land" (106). He explains that Asturias agreed with the Árbenz administration that the government should encourage the growth of small individually owned farms (107). While I agree with Prieto that the novel explores the relationship between humanity and land, I argue that the novel does not embrace capitalist systems. This is evident in the conclusion of the novel, where the rebuilding of the town Pisigüilito is a collective endeavour spearheaded by local inhabitants and where the private landowner remains absent or is banished. I therefore contend that the novel questions the validity of capitalist structures and ideologies and whether they fit the ecological and social realities of Guatemala.

Hombres de maíz challenges capitalism from a cultural space located outside of western ideologies, denouncing its practice of turning sacred entities such as corn into commodities to be bought and sold at the highest price. Consequently, the novel depicts how intensive land tenure creates a gap between humanity and nature, where farmers who view crops as resources become increasingly estranged from their surroundings. The *maiceros,* driven by greed, are ruthless and, as a result, rootless. Always searching for more land, they exhaust the earth as well as the community. The selling of corn is equivalent to the selling of one's own flesh, linking capitalism to the act of cannibalism. At one point in the novel, Aquino meets an old traveler. They debate the cultivation of corn and the old traveler says:

> [l]a ley de antes autorizaba al padre comerse al hijo, en caso de estar sitiados, pero nunca llegó a autorizarlo a matarlo para vender la carne. Dentro de las cosas oscuras entre el que podamos alimentarnos de méiz, que es carne de nuestra carne, de las mazorcas que

> son como nuestros hijos; pero todo acabará pobre y quemado por el sol, por el aire, por las rozas, si se sigue sembrando méiz para negociar con él, como si ni fuera sagrado, altamente sagrado.[25] (272)

In his speech, the old traveler connects growing corn as a commodity crop to times of extreme need, where a father might have to eat his child to survive a siege. But even in this most desperate of times a father would not be allowed to sell his child's flesh, in contrast to the fate of corn being sold for profit. This anecdote likens capitalism to being at war; at war with oneself and with the earth. Corn, its cob as precious as a swaddled babe, becomes the victim of this system. Thus, selling corn for profit is blasphemy; it signals a complete rejection of the sacred relationship between corn and humanity. The novel predicts that in severing this sacred bond and disregarding the mythological role of the plant, destruction and the disintegration of communities will ensue.

The novel depicts capitalism as a destructive force, upsetting the harmonious relationship between human and more-than-human entities. Christopher Warnes comments on this element of the text when he writes, "imaginary states of wholeness are presented in the novel as shattered by the effects of capitalism and colonialism. It is especially deforestation and the exploitation of the land for the purposes of growing maize for profit that is responsible for the rupture of union between human and earth" (50). Destruction of ecosystems causes the fragmentation of communities. Social and ecological well-being are intertwined; upset one and the effects will be felt by the other entity. Therefore, the mounting resistance presented in the novel arises from the human and more-than-human world. José Manuel Losada observes that "la resistencia de la

[25] Here "maíz" is spelled as "méiz" on purpose to imitate the speech of rural Guatemalans.

historia se resume en la venganza que la tierra toma contra los enemigos de Gaspar" (44). More-than-human agents instigate revenge; motivated by cosmological forces and the elements, they revolt against the *maiceros.*

The holistic response of a world rising up in protest against capitalist notions of land management is vividly portrayed through the magical realist style rooted in the Mayan cosmovision. In this way, *Hombres de maíz* anticipates the idea of ecological thought proposed by literary critic Timothy Morton. In a book by the same title, Morton explores the ways in which humanity can think ecologically in a time where the focus is on independent units and where the concept of nature is perceived as an isolated entity, separate from humanity. He explains that "ecological thought permits no distance. Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between 'over here' and 'over there,' and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside" (39). Thinking ecologically means recognizing that the world is made up of interdependencies, and interrelationships between all organisms and all levels of existence. Morton reminds the reader that "ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island" (4). The focus should therefore shift from studying an entity in isolation to instead looking at the relationships the entity maintains with others and the interdependencies it needs to continue its existence. This phenomenon can be observed from a molecular level to the macro level of the biosphere. Embracing the concept of an interconnected world signifies breaking down the artificial barriers between the human and the more-than-human. Boundaries become fluid, permitting entities to enter into close contact with one another, and this ultimately results in the decentering of the human.

Hombres de maíz engages with this process, portraying a world where characters bond with their surroundings, erasing ontological distance. Building on Morton's vision and the world depicted in the novel, I suggest that the text shows the importance of establishing and maintaining a multitude of connections since this process fosters the resilience needed to begin the reconciliation process. Morton's main concern seems to be concentrated on how ecological thought eliminates distance and how the arts perform a crucial role in visualizing scientific processes, making them accessible to a larger public. I posit that ecological thought also leads one to consider the importance of a rich network of interrelationships. The smaller the number of connections, the more vulnerable the mesh of existence becomes to forces that erode and break it apart. By exploring the many layers of interrelations present in the novel, impregnated with biological, metaphorical and mythological significance, one realizes that this multiplicity strengthens the cultural and ecological fabric, making reconciliation and rebirth possible.

The novel's opening pages submerge the reader into a mythological world, portraying the Cacique Gaspar Ilóm dreaming in and with the landscape. His dreams are earth dreams; the biosphere, in the form of a snake, has wound its way around Ilóm as he wakes, "El Gaspar Ilóm movía la cabeza de un lado a otro. Negar, moler la acusación del suelo en que estaba dormido con su petate, su sombra y su mujer y enterrado con sus muertos y su ombligo, sin poder deshacerse de una culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas de lodo, luna, bosques, aguaceros, montañas, pájaros y retumbos que sentía alrededor del cuerpo" (13). The snake embodies the cosmos; its six hundred thousand turns hold animals, landscapes, and even the moon. The lunar presence indicates the cosmological connection each indigenous character has in the book, foreshadowing what is to come. Ilóm's connection to his community is reinforced through the "ombligo," the umbilical cord. According to Mayan tradition, after a birth a baby's umbilical

cord is buried in the earth, establishing a connection between the baby, the earth, and its community. This action reinforces that one's identity consists of family, community, and the land where one is born. The magical realist mode employed in this passage allows the reader to penetrate the world of myth where humanity and nature are intertwined. The imagery of the cosmic snake wrapped around Ilóm introduces this idea, continuously reinforced throughout the novel by a landscape that moves and interacts with the characters.

The development of ecological imagery surrounding Ilóm demonstrates how his identity and livelihood are intertwined with the fate of his lands. The text repeatedly emphasizes the close connection between Ilóm and the earth: "Lo que hablaba el Gaspar ya viejo, era monte. Lo que pensaba era monte recordado… De las orejas le salía el pensamiento a oír el ganado que le pasaba encima" (17). Ilóm's speech, as old as the surrounding mountains, physically embodies the memory of the landscape, communicating and forming connections between the human and more-than-human world. This intimate relationship is violated by the arrival of the *maiceros.* As they clear the land, cutting down trees to make room for their crops, they not only damage the physical landscape but also attack Ilóm's identity. The destruction of the forests drives Ilóm into a moment of spiritual distress. He reaches for his aguardiente, drinking himself into oblivion. When he finally awakens from his drunken stupor, he takes on the role of warrior, protecting his ancestral territory, and thereby defending his identity and that of his people. From this initial conflict, the novel establishes the tensions between the Mayan cosmovision and liberal ideologies. Ilóm protects his home while the *maiceros* see the Cacique as an obstacle to increasing their crop yield and financial gain.

Ilóm's resistance is successful until his murder at the hands of Manuela la Vaca, who, on the orders of her husband, Don Tomás Machojón, and Coronel Chalo Godoy, poisons the

cacique. However, as a creature of the earth, Ilóm transforms himself. He drowns in the river and although this seems to be his demise it is instead the beginning of another cycle. His drowning links Ilóm to the twins in *Popol Wuj* who, transforming into fish in the river, evade the lords of Xibalba.[26] Through reincarnation, Ilóm reappears in different forms throughout the novel. According to Camayd-Freixas, the reincarnation is connected to a *katun*, a 20-year cycle in the Mayan calendar. Consequently, "la pareja Gaspar Ilóm/Piojosa Grande se repetirá tres veces con variaciones en cada nuevo katún" (212). With each reincarnation of Ilóm and his wife La Piojosa Grande—also known as María the Rain --- the resistance against the *maiceros* continues. The pair is represented by Goyo Yic and his wife María Tecún, and later by Nicho Aquino and his wife, Isabra. The reincarnations preserve the continued sacred relationship with corn. This is reinforced by the symbolic representations of all the characters. In *Ensayos Asturianos,* Arias suggests that "Gaspar Ilóm es la tierra, su mujer es la lluvia y su hijo es el maíz" (76). Ilóm gives himself to the river, thus returning to the earth. Meanwhile, Piojosa la Grande, escaping with their son, transforms into rain and her little son becomes corn nourished by the rain. Each character in the novel represents several layers of existence, cosmological and earthly. They have their human and elemental form, complemented by a sentient being in the form of an animal or plant also known as a *nawal.* As a result, human, natural and cosmological elements all band together to form a resistance against the *maiceros.*

This emerging resistance formed by a tightly woven fabric forms around corn, the sustainer of all life. I argue that this interconnection between the cosmos, humanity and corn represents what Morton has called the *mesh*. According to Morton, the *mesh* materially

---

[26] The reincarnation is that of the twins Hunahphu and Ixbalanque, who after the initial defeat of the lords of Xibalba, the Mayan underworld, become fish and thus escape complete annihilation. Prieto describes this episode and its parallels in detail in *The Archeological Return of Asturias* (182).

characterizes the interconnectedness between all beings. Everything exists within one fabric, woven together by many strands, without centre or edge. Furthermore, "everything is adapted to everything else" (39). Corn and humanity are the perfect example of this adaptation. Corn helped feed a growing culture. Conversely, as the population grew, the cultivation of corn also increased. This reciprocal relationship between land and people lies at the heart of the Mayan cosmovision and is represented in the *Popol Wuj*. The Mayan text reads: "de maíz amarillo y de maíz blanco se hizo su carne; de masa de maíz se hicieron los brazos y las piernas del hombre. Únicamente masa de maíz entró en la carne de nuestros padres" (104). White and yellow corn were brought together to shape men, a fact often repeated throughout the novel. In the beginning, the narrator states that "el maíz hecho hombre sembrador de maíz" (15), indicating the reciprocal relationship between the two.

Some critics have even suggested that the novel's real protagonist is not humanity but corn itself. For example, Ignacio Díaz Ruíz argues that Asturias "convierte el maíz en el gran protagonista de su novela, en el motivo medular de su relato" (208). Corn motivates the plot development, functioning as a unifying element. Scholars have frequently commented on the fragmentary nature of the text divided into six separate parts. However, according to Prieto, *Hombres de maíz* "does not lack unity. Its unifying principle is thematic and not dependent on character or chronological development but instead, on three polyvalent signs -- fire, water, and corn -- which harness together the six tales" ("The Unifying Principle" 35). *Hombres de maíz*, unlike the traditional novel, is not organized around a chronological timeline or character development but rather presents itself as an organic organism developing along with the natural elements. Thus, more-than-human actors such as corn together with the natural elements of fire and water unify the ideas in the novel. Natural forces permeate the *mesh*, collaborating and

interacting with all other elements of the plot. Through their joint efforts, corn is restored to its rightful place in society and the main characters are reconciled with their lost loved ones, their cultural roots and their environment. I suggest that the novel's conclusion of a return to more traditional modes of production, centred around stable communities, points to how a balanced society and ecosystem with a multitude of interrelationships provides resiliency to all involved compared to capitalist systems, which focus on streamlining production and therefore often seek to reduce the variety of connections between organizational and organic entities. Yet, resiliency is a key ingredient in bringing about social and ecological reconciliation.

Holistic Reconciliation and the Nawal as Reconciliation's Agent

In a novel grounded in an ecological understanding of the world, reconciliation necessarily includes the human and more-than-human world. Generally, reconciliation is considered a social and political process. The Oxford dictionary definition states that reconciliation is the "action of restoring estranged people or parties to friendship; the result of this; the fact of being reconciled." Building on this definition, reconciliatory processes bring people back together. In the context of political and social justice, reconciliation is also the act of "building or rebuilding relationships today that are not haunted by the conflicts and hatreds of yesterday" (Quinn 4). The rebuilding of relationships, in the wake of traumatic events, plays a crucial role in the reconciliation process, allowing injured parties and aggressors to work through a series of acts involving acknowledgement and forgiveness. The outcome should be a new-found respectful co-existence between former perpetrators and victims. In the introduction to the book *Reconciliation(s): Transitional Justice in Postconflict Societies* (2009), Joanna R. Quinn writes that "at its heart, reconciliation is about building relationships of trust and cohesion" (5). From this perspective, reconciliation processes, in striving to uncover the truth and bring to light

events that have previously been silenced or ignored, should build on re-establishing trust between the involved parties. These definitions focus on the human world, seeking to describe and aid social reparations. I posit that *Hombres de maíz* shows a reconciliation process involving the natural world and the cosmos, spearheaded by the figure of the *nawal.* The presence of the *nawal* strengthens weakened relationships between communities and environments, fostering a new resiliency in personal and cultural identities which paves the way for reconciliation.

The figure of the *nawal* acts as a catalyst in initiating the reconciliation process. A crucial component of Maya cosmovision, *nawalism* persists despite the processes of conquest and colonization. *Nawals* are spiritual beings or co-essences, moving between the human and more-than-human world. In her memoirs, Rigoberta Menchú explains the continuing importance of the *nawal* in Mayan society. She writes, "todo niño nace con su nahual. Su nahual es como su sombra. Van a vivir paralelamente y casi siempre es un animal el nahual" (39). The *nawal* plays several roles, accompanying, supporting and guarding the human beings to whom they are linked. Jean Molesky-Poz writes that the *nawal* "assists the individual [in maintaining] ecological equilibrium; the *nawal* helps one discover, through feeling and goodness, the depth and intensity of relations with nature as well as activating the awareness of one's specific identity" (44). Through the *nawal* an individual experiences being part of the cosmos. Henne expands on this when he explains that

> The *nawal's* ubiquity and its pervasive connection to all kinds of co-essences means that *nawalism* becomes an enactment of the sum total of all relationships in our ecology… entities participating in *nawalism* can include weather patterns, rocks, shapes, and trees, in addition to members of the commonly cited animal kingdom. Essentially anything that interacts with and affects any other entity in any way participates in the shared ontology

> of *nawalism*. As a result, when all those relationships are taken together, *nawalism* expands from a poetics of ontology and becomes a poetics of ecology. (176)

Accepting one's *nawal* and developing one's relationship with the co-essence signifies affirming one's connection with the cosmos, becoming receptive to different ways of being and working to sustain the equilibrium of the universe. Fundamentally, *nawalism* is an ecological and ontological experience, helping an individual achieve a new level of fulfilment while also becoming cognizant of one's role in the cosmos.

In the novel, the two most complex examples of *nawalism* are the figures of Goyo Yic with his *nawal* the possum and Nicho Aquino who transforms into a coyote. As they embark on journeys in search of wholeness and understanding, they become agents of the reconciliation process. Through their respective odysseys, they reconnect with their cultural roots, bringing about the reconstruction of their community and its ecosystem. For the process to begin, a linkage with the cosmos needs to be established. The cosmic and natural elements of moonlight and water initiate Goyo Yic's transformation into a possum. These two elements are intertwined in Mayan cosmology where the moon goddess resides in the realm of the rain gods. In the novel, several female characters, including Yic's wife María Tecún, are linked to the rain and the moon. In his search for his wife, Goyo Yic cries out for her, "María TecúúúUUUn!" (145), emphasizing the "Ú." The use of the "Ú" has a specific purpose. Prieto explains that the "repetition and onomatopoeia… are particularly relevant to the thematic development, for in lowland and Chiapan languages "U" is one of the names for the moon" (97). Thus, Yic calls to both his wife and the moon. In Mayan belief, everything comes in pairs to maintain cosmological equilibrium and the narrative follows this structure. Yic, searching for his lost other half, only comes close to

finding her once he bathes in the moonlight and transforms into his *nawal* bringing the moon and water together into a unified whole.

The transformation, filled with cosmological and symbolic significance, signals the coming of a new age. Acquiring possum form, Yic "[d]e hombre al hacerse animal a la luz de la luna pasaba a tacuatzina, a hembra de tacuatzín, con una bolsa por delante para cargar sus crías" (178). He turns into a female possum complete with pouch ready to carry a new generation, symbolizing the potential for rebirth. In the absence of his female half he transforms, with the cosmological forces of the moon, into a female, thus becoming whole and an agent who will bring about the new age in the Mayan calendar. In Mayan culture, a possum is a symbol of renewal and rebirth. Prieto explains that the possum is a "god of dawn and harbinger of light and it is portrayed as the civilizing model representative of the Mayan Fourth Age" (104). Yic's transformation symbolically links him to the role of bringing about a new age where the sacred bond with corn will be re-established. I argue that the unfolding of this process shows an intricate layering of forces coming together, reminding the reader that a resilient mesh is a product of a multitude of interdependencies supporting each other in keeping the fabric whole. To this end the text plays with several levels of meaning and imagery; cosmological, metaphorical and physiological transformations intersect to aid Yic in the process of uncovering his identity and eventually understanding the role he needs to play in re-establishing his community. Yic, in embracing his *nawal* form, brings into motion a series of events eventually leading to a breaking down of barriers established between the natural and human world by capitalist forms of land management. This dissolving of barriers allows for a fragmented being to become one and in turn bring ecological and social reconciliation to his community. In other words, adopting the

nawal form leads to restoring linkages with the cosmos and regaining harmony between humanity and creation.

The new cycle and reconciliation process, once initiated by Yic's metamorphosis, requires collective action in order to be completed. At this stage in the narrative, humanity has drifted away from its roots. The true events around Ilóm's death have been forgotten as has the sacred relationship with corn and the pact humanity made with the gods. The *Popol Wuj* states that "[h]umans were to be *givers of praise, givers of respect, providers,* and *nurturers* (Molesky-Poz 38, italics in the original) but no one in Goyo Yic and Nicho Aquino's community remembers these words or their promise. Martin explains how this process of alienation is reflected in the structure of the novel: "[i]n each of the three phases__ tribal, feudal-colonial, and capitalist-neocolonial__an Indian protagonist is defeated, loses his woman, and, cut off from the earth and the maizefield, turns to drink and despair. Each is more alienated and distanced than his predecessor" (xvii). In each part of the novel, time has passed, depicting a different historical moment with characters increasingly estranged from their cultural heritage and their land. The new structures of private property and management of individual profits promoted by the *maiceros* sever the collective bond the community maintained with the land. Ariel Dorfman observes that the narrative world is a "degraded world, replete with sickly beings, beggars, blind men", a "sweeping prison in which the characters mature and decay [and which] is their punishment for having broken the repose in which earth dreamed it was one with man and become commercial men of once divine corn" (406-407). In its embrace of commercial ventures focused on monetary profits, humanity breaks its sacred understanding with the earth. This entails a loss of cultural and ecological knowledge as the community fabric breaks down into isolated pockets. I suggest that the novel, in its development, proposes a return to origins as a

solution to combat environmental and social erosion. By fostering a deep understanding of one's cultural and ecological beginnings, the collective social identity can be recovered, guiding the process of re-establishing a coherent whole.

In the narrative world of *Hombres de maíz,* cosmological and natural forces band together to realize this process. Although society seems alienated from their roots and the possibility for reconciliation to occur has evaporated in part 5, it turns out that collective memory is encapsulated by the stone pillar located in the María Tecuna ridge. The reader discovers that Ilóm's wife, Piojosa la Grande also known as María the rain, turned into rain to escape her husbands' killers until she reached the ridge and became a pillar of stone, taking with her the truth of Ilóm's demise. This series of transformations align with the concept of duality in Mayan cosmovision. In *The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya* (2008), Thomas Hart explains that for the "Maya nothing exists in isolation, a complement has to exist: day and night, male and female, the material and the spiritual" (34). For the Mayans all entities need to be accompanied by a counterpart to maintain cosmological balance. This implies a relational view of the world where the connections established between entities are as important as the entities themselves. Thus, María the rain's stone pillar represents both the rain's symbolism of rebirth and the capacity of stone to contain the collective memory of the community. Furthermore, the choice of a stone pillar is no accident since stones are held in high regard. "There is a respect and reverence for stone in Mayan communities: as links to the past, both symbolic and actual, stones contain secrets" (Hart 163) and souls too. Thus, shrines are often found at the foot of a solitary stone, marking a place for people to commune with the gods and their ancestors.

In the novel, the location of the stone pillar on the ridge is significant because it enables the pillar to connect the sky, the earth, and the underworld. It encapsulates the "three-part Mayan

cosmic design—underworld, earth, and sky (past, present, and future)" (Martin xvii). While Martin refers to the three phases in the novel, where an Indian protagonist (Ilóm, Yic, Aquino) is defeated three times and loses his woman, the number three represents other elements as well. As mentioned above, the number is a deliberate choice because of its function in the cosmic design of the Mayan worldview, which has three levels: underworld, earth and sky. This imagery emphasizes the function of the standing stone as a pillar connecting a community with its past. The loss of cultural knowledge, however, complicates this role. Camayd-Freixas remarks that the novel depicts the "transformación del mito en leyenda y de la leyenda en suceso cotidiano, donde persisten, sin embargo, las lejanas repercusiones de la transgresión original" (210). Myth has become legend, and legend has made way for the ordinary present. The villagers, disconnected from their mythological past, believe that the stone holds Goyo Yic's runaway wife, María Tecún. Over the course of many generations, the story spreads to such an extent that all runaway wives in the book are called *tecunas*. Additionally, the community sees the ridge as a dangerous place where men in search for their wives lose their way in the thick mists, tumbling down the mountainside towards their death. This mistaken belief instills fear and suspicion in the community, undermining the actual purpose of the stone as a guardian of the community´s collective knowledge and memory. It is not until Nicho Aquino's metamorphosis into his *nawal* that the real purpose of the stone is revealed and points Aquino in the right direction to begin his journey, one leading to uncover the ultimate truth and bring the journey of reconciliation to its conclusion.

Nicho Aquino's metamorphosis into his *nawal* advances the reconciliation process because it permits him to enter the mythological plane of existence, thus uncovering long forgotten truths. His journey begins when, like Ilóm and Yic, Aquino also loses his woman,

Isabra. After getting outrageously drunk and then eventually sobering up, he decides to search for her. Along the way he meets a traveler who later reveals himself to be one of the firefly wizards. The traveler promises Aquino that together they will find Isabra. At the site of the standing stone on María Tecún ridge, the postman turns into his *nawal*, the coyote.[27] This figure, like the possum, carries cosmological significance. Nancy Gray Diaz explains that, in the *Popol Wuj,* "the coyote is one of the four animals which bring the good news about the new food, corn, and it is at this point exactly in the sacred narrative that the men of corn are formed" (246). Aquino's transformation into a coyote marks a progression in the cycle. He, as a messenger bearing good news, will help reunite Goyo Yic with his partner María Tecún, who will see the reconciliation process completed. This reconciliatory journey through cultural and ecological memory will lead the postman to the heart of the cosmos and the truth. After shifting his shape into that of a coyote, Aquino/Coyote notices that "en lugar de cabello, pelo de música de flauta de caña. Un pelo de hilos finos que su mano de hoja con dedos peinaba suavemente, porque al hundir mucho sus uñas, cambiaba el sonido, se le resbalaba como un torrente" (369). Aquino struggles to reconcile himself with his new body as he experiments with his paws. Coyote's fur, the source of the "música de flauta de caña," further emphasizes the cosmological connection because its imagery links Coyote to the god Hunahpu-Utiu, the "wizard who hunts with the blowpipe [and] a crucial figure in the preagricultural period" (Martin 372). The figure of the coyote is significant in maintaining a balance, "Nicho… is now Hunahpu-Utiu, the hunting coyote, god of the night in masculine guise… and counterpart of the "feminine" god of dawn—Hunahpu-Vuch, the possum, Goyo Yic__ in the underground meaning of the novel" (Martin 372). Now that Aquino has become a coyote, the cosmos prepares him for his eventual meeting with Yic towards the end of

---

[27] As mentioned previously, this ridge is located north of Lake Atitlán and still serves as a place where Aj'Qijab (timekeepers) complete their rituals.

the novel. The nature of their *nawals,* the harbinger of dawn and the messenger who brings news of the discovery of corn, compliment each other, and ensure that the one will aid the other and vice versa.

As mentioned before, the novel never represents relationships as one-dimensional but goes to great lengths in its imagery and metaphors to position characters within a complicated web of interdependencies. Aquino/Coyote's experience as he travels through the caves is no different. During his journey into the caves, Aquino/Coyote forms another relationship, equally crucial in regaining the cosmological equilibrium. However, before this connection can be established, the novel takes great pains to show the reader that the postman is leaving the ordinary world behind. Aquino/Coyote follows the firefly wizards into a series of caves that according to the Maya provide access to the underworld. The novel clearly indicates this next stage, describing a green blue glow associated with Xibalba, enveloping Aquino/coyote (Martin 374). Concurrently, the narratological imagery also suggests a passing through ecological time, penetrating the geological memory of the earth. Aquino and the firefly wizard reach their first stop, the Painted House, observing the scenery,

> Por un altísimo cañón se derramaba la luz del sol hacia el interior, con movimiento de agua… agua congelada de diamantes. Pero no solo de arriba, de abajo salía también una extraña verdura de cristales. [Aquino] [t]uvo la sensación de estar dentro de una perla… No era la gruta de un cuento de niños. Era efectivamente real… Por una graciosa abertura, medias naranjas de bóvedas cubiertas de estalactitas y estalagmitas, se reflejaban en el lago. El líquido de un profundo azul de pluma brillante, mostraba en su interior, como en un estuche de joyas las soguillas del deslumbramiento, los fantásticos chalchihuites atesorados por la más india de las indias, la tierra. (374-376)

The cave system opens up, allowing natural light to filter through, revealing an astounding richness in precious stones and rock formations. The light reflects off a multitude of surfaces, making this the brightest scene in the novel, bringing light to a world previously darkened by degradation and ignorance. The slow earth processes producing calcite, stalactites, and stalagmites remind the reader of a different time paradigm where water, carrying minerals, slowly drips down, causing mineral deposits to build up, producing glittering rock. Aquino feels the slowness of time passing as he has the "sensación de estar dentro de una perla." The metaphor of the pearl conjures an atmosphere of wonder and hints at the return of the dreamlike state with which the novel began. The passage anticipates the coming reconciliation with the Maya cosmovision and the earth.

In this Painted House, Aquino learns the truth about his wife Isabra, bringing an end to his relationship with her but leading to other possibilities. Isabra, his earthly wife, suffered a tragic death, swallowed up by the earth while venturing out to collect water. Aquino weeps bitterly at the discovery of this painful truth and realizes that he cannot return to the world as he knew it. Wholeness in the world above has been denied to Aquino, but during his travels deeper into the caves, he is surrounded by another female entity, "la más india de las indias," the earth itself. A recurring metaphor in the novel, imagery connects earth with the female body. Earlier in the narrative, a description symbolically and physically links women to earth when, after a gentle rainfall, "El pellejo de sus chiches del mismo color que la tierra llovida. Lo negro del pezón. La humedad del pezón con leche. Pesaba la chiche para dar de mamar como la tierra mojada. Sí, la tierra era un gran pezón, un enorme seno al que estaban pegados todos los peones con hambre de cosecha" (60). Woman and earth, both givers of life, are bound together in this intimate moment where rain nourishes the soil while a mother's milk nourishes her baby. María José García

Rodríguez explains that in the novel "[l]a mujer no es otra cosa que la representación misma de la fecundidad de la tierra, tierra de la que nace el maíz, elemento con el que se crearon los primeros hombres y que dio paso a la humanidad. La tierra es por tanto la madre del ser humano" (63). Women and the earth are fertile, bearers of life and inextricably fused together. Furthermore, each male character needs his female counterpart to be whole.

Since Aquino/Coyote has lost Isabra forever, he is only able to attain his wholeness by joining the earth. This involves undergoing an initiation rite, where he undergoes a series of trials, traveling ever deeper into the earth, into the very heart of existence. Once he reaches a corn field, Aquino rediscovers the sacred socially and ecologically binding truth that humanity is made of corn in "todas las formas el maíz, en la carne de sus hijos que son de maíz; en el hueso de sus muertos que son de olote seco, polvo de maíz; en la carne de sus mujeres, maíz remojado para el contento, porque el maíz en la carne de la mujer joven es como el grano humedecido por la tierra, ya cuando va a soltar el brote" (389). Corn is present in every little part of humanity's composition. The passage ties the stages of plant life to those of a human life, from the dry corn dust in the ancestor's bones to the soft corn forming women's bodies. Once again, the text celebrates women's capacity to give birth and bring new life, linking them to the bounty of the earth. In this passage, Aquino is told that corn, being the essence of humanity, should be respected and treated as such.

Significantly, the cornfield is found next to the ceiba, the tree of life who links the three worlds in the Mayan cosmovision. "In the Popol Vuh, the centre is represented by the Ceiba, or the axis from which all life emanates and through which all life passes" (Estrada 49). In this sacred space, Aquino learns another truth; that of Ilóm's demise and the stone of María Tecún. As stated above, the widely held belief that the stone represents María Tecún is false. María the

Rain, who fled with Ilóm's son, resides inside the stone. The firefly wizard recounts how she "¡Llevaba a su espalda al hijo del invencible Gaspar Ilóm y fue paralizada allí donde está, entre el cielo, la tierra y el vacío!" (421). The stone and the ceiba are brought together in this part of the novel because they both sustain the truth and in extension the cosmovision. Again, the novel insists on duplicity, showing that a resilient and strong mesh necessitates redundancy. If one element fails, another can fulfill its purpose to sustain the larger web of life. In the novel, the stone alone was not enough to sustain the cosmovision. Cosmic and natural elements needed to come together to aid the *nawals* in their journey to the tree of life and to uncover the long-forgotten unifying truth about corn.

Aquino, reconciled with his past and the core truth of his people, now accepts his role as messenger and reunites Goyo Yic with his woman, María Tecún. Through this union and the recognition of all the elements involved, a new age can officially dawn. This collective effort of cosmological and ecological forces is what, in the end, leads to the defeat of the *maiceros.* Goyo Yic and his family return to Pisigüilito, growing corn and raising a big family, "lujo de hombres y lujo de mujeres, tener muchos hijos. Viejos, niños, hombres y mujeres, se volvían hormigas después de la cosecha para acarrear el maíz; hormigas, hormigas, hormigas, hormigas…" (426). Harvests are bountiful thanks to the faithful labour of Goyo Yic and his family who undergo a final transformation into ants. This metamorphosis connects Yic and his family to the cosmological cycles explained in the *Popol Wuj,* where the ants bring the first kernels of corn to the gods, who then grind the cornmeal to form the first humans and begin a new age. Thus, the ending of the novel indicates the completion of one cycle and the beginning of a new one characterized for its harmony. With a multitude of interconnections and interdependencies established between human and more-than-human beings, the text shows how a healthy resilient

society arises from this intricate network. The resilient and sturdy fabric facilitates social and ecological reconciliation, providing a space for people to recover their roots and heal their spiritual wounds. Steeped in myth, *Hombres de maíz* provides a theoretical and philosophical map for these processes.

In the next section, I argue that, in contrast, Rey Rosa's novel *El país de Toó* presents a more pragmatic approach in its exploration of ecological and social reconciliation. The text reveals how indigenous legal systems co-existing with western ones allow Mayan communities to resist the ongoing usurpation of their culture and lands. Additionally, the narrative explores the role indigenous communities can play in the current moment marked by the intensifying climate crisis. The impact of the Anthropocene is visible throughout the novel, bringing the reader face to face with the many ways in which human activity is changing the planet. I posit that the hybrid legal and governing models of the Maya communities portrayed in the text create a more agile community when responding to local environmental crises. My analysis will engage with Mary Louise Pratt's concept of worldmaking and indigeneity, showing that, while indigenous governing systems can be effective in addressing local issues, their influences are casting a much wider web across the planet.

Guatemala's Civil War and Reconciliation Processes

Hombres de maíz ends with reconciliation and a hopeful beginning of a new cycle within Asturias's conception of the Maya cosmovision. However, the democratic *diez años de primavera* (1944-1954) during which time the novel was completed and published ended abruptly with the CIA coup. The Agrarian Reform, among other initiatives, came to a standstill. Handy describes the subsequent years in the following terms:

> The extremely inequitable land-ownership pattern recorded in the 1950 census changed little in the succeeding three decades. In absolute terms, the highland peasantry was worse off in 1982 than in 1950. With even less land for subsistence, plantation wages increased hardly at all while prices rose rapidly. Many highland villages sank even farther into collective destitution; illiteracy was widespread, malnutrition universal, hunger frequent, disease rampant, living rudimentary and life short. (*Gift* 205)

By the time *El país de Toó* was published, almost seven decades later in 2018, Guatemala had endured a series of military dictatorships culminating into decades of the so-called civil war (1960-1996). The most traumatic of these years is the short period known as *la violencia* (1982-1983) when thousands of people were murdered or disappeared. A fragile peace returned to the country with the signing of a peace accord in 1996, followed by the prosecution in 2012 of former president José Efraín Ríos Montt, who was head of state during *la violencia.* Truth and reconciliation commissions were established to unearth and establish the facts; their reports uncovered that the "state and its security forces were responsible for 93 percent of the violations committed and for 626 massacres; the guerrillas for 3 percent and for thirty-two mass killings" (Isaacs 118). During the conflict 200,000 people, most of whom were Maya, lost their lives. The truth and reconciliation commissions and their corresponding reports were designed to help people overcome their traumas and embark on a healing process. In "Truth and the Challenge of Reconciliation in Guatemala," Anita Isaacs explains that by "striking the right kind of balance between historical memory and accountability, advocates claim that truth fosters political and social reconciliation or reconstruction. Truth initiatives are often also championed because of their therapeutic benefits: they permit survivors to come to terms with past traumas in ways that could be described as internally conciliatory" (117). Advocates claim that the process initiated by

truth commissions can guide legal procedures and, on an individual level, help people find a certain level of social and psychological peace. However, I posit that these reconciliation processes with their focus on social repercussions and reparations, ignore the wider implications of the destruction where the army used scorched earth tactics, razing villages and lands to the ground. People not only lost family members and friends but were also dispossessed of the lands supporting them.

The collection of essays in *Human and Environmental Justice in Guatemala* (2018) explore the interconnection between human and environmental injustice. For example, the chapter on Canadian mining by Magali Rey Rosa "documents the consequences of environmental injustices, related to international extractive industries, and the ways in which environmental harms are enacted through institutional and human injustices." (5) Human and environmental injustices are not separate entities and a healing process for the one should involve the other to be successful. The text goes on to explain that it "is no coincidence that the military targets of the civil war are also the areas that became sites for hydroelectric projects and gold and nickel mines" (5). In effect, the successive dictatorial governments introduced neoliberal reforms through violence and ecocide, which, as explained notably by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), reflects a pattern that characterized authoritarian politics in Latin America during the Cold War. Broken communities and ruined land make it easier for foreign companies to occupy the area and continue the destruction in the form of resource extraction. The novel exposes this dynamic where the highland communities that faced the worst violence are now threatened by extractive industries and their aggressive tactics to run their operations and acquire more land. Thus, peace remains elusive, and one wonders what happened to the revolutionary ideals of the October Revolution and if they are still

alive. My reading of *El país de Toó* would suggest that they are, and recent events in Guatemala, analyzed later in the chapter, seem to suggest the same.

Rodrigo Rey Rosa: Cosmopolitan Author and Lover of the Guatemalan Wild

Rodrigo Rey Rosa, like Asturias, spent many years living abroad before returning to Guatemala. Born in 1958, he grew up in the capital Guatemala City and moved to New York in the 1980s to study film and begin a career in writing. During this time, Rey Rosa, always intrigued by the African continent, attended a writing workshop led by the American composer and writer Paul Bowles in Tangier, Morocco. Like Asturias, who was mentored by Raynaud, Rey Rosa also experienced a life changing moment when he met Bowles. Under his tutelage, the young Guatemalan developed his writing career and worked as a translator. Rey Rosa acknowledges Bowles's influence on his style. In an interview, Rey Rosa says that above all,

> tomo su precisión en el lenguaje y en la carencia de adornos innecesarios. ¿Qué dejo?... No sé. No sé si pienso en esos términos de qué dejo y qué tomo. A mí me parece un cuentista ejemplar, y único. Lo que creo que he querido aprender de él es este uso, digamos preciso y al mismo tiempo armonioso, de la prosa... Además, Bowles no creía en la revisión de los textos; si uno ve sus manuscritos se da cuenta de que casi no corrige. Pues eso no lo podría imitar porque yo sí necesito corregir, pero eso él me decía, ¡déjelo así! Como práctica constante a mí no me funciona porque si no saldrían unos mamarrachos, yo sí tengo que corregir, y mucho. (Rodriguez Freire np)

The author focuses on precision and accuracy in his work, initially producing short stories and later short novels. His unadorned prose, focused on action and dialogue more than description, contrasts with Asturias's flowery and more expansive narrative. In the 1990s, with the peace

process underway in Guatemala, Rey Rosa returned to his home country. His move is reflected in his writing, where his focus shifted from Africa to Guatemala. Thus, several parallels can be drawn between both authors who, while living abroad, met key figures who greatly influenced their lives. Furthermore, the works of Asturias and Rey Rosa coincide on multiple thematic and stylistic levels.

Asturias and Rey Rosa touch on similar themes in their writing, such as violence, corruption and a concern for the exploitation of indigenous peoples and natural environments, creating a disturbing portrait of the historical and current state of Guatemala. For example, Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (1946) depicts the brutal oppression of the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, while Rey Rosa's novel *El material humano* (2009) explores the lasting impact of decades of military dictatorships followed by bloody civil war. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, their texts explore the contributions of Mayan communities to Guatemalan culture and the preservation of natural environments. Stylistically, both authors experiment with fantastical and surreal imagery. Asturias played a fundamental role in the development of magical realism, as I discuss above in my reading of *Hombres de maíz.* Rey Rosa's fiction, while generally more realistic in tone, also contains elements of the surreal or fantastical; *El país de Toó* is no exception. I posit that read together, *Hombres de maíz* and *El país de Toó* imagine how a process of reconciliation with the Mayan peoples and the natural world would allow Guatemala to flourish socially and ecologically, bringing the dreams of the October Revolution (1944-1954) to fruition.

Before analyzing the novel, a brief overview of Rey Rosa's literary trajectory highlights the growing presence of environmental themes as well as the Mayan community in his texts. The narrative in the author's early work often unfolds outside Guatemala, in urban settings. However,

after his return to Guatemala in 1994, the writing increasingly focuses on his home country. Stephen Henighan observes that "over time, (his) depictions of Guatemala grew more complex, troubling and politicized" (180). This transition is visible when comparing his novel *Lo que soñó Sebastián* (1994) with *Material Humano* (2009) and more recently *El país de Toó*. Rey Rosa's portrayal of the environment and the Mayan people in particular gain greater prominence and complexity over the course of these texts. The earlier novel, *Lo que soñó Sebastián*, portrays a conservationist perspective of nature where the main character endeavours to protect his plot of land in the Petén jungle from local hunters. While the novel problematizes this attitude, the text avoids delving into the political realities of Guatemala, maintaining its focus on the jungle. Furthermore, the Mayan community is only present on the peripheries with the focus on the protagonist who is *ladino.* Henighan writes that the "Mayan presence enters Rey Rosa's fiction as an element of national heritage. Unlike the natural world, the Maya cannot be preserved because, as portrayed [in *Lo que soñó Sebastián*] they have already been assimilated. The vestigial Mayan culture is engulfed by corruption in the form of an illicit trade in real and counterfeit Mayan artefacts" (190). In *Lo que soñó Sebastián,* the degradation of the jungle not only represents the loss of wildlife but also of the indigenous way of life. Traditional hunters are forced to give up hunting, becoming an ephemeral presence like the animals they once hunted.

However, in *El país de Toó,* the Mayan community plays a central role and forges a different path, resisting assimilation by maintaining a semiautonomous state and governing their lands through a hybrid system of Western and Mayan laws. Melding the two systems ensures the safeguarding of communal forests and the sacred springs found throughout the region. By upholding traditional structures of governance as well as understanding the western legal system, the community successfully resists international resource companies. These acts of resistance

gain a new level of urgency as indigenous communities continue to see their livelihoods and lands disappear, consumed by heavy industry. In this aspect, *Hombres de maíz* and *El país de Toó* differ dramatically. I argue that although both novels consider the indigenous worldview an important source of knowledge capable of providing solutions to current problems, *Hombres de maíz* is more philosophical in this approach. Asturias's text posits the possibility of a return to a more traditional, almost idyllic, society. This is something *El país de Toó* does not try to do for several reasons. First, Rey Rosa's prose is directed by a realist style, generally excluding mythological imagery. Secondly, at this current moment a return to a traditional past is simply not an option. Human activity has intensified and increased at such a scale, not to mention the developments in technology and explosion in population, causing the planet's landscapes to undergo dramatic change. The global climate crisis accelerates, destabilizing weather patterns and with it political and social systems. Humanity, and the planet along with it, are therefore entering a new geological epoch known as the Anthropocene. This new era will see an increasingly unstable planet with major extinction events and the possibility of a complete collapse of ecosystems across the globe.

Setting the Garbage Scene: The Anthropocene in *El país de Toó*

El país de Toó unfolds in an unnamed Central American republic, yet the use of place names and key geographical features clearly set the novel in Guatemala. Three characters, all *ladino,* are guided by the indigenous community of Toó to embark on a journey of healing and redemption. The three *ladinos*, Polo, Cobra and Jacobo, undergo a near-death experience and in their second life become intimately connected to the county of Toó and its people. As the novel ends, Polo Yrrarraga, a political activist, continues his fight exposing corrupt government politics and helping Mayan communities find the tools to resist the foreign resource companies

exploiting their lands. Young Jacobo, son of the businessman Emilio Carrión, who has close ties to the country's president, escapes his father's grip with the help of his nana, Doña Matilde, a member of the Toó community. At the same time Cobra, Emilio Carrión's former driver and hitman, finds redemption in saving Polo's life and later by seeking refuge and finding acceptance in Toó. Specifically, Jacobo and Cobra fully realize themselves by integrating into the community and its natural surroundings. As they earn their position in the community, they are included in the world-making practices of Toó, finding personal and social reconciliation. Additionally, becoming part of the Toó community means ecological reconciliation where the characters learn how to respect and take care of their natural surroundings.

As violent human conflict pushed Guatemala into new levels of crisis in the 20th century, another threshold was breached. Increasingly intensive levels of energy consumption, industrial agriculture and growing levels of pollution pushed the world into the Anthropocene. Paul Crutzen, a Dutch meteorologist and atmospheric chemist, first introduced the term in a short scientific article published in 2000, explaining that humanity has reached a point where our impact is such that we influence the climate on earth.[28] Thus, the stable climate which marked the previous epoch known as the Holocene, is giving way to an unstable climate where weather patterns and seasons will become less predictable accompanied by more frequent occurrences of storms, flash floods and drought. This new reality refutes the long-held belief that human activity has no impact on the environment. It is now clear that what happens at one place of the globe has repercussion for all human and more-than-human beings. Dipesh Chakrabarty, an Indian

---

[28] "The Anthropocene" Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer, *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (May 2000): 17-18. Accessed on Feb. 18, 2024. https://www.mpic.de/3865097/the-anthropocene

historian and postcolonial scholar, describes the scale of the impact, arguing that humans have become geological agents with the potential to affect all life around the world. In his view,

> Humans are biological agents, both collectively and as individuals. They have always been so. There was no point in human history when humans were not biological agents. But we can become geological agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself. To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species. We seem to be currently going through that kind of a period. (*The Climate of History* 206-207)

Technological advancement and population growth influence the very climate of the planet. Previously, in the 1980s and 1990s, governments and political leaders focused on the development of international markets, promoting globalization. During these heady years of free trade commerce, globalization was conceptualized in terms of its economical, political and cultural impact, with humanity at the centre and in control of all these activities. Environmental tragedies were by and large seen as local problems. However, the arrival of the Anthropocene, accompanied by the realization that humanity is not in control, requires a shift in thinking to understand the new reality staring us in the face. It now turns out that human activity has so dramatically altered the environment and unleashed new forces, that any illusion of control is swept away by increasingly intense heat events, forest fires and shifting ocean currents. In face of this dramatic change, Chakrabarty advocates for a transition from a global to a planetary way of thinking. In his recent book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), he writes,

> The globe, I argue, is a humanocentric construction; the planet, or the Earth system, decenters the human. The doubled figure of the human now requires us to think about how various forms of life, our own and others, may be caught up in historical processes that bring together the globe and the planet both as projected entities and as theoretical categories and thus mix the limited timescale over which modern humans and humanist historians contemplate history with the inhumanly vast timescales of deep history. (4)

The concepts of the globe and globalization assume that humanity is in control, directing the action with people focusing on broadening connections between the international community and industry. However, within the new epoch of the Anthropocene, these conceptualizations are too narrow, excluding a whole range of other phenomena. Humanity needs to shift the focus, opening up to more holistic considerations which include planetary processes; namely geological and biological ones. This shift requires acknowledging that, while human activity is becoming a decisive factor in the future evolution of our planet, we have also made it more unpredictable. Thus, thinking in a planetary way consists of recognizing humanity's role in a much larger web, decentering and humbling ourselves to the greater planetary forces.

When described in general terms, the concept of the Anthropocene seems highly abstract because it deals with forces and timespans not visible in everyday life. However, *El país de Toó* visualizes the new epoch by highlighting particular landscape features. In the beginning of the novel, when Cobra drives to Toó for the first time, as he passes through the city, "[a] lo largo de la carretera Panamericana el paisaje de montañas y barrancas como pintado en acuarela estaba obstruido por edificios de lámina y bloques de colores charros, y los carteles de publicidad, grandes y pequeños, se sucedían unos a otros sin interrupción... A la entrada de cada pueblo podían verse cascadas de basura plástica y orgánica" (30). It's a typical modern urban landscape

where cheap buildings, gaudy houses and billboards crowd out the natural landscape. The chaotic city obscures the tranquil backdrop of the mountains, "pintado en acuarela." Billboards, a product of capitalism, promote consumer culture, the results of which are visible at the entrance of towns where one can see "cascadas de basura plástica y orgánica." The specific use of the word "cascadas" recalls waterfalls but the beauty is marred by the fact that it refers to piles of plastic and organic waste. This image points to the widespread problem of plastic waste in Guatemala where the Río Las Vacas carries 2% of the world's plastic pollution out to the ocean.[29] Littered by garbage, the riverbed looks like a garbage dump, scattered with items ranging from shoes to toys to bottlecaps. The global build-up of plastic pollution has reached such a scale that it affects ecosystems and wildlife around the world. The plastic bits and pieces scattered throughout the world make the Anthropocene visible, because the material does not degrade naturally, nourishing and returning to the earth. Rather, it builds up and blocks natural arteries from rivers to ocean currents to a bird's intestines. Traces of plastic pollution also permeate contemporary fiction, from the passage quoted above to another of Rey Rosa's novels: in one episode of *Carta de un ateo guatamalteco al santo padre* (2020), the main character wades through a river filled with plastic waste, becoming ill shortly after the experience.[30] The detritus of human activity piles up, becoming visible in the heaps of waste found not only on the edges of cities and towns, but also, as will be shown later, in what is thought to be pristine wilderness.

---

[29] "The problem of plastic pollution in the Rio Motagua, Guatemala" *Ecohubmap.* https://www.ecohubmap.com/hot-spot/the-problem-of-plastic-pollution-in-the-rio-motagua-guatemala/c096ebmldrtqpq3 Accessed on Dec. 5, 2023.

[30] As discussed in Chapter One, plastic waste serves a metaphorical purpose in *Temporada de huracanes* where plastic and human waste meld together in scenes of abject poverty and neglect. Furthermore, the texts from Cardenal and Belli also depict images of plastic pollution and toxic waste, pointing to the global south drowning under the excesses of the wealthy global north.

While plastic waste is a byproduct of the Anthropocene, garbage carelessly tossed away and left to pile up, the novel explores a pivotal activity in technological progress and environmental degradation: mining. Mining, a highly intensive industrial process with an enormous environmental footprint, is one of the main sources of conflict in the novel as indigenous communities fight to keep a Canadian mining company from commencing operations in their territory. A bus tour organized by indigenous groups to inform local inhabitants of the dangers of mining operations visits the gold mine called La Pirámide in the neighbouring county. The text describes how the mine brings down the once majestic mountain: "Antes de iniciarse el proceso, el monte a medio devastar, de nombre San Miguel, se elevaba dos mil novecientos metros sobre el nivel del mar. No alcanzaba ahora los dos mil, dentro de pocos años sería terreno raso, o tal vez un gran cráter, si seguían encontrando oro más abajo" (233). The name of the mountain, San Miguel, alludes to its sacred nature, reminding the reader of syncretic religious systems discussed earlier in this chapter, where Christian saint names often indicate the existence of a sacred Mayan site. This sacred mountain is now desecrated, devastated by industrial processes. The text continues to highlight the massive scale of the destruction when the tour guide, a former engineer turned activist, describes the processing plant where,

> a medida que el monte original iba disgregándose, se levantaba una especie de pirámide escalonada que recordaba las de Teotihuacán. Debe ser bañada día y noche con solución de cianuro, lo que contaminaría el aire, el agua y la tierra del valle durante muchos, muchos años… En el año 2016, la compañía extrajo unos cuatro mil quinientos gramos de oro y consumió agua a razón de cien mil litros por hora durante los trescientos sesenta y cinco días del año. (233-234)

In a didactic tone the text informs both the tourists and the reader about the environmental impact of the mine. Cyanide is blown into the air and leaks into the ground water, while the extraction process requires thousands of litres of water daily and surrounding communities will bear the brunt of the contamination of their earth, water, and air. The impact of the mine spreads well beyond the immediate site. By naming Teotihuacán, the text invokes historical memory of the ancient Aztec empire, sarcastically comparing the glorious pyramids of Teotihuacán with the mountain of mining rubble. This comparison underlines the ugliness of the mine, mocking technological might and a society that is only able to produce a giant heap of rubble instead of a splendid pyramid.

The Anthropocene is a time filled with contradictions, an aspect the novel readily brings to the forefront. Ideas formed during the Enlightenment maintain human exceptionality and our capacity to control the environment. These assumptions around control persist even though climate change puts the notion on its head. Pratt remarks on this contradiction when she imagines what a future being might find on earth. She writes, "our detritus, to some hypothetical future nonhuman geologist, will reveal a world that became, as [Nils] Bubant puts it, increasingly "shaped by human activity but…also increasingly outside human control" (120). Thus, while humanity strives to dominate and control the planet, the unpredictable forces of a warming planet push this possibility out of reach. In the meantime, no space displays the beliefs around human control better than the golf course. The villains in the novel regularly meet on the perfectly manicured greens of a golf course to plot and scheme. This space epitomizes the anthropocentric epoch because the course, perfectly tailored for the pleasures of the wealthy, displays a force of humanity expert at modelling and manipulating landscapes to fit their perceived needs, disregarding the impact on nature and marginalized communities:

> La gramilla del campo de golf, de un verde muy brillante, parecía artificial. Pocos habrían imaginado que, más allá de las pequeñas colinas ondulantes y los bosquecillos de pinos y cipreses, las residencias con piscinas y las canchas de tenis, comenzaban las barriadas obreras, los arrabales, y, un poco más allá, los barrancos bañados con aguas negras y poblados de covachas, donde los torrentes del final de la estación lluviosa causaban año tras año deslizamientos de tierra y pérdidas de vidas y viviendas. (43)

Situated at the centre of the golf course, the villains are far removed from the misery barely visible on the horizon. The distinction between the artificial and natural environments is underscored by the ironic observation that the brilliant green of the golf course "parecía artificial." The long list of luxurious features of the affluent neighbourhood emphasizes the geographical and socioeconomic distance between the rich and the poor. While the rich surround themselves with a perfectly shaped landscape, the poor are forced to live in degraded environments where floods and mudslides occur regularly, erasing their communities. The chaos unleashed by the rainy season further belies the illusion of control maintained by the artificial landscape of the golf course. For now, the rich are in complete control, but as the story unfolds this control will degrade, swept away by a current of resistance and change.

Resistance and Indigeneity as a Force

Whereas mythological and ecological forces propelled the resistance in *Hombres de maíz,* human actors drive the resistance, striving to bring about change, in *El país de Toó*. Furthermore, while Asturias's work mainly takes place within his conception of a Mayan world, *El país de Toó* is more cosmopolitan, describing characters from multiple cultural backgrounds who are joining the indigenous cause and fight against the foreign resource extraction companies. This network

of social and environmental activists, headed by Polo Yrrarraga, harnesses technology to combat corruption and impunity. Polo founded an organization working with indigenous communities spread across the small republic. At one point in the novel, Polo explains to Cobra how he uses technology to arm locals in their struggle against corrupt schemes. In this case, a local mestizo family, desperate to hold on to their political power, wants to construct a dam near the town of Purulhá despite the protest of the local population. With the help of Polo's organization,

> habían conseguido media docena de cámaras digitales de segunda y una computadora para regalar a los resistentes, y pasaron dos semanas en Purulhá dando talleres de producción audiovisual. Seis meses después, por iniciativa de los pobladores, inauguraron ahí una estación de radio comunitaria, perseguida por el Estado (hurto de fluidos, alegaban), pero muy efectiva. Y la hidroeléctrica todavía no empezaba a trabajar. (122)

Ladino organizations and indigenous communities make use of the latest technology to resist ongoing corruption. Empowered by the tools they acquire, citizens take matters into their own hands, successfully preventing the construction of a hydroelectric station. The narrative, while seemingly matter of fact, takes on an ironic tone, dryly noting that the authorities pursued the radio station for "hurto de fluidos." The recurrent use of irony in the novel indicates a fragmentation of truth or what is believed to be true.

One truth, that of the Mayan cosmovision and its origin stories, clearly directs the narrative in *Hombres de maíz*. Towards the end of the novel, the characters appear to have lost their cultural values. However, the deeper level of the text, in the form of thematic development and style, indicates that all threads are unified by Mayan cosmology. This cultural cohesion is absent in *El país de Toó*, *w*here a web of political deceit and impunity fractures the truth. The

main characters, all in search of the truth whether personal or political, endure a long and arduous journey trying to find it, often at the risk of losing their own lives. Polo, in his efforts to uncover social and political truths, is nearly killed in an assassination attempt. Jacobo, after discovering the truth about his father's involvement with the government, almost dies before being rescued by Cobra and Doña Matilde. The fragmented *ladino* world is countered by the unity found in the indigenous communities, particularly the county of Toó. In the face of the ongoing corruption and destruction, the people of Toó unite around the common goal of resisting forces that threaten their cultural and environmental survival. I posit that this resistance aligns with Mary Louise Pratt's ideas of indigeneity as a force, where indigenous people around the world are banding together to oppose the status quo and use their worldview to imagine alternative ways forward in the face of climate change and environmental degradation.

Indigeneity plays a pivotal role in the shift from a global to a planetary conceptualization of the Earth. As Chakrabarty explained above, humanity has become a planetary force, able for better or worse to alter the course of planetary processes. Pratt follows similar concerns and ideas in her book *Planetary Longings,* published a year after Chakrabarty's volume. She also discusses the need for humanity to rethink its role on the planet. She refers to Gayatri Spivak, who had already begun to think about planetarity in the 1990s, positing that in "the millennial crisis of agency and futurity: humans must reimagine themselves as 'planetary subjects' rather than 'global agents'" (Pratt 10). This observation echoes Chakrabarty's writings in its call for humanity to reconceptualize its position within the web of life and how human activity influences future developments of geo- and ecological processes. Pratt connects this process to what she calls the crisis of futurity, where people feel lost in the face of so much uncertainty and are unable of conceiving ways forward outside of the established status quo. However, the

climate crisis demands a different response as current systems are failing, unable to provide the solutions needed. [31] Pratt explains that as a "concept, planetarity resonates above all with what I have been calling the crisis of futurity linked to climate change and the impending ecological catastrophe" (10). Faced with the unpredictable and even the unimaginable, humanity needs to reimagine future possibilities and can do so by broadening perceptions of the world from globe to planet. Pratt focuses on how the notion of planetarity serves as an analytical framework and informs the imaginary of the future. She writes that planetarity "shifted the focus toward ecological standpoints that conjugated the human with the nonhuman, the living with the nonliving" (11). Understanding humanity to be an intrinsic part of the planet rather than a separate entity facilitates imagining what it is like to live and collaborate with other beings. This reimagining is necessary to respond to the crisis of futurity and climate change.

This movement is also precisely what indigenous communities are advocating for and what is portrayed in *El país de Toó.* Resisting capitalist systems and exposing the repercussions of the Anthropocene on marginalized communities, the novel explores alternate ways of approaching the future through its portrayal of the fictional county of Toó, based on the existing county of Totonicapán located in Guatemala's western highlands, and its inhabitants and the ways in which they resist neoliberal systems. Within this notion of planetarity, indigeneity becomes a force, motivating world debate and action. Pratt reminds the reader that "the term indigeneity is relational, a product of the colonial encounter. The colonial labels for the colonized—Indigenous, First Nations, pueblos originarios (original people), autochthones (autochthonous), aboriginal, native—all refer to anteriority in time and place; that is, they evoke

---

[31] In some ways, this is reminiscent of what Amitav Ghosh wrote in *The Great Derangement* (2016) where he ponders fiction's inability to grapple with climate change in what he sees as a crisis of the imagination.

an other who was there first, before someone else arrived" (18). The idea of being indigenous emerged after the conquest, and its discourses created an us (original inhabitants) versus them (the Europeans) mentality. After the initial moments of contact, processes of conquest and colonization led to a general resistance to the colonizer. While the concept of indigeneity spans the globe, "[i]ndigenous subjectivity is grounded in place (though not necessarily ancestral place), where political sovereignty and the sacred both dwell" (18).[32] As a result, while being indigenous unites the first peoples across the Americas, their ties to their ancestral territories come first and foremost. In recent history, the resistance of indigenous communities against colonizers transformed into resisting against a new foreign force, multinational corporations and extraction companies, lending an international level to their resistance (Pratt 18). In this context, Pratt conceives of indigeneity as a force that

> generates agency wherever it comes into play. It has the power to make things happen, but what it will make happen is not systemic or predictable. This force can operate on any range or scale, in any register, using any materials. Indigeneity today can generate a land occupation, a United Nations bureaucracy, a poetry anthology… international travel, academic programs, tax law, dance and theater, court battles, alternative legal systems… education experiments, insurgencies, archaeology, cosmovisions. (19)

Indigenous peoples increasingly influence the outcome of proposed (or ongoing) industrial projects involving national and international companies operating in their territories. These actions involve local population as well as their diaspora, who often lend their expertise in aiding their home communities in resisting threats to territorial sovereignty. The historical isolation that

---

[32] To gain an appreciation of the importance of place and location in indigenous cultures, see *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996) by Keith H. Basso. While Basso's book focuses on the Apache, many of his observations run true for most indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Handy describes, explained in the first section of the chapter, has been overcome with Mayan people themselves reaching out and connecting with the wider world.

The county of Toó functions under a hybrid legal and governing system of Mayan and Western structures. The semi-autonomous region practices communal management of land and resources, maintaining its sovereignty thanks to a strong governing system that has withstood the test of time. In the article, “Indigenous Environmental Rights and Sustainable Development: Lessons from Totonicapán in Guatemala” by Patricia Galvao-Ferreira and Mario Mancilla, the region of Totonicapán is described as follows:

> The Communal Forest of Totonicapán is recognized as the largest and most well-preserved coniferous forest in all of Central America. Approximately 39,000 hectares of forests support a rich ecosystem that has been communally preserved for centuries in spite of extreme pressures on the land resulting from the high rural population densities and broader economic pressures of a national economy with a strong focus on exporting natural resources. The forest ecosystem functions as a sponge: it absorbs water from the rains, retains this water in the subsoil, and gradually releases it back to the surface in the form of natural springs. This cycle is possible because the surface of the volcanic soil is constituted of permeable material like sand and clay, while impermeable material is found in the subsoil. This is the only source of water for Totonicapán through the six months of the dry season. (21)

The authors continue to explain the management of this land by the Maya K’iche’ peoples who have

> sustainably managed this forest watershed for hundreds of years. They have adapted their systems along the way, in order to address natural and societal changes that threatened their water resources, considered sacred. In order to protect the watershed, the Maya K'iche' have adopted participatory models of water governance. These communal water management systems function independently from Guatemalan water management systems and they are anchored in a distinct cosmovision. (22)

The water retention of the forests in Totonicapán further contributes to the surrounding region because the springs form a headwater for Guatemala's major rivers (22). Therefore, the communal system developed by the Maya K'iche' benefits both human and more-than-human beings, creating stable yet flexible structures capable of sustaining the community and ecosystem.

Toó is a fictional copy of Totonicapán as illustrated in the descriptions of the area throughout the novel. The narrative adopts a didactic tone when describing Toó, actively seeking to instruct the reader in the governing systems of the region and its success in maintaining its semi-autonomous state. Polo's explanation of Toó emphasizes the mechanics of its governing structure:

> Funcionan de manera rotativa, en ciclos de un año, como todos los trabajos comunales, desde el cuidado de los caminos y los cementerios hasta el control del agua comunal y la organización de las fiestas. Así, quienes ejercen como jueces se cuidan mucho de ser justos, porque saben que tal vez a alguien a quien ellos juzgan hoy le tocará juzgarlos a ellos el día de mañana. (82)

All communal work is rotational by nature, meaning that each member will have the opportunity to play a specific role at some point, including that of mayor. Polo's explanation is later expanded on by Pamela, who works for Polo's organization. In a conversation with Cobra, she explains that predominantly Mayan areas have a

> sistema de organización comunal que pocos *ladinos* o *kaxlanes* conocían. Habló del caso de Toó… Era un lugar aparte, dijo, desde antes de 1847, cuando los principales se habían rebelado para no formar parte de la república recién fundada… Allí, la tierra era de todos, como en los países comunistas, solo que esto venía de antes… desde antes de la conquista. Había dos alcaldías en cada municipio; una indígena y comunal, que la gente maya apoyaba, y, ni modo, otra ladina, partidista y casi siempre muy corrupta, que dependía del Estado. Todos trabajaban la tierra, cuidaban los caminos, las fuentes y las venas de agua, con y sin azufre, los cementerios, los temascales, organizaban las ceremonias y las fiestas. Hombres y mujeres, niñas y niños participaban en la vida comunal. (99-100)

Communal work stands at the centre of the social and ecological maintenance of Toó. The mention of the year 1847 alludes to a historical event when a group of K'iche' residents in Totonicapán rebelled, refusing to pay tribute to the Spanish colonizers. After the uprising, people banded together and "bought communal land title deeds for 22,000 hectares of forest" (Abbott, np). The above selected passages, didactic in tone, reveal an eagerness in showing the sophisticated system developed in rural Guatemala as an alternative way to address issues of land and resource management. From these explanations one can surmise that the author addresses an international audience, looking to educate it on the Mayan world. To this end, the novel provides a glossary of Mayan terms. Ultimately, the information on Totonicapán and its fictional

counterpart Toó also reveals a community strong in its traditions and organization. This strength enables the community to flourish and nourishes its ongoing resistance against corrupt forces coming from the outside.

This positive evaluation of the Mayan community is confirmed by Rey Rosa, who in an interview explained that he considers the "mundo maya, tan poderoso y rico, tendría que ser una esperanza. Nos hace diferentes. Pero el mundo maya no está bien representado en las clases dirigentes del país. Y eso hace que todo sea más trágico respecto al futuro." (Cruz n.p.). Rey Rosa's cautious observation, however, points to the many obstacles the indigenous people face. While the Mayan communities offer some hope in stemming the tide of social and ecological degradation, corrupt existing power structures prevent the community from reaching its full potential.

By introducing a broad cast of indigenous characters, the novel engages with the many ways community members interact with the world at large. Each character is knowledgeable about their own culture and successful at navigating western systems outside of their community. In this way, the narrative joins a literary movement refuting the pervasive discourse about indigenous peoples as hapless victims paralyzed by trauma. *El país de Toó* offers many examples of Mayans actively engaging within their community and beyond. Some, such as Don Akiral Atanasio, work to instruct newcomers in the Mayan cosmovision and the ways of Toó, maintaining the didactic tone of the text. Goya, Doña Matilde's niece, becomes a lawyer touring the world, and Don Santos, a former Mayor of Toó, also studied law. Don Santos, true to the syncretic nature of the community is both lawyer and Aj Kij, timekeeper and spiritual guide. Together, Don Akiral, Doña Matilde and Don Santos organize the bus tour mentioned earlier and join with other communities to educate themselves and acquire tools for their continued

resistance. They also reach out to organizations such as the one run by Polo to band together to oppose international companies threatening to invade their regions. Finally, Doña Matilde, Jacobo's former nana, uses her knowledge of traditional medicine to heal him and give him a second chance to live in Toó. Each character reveals the different ways through which indigenous peoples are carving out their own place in the national and international space, raising their voices and demanding to be heard. Successfully navigating between their traditional and the international spheres, they are active forces helping shape conversations held at all levels. Through these new levels of engagement, indigenous peoples are also becoming increasingly successful at maintaining levels of sovereignty in their home territories.

The fictional success finds its real world counterpart in a recent news story the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled against Guatemala and the Canadian mining company Hudbay Minerals, who illegally acquired the land for their operations through a series of bribes, thus violating the rights of the local Q'eqchi' people.[33] Here fiction reflects reality in demonstrating that indigeneity is a force that cannot be overlooked and must be reckoned with.

Holistic Reconciliation and World-making in the Western Guatemalan Highlands

Increasing numbers of indigenous communities across the world are carefully opening up, participating with organizations on an international level and engaging in a process Pratt calls world-making. Although there is still considerable and well-founded historical distrust of outsiders, indigenous peoples are keen to share their knowledge with the world in this time of

---

[33] "International court rules against Guatemala in a landmark Indigenous and environmental rights case" Daniel Shailer, Dec 16, 2023. Accessed Jan 9, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/guatemala-mine-indigenous-rights-court-nickel-fenix-346b0c882d4ee52954a7bd32c81202a5?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=share

crisis. *El país de Toó* is a fictional example of this world-making process; the town of Toó takes in certain members of the *ladino* population, offering them insight into Mayan cosmologies and inviting their participation in resisting the corrupt ruling elite and mining companies. Pratt observes the recent move among indigenous peoples to include people outside of their communities in their debates and ideas. She calls this process world-making:

> Far from speaking for and about themselves, Indigenous thinkers today address all humanity, exhorting non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to remake their place on the planet and in the cosmos and aiming to show them how. This turn toward what I am calling world-making shifts the understanding of cultural continuity. Continuity is defined not by the collective maintenance of practices, stories, and beliefs over time but by the shared work of world-making conducted by the group over time. (9)

World-making focuses on sharing knowledge with a wider audience with the hope of creating new ways of thinking outside of the normative western tradition. Pratt goes on to say that this world-making activity is "futurological" since it "directly addresses the crisis of the future" (115). For Pratt,

> (the) Indigenous has become a generative space for noncapitalist and anticapitalist civilizational thinking and a source for the more radical visions needed to respond to the unfolding environmental catastrophe. Even as it aims at sustaining Indigenous life, this stream of extroverted thought claims a place in a global intellectual, political, and cultural commons, actively recruiting new audiences, Indigenous and non-Indigenous—with ideas meant to travel, to reach all humankind. (115)

In fact, emerging indigenous thought is gaining ground in international arenas and people are developing confidence in their ability to have an impact on the global stage. It looks to the future and thinks of ways in which a society can survive in the face of growing environmental adversity and instability. While in *Hombres de maíz,* indigenous characters such as Yic and Aquino had to rediscover and recover their cosmovision, the people of Toó have already passed this stage. Moving confidently into the wider world and directing themselves to a pan-indigenous audience, they are showing the desire and capability to become guides to others. I posit that the Mayan community in *El país de Toó* is already at peace with its past and looking ahead to the future, ready to reconcile with nonindigenous society in order to work together to safeguard their territory from further industrial invasion. The novel portrays a confident indigenous community in tune with their environment and their cosmovision. This community fully embraces all elements of its culture and celebrates it. It is not the Mayan characters who are in search for reconciliation and redemption; rather it is the *ladinos* who are damaged and in need of a second chance. In this way, the novel constitutes an empowering narrative where the meeting of *ladino* and Mayan worlds leads to a constructive rather than a destructive outcome for traditional communities and their local landscapes. The Mayan characters serve as guides to the *ladinos* who after a near-death experience embark on a journey of healing and redemption, eventually settling in Toó. Reborn, Jacobo and Cobra integrate into the community, contributing to the world-making practices of Toó.

However, a holistic reconciliation where social and ecological forces coalesce necessitates certain adjustments in narratological tone. The novel begins in a realist mode but, as events lead the main *ladino* characters to Toó, the tone shifts, creating a fable like ambiance. I argue that this shift in tone is due to several factors. First, as Ghosh succinctly writes,

contemporary fiction struggles in its portrayal of climate change and the Anthropocene. He argues that,

> the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also our commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general… it may well be the key to understanding why contemporary culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change. Indeed, this is perhaps the most important question ever to confront culture in the broadest sense -- for let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination. (9)

Many everyday assumptions about the world as a stable place under human control guide our actions and the culture created. These assumptions arise from a sense that humanity is at the centre of everything. Complementing Ghosh's statement is Pratt's observation that the "fatal limitation of Anthropocene is surely that… it leaves the anthropo- in its place. It remains compatible with the man/nature dichotomy and the narrative machine of man acting on nature" (124). The foundation of the concept of the Anthropocene lies in humanity, placing people at the centre of the planetary drama. A growing realization that a shift in mindset is needed runs parallel to the development of the Anthropocene as a concept. Increasing numbers of people look for ways to resolve the climate crisis or to find ways to live in this new world both mentally and physically. Pratt recognizes this movement, stating that many who subscribe to the Anthropocene as a concept look to "non-Western knowledges for alternatives to modern capitalist thinking about how to inhabit the world" (123), trying to break the current limitation on our imaginations and thus engage in new ways of thinking about a future beyond capitalism.

Rey Rosa's novel contributes to this movement by exploring the world-making practices happening in Toó and by altering the mode of the text accordingly. By transitioning into a fable-

like tone, the text recognizes that solutions to the current crises facing humanity need to be found partially outside of the dominant narrative embedded in western systems and cultures. Rejecting the constraints of realist fiction frees the narrative to explore alternative ways of viewing the world and contemplating solutions beyond capitalist systems. The text relies on indigenous cosmovisions in order to imagine alternative paths people can take moving forward into a world of deepening uncertainty. In her article, "La búsqueda del mythos en la posguerra centroamericana: una aproximación a la narrativa de Rodrigo Rey Rosa," Nanci Buiza writes, "El mundo narrativo de *El país de Toó* es de conspiraciones, intrigas y acontecimientos políticos. Pero detrás de todo ello rige un cosmos maya… El hecho de que la novela se encuadra dentro del *Chilam Balam* le confiere un carácter metafísico a los acontecimientos que describe" (n.p). On the surface, *El país de Toó seems* like any other novel about Central America, focused on corruption, intrigue and the villains successfully completing their evil plans. However, as the narrative begins to look to the future and a resolution, it turns to the indigenous world, finding hope in its resistance and the growing influence of its cosmovision on a local and planetary scale.

The healing of Jacobo introduces the shift in the text, bringing the Mayan cosmovision to the forefront. Jacobo is mentally handicapped due to a swimming pool accident, causing him to become mute. His father places him in a centre for mentally handicapped youth, locked away from the world. Although the centre provides treatment, Jacobo's recovery of speech begins with the ingestion of a hallucinogenic mushroom given to him by his nana, Doña Matilde, who regularly visits him. Thus, Jacobo's healing journey is sparked by a natural medicine from the community that will later accept him and guide his healing journey both physically and socially. Commonly considered poisonous, the hallucinogenic mushroom, Kakulhá, is actually a powerful healer. The name of the mushroom links the medicine to Mayan cosmology because Kakulhá is

another name for Huracán, the Mayan God of Thunder and Lightning. Shortly after ingesting the mushroom, Jacobo immediately feels its effects:

> El fondo de su visión interior era de un color rojo brillante, pero de pronto como por un golpe de luz, se convirtió en azul… En primer plano, vio algo que podía ser una medusa que alargaba en varias direcciones sus finos tentáculos, suspendido en el vacío. *Yo soy. Yo soy. Yo soy,* decía una voz callada que parecía venir de un lugar en su interior, pero que alguien más producía… De pronto dos finos tentáculos rosados y amarillos de este y aquel ser llegaron a tocarse, y todo se transformó. Una conexión dio lugar a otra, otra medusa, otra ameba, otra palabra apareció… (172)

Jacobo's linguistic re-awakening is accompanied by primeval images of early life forms in the shape of medusas and amoebas. The return of language leads to a chain reaction where "una conexión dio lugar a otra, otra medusa, otra ameba otra palabra apareció." The words *yo soy, yo soy,* pulse like the medusas floating in the deep, emerged in a liquid environment that slowly becomes more concrete as Jacobo's sense of self returns along with his capacity to produce language and meaning.

Jacobo's linguistic rebirth occurs in two languages because Doña Matilde teaches him both Maya Kiché and Spanish. While both cultures shape his new identity, it is mainly grounded in his reading of the *Popol Wuj* which he uses to make sense of his relationship with his father whom he compares to one of the Lords of Xibalba, the Mayan underworld. The sacred text furthermore accompanies him through times of trial, from surviving the clinic whose staff keep him drugged to being kidnapped and held in a small underground cell. These events run parallel to the plot of the *Popol Wuj,* where the twins Xbalanque and Hunahpu descend into the underworld and undergo a series of trials. Fortunately, Cobra and Doña Matilde rescue Jacobo,

saving him from certain death, bringing him to Toó where his readings of the *Popol Wuj* come to life in the form of the teachings of Don Atanasio "que acompañaba siempre la palabra «milpa» con el adjetivo «santa»" (243). Ultimately, rejected by the western world, Jacobo finds acceptance in the Mayan world and quickly integrates into the community. He adopts its dress, prefers speaking Kiché to Spanish, and learns from the elders how to respect and take care of the communal forests (269).

Jacobo's awakening is closely followed by an important date on the Mayan calendar further signaling the novel's adoption of the Mayan cosmovision. Doña Matilde tells Jacobo that the president has been jailed and that "las cosas cambiaban, que el momento, la fecha, había llegado, ese año. Lo llamaban el Oxlajuj Baktún, «un Señor muy poderoso hecho no de carne sino de años.» La era de su gente había comenzado. Un cargador de buena suerte había llegado, decía. Otro tiempo iba a empezar" (183). Doña Matilde refers to the year 2012, a year that, according to the Mayan calendar, signifies the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. From this moment, the pace of the story accelerates, and the missing pieces fall into place. The corrupt governing elite are imprisoned or flee the country while the good guys successfully resist a new mining development. The text portrays all the governing elite as evil, not offering a single redeeming quality. This is confirmed when Jacobo´s father imprisons his own son, adding to the fable-like tone with stereotypes who are either good or evil. Additionally, the villains are all condemned and defeated by triumphant heroes who uphold the good.

Cobra is the other hero of the novel, transformed from aiding the evil forces to assisting Toó in successfully resisting the advances of a mining company. His first visit to Toó foreshadows his redemptive journey later in the novel. When, on orders of his boss, he takes

Doña Matilde and her niece home for a religious holiday, the place embraces him, leaving a deep impression of peace and tranquility:

> El camino de tierra bordeaba una colina cubierta de milpa. Aguacates de copas verdes y frondosas como globos se veían aquí y allá… siguieron avanzando y poco después llegaron al pie de una montaña que hacía pensar en un catedral. Se perdía en una llanura invertida de nubes grises. Un lugar sombrío pero hermoso… Las matas verdes de maíz brillaban en la luz de la tarde. (35-36)

Beautiful fertile cornfields, along with other crops, surround the village. Cobra narrates the scene, giving the landscape a sacred air when he compares the mountain to a cathedral. This sacred connotation further hints at his conversion unfolding throughout the novel and materializes with his decision to remain in the cathedral-like mountains and help the community fight impunity and corruption instead of fleeing to Mexico.

Cobra's transformation begins with learning how to tend the land and cultivate the milpa of Doña Matilde. The community also teaches him how to take care of the communal forests. "La manera como el Cobra resultó incluido en la comunidad de Toó no fue clara ni siquiera para él mismo. Pero la especie de iniciación sin protocolo a la que fue sometido era propia de la organización de los pueblos en resistencia" (269). Slowly and organically, the community allows Cobra to become part of their world-making, embracing him in their cultural practices and society. The phrase, "pueblos en resistencia" points to the collective network Cobra has joined and is helping to resist the foreign resource companies looking to exploit their region. His decision to raise his son in Toó demonstrates his deep commitment to the cause. He transitions from being a pawn obeying orders into a free individual participating in a community that

prioritizes the human and more-than-human collective. Thanks to the people of Toó, he gains personal, social, and ecological reconciliation.

Nonetheless, the novel complicates this seemingly peaceful process when Cobra, with the help of community members, decides to blow up a gaudy plaza constructed by a Canadian mining company in a nearby Mayan community. The construction of the square symbolizes the friendship of the local community with the mining company. However, the cheap and tasteless design of the square demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of local culture on the part of the company and belies the real purpose behind this symbol of friendship, namely acquiring the land for a new mine. This final closing episode also demonstrates the complicated nature of a peaceful resistance when the perpetrators themselves do not reject committing violent acts. The text describes how the mines are closed off by imposing fences lined by armed guards who are supposed to keep out angry locals. Cobra is well acquainted with the inner workings of this world and therefore does not shy away from using violence himself, hopefully for the last time. As the sounds of loud explosions reverberate through the valley, Cobra says, "Fue… una declaración de guerra incruenta y jubilosa" to which his companion Ermenegilda responds, "Fue una declaración de independencia" (294), announcing the coming of a new revolution. Although it might seem that, after decades of civil war and violence, dreams of revolution have evaporated, the closing scene of the novel shows that the dream is still alive and now resides with the future of the Mayan communities. The text's conclusion furthermore shows a continued concern for land and environmental justice. While the October Revolution was initiated by the middle classes, the novel seems to suggest that the next revolution might arise with the increasing efforts on the part of the Mayan communities to maintain their social and ecological sovereignty.

Conclusion

The ten years of Spring brought dramatic changes to Guatemala accompanied by the hope for a better future for Guatemala. The revolution's most radical piece of legislation, the Agrarian Reform, would have seen foreign corporations pay taxes for the first time in Guatemala's history. Furthermore, the seizing of some of the United Fruit Co.'s land and its redistribution to peasant families gave many a renewed chance at prosperity. Asturias completed and published *Hombres de maíz* in this rare moment in Guatemalan history where he had the freedom to celebrate the revolution but also critique it. The novel illustrates how the Mayan cosmovision, founded in an ecological conceptualization of the world, would clash with the capitalist underpinnings of the Agrarian Reform focused on private ownership. The main characters, in their journeys to recover what was lost, find cultural and ecological reconciliation, thus restoring the harmony disrupted by the capitalist *maiceros.* Through the layered cosmological concepts interacting with the environment and the people, the novel constructs a resilient web of interrelationships and interdependencies which guarantee Goyo Yic's ultimate success. Despite the novel's cosmic proportions, the focus remains on a local community and one culture, the Maya.

On the other hand, *El país de Toó* shows an indigenous community connected with the modern world where its members study abroad, travel and make connections with a broader public in an effort to protect their homeland. At this point it has been several decades since the abrupt ending of the revolution orchestrated by the U.S. government and the CIA. Cold War dynamics have made way for globalization and in the age of the Anthropocene, the Maya become a force to be reckoned with on the global stage and the focus has shifted from Mayan peoples searching for reconnection with their own roots, to sharing their knowledge with people

outside of their communities, offering with it processes of holistic reconciliation. Thus, characters like Cobra and Jacobo begin a process of healing and a new life in the community of Toó. It shows the power of a community successfully resisting foreign interference on a local scale and reminds the reader of the interconnections between a healthy ecosystem and society. The end of the novel furthermore signals the beginning of a new age and a new revolution, revealing dormant dreams of change awakening to new possibilities.

Socio-Ecological Utopian Writing from Nicaragua's Revolutionary Past and Authoritarian Present: Ernesto Cardenal and Gioconda Belli's Intertwined Visions for the Future

Scenes of environmental destruction and ecological rebirth in Nicaragua and beyond emerge from the pages of *Cántico cósmico* (1989), the poem by Ernesto Cardenal, and *Waslala* (1996), the novel by Gioconda Belli. The two authors, both fully committed to the Sandinista Revolution, produced texts deeply connected to the political project powered by utopian imaginaries of a better future. Since the Somoza dictatorship had left Nicaragua's society and environment in ruins and most Nicaraguans lived in complete poverty and highly polluted ecosystems, the Sandinista mandate focused on social and ecological reconstruction. Furthermore, during the *somocismo* or Somoza era, the dictator's family owned most of the arable land and used it to grow crops for export, leaving many Nicaraguans with plots of land too small to sustain themselves and their families or no land at all. The linkages between social and environmental wellbeing are fundamental themes in both *Cántico cósmico* and *Waslala.* The former, an epic poem consisting of 43 cantigas, celebrates the triumph of the revolution, imagining it as part of evolutionary processes which will eventually unify creation when the universe ends. In this cosmic utopia, all beings are interconnected and evolving towards a greater state of harmony. Although the Sandinista Revolution ultimately failed due to a combination of Cold War politics and infighting, *Waslala*, published well after the fall of the Sandinista government in 1990, still imagines a utopia. This dystopic novel follows the protagonist Melisandra in her search for her parents and Waslala, the ideal community they had hoped to create. In its depiction of an unequal geopolitical relationship between the hemispheric north and south, the narrative warns of the potential consequences of maintaining the economic and political status quo. The novel explores how patterns established around the point of contact

between the colonizer and the colonized reverberate into the present and how the power of a utopian imaginary can disrupt these negative patterns. While Nicaragua has once again slipped into authoritarian rule under Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, Cardenal's and Belli's work nourishes the Sandinista legacy, serving as testaments to a time when masses gathered, dreaming big and fighting to make concrete change.

Methodology: Where Two Sandinistas Meet

At first glance, the two writers appear to be very different. Cardenal, a Catholic priest, leads the contemplative community Solentiname (1966-1977) on an isolated island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua, while Belli, married young and from an upper-class family, works in advertising and hones her skills as a feminist poet. Cardenal's poetry and memoirs delve into spiritual notions of life while Belli's poetry and novels portray the female experience and the struggle for gender equality. The corpus of the two authors converges in their use of personal experiences and crucially, their respective roles in the Sandinista Revolution. Both Cardenal and Belli worked on gaining support for the Sandinista cause leading up to their victory in 1979, and afterwards, both were involved in the Sandinista government. Their works coincide in the conviction of each author that the Sandinista Revolution would improve the lives of the ordinary Nicaraguan, the environment, and overall prosperity of their nation.

Cántico cósmico and *Waslala* construct a vision of the future arising from these shared experiences. Rooted in the aspirations of the Revolution, the utopian impulse motivates their literary visions, portraying a more harmonious coexistence between humanity and the environment. Through an ecocritical lens, my analysis investigates the ecological awareness present in both the poem and the novel, bringing to the fore the interdependencies between a

healthy society and a healthy ecosystem. In the case of Cardenal's poem, I focus on how the text is suffused with an ecological spirituality which highlights all interconnected elements of creation. I demonstrate how the verses explore the interrelated nature of creation spun through a web of interdisciplinary discourses including science, theology and the everyday human experience. First, I consider how the poem depicts the linkages between the various elements that make up the whole, eliminating distances and hierarchies between all forms of existence. This holistic view of the world allows Cardenal to expand on the idea of physical processes to include social ones like the Sandinista Revolution. Secondly, I examine how Cardenal incorporates the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin and British chemist James Lovelock to theorize on the existence of a conscience at each level of creation. I delve into how the poem converts all objects into subjects deserving of respect and transforms the earth into a space actively commemorating the fallen martyrs of the Sandinista Revolution. Finally, I focus on the utopian element of the poem by analyzing the representation of forces which pull creation toward the future. Through a juxtaposition with the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin concerning love and cosmogenesis, I analyze the ways in which Cardenal brings together scientific and social discourses to illustrate how the forces of gravity and love unite the cosmos from the humble atom to the human body, eventually uniting all of existence in the love of God. Ultimately, according to Cardenal, everything coalesces in the Omega Point, or God, thus completing the picture of a cosmic utopia where the ideal society will be found in God's love when the universe ends.

On the other hand, Belli's speculative novel explores what the world would look like should current global economic models persist. The dystopian fictional world reveals how unequal geopolitical relationships generate grave consequences for both the human and the more-than-human, in a world so contaminated that oxygen has become scarce and garbage

plentiful. The novel reveals the shortcomings of universal histories and advocates for the role that local histories (Mignolo) play in bringing about social and environmental justice. Building on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone, I suggest that late capitalism creates sacrifice zones, areas relegated to receiving the waste of the prosperous north and forced into a state of social and economic stagnation for the global good. While the novel has been criticized for its shallow portrayal of nature and its reliance on tropes in terms of metaphor and plot development, I counter that the strength of its environmental message is two-fold. First, the novel reveals the hypocrisy of the developed world in its judgement of the lack of progress in the developing world, although it is the policies of the north that subject the south to its underdevelopment. Secondly, in the midst of this crisis, the novel engages in the utopian imaginary to propose solutions and give renewed energy to local resistance against the global order. With the depiction of the ecological utopian community of Waslala, the novel posits an alternative and more environmentally friendly way of organizing society. I contend that this fictional ideal community gives new life to Cardenal's contemplative community of Solentiname. Waslala arises from a concrete place which in its time attracted visitors from around the world and flourished. Thus, the novel's homage to the Sandinista Revolution draws on people and places who existed in real life, underscoring the idealism of the movement and its holistic approach to social and environmental health, reminding the reader of government's duty to nourish healthy societies and ecosystems.

Utopian Imaginaries and Revolution in Latin America

Utopian discourses have a long tradition in the Americas. In the Latin American context, travel logs, letters and diaries written by early European explorers lay the foundation for visions of an ideal society. In his introduction to *Utopias in Latin America: Past and Present* (2018),

Juan Pro writes that “there is a constant relationship between utopia and Latin America. The one cannot be understood without the other” (2). From the moment that Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola, stories of a lush paradise made their way back to Europe, sparking legends of plentiful food, easily acquired riches and perfect cities, such as El Dorado. For many Europeans, the Americas represented a world of new beginnings and better futures. These idyllic images evolved over the course of centuries and developed into two stereotypes dominating the utopian imaginary. Pro explains that in the 19th century the

> first [stereotype] emphasized the nature of Latin America as a terra nova, a new land in which the way of organizing future society had not yet been determined... In the second stereotype, European Romantics regarded the luxuriant vegetation and abundance of nature in some parts of America, especially in the tropics, as motivating the wealth of possibilities that the land offered for different forms of social organization. (4)

The abundance of nature features prominently in this stereotypical discourse, where lush landscapes give the impression of bounty and descriptions of open land nourish the idea of limitless opportunities to construct a new and infinitely better society.

This initial narrative gave way to projecting utopias of abundance, places which support lavish lifestyles and where “people attempt to dominate the natural environment: nature is viewed as an instrument to satisfy the incessantly increasing desires of mankind” (22). Utopias of abundance conceive of nature as a commodity, a tool allowing people to live in comfort, surrounded by material wealth. Concurrently, such notions contribute to existing hierarchies and manifest themselves in unequal power relationships between the centre and the periphery. These dynamics, as well as geopolitical realities, will be further explored in the second half of the chapter with the analysis of *Waslala*. In this text, the utopian trope continues to resonate in the

present, speaking to the collective imagination and contributing to the formation of national identities.[34] While Latin American literature took an urban turn during the Boom years, a range of literary works, including the ones studied in this chapter, remind the reader that Latin America encompasses a breathtaking array of natural landscapes and its biodiversity constitutes a continuing source of national pride.

It is, therefore, not surprising that revolutionary rhetoric in Central America highlighted the need to ameliorate social living conditions and address environmental degradation. Revolutions and utopian imaginaries go hand in hand because, as Pro explains, "even when they are not inspired by utopian texts, [revolutions] are responses to an undeniably utopian stimulus, because of their tendency to imagine an ideal future that contrasts with the limitations of the present" (6). Ideals of a perfect society were implicitly embedded in the revolutionary discourse, with participants seeking to convince people to join the struggle to overthrow corrupt authoritarian regimes. In the 20th century specifically, a connection emerged between the political left and utopian imaginaries. Beauchesne and Santos observe that "when thinking about utopia in Latin America, the socialist movements of the 1960s and 1970s—especially the revolutions led by Ernesto Che Guevara (inspired by the concept of the 'new man') as well as the influence of liberation theology since the mid-1950s—immediately come to mind" (10). Socialist revolutions, with their fundamental desire to create a more just society, turned to utopian ideas to fuel their political discourse and policy design.

The Nicaraguan revolution, the last major revolution to occur in Central America, follows this well-established tradition. For decades, Nicaragua suffered under the Somoza dictatorship

---

[34] A good example of this utopian impulse is evident in the poem "La agricultura de la zona tórrida" in which Andrés Bello (1781-1865) describes the lush nature and its role in fuelling progress in South America.

and, as the corruption attained excessive levels, it was easy for the revolutionaries to tap into the widespread feelings of discontent as well as the desire for better living and working conditions and more national stability. A brief overview of Nicaragua's history will quickly make apparent the yearning for change felt by the ordinary Nicaraguan. Split by rugged mountain chains, dotted by volcanos and great lakes, the nation known today as Nicaragua was a land divided for centuries; its Atlantic coast practically cut off from the Pacific coast. Given this challenging geography, a series of foreign powers occupied different regions at different points in time. While the Pacific coast remained a Spanish colony until Nicaragua gained its independence in 1838, the Atlantic coast traded hands several times until finally the Miskito, a new ethnic group formed by escaped slaves who intermarried with the local indigenous people, became the dominant power. Nicaragua eventually received the formal support of England, which was interested in the country's primary resources and its location on the Caribbean coast. In this complex sociopolitical context with so many competing interests at play, the country was far from united when it became independent.

In *Sandino's Nation* (2018), Stephen Henighan describes the country's predicament at the time of emancipation:

> Nicaraguan independence in 1838 occurred in an atmosphere of economic crisis and continuing violence between the Liberals, based in León, and Conservatives, based in Granada. Both groups saw an opportunity for profit and prosperity in building a maritime transportation route across the country, extending the thoroughfare offered by the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua to the Pacific Ocean. (24)

The divisions between political parties, both geographic and ideological, made it easy for foreign powers to play opposing factions against one another and press their own agendas. In need of

foreign investment to make the idea of an intercontinental channel viable, the Nicaraguan elite looked abroad for investors. European nations, in turn, saw the opportunity for great financial reward and increased control over Nicaragua. At first, Britain was the most serious contender as an investor, but, when it became preoccupied with the Crimean War (1853-1856), it was forced to leave Nicaragua. The United States of America (US) saw this as an opportunity to step into the power vacuum. From that moment on, the US gained increasing political and economic power over the country. Cornelius Vanderbilt, an American business magnate, secured the backing of the conservative Nicaraguan government to develop the cross-continental route, which proved so lucrative that other American financiers took note and tried to secure a share of the gains by supporting the liberals. This led to increasing tensions between the Liberals and the Conservatives and caused a string of conflicts with a series of American governments supporting either one or the other.

As the US continued to tighten its grip on the country in the early decades of the 20th century, forcing increasing concessions on land use and gaining more influence in national politics, Nicaraguans began to protest. The most prominent figure among them was Augusto César Sandino (1895-1934); his first steps involved organizing an uprising in the Segovia mountains in the northwest of the country in the 1920s. He successfully held this territory for a decade, building a self-sustaining society where people worked the land communally. Sandino also developed his own ideas about a new Nicaraguan identity. Henighan explains that the "Sandinista ideology was nationalist, Panamerican, and egalitarian… Influenced by the Mexican Revolution's resuscitation of the indigenous past, Sandino, the illegitimate son of a minor landowner and his indigenous servant, became the first prominent Nicaraguan in centuries to acknowledge with pride his indigenous heritage" (31). Although Sandino was brutally murdered

in 1934 by the head of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza García (1896-1956), his legacy would live on and resurface in the 1960s with the formation of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional-FSLN). For his part, Somoza would come to power in 1937, launching a US-supported dictatorial dynasty marked by increasing levels of corruption, socioeconomic inequality and environmental degradation which lasted until the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.

Frustrated by decades of corrupt rule, Carlos Fonseca founded the FSLN in the 1960s. Inspired by Sandino's earlier resistance and ideas, this new movement drew on Marxism, the Cuban Revolution, and Liberation Theology (Chomsky 100). Furthermore, the Sandinistas considered themselves to be a unifying force in a historically divided nation, bringing together the conservative and liberal elite as well as the rural poor with the common goal of deposing Somoza. Consequently, the Sandinista movement created an opportunity for Nicaraguans to both envision and create a new unified national identity. As the resistance spread and the situation in Nicaragua grew more desperate, more people joined the ranks, including Belli and Cardenal. In her memoir *El país bajo mi piel* (2003), Belli recounts that she joined the Sandinistas convinced that "en Nicaragua no quedaba otra salida que la lucha armada y la revolución" (64). The writer was alarmed by the Somoza family's blatant abuse of power; her quest was to rid her country of the dictator and contribute to rebuilding the nation. Cardenal also became increasingly convinced of the need for radical change. In his memoirs, *Las ínsulas extrañas* (2003), he describes the founding of Solentiname, his commune on an island in the vast inland Lake Nicaragua. He writes that, over the course of many years, "la preocupación social y política había sido una inclinación natural mía, y una especie de vocación. Y el contacto con la pobreza de los campesinos en Solentiname, y la realidad nacional cada vez peor, también contribuyeron a que yo y nuestra

pequeña comunidad nos fuéramos politizando y radicalizando. Nos íbamos haciendo más de izquierda, pues" (206). Gradually, as the situation deteriorated and the level of oppression increased, Cardenal witnessed the suffering of the rural poor and decided it was time to act. He openly joined the Sandinista movement in 1977 when the Somoza regime destroyed Solentiname.

During the final years of the Somoza dictatorship, a number of crises exacerbated the suffering of Nicaraguans. The 1972 earthquake completely flattened Managua. The aid that other countries sent to help those affected was instead confiscated by the Somoza family for their own use. A few years later, in 1978, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, the well-respected director of the newspaper *La prensa*, was kidnapped and murdered, sparking demonstrations throughout the country. In the midst of the chaos, Nicaragua still appeared to be developing rapidly. Mateo Jarquín writes that,

> The Somozas' modernization of the economy produced 4.8 percent GDP growth between 1967 and 1977, one of the fastest rates in the hemisphere… Economic growth, however, masked problems that made the regime vulnerable… [M]ost Nicaraguans did not share in the benefits of an expanding economy; roughly half of the population lived in absolute poverty during the 1970s, a fact related to a host of problems including an especially severe crisis of child malnutrition. (27)

While GDP increased, the economic growth was only a mirage because the Somoza family alone benefited while the rest of the country suffered and starved.

By the mid-70s, "Somoza himself owned 20 percent of the nation's prime farmland. Export commodity crops—cotton, coffee, sugar, tobacco and cattle—dominated agriculture and

ranching" (Faber 47-48). This meant that not enough food was being produced for domestic consumption and that many Nicaraguans went hungry. Meanwhile, the growth of the export sector without adequate regulation caused a series of environmental and social catastrophes where Nicaragua had the "dubious distinction of being a world leader in pesticide poisonings; nearly 400 pesticide-related deaths were reported annually. Pesticide runoff from cotton agriculture, toxic chemical pollution from lakeside industries and untreated sewage dumped from the capital city had virtually killed Lake Managua; a body of water equivalent in size to California's Lake Tahoe had become the Lake Erie of Central America" (Faber 49). The chemical pollution was only one part of the widespread environmental damage, which also included deforestation, erosion, and loss of biodiversity. Cardenal describes the impact of the extensive cotton fields wreaking havoc on local ecosystems and livelihoods. In *Cántico cósmico,* Cantiga 16 "Lo más oscuro antes del alba," the poet writes,

> El campo un sólo gran algodonal como si estuviera nevando.
>
> …
>
> Se sembró algodón hasta en la falda de los cerros.
>
> Salen al monte con los perros a buscar garrobos,
>
> palomas, cusucos, pero han escaseado los animales,
>
> ya es difícil coger un conejo, las palomas son ariscas.
>
> Cuando no hay qué comer van al monte a buscar guayabas
>
> a solares ajenos a cortar mangos verdes.
>
> En esos potreros habían jocotales y jocotales
>
> que daban jocotes y sombra en los potreros
>
> y ya no hay jocotes y ya no hay potreros

sólo algodonales algodonales y los polvazales

de los tractores y los camiones cargados de algodón. (121-122)

Monocultures displace flora and fauna, turning the landscape white when the cotton blooms. Tree cover, and with it shade and protection for human and non-human beings, is replaced by thirsty and dusty cotton fields. The repetition of the word "algodonales" creates a sense of monotony, emphasizing the loss of biodiversity.[35] Hunger plagues the people who resort to scavenging for fruit in the mountains. For the Sandinistas it was therefore clear that social and environmental well-being were interconnected, an awareness that, in my view, surfaces in both Belli's and Cardenal's writings and would also appear in the policies designed by the Sandinista government.

Although the Cuban Revolution and Marxism inspired the Sandinistas, there was a concerted effort on the part of the leadership to craft their own brand of revolutionary politics. Jarquín writes that the three pillars informing Sandinista policy were "a mixed economy, nonalignment in international affairs; and a democratic regime with full political liberties" (31). Through this position the revolutionaries tried to distance themselves from the Soviet Union and thereby avoid any interference from the US. Belli affirms this in *El país bajo mi piel*, where she reflects on the Sandinistas' efforts to create "un gobierno auténticamente nicaragüense e independiente de intereses extranjeros" (313). She also writes that,

> por mucho marxismo-leninismo que hubiéramos estudiado, por mucho amor o respeto que le tuviéramos a Cuba, a Fidel y hasta a la Unión Soviética, nuestro sueño era hacer algo diferente. Un socialismo original, nicaragüense, libertario…[S]in duda que el discurso

---

[35] The description of these monotonous monoculture landscapes resonates throughout Latin American literature as shown by the analysis in chapter 1 of the sugarcane fields in *Temporada de huracanes* and again in chapter 2 in *Hombres de maíz* with the burning of the cornfields.

> sandinista era el producto del radicalismo de la época, de una conciencia heroica convencida de su propia verdad y decidida a cambiar el mundo en favor de los explotados y oprimidos, pero también queríamos hacerlo como la primera revolución de una izquierda tropical, irreverente, original y magnánima. (362-363)

The Sandinista government made genuine efforts to design policies that would support a mixed economy. Above all, the Sandinistas wanted to free themselves from the yoke of the U.S. and lift the ordinary Nicaraguan out of poverty. Belli's description of the Sandinista mandate as "una izquierda tropical, irreverente, original y magnánima" engages with a utopian imaginary with an exotic flare evoked by the word "tropical." The choice of this word also brings to mind a lush rainforest, thus once again linking ideas of an ideal society with that of a flourishing natural environment. Cardenal's poetry also establishes a connection between the victory of the Revolution and the regeneration of the environment. He writes that,

> En septiembre por San Ubaldo se vieron más coyotes.
> Más cuajipales, a poco del triunfo,
>   en los ríos, allá por San Ubaldo.
>   En la carretera más conejos, culumucos…
> La población de pájaros se ha triplicado, nos dicen,
>   en especial la de los piches.
> …
>   La flora también se ha beneficiado.
> Los cusucos andan muy contentos con este gobierno.
>   Recuperaremos los bosques, ríos, lagunas.
> Vamos a descontaminar el lago de Managua.

La liberación no sólo la ansiaban los humanos.
Toda la ecología gemía. La revolución
es también de lagos, ríos, árboles, animales. (141-142)

Animals are returning to the jungle and the rivers, bird species are flourishing as the Sandinistas set to work, cleaning up the contamination left behind by the Somoza regime. As the armadillos "andan muy contentos con este gobierno" and "[l]a liberación no solo la ansiaban los humanos," the verses stress that both human and nonhuman beings rejoice at being liberated from the oppressive regime. The Revolution is presented as a social and ecological victory.

Indeed, the Revolutionary government drafted a thorough overhaul of environmental policies and land management. In his article, Daniel Faber explains that the Sandinista platform contained what he calls a Revolutionary ecology consisting of four points:

1) Promote social and environmental justice by resolving both the dialectically related economic and ecological burdens which *Somocismo* had unequally displaced onto Nicaragua's popular classes, especially the masses of poor peasants and workers; 2) promote national sovereignty and control over the country's natural resources by establishing greater autonomy vis-a-vis the more exploitative features of the world capitalist system in general, and U.S neo-colonialism in particular; 3) promote a model of sustainable development dedicated to meeting the needs of present and future generations of Nicaraguans by overcoming the interrelated "free" market-based economic irrationalities and ecological contradictions that had continuously plagued the country since the beginning of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s; 4) and promote ecological democracy by building popular democratic forms of social governance and

> economic planning in which the people themselves … would share the responsibility of designing and implementing environmental programs in their own communities. (46)

This comprehensive outline shows that the Sandinistas sought to craft a holistic approach to environmental issues that went beyond land redistribution. Leaders realized that, in order to address many entrenched issues, both land management and the health of the environment had to be improved. Cardenal's poetry also describes the work undertaken by the Sandinista Revolution. Cantiga 18, "Vuelos de Victoria" describes a whirlwind of activity:

> Estamos todos muy ocupados
> …
> estamos creando nuevos parques, claro y ya nuevas leyes
> …
> los precios de granos básicos bien controlados
> …
> los campos rumoreando de tractores
>
> organizada ya la asociación de trabajadores del campo
>
> semillas, insecticidas, abonos, nueva conciencia
>
> y rápido, hay que sembrar muy rápido
>
> también es el tiempo de nuevos cantos
>
> los obreros volvieron a sus ruidosas ruedas con alegría (135-136)

In the midst of all the new rules and organization, and the long list of what had to change, Cardenal throws in the phrase "nueva conciencia", indicating that all the material elements are accompanied by a changing mentality as well: one that encourages taking care of the social and environmental collective. Cardenal's verse marks a departure from the initial utopias of abundance promoted by the early European explorers, promoting a relationship of care and respect between all levels of existence. Instead of Nicaragua's resources feeding imperial growth,

the poem envisions nature as a common good, whose recovery accompanies the restoration of social justice and equality.

The Makings of a Poet: The Development of *Exteriorismo* and Composition of *Cántico cósmico*

Born in 1925, Ernesto Cardenal grew up in the elite circles of Granada, Nicaragua. Family connections enabled him to study in Mexico City and at Columbia University in New York. Always drawn to the Christian faith, he decided to become a priest in 1956. He began his theological training at a Trappist monastery in Kentucky under the tutelage of Thomas Merton and later completed it in Mexico and in Colombia[36]. Although he left the Trappist monastery due to health concerns, he would maintain a close friendship with Merton. After his return to Nicaragua, he was ordained and founded Solentiname in 1966. The commune was the product of Cardenal and Merton's desire to found a monastic contemplative community in Latin America. They felt Latin America needed such a space but were also cognizant of the fact that the community would differ dramatically from its North American counterparts due to the cultural, political and geographic differences. Cardenal describes the foundation, building and organization of Solentiname in detail in his memoirs from its conception to its construction. It was initially conceived as a self-sustaining community growing its own food and selling its own artisanal crafts and works of art. Inspired by liberation theology, which encourages community involvement in the reading of the Gospels, Cardenal invited all parishioners to participate in the sermon, commenting on the Bible as they were learning to read it. With the destruction of the

---

[36] Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was an American Trappist monk. He lived in the Abbey of our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky and wrote extensively on a wide variety of topics. He died under mysterious circumstance during a trip in South-East Asia leaving many to speculate whether he had been assassinated due to his sympathetic views of communist ideologies.

commune in 1977, Cardenal was forced into exile in Costa Rica. After the Sandinista victory on July 19, 1979, he returned and was appointed Minister of Culture. In this position, while he frequently traveled all over the world, he also helped organize literacy campaigns where teachers visited remote areas of rural Nicaragua to teach people how to read. As part of this literacy campaign, Cardenal organized poetry workshops where participants were encouraged to write. He also continued to develop his own poetic style called *exteriorismo* which he had already been working on earlier in Solentiname. Written over the course of several decades, *Cántico cósmico* represents a good example of this style. When Cardenal's position as Minister of Culture was dissolved in 1988, he unexpectedly found himself with more time to write and he completed the work in 1989.

All-encompassing in scale, the epic poem *Cántico cósmico* endeavours to embrace all of creation from beginning to end, becoming a textual representation of the universe framing the events of the Sandinista Revolution. Consisting of 43 canticles, it engages in a multitude of discourses, including theology, history, anthropology, politics and science. This broad approach reflects Cardenal's personal interests, his revolutionary ideology and his literary style which he called *exteriorismo*. Initially inspired by the narrative style of American poet Ezra Pound, whose verse combined political and historical discourses, Cardenal adapted this literary approach to the Nicaraguan context. For him it was paramount that his poetry could be understood by a large public with varying levels of literacy and education. This explains why *exteriorismo* has a narrative character. In "*Cántico cósmico* de Cardenal: un texto interdisciplinario," Ivan Carrasco explains that this includes "los elementos de la vida cotidiana, … una escritura abierta a todos los temas y tipos de discurso" (3). By incorporating elements of daily life, the poet seeks to produce poetry that is accessible to the masses while also contributing to the shaping of a new Nicaraguan

cultural identity in the wake of the Revolution's triumph and efforts to rebuild the country. In his memoirs, Cardenal describes *exteriorismo* as an authentically Nicaraguan style. He writes that "[n]osotros hemos tenido en Nicaragua una poesía, que hemos llamado exteriorista—de la realidad concreta, exterior, objetiva, y con un lenguaje claro y directo, a menudo conversacional" (IE 331). Poetry written in the *exteriorist* style is designed to portray everyday reality in Nicaragua, acting as a voice for the poor from the poor. Additionally, it seeks to unify through its interdisciplinary approach as well as through the readers and writers it attracts.

This inclusive and flexible form of *exteriorismo* provided Cardenal with the space necessary to develop his holistic perspective of the universe. Combining and interweaving interdisciplinary ideas, the poem highlights how all disciplines, whether scientific, political or theological, ultimately concern themselves with the same big questions about beginnings, endings and everything that occurs in between. Inherently ecological, this interconnectedness and convergence of disciplines in the poem naturally lends itself to an ecocritical framework of analysis. While Carrasco comments on the predominantly scientific tone of the poem, he goes on to describe its aesthetic elements with its "ritmo característico, el del verso libre: cada línea es una unidad rítmica y no siempre de sentido, es decir; un verso" (5). The poem harnesses the rhythm and aesthetics of verse on the page to translate cosmic processes into planetary ones, which the poet then connects to human and social processes. This web enables the poet to link the social processes of revolution with the developing forces of evolution.

Critics frequently comment on the ecological component of Cardenal's work either in passing or in connection with politics. In "The Poetic Politics of Ecological Inhabitation in Neruda's *Canto General* and Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle,*" Patrick Murphy undertakes a comparative reading of Neruda's and Cardenal's respective texts from an ecological and

postcolonial perspective. Murphy explains that Cardenal displays a "scientific based ecological perspective at the same time that he is spiritually driven in his quest for environmental justice. And he places his perspective on ecology within a much larger cosmology of universal matter" (215). While this description encompasses the scope of Cardenal's work, Murphy's analysis focuses mainly on his anti-imperial message and his ideas on communism. Similarly, in "Landscapes of Hope and Destruction: Ecological Poetry in Spanish America," ecocritic Nial Binns observes that *Cosmic Canticle* is a "vast work which combines physics, politics, biology and religion [which] returns to the idea of a new world announced at the end of 'Apocalipsis'" (115). Both Murphy and Binns underscore the interplay among disciplines, drawing attention to the combined presence of ecology and politics in Cardenal's verse. While they acknowledge the ecological and spiritual elements in the text, they do not bring the two into direct conversation with one another in their analysis. Yet, I would like to suggest that both spiritual and ecological energies pulse at the heart of the poem urging the reader to reconsider humanity's position on the earth and the place of our planet within the greater forces of the cosmos. In their focus on interactions and interdependencies between terrestrial and cosmic forces, the verses weave a web of wonder and inspire awe in the reader, thus presenting a view that is simultaneously spiritual and ecological.

Spiritual Ecology

The notion of spiritual ecology, found in Cardenal's verses, is a concept both old and new. In *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution* (2012), Leslie Sponsel explains that spiritual ecology has existed for thousands of years (xix) and is only more recently known under this

formal designation.[37] According to Sponsel, the contemporary movement sees the climate crisis as resulting

> from human alienation from nature combined with the disenchantment, objectification, and commodification of nature. Increasingly nature is considered as simply a warehouse of resources to be extracted in order to not only meet basic human needs, but also to try to satisfy the apparently unlimited greed for profit of rampant predatory capitalism coupled with the associated modern fixation of many people and societies on materialism and consumerism. (xv-xvi)

Spiritual ecology arises out of a concern for environmental degradation and how it will affect future generations as the climate crisis continues to escalate. The movement proposes a rethinking of humanity's place on the planet, urging a greater emphasis on the human spiritual experience and development instead of the current models of thinking focused on market forces and economic growth (xvi). Along the same lines, in the foreword to *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* (2013), editor Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee describes it as the study of the "spiritual dimension of life—the connection between our soul and the soul of the world, the knowing that we are all part of one living, spiritual being" (vi). Vaughan-Lee directly invites the reader to listen to "this wholeness that is calling to us now, that needs our response. It needs us to return to our own root and rootedness: our relationship to the sacred within creation. Only from the place of sacred wholeness and reverence can we begin the work of healing, of bringing the world back into balance" (vi). Spiritual ecology calls for empathy, reverence, and wholeness, encouraging people to respect the planet and recognize it as a living entity. The movement seeks to foster an

[37] There are a series of terms used to describe the same concept such as ecospirituality, green religion, green spirituality, nature mysticism, religious environmentalism, etc. (Sponsel xiv).

increasing awareness in the general public of the linkages between planetary and social wellbeing, highlighting the spiritual ruptures caused by modern structures and positivist thinking which consider the planet and nature as objects to be exploited by humanity. In my view, Cardenal's work builds on these ideas as well, exposing the damaging effects of capitalism on humanity and, by extension, the planet, while also endeavouring to awaken a sense of wonder in the reader.

In its holistic description of creation, from the most minute to the utmost grandiose, *Cántico cósmico* expresses awe at the complexity of life. From the poem's opening lines onward, a reverence for creation radiates off the page, describing the Big Bang and how a single particle explodes into a multitude of atoms blasted through space.

> En el principio no había nada
>
> ni espacio
>
> ni tiempo.
>
> El universo entero concentrado
>
> en el espacio del núcleo de un átomo,
>
> y antes aún menos, mucho menor que un protón,
>
> y aun menos todavía, un infinitamente denso punto matemático.
>
> Y fue el Big Bang. (9)

The first words, "en el principio no había nada," recall the opening lines of the Book of Genesis. The verse then describes how the "denso punto matemático" explodes in what we know as the Big Bang. The verse harmonically combines religious and scientific thought to create a more comprehensive understanding of existence and show that both discourses seek to explain

the defining moment when the universe came into being. There is also a source of underlying tension as the biblical line poses that there was "nada," but physics posits that all of existence was contained in the single "denso punto," thus rendering nothingness impossible. The poem does not try to resolve these contradictions, establishing instead that nothing, not even God or science, is perfect in this ever-changing cosmos. Perfection can only be achieved at the end of creation when everything converges into the Omega Point. However, in the opening lines the poem concerns itself with how the first tiny particle of the stuff of the universe, or matter, exists unified at a zero-dimensional point. This isolated point breaks apart to become a multitude of dust particles with The Big Bang or "La Gran Explosion," (9) pushing neutrons, protons, and electrons outward and forward. From this point onwards, unity has burst into a series of tiny particles which will reunite at different points in the expanding universe to form planets, and eventually life. The poem circles around these ongoing transformations, contemplating how the parts interact with the whole and vice versa.

Some critics find the interweaving of scientific and religious ideas in the poem both unconvincing and uncomfortable. Steven White, for example, observes tensions between Cardenal's Christian beliefs and his ideas derived from materialists Darwin and Marx. He posits that it is "preferible leer el *Cántico* como la representación de todo lo que nos rodea escrita por un poeta con una conciencia ecológica muy desarrollada y también como un vivo reflejo de las ideas materialistas de Darwin y Marx" (357). For White, it is better to read the text as a poetic reflection on Darwin and Marx because the connections that it establishes between science, particularly the concept of evolution, and theological discourses are problematic (356). Yet, in my view, these conclusions ignore the fact that Cardenal did not consider the theory of evolution to be incompatible with Christian theology. Rather, by adopting the thinking and ideas laid out

by Teilhard de Chardin, among others, *Cántico cósmico* brings to light how the two discourses connect in trying to answer life's big questions.

Teilhard de Chardin's thought greatly inspired Cardenal's poetry. Biographically and theologically, Teilhard de Chardin and Cardenal have a lot in common. Both came from well-to-do families, were ordained as priests, and were interested in science among a wide range of topics. Both also tested the patience of the senior levels of the Roman Catholic Church. As an ordained priest of the Jesuit order, Teilhard de Chardin was deeply committed to his faith, but he also lectured on geology at the Catholic University of Paris, was fascinated by Darwin's theory of evolution and worked as a paleontologist. Over the course of his lifetime, he endeavoured to persuade the Catholic Church that the theory of evolution did not pose a threat to religion but was rather a strong indicator of the presence of a divine force, pulling creation along in the ongoing processes of an expanding universe. He called this concept cosmogenesis, a theory I will return to later in the chapter. His essay titled *The Human Phenomenon* (1955) is a thought experiment where he brings the theory of evolution into direct conversation with theology, reflecting on science's capacity to measure the material elements of the cosmos and its shortcomings in being able to explain the "inside" or the consciousness in things. Appalled by Teilhard de Chardin's ideas, both the Jesuit order and the Catholic Church denied him the right to publish his work and exiled him to China in the 1920s. As a result, Teilhard de Chardin's essays only became available to the general public after his death in 1955 when they were received to wide acclaim. Similarly, Cardenal would also rouse the ire of the Catholic Church for his continuing role in the Sandinista government and for his support and adoption of Liberation Theology, whose principles were based in Marxist thought. In 1985, Pope John Paul II suspended Cardenal's right to administer the sacraments during mass. During a tour of Central

America in 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Managua and publicly scolded Cardenal. Cardenal had kneeled down and asked to kiss his hand, but the Pope denied him the privilege and told him that he must reconcile himself with the Catholic Church. The resulting iconic image of Cardenal kneeling with the Pope pointing his finger at him went around the world, thus making Cardenal's humiliation a global event (Clarín). The ban would not be lifted until shortly before his death in 2020.

Through his writings, Cardenal, like Teilhard de Chardin, sought to connect themes and ideas across disciplines through his use of *exteriorismo* and as a politically active spiritual leader. While Teilhard de Chardin marries physics, chemistry, biology, and theology in his writing, Cardenal, as shown above, linked many disciplines together in his *Cántico cósmico.* In doing so, he emulates ideas advanced by Teilhard de Chardin whose life's work consisted of joining the supposedly antagonistic discourses of science and theology together to create a new conceptualization of the universe. Additionally, both texts anticipate the concerns of the spiritual ecologist movement in upholding the place of the spiritual in an age marked by increasingly materialistic and positivist perspectives on life. I will explore how these ideas are represented in *Cántico cósmico* where the poem interweaves cosmological processes with historical and social developments, namely the Sandinista Revolution, creating the sense that these forces pull creation along to meet at the eventual point of convergence, Omega or God. From this perspective the reader can appreciate how a seemingly local event, such as the Sandinista Revolution, acquires cosmological proportions.

Unity/Plurality and Interconnection

From the moment the Big Bang blasts unity asunder, forces seek to consolidate the loose particles into new formations to regain the harmony lost during the explosion. *Cántico cósmico* follows these oscillations, philosophizing on how different parts merge to make up a collective whole and vice versa, thus bringing to light the interconnected nature of existence. The text reminds the reader that isolation and independence are illusions in this interdependent web of life. It also incorporates the principles of physics and the composition of matter to investigate the interconnections of the physical world. In *The Human Phenomenon,* Teilhard de Chardin writes that "plurality, unity, and energy are the three aspects of matter" (12), explaining how atoms, and their components of protons, neutrons and electrons, appear to be random when studied up close but form a cohesive whole when considered on a larger scale. Cardenal's cantigas echo these movements in their description of the coming into being of the universe where "El espacio lleno de electrones/ que no dejaban pasar la luz. […] /Hasta que los electrones se unieron con los protones /y el espacio se volvió transparente /y corrió la luz" (10). The isolated electrons block out the light until they unite with the protons and light can then shine into the cosmos. This depiction connects with a recurring thematic imagery where darkness, found in isolation and chaos, is defeated by unity and the resulting light. As the poem unfolds, the verses delve into how physical processes influence spiritual developments and vice versa. Thus, for Cardenal, the fusion of elements to form more sophisticated celestial bodies, organisms or revolutions, enables the ongoing expansion of the universe towards a moment of perfection or the Omega Point.

Just as the text harnesses principles of physics to examine the separation and ultimate unification of the universe, it also brings supposedly incompatible discourses into dialogue with one another to demonstrate that a more holistic understanding of existence can only become a reality when different voices interact. The text embodies the power of poetry in creating an

imaginary around material processes such as the melding of electrons and protons otherwise invisible to the naked eye. In this way, the reader can experience aspects of existence not accessible in everyday life. Furthermore, by fusing scientific and theological discourses, the poet strives to depict a profound and comprehensive vision of the cosmos and its inner workings. For example, in Cantiga 15, "Nostalgia del paraíso," the lines read:

> La unidad en la diversidad
> es porque toda la creación es de un sólo creador.
> La teoría de la relatividad de Einstein es
> que distintos observadores ven una cosa distinta
> pero que la cosa es la misma
> y la ley que gobierna esa cosa es universal.
> …
> De todos modos, hay un propósito.
> En el universo, una energía
> dirigida a una concentración progresiva. (104)

The verses liken God to the theory of relativity, arguing that although reality can seem relative depending on the observer, universals ultimately guide the cosmos to converge towards a common point and its end. This unifying energy is God. Here, Cardenal's view coincides with that of Teilhard de Chardin who theorizes about the presence of God in the cosmos in *The Human Phenomenon.* Teilhard de Chardin concludes that God is an evolving force pulling along the expanding universe and through its increasing power will draw all of existence into one unifying moment. Passages like these reveal a spiritual ecological awareness because they depict a universe consolidated by a divine power, where scientific and sacred laws dictate ever evolving processes that drive cosmological and earthly evolution onward. The verses remind the reader that humanity ultimately forms a very small part of an intricate greater whole, a fact that should

inspire humility and respect for the cosmos. In the ongoing dialogue among all the disciplines, a non-hierarchical web emerges where the knowledge of one discipline complements the other, demonstrating that a holistic understanding of creation requires a consolidation of all areas of human knowledge.

The sweeping cosmological images that unfold throughout the poem all unite in the singular event of the Sandinista Revolution. In my view, the poem compares the divine force unifying the cosmos and the gathering of cells to create life with the Revolution bringing everyone together to form a new society.

> La multiplicación de la vida por división
> y de pronto al revés: la unión. No sabemos
> cuándo ni cómo, en qué microscópico, casi invisible
> paraíso
> se unieron dos células cualquiera
> entre miles de millones de otras.
> La revolución más grande ocurrida en la tierra. (105)

These verses begin by describing the multiplication of cells joining together to create new life forms and conveying wonder at an event in cosmological history that we do not yet completely understand. The poet calls this minute scene a paradise where the union of two cells made the rest of life possible, comparing this decisive moment in the evolution of the planet to a human revolution, a moment of ground-breaking change facilitated by the blending of several separate parts into one harmonious whole.

The images above, among many others found in the text, establish a direct connection between cosmological and social processes, eliminating any distance between the evolving universe and the Sandinista Revolution. Indeed, the poem considers the Sandinista Revolution as

the ultimate example of multiple separate entities coalescing to form a cohesive whole. With the common goal shared by everyone and everything, social hierarchies collapse, and people come together in harmony to overthrow their oppressor. What is more, the cosmos joins the people in their demands for change. In Cantiga 8, "La creación entera /pedía, pedía a gritos /la Revolución" (61). All of creation clamours for the Revolution and the poem traces the long evolutionary line that culminates in this transformative event. As life flourishes on earth, organisms become increasingly complex, evolving from single-celled to multicellular organisms such as plants and animals. These evolving levels of complexity lead to more sophisticated levels of organization, and according to the poem ultimately result in biological and social revolutions. The poem documents all these steps, reminding the reader in Cantiga 13, "El árbol de la vida," that it all began millions of years ago,

> Parte de un proceso que empezó en algún charco arcaico
> […]
> En el umbral de una nueva evolución
> como cuando de la materia surgió la vida.
> De lo más simple a lo más complejo,
> de menor a mayor organización.
> Las leyes de la evolución social son las mismas del cosmos. (96)

The verses portray the evolution of life, illustrating that increasing levels of organization accompanied the higher levels of sophistication in organisms. The text then connects these concrete processes to the social realm, claiming that the laws of social evolution mirror those of the cosmos. This natural progression leads to the Revolution celebrated in the last stanza, where "este amanecer del 19 de Julio, … con la Plaza 19 de Julio repleta de pueblo bajo el sol/todos los colores en ella como repleta de flores" (96). As atoms and cells gather, their sum total giving

birth to life, so people assemble to celebrate the victory of the Revolution and unite to bring about a new beginning for their nation. I posit that in this holistic conceptualization of the universe, the Revolution is a natural continuation in biological evolution. These images reinforce that the cosmos is not an entity far removed from humanity's everyday experience but in fact actively participates in human projects. It thereby follows that an active cosmos is both composed of material elements and contains an inside or a consciousness, a spirit.

Conscious Cells

A spiritual conceptualization of the universe is not only visible in the interdependent web of discourses and themes created in the verses but also in the exploration of the consciousness present at all levels of creation. The poem relates how all beings, sentient and non-sentient, contain a psyche, thus opening the conversation to include more-than-human entities. This inclusive approach connects the microscopic with the cosmic as well as biological processes with social ones such as the Sandinista Revolution. These meditations on consciousness are reminiscent of the preoccupations and school of thought developed by Teilhard de Chardin. In "Ecological Spirituality in Teilhard de Chardin," Evelyn Tucker explains that:

> One of Teilhard's greatest contributions to modern religious thought is his conception of reality as composed of both spirit and matter. This is what he called the psychic and the physical components of reality, the within and the without of things. To demonstrate that the numinous dimension of life was present from the beginning was Teilhard's aim in the early chapters of *The Human Phenomenon*. This radically alters our perspective of matter itself. No longer is matter seen as dead and inert. Consequently, the divine is no longer to be sought only in a transcendent union with a merciful God. (8)

Teilhard de Chardin was convinced that science lacked the tools to adequately explain the spiritual element present in life. He noted that while science is very good at measuring exterior elements, the "without" or the exterior of existence, it fails in its ability to calculate the "within." For him, this is where a spiritual conception of the universe can fill the void, creating a sense of purpose in the cosmos where matter is not simply an inert series of particles, but contains a spiritual essence. Teilhard de Chardin argues that the spirit is expressed in consciousness and posits that all matter, from the single atom to the Earth as a whole, possesses a certain degree of consciousness. He understands consciousness "in its broadest sense to designate every kind of psyche, from the most rudimentary forms of interior perception conceivable to the human phenomenon of reflective consciousness" (25). According to Teilhard de Chardin, all levels of existence contain a consciousness that aids in binding creation together. He expands on this idea to include the merging of individual human thought into a collective which he calls the superconscious and the beginning of the noosphere. The evolutionary development of the planet led to the formation of the biosphere, a "living membrane formed by the plant and animal matter of the globe" (123), making way for the noosphere or thinking layer to envelop the earth.

Cántico cósmico follows similar lines of thought in that it raises questions concerning the place of the soul and the divine within creation. The text reflects poetry's capacity to be inclusive, exploring not only the human soul, but the soul of the world, lending a voice to both human and nonhuman beings. Cantiga 13, ""El árbol de la vida," illustrates this idea, proclaiming:

> Colectividad armonizada de conciencias,
> o superconciencia de Chardin.
> El planeta con una sola envoltura pensante.
> La pluralidad de reflexiones individuales

en una sola reflexión unánime a escala sideral (94)

In this formulation where Cardenal cites Teilhard de Chardin, the collective consciousness creates a harmonious whole, visible from space. This movement towards a merging of disparate elements hints at the inevitable reunion at the end of the universe, when all of creation will be fused together into a harmonic unit.[38] For Cardenal, the representation of the planet as a superorganism becomes a dominant poetic image.

Through this exploration of the relationship between molecular and cosmic components, *Cántico cósmico* presents both the outside and the inside of things. In this way, Cardenal builds on Teilhard de Chardin's essay in its connection between disciplines, establishing unorthodox interrelations while also resorting to theology and poetry to imagine what the "inside," the consciousness or the soul, looks like. In addition, the poem links Teilhard de Chardin's ideas to those of British chemist James Lovelock, who developed the Gaia Hypothesis in the 1960s, using the name of Gaia the Greek earth goddess.[39] In *Dazzle Gradually* (2007), Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan explain the hypothesis as follows: "the Gaia hypothesis in its most general form states that the temperature and composites of Earth's atmosphere are actively regulated by the sum of life on the planet" (172). According to this hypothesis, the planet is a living being maintaining stable conditions through the regulation and interaction of gasses and micro-organisms. The interactions between microbes and solar energy create a negative feedback loop

---

[38] This stanza echoes Teilhard de Chardin's words in poetic form. De Chardin writes: "A harmonized collectivity of consciousness, equivalent to a kind of superconsciousness. With the Earth not only covered by myriads of grains of thought, but wrapped in a single thinking envelope until it functionally forms but a single vast grain of thought on the sidereal scale. The plurality of individual reflections being grouped and reinforced in a single unanimous act of reflection" (178).

[39] James Lovelock himself affirms that "para mí, Gaia es un concepto religioso y científico a la vez, y es manejable en ambas esferas" (Pou 129). Cardenal, "Lovelock, el inventor de la teoría de Gaia se pregunta/ si otro nombre de Gaia no podría ser María" (82).

enabling the planet to maintain its homeostatic state. Margulis adds that the idea of a system united in maintaining life implies that "there may be a strong biogeological precedent for the time-honored political and mystical goal of peaceful existence and world unity" (182). I suggest that these ideas connect with ecological spirituality in that they strive to recognize the earth as a living organism, which should be respected. *Cántico cósmico* extends the conceptualization of a living earth to encompass the Sandinista Revolution, positing that a conscious earth can preserve the memory of the Revolution.

Cantiga 11, "Gaia," describes the hypothesis and the formation of the planet in this way:

> se hizo redondo para girar.
> Ser vivo que no necesitaba piernas ni brazos ni boca ni ano
> sino sólo ser redondo y girar y girar en derredor del sol…
> Se creó a sí mismo condiciones para tener organismos
> y después organismos con conciencia, personas; y después
> un organismo que es a la vez comunidad y personas. (78)

The poem describes the planet as a community, signalling the interwoven connections between humanity and the Earth. At the same time, it suggests that the Earth is a living being.

> Es una Tierra viva toda ella, palpitante.
> La piedra también vibra aunque lentamente.
> El planeta late en su interior.
> Un cuerpo vivo el que camina por el cielo entre las estrellas. (79)

The words "palpitante" and "late" evoke the heart with its regular and calming beat. The poem repositions humanity, making it an integral part of earthly processes when it postulates that "somos, como especie, su sistema nervioso" (81) and that the planet is an "Extensión de nuestro cuerpo" (79). The earth, as an active participant in the Sandinista Revolution, transmits energy

from its core to all living things. Concurrently, these processes nourish the collective memory since Cantiga 11 ends by recalling the young men who died in the Revolution, recording their names for posterity and recognizing their sacrifices.

The poem emphasizes that the memory of the Revolution is both a human and a terrestrial act. Cantiga 18, “Vuelos de victoria,” refers to the Revolution itself, beginning with stories about the individuals who took part in the conflict. The poem reads:

> Fue una tarea de todos.
> Los que se fueron sin besar a su mamá
> para que no supiera que se iban.
> El que besó por última vez a su novia. (133)

This passage recognizes the sacrifices made by the participants and emphasizes the collective nature of the conflict. *Cántico cósmico* converts into a testimonial of the Revolution, documenting a multitude of voices and memories of the Nicaraguan people. In particular, it commemorates the martyrs of the Revolution. A close bond developed between Cardenal and the martyrs, a group of young men who joined the commune in Solentiname and went on to fight with the FSLN. Henighan writes that “Cardenal’s impassioned description of these young men arises in part from the legitimacy that his association with them lends his poetry in the context of the revolutionary nation, and partly, one may hypothesize, from a sense of guilt or obligation towards his young companions whom he indoctrinated as future guerrillas in the knowledge they would die” (421). The text, in its detailed description of the men and by documenting their individual names, seeks to immortalize them. Henighan explains that the dead “are not a mere phantasmagoric memory: they are ugly, brutalized corpses. The symmetry of the lines urging the reader to remember the dead” (424). The verses remind the reader that the dead are not an

abstract force, but real flesh and blood individuals who sacrificed everything in their fight against the dictatorship. The poetic voice reflects on the human cost, thinking about

> nuestros muertos,
> en las montañas, en zanjas comunes, en tumba solitaria,
> en cementerio, a la vera de caminos,
> cerca de este aeropuerto, por todo el territorio nacional,
> con monumentos, anónimos sin ningún monumento,
> todos hechos esta tierra, haciendo más sagrada esta tierra (150-151)

Here, memory acquires a materialistic component, smelling of mud, while the martyrs return to the earth, nourishing it just like their sacrifice feeds collective memory. The cantiga ends with a list of the names of the guerrillas who perished in the conflict, forming a solid block of text, affirming that victory is achieved thanks to the sacrifices of all those involved. Simultaneously, the text echoes the processes of the Gaia hypothesis: just as gasses and microbes interact to create a harmonious life, the guerrillas united to bring justice and peace to Nicaragua.

Cantiga 36, "La tumba del guerrillero," broadens the connections established between collective memory, the planet and outer space. It portrays the Revolution as a cosmic event never to be forgotten. The canticle imagines how the events of the Revolution will reverberate into the future, uniting the martyr with the earth and the cosmos.

> Pienso en tu cuerpo que se ha ido desbaratando bajo la tierra
> haciéndose suave tierra, humus otra vez
> junto con el humus de todos los demás humanos
> que han existido y existirán en la bolita del mundo
> haciéndose todo juntos tierra fértil del planeta Tierra.
> Y cuando los cosmonautas miren esta bola azul y rosa

en la noche negra

lo que estarán mirando, lejos, es tu luminosa tumba (321)

The martyr's love for his homeland transforms into a light visible from outer space. Even astronauts will be able to see this "luminosa tumba." Later the poem describes the decomposition of the bodies and how, in accordance with the first law of metaphysics, the decomposed bodies once again form part of the chemical processes which will eventually ripple out into space. In this way, it perpetuates the memory of the Revolution in social and ecological terms. Within these processes, the text has its own role to play, feeding the collective memory and ensuring the future of the Revolution, inspiring future generations to remember the past and to continue the fight in the present.

Cosmological and Divine Forces evolving towards a Cosmic Utopia

From contemplating interrelationships between the whole and its individual parts to musing on the possibilities of a conscious planet and the cosmos, *Cántico cósmico* ultimately reflects on how forces both cosmological and divine unify all elements of existence. The utopian impulse comes to the fore when the verses explore the dreams of an ideal community, nation, and ultimately a harmonious fusion of the cosmological collective. Ruth Kauffmann writes that "Cardenal suggests the possibility of a syncretic Utopia full of diversities that are able to embrace one another" (8). This observation refers to how the text depicts thematic commonalities between cosmovisions and religions from around the globe. Additionally, I posit that the text goes beyond syncretism in its exploration of the historic sources that inspired utopian visions and by expanding on these ideas to include scientific and divine forces. In this way, the utopian imaginary expressed within the verses surpasses the social experiment envisioned by Thomas More and acquires universal dimensions. The poem quotes Bartolomé de

las Casas's description of what would become Nicaragua in his letter to Queen Juana of Castile, harkening back to Latin America's colonial beginnings and evokes a utopia of abundance.[40]

> "Es esta Nicaragua un paraíso del Señor.
> Es unos deleites y alegría para el linaje humano.
> Tanta fertilidad, tanta abundancia, tanta amenidad
> y frescura, tanta sanidad, tantos frutales,
> ordenados como los huertos de las ciudades de Castilla"
>
> Y quiso fundar una comunidad de paz al sur del lago (116)

Las Casas describes a terrestrial paradise, a land of milk and honey, ready to be exploited by the colonizers. Cardenal inserts himself at the end, voicing his dream of building his religious commune Solentimane in that exact location; a dream that became reality until its destruction by the Somozas in 1977. However, in a letter written from exile entitled "Lo que fue Solentiname," Cardenal makes clear that his next project will be even more ambitious in scope, seeking to rebuild the entire nation of Nicaragua (Henighan 224). Thus, Solentiname both poetically and historically becomes the linchpin between Nicaragua's past and the Revolution's future project of rebuilding Nicaragua as a prosperous nation.

The earthly paradise that the early explorers encountered transforms into the revolutionary paradise nourished by Sandinismo. Learning to govern the country, the Sandinistas

---

[40] Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish clergyman as well as conquistador and comendero, arrived in the Americas in the early 1500s. There he experienced a transformation in his worldview because he was shocked at the Spanish treatment of the local indigenous population. Although he briefly advocated for the use of African slaves, he quickly changed his mind and opposed slavery altogether. He would become a major advocate for indigenous rights and wrote *La Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552) where he condemned the Spanish acts of violence and enslavement of local populations. In this poem, I suggest Cardenal quotes las Casas because he was a religious figure and because he wrote one of the first passages describing Nicaragua.

set to work bringing in reforms and restructuring the economy. In Cantiga 19, "Hacia el hombre nuevo," Cardenal writes,

> Y cómo es que me sorprendo leyendo con tanto interés
> cosas como
> la cosecha de algodón 25,5% superior
> a la del año pasado
> lo exportado en café US$ 124,2 millones
> superior en 17,5% al año pasado
> se espera un aumento de 13,6% en el azúcar
> la producción de maíz bajó en un -5,9%
> el oro bajó en un 10% por
> ataques de la contra en esa región
> igualmente los mariscos…
> ¿Cuándo antes me interesaron estos datos?
> Es porque ahora nuestra riqueza,
> poquita que sea,
> es para ser
> para todos.
> Es
> por el pueblo, pues,
> amor al pueblo
> este interés. Es
> que ahora estos números son amor.
> El oro salido de la tierra, sol sólido
> cortado en bloques, se hará luz eléctrica,
> agua potable
> para los pobres….
>
> es que ahora lo económico es poético,

> mejor dicho, con la Revolución
> la economía es amor. (158-159)

The list shows an increase in general prosperity, reminding the reader that this wealth is to be shared by all. The poet asks himself why these numbers fascinate him so much, concluding that, "[e]s porque ahora nuestra riqueza, poquita que sea, es para todos." Although the riches are modest, the poem emphasizes that they belong to everyone. Now released from the US sponsored dictator, the country gains national freedom, and along with it, personal liberty. Unified under the banner of the Revolution, all Nicaraguans share in the opportunity to build an ideal society. In its recognition of Nicaragua's poverty, the stanza does however counter the notion of a utopia of abundance and acknowledges that resources are finite. In Cardenal's conceptualization of a utopia, the bounty is not material but spiritual in nature. The stanza ends with the phrase "la economía es amor," linking material and spiritual utopias, thereby allowing the poet to explore how the earthly utopia that is Nicaragua reverberates across the planet and outwards into space, translating into the forces of cosmogenesis as will be shown in the next section.

The series of utopias depicted throughout the work culminate in the next stages of evolution, ultimately producing a cosmic utopia made possible through the processes of cosmogenesis. The text connects human emotion to science and faith, engaging with Teilhard de Chardin's thought and his proposition that all forces will eventually converge in the Omega Point. The poem dances around this concept, exploring the nature of forces from the physical force of gravity to forces of attraction and love. The verses oscillate between the laws of physics and the raw emotion of love to explain how celestial bodies, terrestrial cells, flora and fauna all fuse to form the universe and earthly life. In these meditations, the poet wonders what keeps life

from drifting away into nothingness, marrying concepts of astrophysics, physics and affect. All these elements are brought into play in Cantiga 41, "El cántico de los cánticos,"

> El *sex-appeal* ya estaba en las estrellas.
> La implacable atracción de la materia hacia otra materia,
> o GRAVEDAD que mantiene unido al universo.
> La gravedad era una inclinación natural, encontró Copérnico.
> En nuestros cuerpos y en el sol y los planetas.
> La gravedad que sólo actúa para juntar.
> No conocemos gravedad que separe. (372)

Gravity is the overarching unifying force. The poem considers the role of gravity in holding all elements together from abstract and chemical processes to emotional states. Playfully describing the stars as having sex-appeal, the stanza metaphorically closes the gap between outer space and the human everyday experience. The text also plays with aesthetics, capitalizing all the letters of the word GRAVEDAD, thus drawing the eye of the reader to the single word, mimicking the function that it represents. Moreover, the text implies that just as gravity is part of the natural order of things, so is sex, rejecting any notion that it might be a taboo subject. Over the course of the cantiga, this idea is reinforced by a myriad of images of molecules and multi-celled organisms copulating and propagating life. Ultimately, the poem tells us that "[l]a gravedad es el amor" (376). In other words, they are inseparable.

With these images, the poem asserts that gravity and love coalesce to unify creation. For example, in Cantiga 8, "Condensaciones y visión de San José de Costa Rica," the text reads that "[E]l universo está hecho de unión. /El universo es condensación. /Condensación es unión, y es calor. (Amor.) /El universo es amor" (57). The canticle, replete with scientific imagery accompanied by the poet's memories and his visions of a revolutionary future, postulates that

processes of condensation helped form the planets, a concept which can be extended to include the unifying power of love. Expanding on this idea, the verse concludes that the cosmos, in its eventual unification, is love, aligning with Teilhard de Chardin. In *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (2021), John Haught explains the priest's thinking as follows:

> Since the cosmos is always subject to drifting back toward the past state of physical dispersal, its emerging unity can be sustained only if it allows itself to be further created, that is, brought into deeper communion with God, the Center and goal of all things. Theologically, Infinite Love is the vital energy of this movement toward a new future for the universe. Love is the means by which the Power of the Future holds all things together even now, opening up for each person, for each living community, and for the whole cosmos, the prospect of deeper consistence and richer coherence up ahead. (13)

Viewed through this lens, love is more than a personal emotion, it is elevated to the divine and cosmological planes of existence, transforming into the force unifying all of creation. Teilhard de Chardin emphasizes that love is "not unique to the human being. It represents a general property of all life, and as such it embraces all the varieties and degrees of every form successively taken by organized matter" (188). The priest proposes that love, not restricted to the human experience, is in fact the key to the continuing formation of the universe. He reinforces this idea by reasoning that "[i]f some internal propensity to unite did not exist, even in the molecule, in probably some incredibly rudimentary yet already nascent state, it would be physically impossible for love to appear higher up, in ourselves, in the hominized state" (188). According to Teilhard de Chardin, love can only exist in more complex beings and organisms due to its presence at the molecular level.

Furthermore, in his view this overarching presence of love is a manifestation of divine love ultimately pulling along the cosmos. Teilhard de Chardin calls this force cosmogenesis, "the process by which the universe is still coming into being… We live in an always nascent, always ongoing process of cosmic movement. God is creating, therefore, not from "up above" but from "up ahead" (Haught 16). In an ever-evolving universe where change is constant, spiritual forces are the only element preventing the universe from dispersing, until everything eventually converges at what Teilhard de Chardin calls the Omega Point or the end of existence. Cardenal plays with this idea in his poem, connecting it with the Nicaraguan Revolution. In the last cantiga, "Omega," he writes:

> ¡Centro de convergencia del universo,
> no me excluyas de tus besos y tus abrazos!
> Misterio de ser más el otro mientras más el mismo.
> Centro de centros, irradiando desde el centro de un sistema de centros
> Como un punto solo. Punto Omega. (409)

Cardenal calls for the eventual reunion with God in the Omega Point. Filled with desire, the text pushes for this moment when all will be resolved and all of creation will be fused to a single point, similar to the place where the universe originated. This conceptualization of the cosmos as a space in constant flux enables the Sandinista Revolution to become the social manifestation of an evolving universe. Through these developing connections the poet reasons that the forces of gravity transcend into the attracting forces of love which help unite societies to rise up against oppression. Revolutions thus become a metaphor for creation evolving toward ultimate perfection: a utopia.

From the beginning, *Cántico cósmico* uses metaphors comparing cosmological forces with social processes. For example, Cantiga 8 likens the increasing force of condensation, drawing together more cosmic components to form the first celestial bodies, to “los fenómenos que llamamos socializaciones, y así es/la Revolución” (59). Placing “la Revolución” on its own at the bottom of the stanza draws attention to how evolutionary processes will culminate in the Revolution. In this context, where the Revolution becomes the social manifestation of an evolving universe, Cardenal described martyrdom as: “el martirio: es evolucionario” (355). This simple phrase brings the concept of evolution together with the theological idea of the resurrection of Christ, reminding the reader of the sacrifice of the revolutionary martyrs while also pointing to the important role played by these men in bringing people together for a common cause. The poem elevates the Revolution, considering it a social manifestation of cosmological processes. Thus, in the concluding Cantiga, “Omega,” Cardenal envisions the end of the universe, where all of creation is reunited, interwoven with a speech by Sandino calling for unity:

> Todas las cosas tienden ardorosas hacía un centro común.
> ¡Punto Omega!
> “Aquí nos ha reunido esa voluntad suprema
> para conseguir la Libertad de Nicaragua.” (405)

The Revolution evolves towards a shared centre based in love and rallying under a common goal. Yet, the poem ends by returning to “Cuando no había nada. / En el principio…” (410) hinting at the possibility of resurrection, that out of the ashes of the old galaxy a new one will rise to begin the processes anew. Thus, no end is ever final, there is always the possibility of rebirth and new beginnings. There is always hope and the possibility of a utopia becoming reality.

The End of the Revolution

Cántico cósmico's bright futuristic vision dissipates in the wake of the Sandinista Revolution's electoral defeat, a mere three months after the publication of the epic. Many Sandinistas were completely taken by surprise when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and her conservative party defeated the revolutionary government. Due to various factors, from the ongoing Contra war (1979-1990) to economic difficulties to infighting within the Sandinista's own ranks, Nicaraguans lost faith in the Revolution and Chamorro won 51 percent of the vote.[41] Immediately following her victory, Chamorro brought an end to the Contra war, making good on her promise to end the conflict. This was however the easiest task, with the government now faced with rebuilding a country ravaged by decades of war and drowning in debt. Immediate cuts were made to the many services that the Sandinistas had put in place, from public healthcare to affordable housing and public education. Chamorro's decision to abolish public schooling in particular "had the most pernicious long-term impact" as it "denied hundreds of thousands of poor children access to primary and secondary education" (Henighan 427). Unsurprisingly, the illiteracy rate, which had decreased under Sandinismo, rose again. By 2006, when Daniel Ortega regained power, 34 percent of the population could not read or write (Henighan 438). Ultimately, it was the poor who suffered the most, losing access to public services and struggling with increasingly high inflation. However, despite dismantling many Sandinista programs, the Chamorro government could not touch the land reform. Compromise informed most of Chamorro's decisions and taking away land given to thousands of families would have sparked a civil war. The government passed legislation legalizing Sandinista agrarian reforms which

[41] The Contra war (1979-1990) began with rebels, some of them former Sandinistas, fighting against the Sandinista government. Most of the armed conflict happened at the border between Nicaragua and Honduras. The rebels mainly engaged in terrorist activities, receiving financial and military support from the Reagan administration.

subsequently meant that Nicaragua lost the promised financial aid from the US.[42] Around this time, in 1994, Cardenal officially left the Sandinista party because of his increasing concerns about Daniel Ortega's leadership and the authoritarian tone the party was taking. By 1996, most Nicaraguans considered Chamorro more corrupt than the Sandinistas. She lost the election to Arnoldo Alemán, a former Somoza official (Henighan 431). That same year Belli published her novel *Waslala.*

Given the course of events, it is easy to overlook the Revolutionary project and forget the dramatic change those years brought to Nicaragua. Henighan reminds us of this, observing that the Revolution was a crucial event in that it provided the ordinary Nicaraguan with the "hope of material progress, spiritual and artistic sustenance, and increased self-respect and autonomy to some of the poorest, most-oppressed people in the Western Hemisphere" (686). He furthermore warns against revisionist scepticism about the project because it denies "the idealistic, liberating qualities of this experience; any study of literature produced in Nicaragua before, during, or after the Revolution is also an act of homage to an ethos of idealism, self-sacrifice, and unity across chasm-like barriers of social class" (686-687). My study continues along this line, underscoring the legacy of the Revolution's vision reflected within Nicaraguan literature and its continued hope for a better future despite current dystopic conditions.[43] Here Cardenal's community Solentiname plays a fundamental role because it arguably embodies some of the Revolution's core values and stood at the centre of the national project. The community would eventually

---

[42] Many Somocistas had moved to the US and become American citizens which allowed right-wing US senator Jesse Helms to pass the Helms-Gonzalez Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act. "This legislation required the US government to suspend aid to Nicaragua and vote against loans to the country by international organizations on the grounds that President Chamorro had 'seized the property of US citizens'" (Henighan 428).

[43] Currently, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo rule Nicaragua with an iron fist. Ortega began consolidating power in the early 2000s and has named himself leader for life. After regaining power in 2006, his government has increasingly restricted the rights and freedoms of Nicaraguans. His government has, for example, criminalized abortion and people opposing the regime have gone into exile.

become so popular that it received visitors from around the world and had to turn people away due to lack of space and resources. The fact that the Somoza army destroyed the community is a testimony of its subversive power and importance. The destruction of Solentiname and the end of the Revolution left behind a vacuum which Belli in her creation of the fictional community of Waslala tries to fill. Simultaneously, the novel explores how such a community would function in the new neoliberal world order. Belli's text thereby reminds the readers of all that the Sandinista Revolution was and all it could still be.

Gioconda Belli: Her Life and Literary Vision

Born in 1948 in Managua, Gioconda Belli grew up sheltered by her upper-class family upbringing. After marrying young in 1969 she quickly had her first child, Myriam. However, feeling constrained by the role of homemaker, she began to work at an advertising agency. In her memoir, *El país bajo mi piel* (2002), Belli recounts how she became involved in the revolutionary project. During her time at the agency, she meets Bosco el Poeta who soon becomes her lover and introduces her to the world of artists and revolutionaries. Thanks to Bosco el Poeta, his circle of friends, and further reading, Belli comes into contact with "el alma de mi país" (57). Around this time, she began to write and published her first collection of feminist erotic poetry to both a scandalous reaction emanating from her own social class and acclaim by fellow artists. Not long after, Belli met Camilo Ortega, Daniel Ortega's brother, who invited her to join the Sandinistas. Worried about the safety of her daughter, Belli's initial involvement was simple and limited, delivering coded messages or transporting people to destinations across Managua. However, as the situation in Nicaragua worsened, she became increasingly convinced that "en Nicaragua no quedaba otra salida que la lucha armada y la revolución" (64). Officially

joining the Revolutionary movement in 1973, Belli was eventually forced into exile in 1975 in Mexico and Costa Rica until after the defeat of the Somozas in 1979.

Belli held various positions in the Sandinista government, at first working for the newly formed national broadcasting and television network. She also worked on the 1990 election campaign but was quickly removed from the commission in charge of the FSLN's electoral campaign due to rising tensions between her and Daniel Ortega (386). In her memoir, Belli writes about warning the FSLN: "teníamos que prepararnos para el peor escenario, pero Daniel Ortega y los demás no coincidieron conmigo" (392). Cognizant of the dissonance between the election campaign platform and the overall mood of the country, Belli observed that the Sandinistas should recognize "el cansancio de la gente… respetar su sentimiento de pérdida, sus muertos, ser autocríticos" (393). The Sandinista's confidence in their electoral victory blinded them to the overall sentiment of the people and the reality that the ordinary Nicaraguan faced after decades of war. Belli's capacity to see otherwise proves her to be an astute observer, sensitive to diverging perspectives and able to perceive a wide range of mindsets. This strength emerges in her novels which often portray characters who move in different social circles but meet through a catalytic event, thus either challenging each others' ideologies or joining forces to fight for the common good. Through these encounters, Belli's texts explore a wide range of viewpoints and social realities. It seems to me that this capacity for emotional and social insight stems from the author's own lived experience; she had to adapt to a multitude of circumstances from married homemaker and mother to guerrilla, from going into exile to forming a revolutionary government, and later in the 80s moving between Nicaragua and the U.S. after her marriage to Charles Castaldi, an American journalist. In an interview, Belli comments on these changes, "hubo tantos cambios en mi vida, pero hay una sola persona. Lo que pasa es que esa

persona se va... [e]ncontrando a sí misma. Todos esos cambios de identidad tal vez tienen que ver con cambio geográfico, pero también yo creo que tienen que ver con cambios en la conciencia en la medida en que vos te vas convirtiendo en vos" (Létocart np). Over the course of her life, these experiences led Belli to reflect on her own identity and the roles she played in different social as well as political environments. These reflections form the heart of her memoir, *El país bajo mi piel*, where she recounts her life, how she became involved in the Sandinista Revolution and shares her observations from her time of moving in political circles gathering support for the Revolution.

Due to the personal nature of Belli's literary work, I frequently refer to her memoir in my reading of *Waslala,* particularly in her descriptions of the little community and its founders. *El país bajo mi piel* offers profound insight into the political situation of Central America in the 1970s and the work required to organize and stage a revolution, and it corroborates Henighan's observations about the idealism that fueled the Sandinista Revolution. The memoir sheds light on how Belli, as one of the few women active in the higher levels of command, continually had to fight against a patriarchal society and protect herself in the predominantly male political landscape. The memoir furthermore reveals how Belli uses her fiction to reflect on her past experiences and to advocate for women's rights as well as social and ecological justice. While most critics of Belli's work focus on her feminist message, the memoir and her novels demonstrate that the writer's interests are much broader in scope. Since the author was deeply involved in the political scene, her memoir contains shrewd observations about the political interrelationships between the Northern and Southern hemispheres which also appear in the thematic development of her literary work.

Several of her novels take place in the fictional country of Faguas, a reimagined Nicaragua. These novels all contain biographical elements ranging from personal experiences to reflections on local and international politics. For example, in *La mujer habitada* (1988), Lavinia, a strong-willed and independent architect with a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, becomes involved with revolutionaries organizing a rebellion. Parts of Lavinia's character, such as her social background and her role in the revolution as message deliverer and as driver, are clearly based on Gioconda's own experiences. In a more recent novel, *El país de las mujeres* (2010), Belli draws on a past project where she, along with a group of other women involved in the Sandinista government, would meet to discuss strategies to promote women's rights (217). The novel imagines Faguas governed by an exclusively female government while men become homemakers and care providers. Finally, in *Waslala,* the author uses a dystopic narrative unfolding in the near future to explore the consequences of contemporary geopolitics and to criticize the power imbalance between the developed and developing worlds. The novel warns of the potential repercussions of globalization where neoliberal free market economies have free reign over both people and environment. Overall, neoliberal societies are characterized by their instrumental view of nature, focus on the individual, and promotion of consumerism. Industrialized nations all embody this viewpoint, considering nature as separate from human society. In "Reviewing the relationship between neoliberal societies and nature: implications of the industrialized dominant social paradigm for a sustainable future," the authors of the study succinctly write that industrialized societies do not recognize nature "as its own entity, but merely as a source for production and profit, and portrayed as a romanticized place separate from daily society" (11). *Waslala* examines these dynamics between human society and nature and their consequences across the globe.

In general, nature forms a prominent part of each plot of the novels mentioned above. Lavinia drinks the juice from an orange tree growing into her garden, becoming inhabited by the spirit of an indigenous woman who lives in the tree, motivating her to join the revolution. In *El país de las mujeres,* a volcanic eruption upsets the amount of testosterone in the male population transforming them into lethargic and ineffectual men, thereby giving the female party the chance to win elections and form a government. *Waslala* contains the most complex environmental message; it portrays the consequences of global policies on environmental and social well-being, the hypocritical attitude of the North towards the South in terms of economical underdevelopment and the importance of an ecological utopian imaginary in energizing local resistance against the global status quo. Together, the three novels continue to pay tribute to the social and environmental idealism that was the Sandinista Revolution. The Sandinista legacy resonates deeply in Belli's texts despite her fierce critique of the current state of Nicaragua and its leader. In 2022, the Nicaraguan government stripped Belli of her citizenship, and she currently lives in exile in Madrid. In 2023, she was awarded the prestigious Reina Sofía Ibero-American Poetry prize for her contribution to Hispanic poetry and her poetic representation of the female experience. In her acceptance speech, Belli reflects on her literary work but also on her recent exile and all she was forced to leave behind, tenderly remembering the natural beauty of the Nicaraguan landscape with its lakes and volcanoes.

Waslala, a Utopia within a Dystopia

This same landscape of lush jungles, wide rivers and awesome volcanos features prominently in *Waslala* where the opening pages describe a river flowing through a beautiful rainforest. The initial description of natural beauty is deceiving, hiding the disfunction and violent corruption of the failed state of Faguas. Due to global policies, Faguas is forced to

provide the globe with oxygen through the conservation of its forests while simultaneously drowning under the garbage brought from the prosperous North. The North enacts its policies in the South through the Corporation of the Environment which oversees the management of the planet, and its Environmental Police enforce its policies on the ground. The protagonist Melisandra navigates through this complicated geopolitical landscape in search of her parents and the utopian community they had hoped to build. Using the conventions of the *Bildungsroman,* the narrative follows Melisandra on a journey where a combination of the people she meets, places she sees, and a series of events lead her to discover her own identity and take charge of her own life. Written from an omnipresent perspective by a third-person narrator, the novel introduces the reader to a wide cast of characters, which allow for the exploration of a broad range of perspectives and motivations within the novel's geopolitical framework. For example, Raphael, a journalist from New York, has come to Faguas to investigate the drug filina, a plant cross between marijuana and cocaine which the country grows and exports under the direction of the Espada brothers.[44] The expedition also includes the scientist Morris who researches the toxic dangers of the garbage Faguas receives from the North and Maclovio, an arms dealer in league with the Espada brothers, among other characters. Over the course of Melisandra's journey, the characters visit different sites in Faguas, enabling the author to develop a critique of the deeply unequal and exploitative relationship between the Global South and the Global North affecting both local societies and environments.

Several critics have commented on the geopolitical relationships depicted in the novel and the resulting inequality. In his article, "Garbage Out: Space, Place, and Neo-imperial Anti--

---

[44] The figures of the Espada brothers and their authoritarian rule of Faguas allude to the rule of brothers Daniel and Camilo Ortega. The use of the name Espada clearly indicates the violent means the brothers use to maintain power both in the fictional world of the novel and in contemporary Nicaragua.

development in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*," Scott deVries observes how Faguas, in its role as garbage dump for the north, loses control and transforms from a specific place into a meaningless space in the web of global power dynamics (40). He notes that the novel effectively illustrates the tensions that arise when global policies clash with the needs of local populations and ecosystems. Nancy Madsen analyzes and expands on this same dynamic in her article "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Ecology and Human Rights in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala.*" Madsen delves into how the novel frames human rights and global ecology "in terms of economy—human 'worth' and natural 'resources'—[where] the novel exposes the fissures between 'thinking globally ' and 'acting locally,'" (135). She points out that the novel is "[m]indful of how ecological crisis is both interpreted and experienced differently in the developed and developing worlds" (136). While the North wants the South to preserve its forests in order to provide the world with oxygen, international laws condemn the Southern nations to poverty, underdevelopment and contaminated environments. Thus, the text criticizes neoliberal approaches to land conservation and management, demonstrating their disproportionate impact on the social and ecological well-being of the South. In my analysis, I expand on these observations, exploring how patterns of domination established during times of conquest reverberate in current power dynamics affecting both people and environments.

Several researchers have also been quite critical of Belli's work, stating that her novel at times lacks depth or that its themes and characters are too stereotypical. For example, Steven F. White finds that the novel does not do justice to the Brazilian tragedy that Belli says inspired her to write the book due to Belli's "libre uso de hechos" (379). In a note, Belli explains that in September 1987 a group of people were exposed to radioactive waste at a garbage dump in the Brazilian city of Goiania. When a scrap dealer opened a cylinder he had found, a beautiful blue

substance glowed in the dark. “Fascinado por la novedad, regaló vasitos llenos de polvo a sus amigos y parientes. En el cumpleaños de una de ellas, una niña de seis años, pusieron el polvo sobre la mesa del comedor y apagaron las luces” (329). The blue substance, cesium 137, contaminated 129 people who ended up in hospital due to radiation poisoning. Twenty of them died, including the little girl. This tragedy reveals the human cost of careless waste disposal. Geographical and cognitive distance obscures the impact of waste disposal from the perspective of the centre which is only brought to light through story and, in the case of the novel, through the fate of Engracia, a strong woman who owns a recycling depot, and her workers. The tragic death of Engracia and the workers at the recycling plant, while poignant and obviously meant as a condemnation of the status quo, lacks depth according to White.

While I see White’s point, I suspect his criticism misses the mark. In my view, Belli uses the incident as a starting point for a more comprehensive examination of existing geopolitical and economic inequalities. However, I believe that Belli has missed a valuable opportunity by not including a reflection on how toxic contamination affects both people and the environment, underscoring both the social and ecological repercussions. The somewhat surface level treatment of the incident can be extended to other shortcomings in the novel. Although the novel’s premise is based on ecological disaster and the lack of oxygen, and broad declarations throughout the text decry the lack of respect for the environment, the overall ecological metaphor remains superficial. Several critics have commented on this; White for example observes that Belli’s works homogenize the biodiversity of Nicaragua (377-378).[45] Additionally, Laura Barbas-Rhoden observes that the ecological imagination and metaphor in the book are mixed, “[a]t times, Belli's language shows that she has inherited a rich legacy of Nicaraguan poetry with

---

[45] He also includes Belli’s other novel, *La mujer habitada*, in this observation.

deep, local knowledge of the natural world. At other times, Belli uses tropes that are traditional, trite, and even consumerist. In some instances, the metaphorical language explicitly commodifies nature" (154). Barbas-Rhoden illustrates the shallowness of the ecological metaphors by citing a passage in which Melisandra contemplates the river. As Melisandra prepares to leave her grandparent's home, she regrets that she cannot take the river with her like a scarf tied around her neck. In her reading, this represents a rather consumerist and possessive view of nature that undercuts some of the ecological messages in *Waslala*.

Furthermore, the novel inadvertently silences nature by engaging with the traditional wilderness trope. The descriptions of beautiful, lush green forests that abound in the novel serve only as a backdrop for the characters and plot development. For example, on the journey towards Waslala, Melisandra and Raphael travel through a dense rainforest.

> A pocas horas de marcha la vegetación aumentó en densidad anunciando que se internaban en un norte boscoso y húmedo. Los árboles de troncos colosales, cubiertos de parásitas y plantas trepadoras de grandes hojas dentadas, le trajeron a Melisandra la memoria del río…Diríase que se habían quedado solos en un mundo intocado cuya soledad era interrumpida únicamente por el canto de los pájaros y la aparición de un ganado desorientado. (290)

The description of the jungle engages with the usual imagery of dense vegetation and mighty trees with "troncos colosales." The use of the expression, "un mundo intocado," emphasizes the wilderness trope playing into the imaginary of a place completely unspoiled by humanity, accentuated by the sentiment of total isolation. In this passage, as in the novel generally, nature does not play an active role in the plot as it does in the works of the other authors studied in this dissertation, notably in *El llano en llamas, Temporada de huracanes*, and *Hombres de maíz*. In

Waslala, the jungle occupies the single function of a beautiful canvas upon which the characters conveniently project their individual ideas and desires; from the explorers described at the beginning of the text to the description of the jungle mentioned above and found towards the end of the story. However, in my view, the ecological imagery in the book gains layers of complexity in the way that it depicts the utopian community of Waslala and the ecological and social legacy of the Sandinista Revolution that it embodies. In particular, I contend that the community of Waslala was inspired by the historical experience of Solentiname. Belli's imaginary community, therefore, follows a historical and ideological precedent. The novel then goes on to imagine what a community like Solentiname would look like in the neoliberal era and its continued importance for marginalized populations. I will expand on this point later in the chapter.

I also believe that the novel's strength comes to the fore in its anticipation of current issues such as the accumulation of garbage around the globe and the increasingly dire forecasts of climate catastrophe. I posit that the novel's main message is increasingly potent; it critiques the hypocritical attitude of the global North which laments the lack of development and environmentalism in the Global South while simultaneously perpetuating the climate crises by prioritizing national economies and promoting consumerist habits, shifting the burden of contamination and material excess in the form of garbage onto the Global south. In this context, the novel strives to provide a scenario representative of the South's experience, and to counter the Eurocentric vision informing the supposedly global policies.

Contact Zones: The Beginning of Empire

The novel, however, begins by bringing the reader into the deep green jungle, reminiscent of the times when these forests served as the backdrop to the contact zone where conquistadors

slashed their way through the undergrowth in search of gold. The notion of contact zones emerged during the early time of conquest with Europeans landing on the shores of the Americas and spreading across the continent, encountering local populations. Pratt describes contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). Established in the form of colonies, these spaces produced hybrid cultures where European epistemologies nonetheless continued to dominate both local populations and local forms of knowledge. Don José, Melisandra’s grandfather recounts these encounters over the course of the last few centuries, with people coming to and leaving Faguas; explorers who are “seres de miradas afiebradas que transitaban el río como si viajaran hacia el fin del mundo, con los mismos ojos de asombro que habrían tenido los conquistadores españoles o los piratas ingleses deslumbrados ante los árboles gigantes, la lujuria de colores, los pájaros deslizándose en el aire, altos y soberbios” (22). In the context of the novel, explorers make contact with the environment rather than the local people, who have retreated deep into the jungle. The lush forests inspire the explorers to dream of wealth and feed an all-consuming desire to find El Dorado, the fabled city of Gold. These visions of utopias of abundance give way to the desire to possess and exploit readily abundant resources. Thus, while the passage cited above only mentions the natural landscape, it converges with Pratt’s definition of the contact zone in the foreign explorer’s desire to dominate and control the environment as well as the local people. The resulting exploitative relationship accompanies emerging ideologies around modernity, further cementing narratives of European superiority.

The encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples and their lands caused a radical reconsideration of humanity’s place in the world and the universe. Aníbal Quijano explains that, in the 16th century, Europeans felt a need to “study, explain, doubt, discuss, and

investigate all that exists and happens in the universe, and to modify ideas, images, and experiences correspondingly" (Quijano 141). This re-examination of humanity and its relationship with the world inspired intellectuals to look to the future, instead of the past, as the "privileged seat of hopes" (142). Increasingly, thinkers conceived of rational and objective reasoning as a way to attain personal liberty. Combined with a more secular approach to knowledge than had prevailed in the past, the concept of modernity was born with its "generic promise… that historical transformation can be brought about by rational human agency, conquering space and time through scientific knowledge to create a society of greater justice, sovereignty and liberty" (Miller 4). Nicola Miller's definition is what Pratt calls the "standard account" of modernity told from the perspective of the centre of the empire. From the viewpoint of those located on the periphery, however, modernity is something that is either defective or lacking in their part of the world. This happens because while modernity proposes that equality is for all, in reality, the discourse thrives on the existence of alterity (or otherness) (Pratt 42). The other, for the benefit of the centre, should be controlled by a central narrative which reinforces the other's backwardness. Additionally, Quijano explains that the encounter between Europe and the Americas led to the age of modernization and the "transformation of the world, of society, according to the requirements of domination and control, specifically, of the domination of capital, stripped of any purpose other than accumulation" (145-146). While intellectuals spoke of liberty, market forces promoted resource and labour acquisition to contribute to economic growth. Concurrently, ecosystems and indigenous people became objects of study, harnessed for resources and labour in generating wealth for the centre. The focus on the accumulation of material wealth continues to have enormous repercussions for colonized peoples and their environments. I posit that modernity, in its objectification of nature and the other, reinforces the

nature/culture divide, facilitating relationships based on exploitation and commodification of human and more-than-human communities. In response, some literary texts strive to restore the subjectivity and agency of marginalized human and more-than-human entities, highlighting the interconnection between human and environmental well-being. Like the rest of my selected corpus, *Waslala* challenges modernity's anthropocentric lens and exposes the damage it generates in light of the climate emergency.

The Environmental Cost of Empire and the Creation of Sacrifice Zones

As discussed above, the trajectory initiated by the moment of contact between the two worlds devastated both the human and more-than-human, as imperial powers exerted their dominance on social and ecological landscapes. In *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley reflect on these dynamics, examining how the project of empire building is inextricably linked with environmental degradation and exploitation in that empires depended on the natural resources of their territories to expand and maintain their position of power. Concurrently, during the early years of conquest, the narrative of unlimited resources and land created the belief that growth could and would continue indefinitely; a belief that is still informing many economic ideologies today. Shortly after the first wave of conquistadors and explorers landed, scientists descended on the continent, conducting research for the advancement of empire and science. DeLoughrey and Handley point out how the taxonomies of flora and fauna developed around this time, connected with the "biologically determinist discourses of race, gender, and nature… [which were] often used to justify the practice of slavery and the denial of citizenship and subjectivity to non-Europeans" (12). Biologically determinist discourses were used to justify the ongoing subjugation of colonial peoples and the extraction of natural resources. This persistent attitude manifests itself in

Waslala, where the Environmental Corporations and Environmental Police, corporate bodies directed by the Global North, keep a close watch on the management of Faguas's jungles. These transnational bodies are designed to serve the interests of the greater good since the jungle crucially provides the planet with oxygen. But in their striving for this "greater good," Laura Barbas-Rhoden observes that "actions… taken by international governing bodies have unforeseen consequences, at least in part because planners have an inadequate grasp of the realities of desperately poor regions" (159). Planners, through geographical distance and cognitive dissonance, are not always aware of how their policies can have a negative impact on the Global South. The novel endeavours to bring these consequences to light in its portrayal of the ordinary Faguans and their struggle to survive in an impoverished country, prevented by the transnational policies from developing its own economy and industry. The fall-out of this unequal power relationship comes to the fore in the existence of sacrifice zones, a term I employ to describe the contemporary spaces which used to be contact zones. In the eyes of the North, these zones are convenient featureless areas useful in fulfilling policy goals. On the other hand, inhabitants of sacrifice zones are faced every day with environmental contamination, underdeveloped infrastructure and violent, corrupt leadership.

The transformation of contact zones into sacrifice zones runs its course over the centuries, where colonial powers exercise complete control over their territories and establish patterns of domination that continue well after the official end of colonialism. With political hierarchies firmly in place, the developed world's policies and global land management strip the developing world of its identity and agency, turning the contact zones into featureless areas used to absorb the North's debris and waste created by its lavish lifestyle. Countries such as Faguas thereby lose their sovereignty and become convenient dumping grounds for unwanted consumer

goods. The loss of political and economic independence is exemplified in the following description where Faguas transforms into "una simple masa geográfica como lo eran antes las selvas del Amazonas y ahora vastas regiones en África, Asia, la América del Sur, el Caribe: manchas verdes sin rasgos… reducidas a selvas, reservas forestales, a función de pulmón y basurero del mundo desarrollado que las explotó para sumirlas después en el olvido" (23). Geographical masses, "manchas verdes sin rasgos," spread out across the southern hemisphere, having lost any unique identifying features that defined their claims to being nation-states. Denying these regions agency over their own affairs, the Global North erases their presence from the world stage. Faguas becomes nothing more than an underdeveloped green stain on the map.

The sense of abandonment and isolation from the rest of the world that permeates Faguas connects with an observation made by Jarquín about Central America's current presence on the world stage. He writes that, while Central American nations participate in global markets, "their politics are less salient on the international scene... [previously during the Cold War] decisions made by Central American leaders sometimes reverberated globally… Today, when Central American countries appear in the headlines in the United States, they appear as part of a domestic problem—the source of immigrants or the cause of the so-called border crisis—rather than a foreign policy issue" (236). In this context, it is important to remember the historic role the Central American isthmus played in the growing economic prosperity of the US. First, in the so-called Neo-colonial era, Central America became an integral part in the emerging power of the United States. The continent provided a variety of resources American corporations used to produce products and profit, while several governments in turn benefited from numerous fiscal, juridical and even racial exemptions. The US furthermore built a critical passage in the Panama Canal, a corridor for which the country itself was created with a constitution written in

Washington.[46] Due to America's many economic interests in Central America, the Cold War era saw the region, like other regions, become a battle ground for the former Soviet Union and the United States, with both countries wooing governments to join the communist or capitalist cause. With the post-Cold War geopolitical and economic shift, the effect of US policy is more oblique or indirect and crises such as illegal immigration are seen as events in and of themselves, rather than the outcome of political and economic decision making by the northern hemisphere. A scene of the novel reflects these dynamics where it portrays the North's only active involvement in Faguas in the form of the environmental police, entering the country to quash an outbreak of ecological terrorism (*Waslala* 120).

The erasure of nationhood and sovereignty gives the northern hemisphere the power to force its policies on the rest of the world. This corresponds to what Pratt calls "imposed receptivity," where the centre forces its goods, ideas, and identities on the periphery. In this scenario, "[t]he receiving community has power to determine how these new elements are received but not whether they are received" (Pratt 47). A concrete example of imposed receptivity are the volumes of consumer goods ending up in dumps around the world. The globe's waste problem is made visible by the mountains of discarded clothes dumped in the Atacama Desert outside of Iquique, Chile (Johnson) or the piles of e-waste found in Ghana. These realities find their fictional mirror in the description of the town Las Luces and later in the recycling depot of the powerful matriarch Engracia. Discarded items take on a second life in the Global South, used creatively to construct houses. The reader learns that the Environmental authorities prohibit the use of wood in buildings since the forests need to be protected at all costs.

---

[46] Amongst the numerous exemptions, it is worth noting the application of segregation laws in areas controlled by American companies or government in the Panama Canal. This exemplifies the power the US wielded over the area. Currently, the Panama Canal is once again in the news with Donald Trump threatening to occupy Panama in order to regain control over the canal.

In response, local populations contrive their own solution by recycling the waste dumped on them. The description of the ironically named town of Las Luces illustrates this dynamic:

> Las casas que bordeaban el camino hasta la posada testimoniaban los portentos que podían lograrse con los desechos de los más favorecidos: viejas bañeras servían de abrevaros de caballos, a la puerta de algunas viviendas; claraboyas opacas y cóncavas o viejas pantallas de ordenador cumplían la función de ventanas, mientras anchas puertas de vidrio irrompible servían de techo en las salas de las casas más grandes (105-106).

Melisandra and her companions walk through the town observing the inventiveness of its inhabitants. Out of necessity, the inhabitants of Las Luces creatively repurpose materials to build their own houses and maintain their infrastructure, creating a new hybrid construction culture and circular economy based on the principles of reuse and repair.[47] Interestingly, computer screens function as windows, becoming objects that, instead of clouding one's vision, enable one's vision. Earlier in the book, characters express concern that the proliferation of computers and virtual reality in the Global North is dulling people's imagination and their capacity to clearly see the global crisis. Conversely, the novel suggests that Faguans, in their lack of access to these trappings of the developed world, sustain their creativity, a necessity in surviving difficult circumstances and eventually a force that will allow them to combat the status quo and build a local resistance.

The other fundamental example of the circular economy is Engracia's recycling depot, located on the outskirts of Cineria. In her compound, Engracia creates a safe haven from the

[47] Today, ironically, the use of recycled building materials might no longer seem as regressive with the growing push to use more goods made from recycled materials.

corrupt rule of the Espada brothers and along with her workers sorts the incoming waste from the North before distributing it across Faguas for local consumption. When Raphael and Melisandra are taken on a tour of the facility, Melisandra is very surprised by the volume and variety of the items that she sees. She asks Raphael why people throw away functioning appliances like washing machines that look practically new. He replies that, "cada año los fabricantes ofrecen máquinas más sofisticadas, con nuevos aditamentos, y la gente tiene afición por lo nuevo, por lo último…" (145). Raphael tries to explain the North's business and consumer mindset to Melisandra, who in turn finds it difficult to understand why consumers so easily discard their items. She remarks, "Qué desperdicio increíble. Qué pecado" (145), to which Raphael responds with, "un gesto de resignación con los hombros. -Si la gente no estuviera dispuesta a cambiar lo viejo por lo nuevo, los fabricantes no tendrían estímulo para producir mejores máquinas. Todo tiene sus pros y sus contras" (145). Raphael attempts to provide a neutral answer but his body language suggests that he, like Melisandra, struggles with the reality. Through this exchange, and others like it, the novel delves into the tensions between the North and South, demonstrating the cultural disconnect between the two hemispheres. From the perspective of the Faguans, people in the North live in perfect material comfort, something the Faguans themselves would like to achieve, "[q]uerían la modernidad, pero no podían adquirirla. No tenían los medios. Los únicos medios de que disponían no hacían más que llevarlos al pasado, o en todo caso, los mantenían en una especie de limbo, en un tiempo redondo que giraba en círculos sobre sí mismo" (95). The narrator observes the impossibility of realizing this dream and recognizes how modernity's idea of linear progress breaks down in the periphery where time moves in circles, mirroring the movement of recycled goods in Faguas's circular economy.

The novel thereby reveals several uncomfortable truths about the concepts of progress, modernity and how global policies designed or deemed for the common good in fact only benefit the minority. Amitav Ghosh delves into these truths in *The Great Derangement* (2016). Although writing from the Asian perspective, several of his observations support the paradoxes outlined in *Waslala.* Ghosh explains that Asia's rapid industrialization, accelerating as of the 1980s, has revealed the uncomfortable truth that the "patterns of life that modernity engenders can only be practiced by a small minority of the world's population…Every family in the world cannot have two cars, a washing machine, and a refrigerator— not because of technical or economic limitations but because humanity would asphyxiate in the process" (92). Globally, humanity is reaching limits, where the earth cannot support the amount of carbon dioxide emitted into the air, the overall contamination produced by the carbon economy and the myriads of other environmental problems that accompany the climate crisis. Simultaneously, Ghosh points out a major deficiency in climate discourse arising from its very origins and how cultural perspectives continue to dictate who is considered an offender or defender of the climate. Asia, due to its high carbon emissions, is often seen as an offender, even though the continent also has the potential to become a partner in creating solutions. Ghosh writes that this uneven perception comes about because "the discourse around the Anthropocene, and climate matters generally, remains largely Eurocentric" (87). The climate change discourse still emanates from the West and is mainly conducted and directed by the centre. The West continues to dictate major decisions and policy design, relegating the rest of the world to a passive role.

Belli's novel reveals these same tensions between the Global North and the Global South, where the North in its climate policies maintains its dominant position, erasing the developing world's agency. *Waslala* provides concrete examples through Las Luces and the description of

the waste found in Engracia's recycling depot. As seen from the descriptions above, one of the reasons Faguas is flooded by the North's excess is due to people wanting the latest and newest machines and the manufacturers feeding this demand by creating new products. Meanwhile, the people from the North obviously do not think about how the waste impacts Faguas and other nations like it. Additionally, the novel reveals the hypocrisy behind these climate policies where the North demands the South sacrifice its prosperity to meet the world's climate goals, while the developed world does not adjust its own patterns of consumption or lifestyle to meet this common goal. The modernization narrative and the climate change discourse share many commonalities: in both, the West continues to dominate and direct the narrative veiled by ideas of universal values or serving the common good. The discourse generated by the centre thereby obscures the lived experiences and realities of the periphery.

The developed world's perception of the South as a backward "mancha verde," conveniently regulated by the Environmental Corporation, also hides the painful outcome of some of the garbage that arrives in Faguas. The North's careless attitude towards the wellbeing of the South surfaces when unidentified radioactive waste arrives at Engracia's facility. Engracia and her workers, unaware of the dangers inherent in the goods they handle, are contaminated and thus condemned to die a painful death. When they find a broken cylinder which contains a beautiful phosphorescent substance, they paint themselves with it. This substance turns out to be "cesio 137. Es un isótopo radiactivo. La dosis letal varía entre 500 y 600 rems" (191). Morris, an expert in toxic materials, explains to the victims that they will soon become very sick, "en unas cuantas horas sufrirán vómitos, fiebre, dolor de cabeza, quemaduras, la piel les arderá. Perderán fluido y electrólitos en los espacios intercelulares, sufrirán daños en la médula espinal, se les

caerá el pelo…" (191). A horrible painful death awaits the victims. Madsen observes that the description of this

> prolonged process of dying emphasizes the temporal distance between cause and effect, as the deaths of the workers occur months after the radioactive material was illegally discarded. Geographical distance is also highlighted, as the garbage pickers who suffer the consequences of contamination live a world away from those who disposed of the radioactive substance. (140)

The passing of Engracia, Morris and her workers underscores the disconnect between the countries that dispose of the waste so thoughtlessly and those that receive it, unaware of the dangers it represents.

The victims prepare themselves for their final end, resigning themselves to a premature death by deciding to spend the night singing and dancing. The description of their phosphorescent bodies in motion heightens the sense of tragedy, "Engracia semejaba una diosa antigua, terrible y magnánima, recién llegada de un viaje astral. Los muchachos tenían la magnificencia y levedad de efebos andróginos salidos de la selva sagrada… Era difícil imaginar que algo tan bello pudiese ser mortal" (192). The beautiful but grotesque display establishes a link to a primeval time, where Engracia is an ancient goddess, and the depot's workers transform into mysterious jungle beings. The scene evokes an ancient ritual where people prepare themselves for sacrifice. This sacrificial image is completed when Engracia decides to invade the fortress of the filina drug-dealing Espada brothers and to blow herself up in a final act of resistance, clearing the way for Melisandra to found a new order in Faguas. This tragedy carries an added layer of horror for the reader because, as explained above, it is inspired by an actual event where people in a small city in Brazil died of radioactive poisoning. Faced by these

tragedies, one wonders how people find the mental and physical capacity to resist the global status quo. In the context of Belli's novel, the ideal community of Waslala and the hope that it inspires fuels the resistance.

Cardenal and Belli: Two Revolutionaries Dreaming of a Utopia

In my reading, Waslala allows for multiple layers of meaning, from imagining a community harmoniously co-existing with nature to commemorating the poetic and ecological legacy of the Sandinista Revolution. The novel affirms the importance of the idea of utopia in times of crises and proposes alternative ways of organizing a collective, contrasting the forces of globalization and neoliberal policies. In its utopian impulse, Belli's work coincides with that of Cardenal in that both authors explore what an ideal society could look like and use their art to commemorate and immortalize the aspirations of the Sandinista project. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Cardenal dedicated *Cántico cósmico* to the Revolution and used the poem to envision a cosmic Utopia where all of creation will eventually unite in a harmonious whole. Writing while the Revolution was still a reality, Cardenal confidently predicts a utopian future for Nicaragua, the world and ultimately the universe. His worldview, guided by his Christian faith, his belief in the Revolution's success, and the existence of a universal morality propagated by thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin culminates in his depiction of a cosmic Utopia. However, Cardenal's belief in planetary progress mirrored by the expansion of the universe towards an eventual cosmic utopia is not replicated in Belli's work, written in the aftermath of the failed Revolution. The end of the Revolution was soon followed by the collapse of the former Soviet Union, capitalism's victory and the supposed end of history as projected by writers such as Francis Fukuyama. As a result, the world created in the novel reflects the fragmentation experienced on the global stage, where the breakdown of the east/west dichotomy gave way to a series of

political powers uncomfortably collaborating through successive trade agreements and political alliances.

Waslala pays tribute to the Sandinista's dreams through its depiction of the idealized community founded by a group of poets. Barbas-Rhoden notes this characteristic of the novel, writing that "Belli memorializes the utopian dreams of the Nicaraguan revolutionary movement in which she herself came of age as a woman, citizen, and writer. She also redeems the notion of a utopian impulse in revolutionary movements and signals a role for art in shaping a better future" (162). Art and literature played crucial roles in shaping the Sandinista discourse and imaginary. Thus, it is unsurprising that the idea of Waslala arose from the musings of a group of poets, whose fictional characters are based on important figures in the Sandinista movement. For example, Melisandra's grandfather, Don José, fictionally represents the great Nicaraguan poet José Coronel Urtecho (1906-1994), whom Gioconda met in person. In her memoir, she describes how her visit to Urtecho's home inspired Melisandra's house in the novel, and how the house and surroundings had "el aire de lugar mítico" that "quedó grabado en mi imaginación y encontró vida también en mi literatura" (205). In the novel, Don José describes the initial planning process of what would become Waslala.[48] He recalls how his

> gran amigo, Ernesto, un poeta callado, sabio, con profundos conocimientos de la física y del cosmos, nos planteó el problema esencial que encontraba en nuestras propuestas (acerca de Waslala) … "Casi se remontan al Big Bang", nos dijo… "Hay que crear el núcleo original, descontaminarlo a través de varias generaciones hasta que sólo lo

---

[48] Belli explains that her visit to José Coronel Urtecho's home also coincided with her meeting Ernesto Cardenal. She writes, "No olvido la llegada de Ernesto vestido de jeans, cotona blanca y sandalias, que venía de Solentiname en una panga…Ernesto era más bien callado [comparado con su hermano Fernando], pero cuando hablaba lo hacía con firmeza" (206). This meeting must have made an impression on both writers, since Cardenal also describes this event in his memoir, *Las ínsulas extrañas* (2002).

> conformen hombres y mujeres que nunca hayan conocido la ambición, el poder, la avaricia, la violencia, el mal. Se trata de construir la primera célula, la partícula, el primer organismo vivo." (59-60)

Don José's friend is none other than Ernesto Cardenal, as is made obvious by the description of Ernesto as a man with "profundos conocimientos de la física y del cosmos" (59). The foundation of Waslala takes on an organic aspect when Ernesto compares it to the formation of the first cell which made organic planetary life possible. I would also suggest that, by portraying Ernesto as the mastermind behind the idyllic community, the text directly links Waslala to Solentiname, Cardenal's own religious commune. In the next section, I explore how the description of Waslala coincides with that of Solentiname.

Dreaming of Solentiname: Waslala's Revolutionary Precursor

Founded on the Solentiname archipelago of Lake Nicaragua, Solentiname was designed as a self-sustaining religious community built and maintained collectively by its members. Cardenal led his community through collective readings of the gospel.[49] Together, the founding members cleared the land, rebuilt the tumbledown church, experimented with growing a variety of crops and fished in the lake, striving to become self-sufficient with mixed success. In his memoir, *Las ínsulas extrañas,* Cardenal recounts the founding of Solentiname. His descriptions are filled with symbolic meaning, unmistakably presenting the community as an allegory for the kind of nation he would have liked Nicaragua to become. For example, in reconstructing the church, Cardenal decides to maintain the earthen floor "como los ranchos en el campo" (98), signalling the community's proximity to the everyday experience of the ordinary Nicaraguan as

---

[49] Ernesto Cardenal recorded the communal commentary which can be read in the book, *El evangelio en Solentiname* (1975).

well as a closeness to the earth. Furthermore, the text describes the beautiful sajuancoche tree in front of the church with "nuestra flor nacional, que ya está en flor, está botando sus olorosas flores blancas" (112). Upon the completion of the church, Nicaragua's national flower begins to bloom, symbolizing social rebirth. Cardenal also paints a vivid picture of the surrounding natural landscape bursting with life. As he contemplates the vegetation and the wildlife, he writes that:

> Todo esto son figuras del amor, decía yo. Observar lo que nos rodea era estar en diálogo con Dios. Bastaba ver los zanates comiendo en el palo de jocotes, donde ya empiezan a madurar los jocotes. Bastaba ver las oropéndolas en los mangos centenarios enfrente de la iglesia, ya empezando a florecer... Ver el paso de cuatro garzas puras que van volando hacia Costa Rica; las sardinas que saltan en el agua, y los mismos tiburones del lago y la culebra que cayó del techo de la iglesia. El creador de todos estos seres, nacidos de una unión de amor y que a su vez se reproducen por una unión de amor, ¿quién otro podría ser sino el MISMO AMOR? (112)

For Cardenal, the rhythms of nature reflect the love of God while quiet contemplation allows the observer to engage in a conversation with the divine. Thus, the creation of an ideal society leads to a closer spiritual relationship with God.

Through her utopian imaginary, Belli in turn constructs a community which clearly rejects the materialistic lifestyle of the developed world. Her view converges with Cardenal's reflections in its emphasis on a society in tune with its surrounding landscape, although without the religious context; one that sustainably inhabits the local ecosystem. When Melisandra enters Waslala through a wrinkle in time she observes that the buildings

> no seguían la disposición acostumbrada, sino se acomodaban según lo permitían los árboles que las precedieron. Admiró las construcciones de madera sólida, alzadas sobre pilotes, con terrazas y gruesos pilares de roble y caoba maciza; los troncos centenarios naciéndolos a algunas en el centro, las habitaciones encajadas sobre árboles vecinos unidas por puentes, las pequeñas cabañas con formas geométricas caprichosas, esquinas insólitas, cuyos ángulos obedecían las necesidades del terreno. (308)

The natural landscape dictates the lay-out of the houses which are snugly fit in between and around the massive tree trunks and branches. Built to fit within the contours of the terrain, the community recalls Don José's description of Waslala as "un organismo vivo," a place responsive to and respectful of its immediate environment. In its essence Waslala represents a local vision of how to live in contrast to the global policies that seek to dictate global land management from the top down.

This local vision is firmly rooted in the Central American environment and cosmology due to the presence of the ceiba trees. Two ceiba trees guard the wrinkle in time that allows access to the utopian community. Don José explains how the founders located Waslala with the help of a neighbouring community. He recalls that

> La extensión de nuestra comunidad la demarcaban cuatro ceibos gigantescos. Cuando llegamos con nuestros bártulos nos reunimos con el alcalde de vara del poblado campesino asentado sobre las faldas de una colina al sur. Siguiendo las señales recibidas en un viejo sueño, él nos asignó ese lugar sin antes realizar una ceremonia donde pedimos permiso a los viejos y centenarios árboles para invadir se espacio vital. (62)

Having arrived at the foot of the four majestic ceibas, the founding members are led through a ceremony by an "alcalde de la vara," before entering into Waslala. The ceiba trees are consulted and included in the founding of Waslala. As discussed previously in this dissertation, the ceiba trees form the centre of the Mayan cosmovision, representing life as well as connecting all planes of existence. The indigenous leader, carrying his vara, is reminiscent of similar scenes in *El país de Toó,* where the "alcalde de la vara," Don Atanasio Akiral, leads Cobra through a ceremony of redemption. In *Waslala* and *El país de Toó*, the ceremonies converge in symbolizing new beginnings and the bringing together of the human with the more-than-human world. In the case of Waslala, where the descriptions of the jungle are at times generic, I suggest that this moment is also important in that it depicts a Mayan world view in the face of a global but ultimately Eurocentric treatment of the Global South's environment.

The Mayan cosmovision is inherently ecological. It is therefore unsurprising that the community of Waslala is founded on a respectful attitude towards the environment. Waslala thereby fits de Geus's definition of a utopia of sufficiency which "consistently emphasize[s] the advantages of a simpler life, and insists that humans should treat and use the natural surroundings with care: contact with nature is considered to be of great importance" (21-22). Utopias of sufficiency strive to exist in close contact with the environment and function within the natural limits of the local ecosystem. To be self-sufficient means to respect the capacity of the landscape. Waslala exemplifies this goal with its

> huertos, granjas, el sistema de molinos de viento para el riego, el motor con energía solar que proveía la electricidad, la sección industrial con prensas para obtener de los árboles papel, telas, láminas para construcciones…métodos absolutamente primitivos, advirtió,

> una suerte de Edad Media iluminada, con alguna que otra tecnología multiplicando las posibilidades. Una variedad de objetos funcionaban mediante dinamos y cuerdas. (323)

Materially, the community has everything it needs to sustain itself, from food sources to a small-scale manufacturing centre fueled by renewable energy. The text describes the combination of machinery as a "suerte de Edad Media iluminada" indicating that the inhabitants creatively tapped all the resources and technologies available to them. The synthesis of technologies, irrespective of whether or not they are considered advanced, further challenges modernity and its obsession with the latest advances in technology and the desire for linear progress. Concurrently, the description of the use of renewable energy is reminiscent of some of the goals of the Sandinista environmental policy. Faber explains that at that time the new government was faced with "problems of deforestation, habitat destruction, and poverty [which] were intimately connected to the peasantry's lack of access to alternative energy sources and appropriate technologies, as well as land, credit, and related social services" (64). After the victory of the Revolution, the Nicaraguan Energy Institute (Instituto Nicaragüense de Energía, or INE) worked with IRENA (Instituto Nicaragüense de Recursos Naturales y del Ambiente) to "promote alternative renewable energy technologies and other "appropriate" productive forces which would foster more democratic and equitable forms of sustainable rural development. Small innovative programs in biomass, solar, wind, and micro-hydroelectricity were soon launched" (Faber 64).[50] It is clear that the literary depiction of Waslala resonates in the Sandinista policies crafted in the 1980s with their focus on cleaning up the contaminated environment and offering

---

[50]In 1979, the Sandinista government created IRENA, Nicaragua's first environmental agency. Faber writes that, with its creation, there was a recognition that "comprehensive environmental programs and policies were absolutely essential in addressing the country's social and economic crisis, just as comprehensive social and economic reform of the existing model of dependent capitalist development was essential for addressing the country's ecological crisis" (51-52).

farmers alternatives to how they managed their land, using a combination of new and traditional methods to break their complete dependency on foreign capital and technologies.

Melisandra however discovers that the project of Waslala failed due to its inability to expand. For unclear reasons, women were unable to bear children and some members, after leaving the community for short periods of time, discovered they could not find the wrinkle in time that allowed them to enter the community in the first place. Through these trials, the novel underlines that it does not blindly embrace utopian visions, cognizant of their shortcomings. In his survey of ecotopias, de Geus outlines the problems with ideal microcosms. First, they are constructed on the premise of complete isolation from the world, a factor not compatible with today's hyperconnected global communications systems and complex trade networks (86). Secondly, these communities are often static in their conceptualization, perfect blueprints for perfect societies but not functional in a dynamic world in constant flux (85-86). These two points form the Achilles heels of Waslala, something the founders quickly recognized. Together, they make a concerted effort to reinvent their community so that it can serve a different purpose in Faguas where "la razón de ser de Waslala era ser Waslala, la utopía, el lugar que no era, que no podía ser el tiempo y el espacio habitual, sino otra cosa, el laboratorio quizás, la luz tal vez, el ideal constantemente en movimiento, poblado, abandonado y vuelto a repoblar; creído, descreído y vuelto a creer" (321). Abandoning the idea of creating the perfect isolated community, members focus instead on nourishing the utopian imaginary, hoping to provide ordinary Faguans with inspired ways to overcome the many obstacles they face in everyday life. A direct result is Engracia's recycling depot, whose organization provides a refuge in the middle of a chaotic and corrupt society. In this way, Waslala serves as a "navigational compass" (de Geus 90) for Faguas. In my view, Belli created the community of Waslala, not only to embody the legacy of the

Sandinista Revolution, but also to serve as a cautionary tale, warning of the impossibility of complete independence within an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, however, this vision of Waslala is meant to inspire and to foster a different one where larger geopolitical forces are recognized while also advocating for nations to maintain a certain level of sovereignty enabling them to find local solutions to local social and ecological needs. Thus, while Solentiname filled the role of representing what Nicaragua could become in the future, Waslala, in turn, embodies the legacy of the utopian imaginaries contained within the Sandinista project.

Conclusion

The Sandinista Revolution brought hope and profound change to one of the poorest nations in the Western hemisphere. After decades of dictatorship, the Sandinistas promised the ordinary Nicaraguan a more equal and prosperous future for everybody, including the environment. Cognizant of the fact that a polluted environment as well as lack of land available to farmers hindered collective prosperity, Sandinista policies demonstrate an effort to create a holistic approach promoting social as well as ecological well-being. Cardenal and Belli, both deeply involved in this project, used their writing to further expand on their personal experiences, revolutionary ideas and ultimately to engage with the utopian impulse that drove the Sandinista Revolution. As shown in this chapter, both authors wrote memoirs, poetry and novels dedicated to the Sandinista movement and legacy. From these many writings emerges a vision promoting a more inclusive approach to life, taking into account the interconnectedness between a healthy society and environment. In *Cántico cósmico,* spiritual ecology and the development of interrelated discourses and themes present a holistic view of the universe, promoting harmony, community and, most importantly, God's love for the cosmos. Published after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1989, *Waslala,* on the other hand, searches for the possibilities of a utopia

within a dystopia. The novel portrays and rejects the potential outcomes of unfettered capitalism for the Global South's people and ecosystems. In this context, the community of Waslala plays an important role and gains potency due to the fact that it is based on Cardenal's Solentiname. This historical experiment was highly successful, serving as an example that an alternate type of society could be a reality. Waslala, based in this tradition, thereby contributes to the Sandinista legacy. Although Belli is not afraid to examine why utopias fail, she also explores the continuing need for the utopian imaginary. The vibrant revolutionary discourse of the Sandinista Revolution has faded, silenced by the new dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega, who coopted the Revolution's image for his own use. His regime strives to silence the voices of both Cardenal, who died in 2020, and Belli, who continues to live in exile. However, the vision captured in their works lives on as a testament to the Revolution and as a source of inspiration for those who want to envision an alternate and better world for both the human and more-than-human.

Conclusion

Corn fields, sugarcane, coffee, banana plantations, from an outsider's perspective it might seem like these plants grow as they have always done with farmers doing the same work of cultivating food crops as they have for centuries. However, as shown throughout this dissertation, the seeming simplicity of a corn field is deceiving, hiding the many tensions that led to its sowing and growing. The monocultures that dominate rural landscapes today are only a very recent phenomenon, becoming more prominent over the course of the 20th century until today. This transformation reflects a changing relationship between the public at large and the land, as societies have become increasingly urbanized, leaving the work of cultivating food to a minority. In the context of Latin America, independence from Spain followed by the desire of the elite to modernize their nations accelerated the shift from a culture of subsistence farming and mineral resource extraction in the colonial era to a largely export based economy which included an increasing variety of cash crops from the twentieth century onward.

Although the revolutions that sprang up throughout the region emphasized the need for agrarian reform and a change in land management, the results were haphazard at best. In the case of Mexico, post-revolutionary governments – largely in the same modernization quest as their predecessors – chose to emulate western ideologies and policies, favouring large businesses over the interest of the *campesino*, thus exacerbating existing power inequalities. On the other hand, several revolutionary governments had to contend with foreign interference. In particular, Guatemala and Nicaragua suffered at the hands of U.S. foreign policy, which thwarted the positive changes their respective revolutionary governments tried to implement.

Meanwhile, the global geopolitical landscape also experienced profound change with the Second World War followed closely by the Cold War. Both events had major impacts on Central

America and Mexico in terms of economic and industrial development as well as regional sovereignty. While the Second World War brought relative calm to the region, the Cold War saw an increase in U.S. interference across Latin America. A few decades later, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, policies changed again. The victory of capitalism paved the way for globalization, free markets and trade deals such as NAFTA. The rate of change accelerated, accompanied by the increasing impact of human activity on the planet. Every text in this dissertation depicts landscapes dramatically altered by humanity; from the barren plains in *El llano en llamas*, the burning forests in *Hombres de maíz,* the polluted waters in *Cántico cósmico,* the dirty irrigation canals in *Temporada de huracanes,* the plastic flying around in *El país de Toó* to the town of Las Luces and Engracia's recycling depot in *Waslala.* To best analyze these effects and show that political decisions around land management have environmental as well as social repercussions, I engaged with the concepts of slow violence, sacrifice zones and the Anthropocene. Nixon's concept of slow violence signals gradual processes of increased environmental degradation, often invisible to the naked eye until an image or narrative draws attention to it, as evidenced by Rulfo's stories such as "Nos han dado la tierra," "La cuesta de las comadres," "Luvina" and "Es que somos muy pobres." In these stories, slow violence expresses itself through decades of poor management and intensive agriculture, resulting in soil erosion and environmental degradation. Later, in *Temporada de huracanes,* the thirsty sugar cane fields are also testament to these continued processes.

Late capitalism seems to accelerate processes of slow violence, and the novel *Waslala* depicts more acute forms of environmental degradation. To better describe the increasingly urgent nature of the climate crisis, I created the concept of sacrifice zones. While mainly used in the analysis of the third chapter, sacrifice zones are visible in other areas of my corpus such as the squalid slums

on the edge of the luxury golf course in *El país de Toó* or the town of La Matosa in *Temporada de huracanes.* Sacrifice zones coincide with and could be considered part of the greater phenomenon known as the Anthropocene discussed in my second and third chapter. In this context, my comparative reading brings to the fore a shift between the canonical and contemporary texts not only in a sense of increased urgency but also in how the contemporary texts portray a pervasive level of pollution absent in the earlier works. *Hombres de maíz*, for example, describes destructive processes in the form of slash and burn techniques. However, there are also many scenes depicting extensive forests and isolated areas where human and more-than-human beings coexist in relative harmony. On the other hand, waste and plastic debris permeate the literary landscapes in the contemporary works, creating a perpetual shadow throughout. This shift announces the arrival of the Anthropocene and the realities of the late capitalist period, when overconsumption is spilling over from urban into rural areas, and from the Global North to the Global South, in the form of undegradable garbage and the accompanying toxins released into the environment.

The destructive processes enumerated above are partly a result from tensions between official, vernacular and residual landscapes. The interplay and power dynamics between these landscapes illustrate how revolutionary governments, despite initial good intentions, fall short in bringing about concrete change for the marginalized rural populations and environments. In my investigation of Rulfo's short stories and Melchor's novel, I have shown how vernacular and residual landscapes clash with the official landscape. The landscape developed by politicians and bureaucrats corresponds to an abstract notion of the territory under their control, yet their reductive vision imposes itself on other landscapes, oftentimes ignoring the physical realities and lived experience of a particular region. This is how a bureaucrat gives a group of peasants a large

plot of useless land in “Nos han dado la tierra.” Additionally, in other stories such as “La cuesta de las comadres,” “Luvina” and “Es que somos muy pobres,” characters struggle against antagonistic forces presented by desolate landscapes and unsympathetic government officials. Together, these stories construct a devastated natural world and impoverished peasantry whose fate has not been improved by the revolution. Instead, they seem to be forgotten in the fervour of industrialization and urbanization.

Whereas *El llano en llamas* contained remnants of a vernacular landscape, Melchor’s work signals a shift to neoliberal policies with its depiction of residual landscapes, areas profoundly impacted by years of intensive agricultural and industrial projects. These places are characterized by depleted soils, lack of employment opportunities for the local workforce and a sense of abandonment as business and government leave the region to its own fate. The official landscape is taken over by business and invaded by organized crime in the form of Narco gangs. A dysfunctional union, plagued by clientelism, represents the sorry remains of the revolution’s promise to the rural poor. In this dismal portrait, Mexico has slid from a failing to a failed state, where a cohesive vision of a healthy society and environment remain a distant dream. These concepts, mainly explored in my first chapter, resonate throughout the selected corpus with examples of the vernacular landscapes found in the village of Pisigüilito in *Hombres de maíz* and the description of the county of Toó in Rey Rosa’s novel. Official landscapes are found in Cardenal’s description of Cold War tensions and the Somoza’s mismanagement of Nicaragua. Furthermore, Belli’s Faguas could be considered a residual landscape in its function as a garbage dump for the goods coming from the Global North.

Although revolutions failed or broke down at various stages, with the examples of fragmented communities and degraded environments at the forefront in my first chapter, most of

my corpus shows how many communities continued resisting policies they felt were detrimental to their communities. In *Hombres de maíz* and *El país de Toó*, the local responses to inadequate land reforms and management are rooted in ancient traditions and cultures. Both novels, drawing on the Mayan cosmovision, present different conceptualizations of how the human and more-than-human world should interact and coexist and explore comprehensive approaches to the ways in which a collective can create a more resilient society. To better describe this holistic response, I engaged with Morton's concept of the mesh, ecological thought and my proposed idea of holistic reconciliation and explored how the narrative worlds broke free from dichotomies and hierarchies. In my reading, *Hombres de maíz,* in particular, presents a world where nature is an active agent, influencing character and plot development. Thus, Goyo Yic transforms into his nahual and the stone on the María Tecún ridge shows Nicho Aquino the entrance into the underworld to discover the ultimate truth about his people. Examples of these concepts are also found in other parts of my corpus such as Cardenal's sweeping verse, which dismantles hierarchies and brings all levels of existence into a dynamic conversation.

In the decades that have passed between the publication of *Hombres de maíz* and *El país de Toó,* a dramatic change occurred in indigenous communities and their interactions with the world at large. The contemporary texts in this dissertation serve as a testament to this transformation. In *El llano en llamas* indigenous cosmovisions are a shadowy presence, sporadically alluded to by the text. In *Cántico cósmico,* and to a lesser extent *Waslala,* the focus is on indigenous mythology and communities are represented as isolated from the centres of power. However, by harnessing Pratt's concepts of indigeneity and worldmaking, I show how my contemporary corpus depicts indigenous communities actively engaging with the world. Indigenous leaders travel outside their communities to share their cosmovision and create a

larger network that challenges dominant economic and cultural ideologies. Rey Rosa's novel portrays this new reality in its description of Doña Matilde's niece and her involvement in environmental justice projects, and Don Atanasio Akiral's leadership in organizing local responses to the advances of a Canadian mining company while also sharing his traditional knowledge. Importantly, by sharing this knowledge with the *ladino* characters, holistic reconciliation takes place with the healing of a social rupture between *ladino* and indigenous people further cemented in the *ladino* characters learning how to care for the human and more-than-human beings in the county.

Finally, in analyzing ecological utopias and ecological spirituality, my dissertation explored how these ideas and worldviews contribute to a continued resistance against geopolitical hegemonies while also promoting a kinder way of inhabiting the earth. These concepts affirm the importance and effectiveness of local responses to global issues, with Cardenal's verse connecting the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution to the greater cosmic forces of the universe and Melisandra discovering the power of Utopia as an idea that fuels resistance in the face of global inequality and environmental degradation. These visions continually remind the reader of the interconnection between environmental and social well-being.

Ultimately, the corpus studied in this dissertation presents a world where both human and more-than-human actors need to be considered in order to bring about a healthier society and environment. Although my study is based in the cultural, political, and historical context of Latin America, many issues presented by the selected works are found across literatures and societies of the globe. Returning to Ghosh's comments on a crisis of imagination in terms of how humanity should address climate change, I believe my selected corpus offers a glimpse of what

could be possible. These works, in pushing boundaries thematically and stylistically, invite readers to think big. Furthermore, I propose that the texts, when read together, propose a new grand narrative: a narrative of care or, in the case of *El llano en llamas* and *Temporada de huracanes*, a narrative that warns readers about the absence of care. While in the last few decades literary and cultural studies have moved away from studying or promoting grand narratives, favouring stories focused on individual truths, I would like to suggest that the all-encompassing nature of the climate crisis requires a more cohesive response promoted by a grand narrative.

The narrative of care, as promoted by my studied texts, advocates for a more harmonious interrelationship between the human and more-than-human world, recognizing the interconnected nature of existence. It also encourages a world where economic and political decisions take into consideration both social and ecological well-being. This notion of the narrative of care opens up an area of possible research in the future. At different historical junctures, my study has demonstrated that literature created a critical space reflecting on the ways in which communities could inhabit their natural surroundings in a more ethical, just, and harmonious way. Yet in each instance, and in spite of the role of the authors as public intellectuals or even in government, the literary imagination has not prevailed. The message of care has been ignored or lost. Nonetheless, as an ecocritical researcher, the task is to continue to discern the message of care in Latin American literature with the objective not only of contributing to cultural and literary studies, but also of relaying the message to the public at large and informing researchers and policy makers alike, thus striving to bridge the gap between the literary imagination and public policy.

Works Cited

Aguinaga, Blanco. "Realidad y estilo de Juan Rulfo" *La ficción de la memoria: Juan Rulfo antela crítica*. 1. ed., Coordinación de Difusión Cultural, Dirección de Literatura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2003, pp. 19-43.

Alarcón, Óscar. "Entrevista a Fernanda Melchor." *Neotraba.* August 20, 2017. https://neotraba.com/entrevista-a-fernanda-melchor/ Accessed Nov. 12, 2024.

Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Hombres de Maíz*. 1949. Alianza Editorial, 2014.

---. and Gerald Martin. *Men of Maize*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.

Arias, Arturo. *Ensayos Asturianos.* Editorial Cultura, 2017.

---. *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Abbott, Jeff. "Reviving Indigenous Authorities in Guatemala", *Briarpatch Magazine*, April 27,2020. briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/reviving-indigenous-authorities-in-guatemala

Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction.* University Press ofArizona, 2011.

Bartra, Roger. *La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano*. Grijalbo, 1987.

Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache.*University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Polity, 2004.

Beauchesne, Kim, and Alessandra Santos. *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*. PalgraveMacmillan, 2011, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339613.

Bell, Lucy. "Viscous Porosity: Interactions Between Human and Environment in Juan Rulfo's *Elllano en llamas*." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 21, no. 3,2015, pp. 389 404, doi:10.1080/13260219.2015.1153030.

Belli, Gioconda. *Waslala: Memorial del futuro.* 1996. Emecé editores, 1996.

--- *El país bajo mi piel.* Vintage Books, 2003.

--- "Gioconda Belli recibe el XXXII Premio Reina Sofía de Poesía Iberoamericana" *YouTube,* uploaded by Patrimonio Nacional, 30 Nov, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsR0vufWI40&ab_channel=PatrimonioNacional

---. *La mujer habitada*, Emecé Editores España,1997.

Bello, Andrés. "Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida." *Biblioteca virtual universal*, 2003.

Binns, Niall. "Landscapes of Hope and Destruction: Ecological Poetry in Spanish America."*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, pp. 105–19.

Bogert, Jeanne M., et al. "Reviewing the Relationship between Neoliberal Societies and Nature:Implications of the Industrialized Dominant Social Paradigm for a SustainableFuture." *Ecology and Society*, vol. 27, no. 2, art7, 2022, https://doi.org/10.5751/ES13134-270207. Accessed May 2024.

Boldy, Steve. *A Companion to Juan Rulfo.* Tamesis Books, 2016.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

---. "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 87–115, doi:10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0087.

---. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Pub., 2005.

---. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.

Buiza, Nanci (2020). "La Búsqueda Del Mythos En La Posguerra Centroamericana: Una Aproximación A La Narrativa De Rodrigo Rey Rosa". *Iowa Literaria.* Volume 2020, Issue 2. https://iowaliteraria.lib.uiowa.edu/article/la-busqueda-del-mythos-en-la-posguerra-centroamericana-una-aproximacion-a-la-narrativa-de-rodrigo-rey-rosa/ Accessed Jan 24 2024.

Bussing Lopez, Ilse Marie. "Maíz, Coyotes and Fireflies: Transformation and Nagualism in *Hombres de maíz*". *Doubles and Hybrids in Latin American Gothic*. Edited by Antonio Alcalá González and Ilse Marie Bussing López, Routledge, 2019, pp. 101-114.

Castañeda, Jorge C. *Utopia Unarmed:The Latin American Left after the Cold War.* Knopf, 1993.

Cardenal, Ernesto. *Cántico cósmico.* 1989. Editorial Trotta, 2012.

---. *Cosmic Canticle.* Translated by John Lyons, Curbstone Press, 1991.

---. *El Evangelio en Solentiname.* Ediciones Síguema, 1975.

---. *Las ínsulas extrañas.* Editorial Trotta, 2003.

Camayd- Freixas, Erik. "Miguel Angel Asturias, 'Hombres de Maíz': Como Lectura Surrealista de La Escritura Mayense." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, vol. 24, no. 47, 1998, p. 207–225.

Campbell, Craig. "Residual Landscapes and the Everyday: An Interview with EdwardBurtynsky." *Space and Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2008, pp. 39–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331207310703.

Carrasco, Ivan. "Cantico cósmico de Cardenal: un texto interdisciplinario/Cosmic song of Cardenal: an interdisciplinary text" *Estudios Filológicos*, no. 39, 2004, pp. 129-140.scielo.conicyt.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S007117132004003900007&ln=e&nrm=iso&tlng=en Accessed 15 Apr.2020.

Carrington, Damian. “Geologists Reject Declaration of Anthropocene Epoch.” *The Guardian,* 22 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/mar/22/geologists-reject-declaration-of-anthropocene-epoch Accessed May 21 2025.

Casas, Bartolomé de las. *Brevísima relación de la destruccion de las Indias [por] Bartolomé de las Casas.* Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1966.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222, https://doi.org/10.1086/596640.

---.and Bruno. Latour. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2021, https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226733050.

Chasteen, John Charles. *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America.* W.W.Norton & Company, 2016.

Chomsky, Aviva. *Central America’s Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence and the Roots of Migration.* Beacon Press, 2021.

Cotter, Joseph. *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880-2002*. Praeger, 2003.

Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene.” *Global Change Newslette*r, 41: May 2000, pp. 17-18. https://www.mpic.de/3865097/the-anthropocene. Accessed on Feb. 18, 2024

Cueva, Luis G. *Forsaken Harvests: Haciendas and Agrarian Reform in Jalisco, Mexico: 1915-1940.* Xlibris, 2013.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and George B. Handley. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of theEnvironment*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Devries, Scott M. *A History of Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature,* Bucknell University Press, 2013.

---.“Garbage Out: Space, Place, and Neo-Imperial Anti-Development in Gioconda Belli’s *Waslala*.” *Ecozon@*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2010, pp.38-50. https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2010.1.2.361.

Di Bernardo, Francesco. “Capitalismo global y petroficción en *Temporada de huracanes* de Fernanda Melchor.” *Valenciana: revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Guanajuato*, vol. 15, no. 29, Universidad de Guanajuato, 2022, pp. 81-102, https://doi.org/10.15174/rv.v14i29.548.

Díaz, Nancy G. “Metamorphosis as Integration in Miguel Angel Asturias' “Hombres de maíz””. *Revista Canadiense De Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1988, pp. 235-252. *ProQuest*, https://searchproquestcom.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/docview/748503090?accountid=14701

Díaz Ruíz, Ignacio. “El maíz, sustento de la identidad maya (una aproximación de maíz de Asturias)”, *Cuadernos Americanos,* vol. 5, no. 83,2000, pp. 201-209, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106015690412&view=1up&seq=13.

Dünne, Jörg and Jenny Haase (eds.). *Estéticas de la tierra en América Latina: Literatura, cine, arte*, Iberoamericano-Vervuert, 2024.

Estrada, Vivian M. Jiménez. "The Tree of Life as a Research Methodology." *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 34, no. 2005, 2005, pp. 44–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1326011100003951.

Ecohubmap. "The problem of plastic pollution in the Rio Motagua, Guatemala," https://www.ecohubmap.com/hot-spot/the-problem-of-plastic-pollution-in-the-rio-motaguaguatemala/c096ebmldrtqpq3. Accessed on Dec. 5, 2023.

Faber, Daniel. "La Liberación Del Medio Ambiente: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Ecology in Nicaragua, 1979-1999." *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, vol. 10(1), no. 37, 1999, pp. 45-80.

Finch, Jason. *Deep Locational Criticism*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1075/fillm.3.

French, Jennifer. *Nature, Neo-Colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers*. Dartmouth College Press, 2005.

Fromm, Harold and Cheryll Glotfelty. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Fuentes, Carlos. "El tiempo del mito," Rulfo, Juan., and Claude. Fell. *Toda la obra*. 1. ed., ALLCA XXe, 1992, pp. 825-833.

Galvao-Ferreira, Patricia and Mario Mancilla. "Indigenous Environmental Rights and Sustainable Development: Lessons from Totonicapán in Guatemala". *The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development*, 2021, pp.164-182, https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/lawpub/139.

García Añovero, Jesús M. *La reforma agraria de Arbenz en Guatemala*. Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, 1987.

García Rodríguez, María José. "La figura de la mujer en *Hombres de maíz* de Miguel Ángel Asturias." *Cartaphilus (Murcia)*, vol. 13, 2015, pp. 51-69.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism.* Routledge, 2012.

Geus, Marius de. *Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society*. International Books, 1999.

--- *The End of Overconsumption: Towards a Lifestyle of Moderation and Self-Restraint.* International Books, 2003.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Giddens, Anthony. *Consequences of Modernity.* Stanford University Press, 1999.

Godínez Rivas, Gloria Luz and Luis Román Nieto. "De torcidos y embrujos: *Temporada de huracanes* de Fernanda Melchor / Queers and bewitched: *Temporada de huracanes* of Fernanda Melchor." *Anclajes: Revista del Instituto de Análisis Semiótico del Discurso*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2019, pp. 59–70, https://doi.org/10.19137/anclajes-2019-2335.

González, Mauricio Ostria. "Globalización, Ecología y Literatura. Aproximación Ecocrítica a Textos Literarios Latinoamericanos." *Kipus*, no. 27, 2010, pp. 97-109.

https://login.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly journals/globalización-ecología-y-literatura-aproximación/docview/1010054598/se 2?accountid=14701 Date accessed May 30, 2025.

Handy, Jim. *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala.* Between the lines, 1984.

---. *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944-1954*. University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Hart, Thomas. *The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Harss, Luis and Barbara Dohmann. "Miguel Ángel Asturias, or the Land where the Flowers Bloom."*Men of Maize.* Edited by Geral Martin, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993. pp. 413-433.

Haught, John F. *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*. Orbis Books, 2021.

Heffes, Gisela. *Políticas de la destrucción/Poéticas de la preservación: Apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina.* Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2013.

--- "Para una ecocrítica latinoamericana: Entre la postulación de un ecocentrismo crítico y la crítica a un antropocentrismo hegemónico. Introducción." Ed. *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana,* no.79, 2014. Date accessed May 30, 2025. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/ejemplar/432331

Henighan, Stephen. *Assuming the Light*. Routledge, 2017, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351198790.

---. "Human and Environmental Justice in the work of Rodrigo Rey Rosa."*Human and Environmental Justice in Guatemala*, edited by Stephen Henighan and Candace Johnson, University of Toronto Press, 2018, pp. 173-213.

---. *Sandino's Nation: Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramirez Writing Nicaragua,1940-2012,* Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

Henne, Nathan C. *Reading Popol Wuj: A Decolonial Guide*. University of Arizona Press, 2020.

---. "Untranslation: The 'Popol Wuj' and Comparative Methodology." *CR,* vol. 12, no. 2, Michigan State University Press, 2012, pp. 107–49, doi:10.1353/ncr.2012.0042.

Huber, Katherine M. *Irish Ecomedia: Empire and Environmental Justice in the Modernization of Postcolonial Ireland.* Under-the-Sign-of-Nature series. University of Virginia Press, forthcoming 2025.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious:Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981.

Jarquín, Mateo. *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2024.

Johnson, Sarah. "Castoffs to catwalk: fashion show shines light on vast Chile clothes dump visible from space," *The Guardian*, 8 May 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/global development/article/2024/may/08/castoffs-to catwalk-fashion-show-shines-light-on-vast chile-clothes-dump-visible-from

space#:~:text=A%20staggering%2060%2C000%20tonnes%20of,dumped%20in%20th%20Atacama%20desert. Accessed Oct. 20, 2024.

Jurado Valencia, Fabio. "Oralidad y orfandad en la escritura de Juan Rulfo." *Enunciación*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2011, pp. 76–86, https://doi.org/10.14483/22486798.3906.

Kane, Adrian Taylor. *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings*. McFarland & Company Inc, 2010.

Kaufman, Ruth. "Ernesto Cardenal's Cosmic Canticle: A Vision for the future." *Confluencia*, vol. 11, no. 2,1996, pp. 3-18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27922354 Accessed Mar.10,2020.

Kressner, Ilka, et al. *Ecofictions, Ecorealities and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World*. Routledge, 2020.

Larrain, Jorge. *Identity and Modernity in Latin America*. Polity Press, 2000.

Létocart, Mélanie. Entrevista con Gioconda Belli. "Identidades, feminismos y maternidad." *Textes & contextes*, no. 15-2, 2020, https://doi.org/10.58335/textesetcontextes.2842.

López-Alonso, Moramay. *Measuring up a History of Living Standards in Mexico, 1850-1950*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

Losada, José Manuel. "Mito y antropogonía en la literatura hispanoamericana. Hombres de maíz, de Miguel Ángel Asturias." *Rassegna iberistica*, no. 113, 2020, pp. 41–55.

Madsen, Nancy Gates. "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Ecology and Human Rights in Gioconda Belli's Waslala." *Ecozon@*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2020, pp. 134–51, https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3242.

Manes, Christopher. "Silence and Nature." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty, University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp.15-29.

Margulis, Lynn, et al. *Dazzle Gradually: Reflections on the Nature of Nature*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007.

Melchor, Fernanda. *Temporada de huracanes.* Penguin Random House, 2017.

Melville, Elinor G. K. *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Menchú, Rigoberta, and Burgos-Debray, Élisabeth. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. Siglo Veintiuno Editores,1989.

Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

Miller, Nicola. *Reinventing Modernity in Latin America: Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900-1930.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Molesky-Poz, Jean. *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

Monsiváis, Carlos. "Sí, tampoco los muertos retoñan. Desgraciadamente," *La ficción de la memoria: Juan Rulfo ante la crítica*. 1. ed., Coordinación de Difusión Cultural, Dirección de Literatura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2003, pp.187-202.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecological Thought.* Harvard University Press, 2011.

---. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics,* Harvard University Press, 2007.

Muñoz González, Aehécatl. "Del espacio al lugar y justicia ambiental: una propuesta de lectura ecocrítica de 'Nos han dado la tierra' de Juan Rulfo." *Liminar*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–15, https://doi.org/10.29043/liminar.v20i1.890.

Murphy, Patrick. "The Poetic Politics of Ecological Inhabitation in Neruda's *Canto General* and Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle*" *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives,* edited by Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt, University of Virginia Press, 2010, pp.213-228.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Harvard University Press, 2011.

Oloff, Kerstin. "The "Monstrous Head" and the "Mouth of Hell": The Gothic Ecologies of the "Mexican Miracle."" Anderson, Mark, and Zélia Bora. *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature*. Lexington Books, 2016, pp.79-90.

Paredes, Jorge and Benjamin McLean. "Hacia una tipología de la literatura ecologista en el mundo hispano." *Ixquic,*vol. 2, 2000, pp.1-37. Accessed May 30,2025.

Pearl, Max. "Fernanda Melchor Writes Tragic Machismo: In Her Novels, Male Fear and Desire Are Two Sides of the Same Coin." *New York Magazine*, vol. 55, no. 10, 2022, p. 70-71."

"Peasant." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam webster.com/dictionary/peasant. Accessed 16 Mar. 2022.

Popol Vuh: Las antiguas historias del Quiché. Edited and translated by Adrián Recinos, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005.

Pou, Antonio. "Algunas reflexiones sobre Gaia. evolución y cultura," *Arbor*, vol. 172, no. 677, 2002, pp. 127–34, https://doi.org/10.3989/arbor.2002.i677.1072.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Planetary Longings.* Duke University Press, 2022.

Prieto, René. *Miguel Ángel Asturias´s Archeology of Return*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

---. "The Unifying principle of "Men of Maize by Miguel Angel Asturias"". *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1986, pp. 26–38, doi:10.2307/3195070.

Pro, Juan. *Utopias in Latin America: Past and Present.* Sussex Academic Press, 2018.

Quijano, Aníbal. "Modernity, Identity, and Utopia in Latin America." *Boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1993, pp. 140–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/303346.

Quinn, Joanna R. *Reconciliation(s) Transitional Justice in Postconflict Societies*. McGill Queen's University Press, 2009.

Quiroga, Horacio. *Cuentos de la selva,* Alianza editorial, 2018.

Rama, Angel., and David L. Frye. *Writing Across Cultures Narrative: Transculturation in Latin America*. Duke University Press, 2012.

"Reconciliation" Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, 2023, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=reconciliation. Accessed Nov. 14, 2023.

Redacción Clarín, "Ernesto Cardenal y la historia de la foto cuando lo rechazó el papa Juan Pablo II" *Clarín.* 3 March, 2020. https://www.clarin.com/mundo/ernesto-cardenal historia-foto-rechazo-papa-juan-pablo-ii_0_phpJ10Ab.html.Accessed June 16,2025.

Rey Rosa, Rodrigo. *El país de Toó*. Alfaguara, 2018.

---. Interview by Juan Cruz. "Rodrigo Rey Rosa: Mi oficio es que todo parezca verdad" *El periódico de España*, 8 Dec.2022. https://www.epe.es/es/abril/20221208/rodrigo-rey-rosa-oficio-parezca-79451626. Accessed April 3 2023.

---. Interview by Raúl Rodríguez Freire. "Escritura en movimiento: entrevista con Rodrigo Rey Rosa" *Revista iberoamericana*, vol. 77, no. 236–237, 2011, pp. 1073–82, https://doi.org/10.5195/reviberoamer.2011.6870. Accessed April 4 2023.

Rivera, José Eustasio. *La vorágine.* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1978.

Rivera Garza, Cristina. *Autobiografía del algodón.* Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2022.

---. *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué.* Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2016.

Robles Lomelí, Jafte Dilean. "El chisme como representación histórica de la ausencia en Temporada de huracanes de Fernanda Melchor." *Revista de historia de América*, no. 161, 2021, pp. 435–58. https://doi.org/10.35424/rha.161.2021.1044. Accessed May 20 2022.

Rowe, William. *Rulfo, El llano en llamas*. Grant & Cutler Ltd. in association with Tamesis Books, 1987.

Rulfo, Juan. *El llano en llamas.*1953. Cátedra, 2018.

---. *Pedro Paramo.* Cátedra, 2015.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, et al. *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*. The Ohio State University Press, 2016.

Saramago, Victoria. *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America*. Northwestern University Press, 2021.

Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino, and Alberto Palcos. *Facundo.* Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1962.

Schlesinger, Stephen C., et al. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. Rev. and exp. ed., 2nd David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies ed., Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2005.

Serna Arnaiz, Mercedes. "Discursos sobre la naturaleza americana: desde el descubrimiento de America hasta la vision ilustrada." *Anales de literatura hispanoamericana*, vol.39, 2010, pp. 251-264. https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ALHI/article/view/ALHI1010110251A/21393 Accessed April 15, 2025.

Shailer, Daniel. "International Court Rules against Guatemala in a Landmark Indigenous and Environmental Rights Case" *Associated Press,* 16 December 2023.

https://apnews.com/article/guatemala-mine-indigenous-rights-court-nickel-fenix 346b0c882d4ee52954a7bd32c81202a5?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=share. Accessed Jan 9 2024.

Signet, William D. "Grading a Revolution: 100 Years of Mexican Land Reform." *Law and Business Review of the Americas*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2010, pp. 481–530.

Silva Herzog, Jesús. *El agrarismo mexicano y la reforma agraria: exposición y crítica*. 2nd ed., Fondo de cultura económica, 1964.

Skidmore, Thomas E. and Peter H. Smith. *Modern Latin America*., Oxford University Press, 1992.

Slovic, Scott. "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." *Ecozon@*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, p. 4–10. doi:10.37536/ECOZONA.2010.1.1.312.

Sommers, Joseph. "Los muertos no tienen tiempo ni espacio" *Toda la obra*. 1. ed., ALLCA XXe, 1992, pp.517-521.

Sonnenfeld, David A. "Mexico's 'Green Revolution,' 1940-1980: Towards an Environmental History." *Environmental History Review*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1992, pp. 29–52, https://doi.org/10.2307/3984948.

Soper, Kate. *What is Nature?* Wiley- Blackwell, 1995.

Sponsel, Leslie E. *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*. Praeger, 2012.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Human Phenomenon*. Sussex Academic Press, 2003.

Torres, Victoria. "Fernanda Melchor." *Hispamérica*, vol. 49, no. 146, 2020, pp. 87–94, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27079517. Accessed January 9, 2025.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn. "The Ecological Spirituality of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin." *Spiritus*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2007. pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2007.0020.

Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn, editor. *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth: A Collection of Essays*. The Golden Sufi Center, 2016.

Vital Díaz, Alberto. *Noticias sobre Juan Rulfo: la biografía, 1762-2016*. RM Verlag, 2017.

Wainwright, Joel, and Joshua Lund. "Race, Space, and the Problem of Guatemala in Miguel Ángel Asturias's Early Work." *GeoHumanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp.102–18, doi:10.1080/2373566X.2016.1167616.

Ward, Julie A. "Capitalist Naturalism." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jan. 7,2021, np. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/capitalist-naturalism/

Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

White, Steven F. *Arando el aire: La Ecología en la Poesía y la Música de Nicaragua*. 400 Elefantes, 2011.

Williams, Raymond Leslie and Enrique Salas-Durazo. "Ficción urbana, tecnología y naturaleza: una lectura ecocrítica de la novela latinoamericana desde el boom hasta 2666 de Roberto Bolaño." *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana*, vol. 40, no. 79, 2014, pp. 295–313.

Zamora, José M. Rodríguez. “Cántico Cósmico: poesía, política y silencio en Ernesto Cardenal.” *Revista de Filologia y Linguistica de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 31-48. https://web-b-ebscohost com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=e250e735-6798-4ccc 9da9-eea01553a0bd%40pdc-v-sessmgr05 Accessed April 15 2021.