Planet Earth Strikes Back: Landscapes of Toxicity in Latin American Fiction

⊙ Leila Lehnen
Brown University

Abstract: This essay discusses how contemporary Latin American literature (Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia) employs the discourse of toxicity—condensed in the metaphor of bio-engineering and mutation—to process and interrogate what Jason Moore has called the "Capitolecene." Moore proposes to understand the "accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity." This essay considers how the co-production of nature, impelled by greed (a recurring allegory of capitalism) goes terribly wrong by generating toxic biomes. As such, these texts function as ecocritical allegories of the Capitolecene (specifically in its iteration as biocapitalism) and its human and environmental consequences.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Latin American literature, Capitolecene, toxic discourse

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Fires in the Amazon, deforestation in Argentina's Gran Chaco, murders of environmental activists in Colombia, a decade of record drought in Chile, hurricanes in the Caribbean. Latin America's contemporary landscapes are dotted with stories of crises. But natural crisis is not necessarily a novelty in Latin America; nor is it new in its cultural imaginary.

In the introduction to his volume on ecological crisis in Latin American culture, Mark Anderson states that contemporary representations of the environment in the region activate the trope of crisis and depletion. This trope captures Latin America's long history of both human and ecological exploitation, which have, according to Anderson, shaped the region's biospheres since the colonial encounters (ix-xxxii).

Anderson's volume, which he co-edited with Brazilian literary scholar Zélia Moreira Bora, is part of a growing corpus of critical works that deal with the intersection between cultural production and the environment and, more specifically, the negative—often disastrous implication of human-wrought changes on Latin America's many biomes.

Ecocritical scholarship on the adverse consequences of human actions dialogues with a spate of cultural production that considers environmental crisis. From visual arts, to cinema and television series and, finally, literary texts, environmental crisis has cast its shadow over Latin American cultural discourse for a while now.

Take for example the 2019 Colombian eco-thriller "The Green Frontier" ("Frontera verde") which blends Indigenous cosmovision, Nazis who are hiding in the Amazon intent on (what else) world

domination and environmental threat into what can only be described as a very peculiar mix. The 2016 Argentine TV series *Chrome* (*Cromo*) links corporate greed and natural degradation—in this case, water pollution.

Environmental pollution is also evoked in works by visual artists such as Pedro Motta's photographic series *Gully* (*Sumidouro*) about the Rio das Mortes, in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso comments on the region's history of mining and land conflicts. Motta's images in the series are bathed in artificial light, an effect achieved through exposure. The muddy tone of the river's water in the photographs references the area's mining operations and the toxic sludge often generated by this kind of industry. In one of the images (Rio das Mortes #1), a hole "cut" into the river can be read as an escape hatch or as yet another invasive manipulation of nature by mankind.

Felipe de Ávila's series "Tropical Delusions" likewise portrays a noxious environs. "Tropical delusions" contemplates the environmental disaster of Mariana in 2015. A dam containing the iron ore tailings of the German iron mining company Samarco burst and buried the neighboring town of Bento Rodrigues. The sludge poured into the Santarém river and eventually reached the Atlantic coast, leaking into the ocean with foreseeable consequences. In Ávila's photos, saturated colors drench the entire image, suggesting an all-encompassing contamination. While the sky is unnaturally pink, the contrasting greenery of shrubs and bushes also seems exaggerated. This prismatic juxtaposition is completed by the conjunction between ruins and a surrounding hyperbolic nature that is progressively overtaking human made environs. As a whole, the contrasts in the photographs intimate environmental toxicity that suffuses everything and imparts a sense of dread, of asphyxiation.

Toxic landscapes are also a trope in recent literary expression. In her poem "Death Valley" ("Vale da Morte"), Brazilian writer Patrícia Aniceto captures the link between environmental disaster, personal catastrophe and historical tragedy that, like Mariana's toxic mud, spills onto the national scene: "in the valley of death / the green pastures are mud / of our mourning there is still memory /… / another dam breaks /../ our rivers absorb the density of our drama / while our history has been covered up / the valley and the valley become toxic" ("no vale da morte / os verdes pastos são lama / do luto ainda resta memória /… / rompe outra barragem /../ nossos rios absorvem a densidade do nosso drama / enquanto nossa história tem sido encoberta / a vale e o vale amargam"; 17).[1] Although Aniceto's poem makes reference to the disaster of Brumadinho ("o vale e a vale amargam"), these verses—which resort to an imaginary both concrete ("os verdes pastos são lama") and immaterial ("do luto ainda resta memória"). The juxtaposition between imagination and referential reality point to a broader scenario where environmental tragedy becomes a recurring motto ("nosssos rios absorvem a densidade do nosso drama / ah e quantas lágrimas disfarçamos / enlameadas"). It is a repetitive cycle of calamities ("another dam breaks / another striking tragedy"). In Aniceto's verses, the mud is a metaphor for both the diachronic accumulation of environmental violence, what environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence," and for the obscuration of this violence throughout Brazil's and, one might argue, the region's history.

We also find this dualism between overt environmental violence and parallel concealment in the mural by the visual artist Mundano. He used 270 tons of toxic mud from Brumadinho to reinterpret Tarsila do Amaral's 1933 painting, "Operários." Mundano explains that his panel evokes Brumadinho's tragedy, at the same time that it confronts us with our own forgetfulness. In Mundano's mural, the nation is construed as a series of catastrophes that disproportionally affect Brazil's impoverished and racialized populations. Nonetheless, in both Aniceto's poem and in Mundano's mural, art can recover the memories and lives devasted by slow violence. The poet, is, in Aniceto's words, also a prophet ("o poeta profético").

Nixon coined the concept of slow violence to describe a type of long-lasting violence that spans

different geographies and temporalities. Temporal and spatial dispersion eclipses the impact of this violence, hiding its victims. In light of this, Nixon suggests that slow violence requires new narrative strategies that can address the dilemma of representing what he calls the "relative invisibility" of slow violence. Recourse to allegory, metaphor, metonymy and other aesthetic devices allow cultural production (visual arts, literary expression) to both chart the symptoms of slow violence while also calling attention to its relative imperceptibility.

For example, in his two series: Glifosato and Glifosato 2, Colombian artist Pedro Ruiz uses the metaphor of the strand to connect multiple modes of violence—including environmental violence that plays out both long and short term. While "Glifosato" features painting saturated in brilliant colors, mainly reds, blues, and greens, Glifosato 2 displays landscapes in blacks, whites, and greys. One element binds the images within and between both series, a thin white thread (or sometimes a set of lines) crosses the canvases. As the title of the two series suggests, the white line represents the herbicide glyphosate, which the Colombian government, with the support of the U.S., used in its aerial drug crop eradication program. The transition from the polychromatic vibrancy of the first set of photographs to the deadened palette of second series connotes damage, the eradication of not only of the targeted corps (i.e., the poppies) but also of other forms of life through immediate and long-term poisoning. For Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutís, and Elizabeth Pettinaroli, Ruiz's pictures materialize Nixon's concept of slow violence. Read in this manner, the white lines intimate multiple, interconnected forms of said violence: from the brutality of drug trafficking, emblematized in the explosive blood-red of the poppy flowers, to the imbrication of capitalism and environmental depredation, what Gisela Heffes calls "savage biocapitalism" (55-73), and, finally, the effects on humans who inhabit wasted landscapes or whose very existence is endangered by the different attempt to harness and control nature for profit.

Argentine photographer Pablo Piovano also centralizes glyphosate to capture the slow violence of the late-capitalist bioeconomy in Argentina. His series *The Human Cost of Pesticides* (*El costo humano de los agrotóxicos*) documents the fallouts of the introduction of transgenic crops (in this case, soy) and the indiscriminate use of agrochemicals on the Argentine countryside and its—mostly impoverished—residents. *El costo humano* highlights how slow violence exacerbates the marginality of certain population groups. Piovano's photographs foreground how the manipulation of nature is par for the course of capitalist economies, especially extractive capitalism. A short description accompanies each photograph. The descriptions humanize the fallout of bio-accumulation by making the victims of such processes visible, giving depth and texture to the images that, otherwise, might seem to engage in an abject of voyeurism of sorts.

To paraphrase Jason Moore: Capitalism is an ecological regime (Moore use the term "world-ecology," which I will reference in the course of this essay) to describe capitalist modes of production that involve exploitation of natural resources. For Moore, humans shape nature as much as nature shapes humanity. Capitalism as mode of production and as a social organization must be understood from this vantage point. Moore explains that:

> Capitalism's governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development, or some other higher good. The reality—the historical process—is radically different.… Nature with a capital "N"—external, controllable, reducible—the web of life is busy shuffling about the biological and geological conditions of capitalism's process. (2-3)

In its current iteration, capitalism as an ecological regime is pushing against the limits of environmental sustainability, against the limits of nature with a capital "N" if you will, as it seeks continuous growth. Piovani's images highlight that in so doing, this regime also pushes against the limits of human biology. It produces toxic landscapes, toxic bodies and, by extension, spills into toxic discourse.

Lawrence Buell uses the designation of "toxic discourse" to describe a certain mode of narrating a defiled environment. Tracing this narrative to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Buell explains that in toxic discourse the "disenchantment from the illusion of the green oasis is accompanied or precipitated by totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration" (648). Toxic discourse deploys the trope of a poisonous nature to uncover the connection between environmental health—or disease—with human well-being (or malady). As such, toxic discourse is closely tied to questions of environmental justice.

One could come up with an extensive list of fictional (or semi-fictional) works, as well as poems (Aniceto's verses being but one example) and *crónicas* that centralize toxic discourse in Latin America. But I will limit my examination to three fictional texts that marshal toxic discourse: *Dried Bodies* (*Corpos secos*), a novel written by a group of young Brazilian writers; Samantha Schweblin's well-known *Fever Dream* (*Distancia de rescate*) and Cristián Romero's *After the Wrath* (*Después de la ira*). What, might one ask, connects these books given that they hail from three different contexts. While Schweblin's novel is set in Argentina, Romero's narrative takes place in Colombia and *Dried Bodies* occurs in Brazil.

All three books enlist the trope of toxicity to speculate on the possibility of environmental disaster. Additionally, all three texts do not fall back upon a pristine landscape as a counterpoint to the discourse of toxicity, therefore departing somewhat from Buell's definition of this type of textual output. Rather, the environs that the novels describe are man-built—agricultural zones that have been made monstrous through human intervention and whose monstrosity leaks into the human. Commenting on Schweblin's novel, Mutís remarks that "the "rural landscape (depicted in Schweblin's book) inverts the traditional association of the countryside retreat as a space of leisure and recreation to one of oppression and mortality" (42). In other words, nature strikes back.

Here, I want to explore how contemporary Latin American literature—and I do include Brazilian texts in this category—employs the discourse of toxicity—condensed in the metaphor of bio-engineering and mutation—to process and interrogate what Jason Moore has called the "Capitolecene." Moore proposes to understand the "accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity" (3). In the novels that I consider, the co-production of nature, impelled by greed (a recurring allegory of capitalism) goes terribly wrong generating toxic biomes. But at the same we should also interrogate what the imagination of these toxic biomes signifies beyond a critique of late biocapitalism? Are these texts suggesting that we reconceptualize our perception of nature so as to include toxic landscapes. If so, what are the implications of this reconceptualization?

While the world was experiencing the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 and Brazil had more than four thousand confirmed cases of the disease (a number that only increased exponentially subsequently), the publishing giant Alfaguara launched the novel *Dried Bodies*. Written by four authors from Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul: Natália Borges Polesso, Luisa Geisler, Samir Machado de Machado, and Marcelo Ferroni (who was born in São Paulo but lives in Rio de Janeiro), the text was conceived before the outbreak of the pandemic. Nonetheless, the imaginary of contamination and ensuing social chaos seems prophetic. *Dried Bodies* imagines a not-so-distant future in which cannibalistic zombies have taken over the country.

Dried Bodies, which received the prestigious 2021 Jabuti award for entertainment fiction, expands

the imagery of the undead in contemporary Brazilian literature by introducing environmental issues into zombie narratology. Some other texts that have undead characters are *Morgan the Only One* (*Morgan o único*) by Douglas Eralldo, *City of God Z* (*Cidade de Deus Z*), by Júlio Pecly, and *Sand Between the Teeth* (*Areia nos dentes*) by Antonio Xerxenesky. Xerxenesky in fact makes a cameo appearance as a character in *Dried Bodies*. He is an author who went to Paraty to attend the renowned Festa Literária de Paraty (FLIP), but gets stranded there because of the zombie outbreak. The character/author Xerxenesky ultimately turns into a zombie himself.

Returning to the idea of the environmental walking dead, Kirstin Oloff suggests that the zombie as an ecological figure "encodes the rift between humans and their natural environment perpetrated by capitalism" (31). Taking her cue from Moore, Oloff explains that the zombie becomes a cipher for environmental depredation and its human costs.

Both the plot of *Dried Bodies* and its narrative structure centralize the idea of contamination. At the plot level, environmental pollution produces zombies—dried up, foul-smelling and brainless beings, intent on one purpose only: eating human flesh. As contemporary zombie lore has it, these "dry bodies" in turn infect healthy humans. At the metafictional realm, we can observe other contagion processes. The different authorial voices that cross-pollinate, the porosity between fiction and reality: many passages in the novel evoke the experiences of the COVID pandemic, and, finally, the hybridization among different literary genres: speculative fiction, suspense, apocalyptic fiction, terror, gore, travel narrative, and so on.

Combining the imaginary of pesticides and bio-engineering (a reference to transgenic crops, which also appears in the two other novels that I will speak about), *Dried Bodies* describes the effects of a disease caused by mutation of the *Anticarsia baculovirus* (*Baculovirus anticarsia*), a biological agent used in combatting a type of caterpillar that affects soy plants, one of Brazil's main export crops, due to Glyphosate. In 2015 the World Health Organization declared that this agrochemical can be carcinogenic. Although a federal judge in Brasília banned the registration of products containing this substance in August 2018, in September of the same year, the ban was lifted.

Dried Bodies explains how chemicals activate the "Matheson-France syndrome, also known as 'dry body'" ("syndrome de Matheson-França, o popular 'corpo seco'"; Geisler et al. 8) that leads to mutations in humans. Human bodies become filled with fungi. Rationality, memory, emotion or any other trait that we commonly associate with the human species disappear. Women, men, and children are transformed into zombies who—much like the caterpillars that are treated with the real Baculovirus, explode after a few days. The exploding walking dead in their turn infect others—onto then healthy people. *Dried Bodies* draws heavily from zombie imaginary not only in its use of the man-made cause of the zombie plague, but also how it depicts the consequences of this contagion. Human civilization breaks down. In this case, cities and suburban terrains quickly become ruins, suggesting a dystopian landscape that is hostile to human existence.

Tellingly, beyond humans, no other animals are affected by the disease. Although, this being a novel about human manipulation of the environment gone bad, the text does have some passages that imagine the second-hand effects of the zombie pandemic on other creatures (I will return to this point shortly).

To give a little background. Brazil's agrobusiness is responsible for more than 4% of the annual value added to the country's gross domestic product (it injects over 360 billion reais into the national economy) and it is accountable for 9% of the country's employment. Brazilian agribusiness relies heavily on pesticides, which makes the country the 3rd largest consumer of agrochemicals in the world and the largest annual buyer of Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs). HHPs contain active ingredients with extremely acute toxicity that have chronic negative impacts on human health and the environment. *Dried*

Bodies conjures this toxic collusion between economy and necropolitics. Not only is the zombification a result of "those damn caterpillars that the people at AgroTechBrazil stuck to us to reduce taxes" ("aquelas porras daquelas lagartas que o pessoal da AgroTechBrazil nos enfiou para reduzir o imposto"; Geisler et al. 37). Among the few "safe" places that remain in the apocalyptic geography that *Dried Bodies* constructs is a large landholding, a *fazenda* that conjures the large agribusinesses that have proliferated in the country's center-east and, increasingly, in the Amazon region.

In the *fazenda*, the zombies are harnessed as feed for monstrous cattle. Of course, the allusion to the necropolitical operations of the concentration camp, with its gas ovens is obvious. Achille Mbembe identifies necropolitics as the dominant paradigm of our times suggesting that today's central project of sovereignty is the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (14). As has been argued, the zombie is a befitting metaphor of this instrumentalization. It can be said that *Dried Bodies* suggests that zombification is latent to the human condition and that the indiscriminate use of pesticides to augment agricultural production merely fertilizes it (pun intended). In other words, the trope of agrochemical poisoning—and the monstrosity that it engenders—exposes the dehumanizing logic inherent in exploitative modes of productions—in this case, biocapitalism, which as Moore points out, has a long history in colonial contexts, including that of Latin America. The history of bio-capitalism is also entwined with slavocrat regimes, which, in turn also beget the zombies. Oloff observes that the figure of the zombie comes about in the context of the Caribbean plantation economy while on the other hand also evoking the dehumanizing effects of capitalism on industrial workers. Zombification signals the breakdown of sociability, the imploding of a communitarian ethos. The walking dead is void of will, filled solely with an insatiable hunger that can only be sated by continuous and abject consumption. Its hunger propels it into mindless action or, to put it in metaphorical terms, mindless production of horror.

In *Dried Bodies*, zombies, because of their compound abjection (disease, cannibalism, lack of rationality), literally represent life not worth living (what Agamben has termed the "homo sacer"). At the farm where one of the novel's four main characters initially seeks refuge, the zombies are confined in fenced enclosures from whence they are led to slaughter. Their extermination and subsequent transformation into feed provides an apt metaphor of the sacrificial relation between men and capitalist economy that transforms humans, environments and, even the no-longer-human into "economic resources." Even in the midst of a national catastrophe, the *fazendeiro* explains to Regina, one of the novel's four main characters, that "we will make some profit out of it. Now we need more fences, more generators, more ovens … more trucks … the big cattle provides us with some thirty arroba of meat" ("alguma coisa a gente ganha por aqui. Agora a gente precisa de mais cerca, de mais gerador, mais forno … mais caminhão … esses boizão dá umas trinta arroba só de carne"; Geisler et al. 109). The quote lays bare the primacy of a sordid economy based on an abject cycle of production and consumption that pushes the limits not only of the ecological, but also of the ethical. If we follow the cycle to its logical end, it's not only the zombies and, by extension, the monstrous cattle that are ingesting human meat. *Dried Bodies* proposes that the cycle of consumption and, therefore, contamination exceeds the limits of representation. Hence the resort to the horror genre, to a narrative that often pushes our imaginative boundaries and might, therefore, give shape to the slow violence of environmental pollution and its accompanying necropolitics.

Schweblin's 2016 book, *Fever Dream* also probes into the overlap between agribusiness and necropolitics. In the novel, the protagonist, Amanda and her small daughter Nina retreat to the Argentine countryside to spend their summer vacations. But this is not your average healthy, organic produce type countryside. Instead of an idyllic landscape, mother and daughter find a dystopian scenario filled with

poisonous streams, dead animals and sick children. Much like *Dried Bodies*, *Distancia de rescate* is both an allegory of the penetration of bio-capitalism not only of Argentina's countryside, but also of his citizens' bodies. In his introductory text to the photographic series *El costo humano de los agrotóxicos*, Piovano divulges the preponderance of agrotoxins in Argentina's agrarian economy, which accounts for about 10% of the national GDP and 7% of the country's employment. Piovano explains that:

> The first survey of areas affected by glyphosate spraying in Argentina revealed that 13-4 million people—one third of the country's population—are affected.
> In 2012, 370 million liters (98 US million gallons) of agrotoxins were used over 21 million hectares, which represents 60 percent of the country's cultivated area. This meant that in a decade, cancer cases in children increased threefold and malformations in newborn babies went up 400 percent. (web)

Like Brazil, Argentina's agricultural production also relies heavily on pesticides. A study published by the Red Universitaria de Ambiente y Salud reveals that use of agrochemicals has risen 858% in the last 22 years. And though cultivated areas increased 50%, crop yield only rose 30% during the same time period. This is to say, incremental application of pesticides emblematizes precisely the push against environmental boundaries that Moore identifies as part of capitalism as "world-ecology." As Moore points out, world agricultural yield has consistently fallen since the 1960s, despite the increased use of pesticides and, more recently, biotechnology.

The disjointed structure of *Distancia de rescate*, with its double narrators, interruptions, narrative ellipsis, and as Mutís has pointed out, multiple time lines, parallels the disruption of the environment by human generated toxicity. Amanda's halting, disoriented account—which constitutes a large portion of the plot that we are reading—is not only an effect of her exposure to chemicals that makes her feel confused. Narrative disruptions also capture the difficulty in interpreting the slow destruction of biomes and the attendant breaks in sociabilities that are the hallmarks of slow violence.

Tellingly, in the town where Amanda and her daughter are spending their summer, twenty-eight graves function as a macabre reminder of the town's slow but inexorable poisoning. The tombs, which have become a natural part of the landscape ("Then I see the graves. I simply look out and I recognize them. There are twenty-eight graves. Yes, twenty-eight graves" ["Entonces veo las tumbas. Simplemente miro hacia afuera y las reconozco. *Son veintiocho tumbas*. Veintiocho tumbas, sí"]; Schweblin 62), epitomize the cumulative, diachronic effects of slow violence, while also pointing to how this violence operates through erasure, through silencing. Still, even as the tombstones represent the ultimate suppression of the voices of those affected by slow violence, Amanda's reiterative gaze, the repetition of the number of gravestones, counteracts the invisibility inherent in slow violence.

Schweblin's countryside is, much like the landscape of *Dried Bodies* and of *After the Wrath* cultivated, manipulated. In effect, there is no nature beyond the fields of soy and other crops that extend into the horizon: "the long plots extend towards the bottom up to half a hectare, a few with wheat or sunflowers, all with soybeans" ("los lotes alargados se extienden havia el fondo hasta media hectárea, unos pocos con trigos o girasoles, caso todos con soja"; 27). Nonetheless the seemingly orderly nature extrapolates control as it encroaches onto human lives by sharing its contamination, its burden of death. The cultivated fields abut a small stream whose dark color augurs the poison lurking in the landscape: "David had crouched down by the stream, his slippers were soaked, his hands were in the water, and he was licking his fingers. Then I saw the dead bird. It was very close, only a step away from David" ("David se había acuclillado en el riachuelo, tenía las zapatillas empapadas, había

metido las manos en el agua y se chupaba los dedos. Entonces vi el pájaro muerto. Estaba muy cerca, a un paso de David"; Schweblin 12). Poison becomes an abject, porous line that links the human to the non-human.

As poison leaks into the biosphere and into human bodies, it also disrupts the latter's psyche to the point that the souls must transmigrate so that their physical selves can survive. Amanda soon finds out that her neighbor's son, David, was contaminated by an unnamed agrochemical. Attempting to save him, Carla, his mother, takes him to a *curandera* who performs a ritual whereby the child's soul is displaced into another body so that it can survive.

Transmigration can be read as an allegory of other types of displacement in the wake environmental crisis or untenable changes such as desertification, extreme soil erosion, among others. Nixon observes that long-term environmental violence not only produces various forms of displacement, but that it also necessitates the trope of displacement. Nixon explains that:

> Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs. Such displacements smooth the way for amnesia, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them, places that ordinarily pass unmourned in the corporate media. (7)

At the rhetorical level, the narrative fragmentation in Schweblin's novel conveys the sense of lives interrupted, of the disrupted ecologies of bio-capitalism.

Like other children in the region, who show various forms of physical afflictions, David's body is a continuous reminder of contamination but also of a violent disruption. His skin is spotted with white blotches, visual mementos of the psychic segmentation effected by the transmigration that seeks to neutralize the poison to which he becomes exposed. Similarly, Amanda, who narrates the story while she lies dying in the local hospital, can only communicate her account of what happened since her arrival in a halting, piecemeal manner. She is also constantly interrupted by David, who provides signposts for the chronicle we are reading. These signposts both order the narrative flow and unsettle it. They dredge up narrative uncanniness, which is paralleled by the plot itself with its strange events and peculiar characters.

Transmigration also introduces an element of the monstrous into the textual fabric. Mutís makes the argument that transmigration transforms David into a zombie figure. Among the zombie-like traits that she identifies are his detached manner, his split personality and, perhaps, most convincingly his resurrected state, all the consequences of the ritual he underwent. Though I am reluctant to categorize David squarely as a zombie, the child does evoke the monstrous, much like the zombies in *Dried Bodies* do. Both the Argentine and the Brazilian novel suggest that environmental contamination engenders monstrosity. Like the zombies of *Dried Bodies*, David exists at the threshold between the living and that (which was) dead. And similar to the living dead of the Brazilian novel, David's existence too is hybrid. While the zombies of *Dried Bodies* monstrously combine the human and the fungal, Schweblin's young character combines two different planes of existence: the soul that inhabits his present body (the body of the time of the narrative) is not this body's original essence. Indeed, Amanda remarks that David's own mother, Carla sees him as monster:

> She called you a "monster," and I kept thinking about that too.... You are confused, and that is not good for this story. I'm a normal guy.
>
> This is not normal, David. There is only darkness, and you speak into my ear. I don't even know if

> this is really happening. (21)[2]

Alternating voices (Amanda's and David's) convey a sense of confusion: of narrative position, of which storyline is being told, of whether the story merits credence. Narrative untidiness, in turn, communicates Amanda's altered state of mind. If indeterminacy ("whatever it is you are now") constitutes the monstrous, then Amanda's account is impregnated with the sense of the grotesque ("you are confused"). By construing the monstrous both at the plot and the narrative level, Schweblin relays the sense of dread that suffuses the text, much like the poison saturates the landscapes of *Distancia del rescate*.

Let me finish this essay by very briefly looking at *After the Wrath*. As the other two texts that I have discussed thus far, this Colombian novel also activates the trope of contamination and monstrosity to critique biocapital. In *After the Wrath* this contagion happens because of extensive cultivation of genetically modified corn. The endless green fields that the novel describes are contrasted to an otherwise impoverished nature, castigated by a relentless sun and pollinated by the toxic detritus of the chemicals used by Semina, the multinational corporation that owns the maize plantations and exploits the local workforce:

> The ground of the farm seemed to vibrate. Samuel felt defeated, as he watched the cow and her skinny calves. He thought about the last time it had rained. It hadn't rained, it hadn't rained for a long time: the heat had been brutal. The land was burning as if it had been abandoned. He stomped his feet at the scrub that relentlessly grew and choked the crops, and a cloud of dust kicked up around him. (Romero 75)[3]

After the Wrath begins with a fire that consumes part of the plantations that surround the town of San Isidro. These fields of transgenic maize are in and of themselves monstrous ("Samuel ran through the cornfield, fleeing from the stalks that were trying to grab him.... Something tangled in his feet. He fell to the ground. The lianas, which seemed larger, thicker, grabbed him by the ankles and began to drag him. The cornfield swallowed him up"; 1111)[4]. Pushing against ontological boundaries, the corn plants assume a life of their own, which replicates the greed of the multinational company and, by extension function as a synecdoche of extractive capitalism. In this context, the fire, which has been set by loose group who resists the dominance of Semina, the multinational agribusiness, signifies not only opposition to the continual violence of transnational corporations such as Monsanto and Bayer (who control the market of transgenic crops and agrochemicals), but also signifies the limits of extractive practices. The hungry fire replicates Semina's greed, it consumes voraciously and destroys everything in its wake, including human lives.

Let us return for a moment to the image of the animated plants. *After the Wrath* deploys the imaginary of both plant sentience (albeit a malignant one) and, related to this, the notion of plant horror. A plant horror, one might note that departs from the dread of an untamed nature (Keetley 1), as is the case in Colombia's canonical 19th-century novel *La vorágine*. Even if in *After the Wrath*, ontic destabilization interrogates human control over nature. In a manner, the horror lies precisely in the incongruous juxtaposition between cultivation and excess (or rather the profusion caused by cultivation). Much like the jungle devours the protagonists of José Eustacio Rivera's novel, Arturo Covas and Alicia, the maize plot consumes Samuel, the protagonist of *After the Wrath*. The excessive plants, which are at once organic and artificial organisms, control his body and penetrate into his psyche, generating a sense of all-compassing terror. As an allegory, the monstrous crops point to the dominance of the multinational corporation that employs predatory tactics to not only manage the arable

lands of San Isidro, but also implements equally coercive methods to control the local population.

Again, the theme of necropolitics comes up vis-à-vis the regime of biocapital. Like the other two novels, *After the Wrath* also deploys sickness as a metaphor for the ultimate and paradoxical lack of control over the ecological regime of capital. Samuel, the novel's protagonist, his father and Samuel's wife, Liliana, as well as many other residents suffer from mysterious illnesses such as respiratory and skin conditions.

Furthermore, the plantations are inhabited by giant locusts, insects that resemble prehistoric beings and that, like the zombies of *Dried Bodies* and the strange children in *Distancia de rescate*, add an element of eco-horror to what could be read as a realist narrative. Comparable to the overgrown corn plants, the giant insects scramble species boundaries (beyond their giant size, their blood smells of ammonia) and, as they evoke prehistoric creatures, also confuse biological temporality and reminding us that we are now firmly ensconced the Capitolocene. Much like *Dried Bodies* and Distance de rescate, *After the Wrath* resorts to a nightmarish scenario to trigger our imagination about the long-term effects of environmental manipulation.

Taken together these three texts and the images discussed at the beginning of this essay highlight the shift Latin America's environmental imaginary that Anderson identifies in his writing. This imaginary is increasingly molded by the Capitalocene and its attendant figurations. Although there has been no lack of Latin American literary texts that conceive of nature as a threatening presence—in the past, this threat was often predicated on the fear of an untamed biome. Nonetheless, as the region progressively falls prey to monoculture, transgenic crops, superweeds and the attendant agrochemicals meant to combat these superweeds (and that came about thanks to human environmental management), the threat emanates less from the wilderness and more from the cultivated expanses of soy and corn plantations, from the bio-accumulation of toxins and not least from our perceptual insufficiency to understand the deep transformations that changing biomes produce individually, locally and globally as well as the sense of loss and trauma that accompanies these alterations. In a way, literary texts such as the ones discussed in this essay make these developments more visible and—given the predilection for genres such as horror, the eco-thriller (*After the Wrath*) or the eco-gothic (*Fever Dream*), they also make it more poignant.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, this and all translations from Portuguese and Spanish to English are by the author.
2. Original text: "Te llamó 'monstruo,'" y me quedé pensando también en eso.... Estás confundida, y eso no es bueno para esta historia. Soy un chico normal. Esto no es normal, David. Sólo hay oscuridad, y me hablás al oído. Ni siquiera sé si realmente esto está suciendo."
3. Original text: "El suelo de la finca parecía vibrar. Samuel, derrotado, mientras observaba la vaca y sus terneros escuálidos, pensaba en los últimos días de lluvia. No llovía, hacía mucho que no llovía: el calor se había ensañado con esas tierras que se tostaban como si ya no tuvieran dueño. Zapateó con fuerza la maleza que sin descanso crecía y asfixiaba los cultivos, y una nube de polvo de levantó a su alrededor."
4. Original text: "Samuel corrió a través del maizal, huía de los tallos que se empeñaban en atraparlo.... Algo se enredó en los pies. Se fue al suelo. Las lianas, más grandes, más gruesas, lo agarraban de los tobillos y lo empezaban a arrastrar. La tierra del maizal se lo tragaba."

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