Surviving the Fractured Future: Contemporary Central American Dystopian Literature and Politics

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Abstract

Much of the scholarship on the literary production from Central America over the past twenty five years has focused on themes such as violence, insecurity, and transnational migration – particularly in relation to the concurrent rise of neoliberal policies and the tenuous process of postwar transitions to democracy in a region marred by nearly four decades of virtually continuous armed conflicts. The general sense of disillusionment and disenchantment with the failures of the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s that emerges at the turn of the century reflects anxieties that are both retrospective and prospective at once. Indeed, many of the issues with which this project is concerned, such as privatization, collapsing ecosystems, political and criminal violence, and authoritarianism, are not new within the context of Central America, but instead represent the latest chapter in a centuries-long cycle of foreign intervention and exploitation in a region coveted both for its strategic geographical location and its economic potential. The transition to peace in Central America was not only an uneasy and incomplete process, but also one that unfolded against the backdrop of an abrupt global shift from the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the post-9/11 era. The works of literature analyzed in this project not only challenge the historical underpinnings of the utopian visions of Central American revolutions, but they also describe the dystopian realities that have emerged over the last twenty five years. I argue that dystopian literature has become an increasingly popular mode of narrative discourse, particularly among younger generations of Central American writers, precisely because of its ability to invite readers to confront the realities of the past and present by projecting them forward into future worlds that are even more hostile. What is more, dystopian literature does not simply present visions of worse worlds for the sake of it, but instead offers an element of hope, and, at times, a sort of roadmap, to avoid those future worlds.

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Introduction. Whose Utopia? Challenging Official Narratives through Dystopian Fiction

¿Qué fue del frío filibustero paranoico robador de países
el malaventurado aventurero de Tennesee fracasado en Sonora
inadaptado en California que por poco les roba Nicaragua a
democráticos y legitimistas o liberales y conservadores que
entre sí se mataban por explotar al pueblo nicaragüense
el primer norteamericano que vio a Nicaragua el país el gobier-
no la tierra como negocio subsidiario de los negocios nortea-
mericanos
- José Coronel Urtecho, "Paneles de infierno"

A warm, colorful painting by Grandma Moses greets visitors in the lobby of this unassuming building that sits among rolling hills with sweeping views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the surrounding Shenandoah Valley – less than 15 miles from where I was born, and a 45 minute drive to the University of Virginia. And yet for the Central American adolescents and teens being held at this detention center, conditions were anything but idyllic and serene. Having fled from unspeakable horrors and difficult living conditions in their home countries in the hope of making it safely to the US, they instead experienced and witnessed brutal acts of violence and endured extreme hardships both physical and psychological. What is more, they suddenly found themselves trapped in the labyrinthine American carceral system, where they were often placed alongside violent juvenile offenders and either ignored or harassed by unsympathetic corrections officers, many of whom did not speak Spanish – and presumably – none of whom spoke any of the indigenous languages still in use throughout Central America. For many of the detained minors, their arrival at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center in Staunton was merely the latest in a dizzying cycle of relocations, as they were shuffled between virtually anonymous detention centers around the country. The frequent transfers, some of which occurred in the middle of the night, and some without any warning whatsoever, had disoriented some of the detainees to the point where they had trouble recalling exactly how many times they

had been relocated, in which facilities they had been held, and in which order their various transfers had occurred.

Unfortunately, the experiences of the Central American minors cut off from the outside world behind the locked doors of the detention center in Staunton are part of a pattern that has become increasingly common, particularly over the past fifteen years. Children locked in cages at the southern US border; families across the country unexpectedly torn apart; tractor-trailers abandoned in the Texas heat, with dozens of dead migrants locked inside; dozens more killed in a fire at a detention center in Mexico; more than one hundred children – some as young as 13 – working the graveyard shift in extremely dangerous conditions cleaning slaughterhouses in the Midwest: stories such as these have become all too routine in recent years. And yet, at the same time, Central American migrants have been turned into political pawns, accused of stealing American jobs, committing violent crime, depleting the social safety net, overburdening the public school system, taking away hospital beds, etc. This sort of anti-immigrant rhetoric, of course, is not only inaccurate, but it also fails to consider the factors that have been driving people from their homes – particularly in the case of Central America – for the past forty years. What is more, it altogether ignores the role that the United States has played, both directly and indirectly, historically and in the present, in creating the conditions that have made life for many people in Central America both unsafe and unsustainable.

These are the realities that ultimately inform this project. And although it is not ostensibly a dissertation about migration, it focuses on many of the factors that continue to contribute to the displacement of people across Central American, such as privatization, collapsing ecosystems, political and criminal violence, and the resurgence of authoritarianism. These issues, moreover, are not new in the context of Central America, but instead represent the

latest chapter in a centuries-long cycle of foreign intervention and exploitation in a region coveted both for its strategic geographical location and its economic potential. As Arturo Arias notes, “The interactions between the United States and the Central American nations and societies it has dominated (and invaded, […]) since the early twentieth century can best be examined through a study of literature, which can frame and contextualize those ‘neocolonial’ forms of subjugation that result from expanding capitalism and globalization” (2007: xii). Particularly relevant to our discussion is the fact that “the region dreamed of itself as a future socialist utopia from the 1960s to the 1980s before being disarticulated by rising transnational factions identified with diverse globalizing forces” (xviii).

Robert Holden has identified three historical processes related to state-sponsored violence in Central America: *caudillismo*, subaltern collaboration, and internationalization. During the nineteenth century, *caudillismo* was a prominent feature of the extremely fragmented politics of Central American nations still in development. State formation was heavily dependent upon well-defined military institutions and the application of destructive power at the national level. As Holden notes, “By the 1930s, institutions of surveillance and repression were absorbing the bulk of state resources and overshadowed in importance all other agencies of the state”, resulting in the creation of Central American states that were very effective “in consolidating and employing fairly unified instruments of coercion” (438). Two of the features preserved through the shift from *caudillismo* to the clientelist state were violence and civilian collaboration.

In the case of El Salvador, for example, the use of civilian collaboration in carrying out violence and terror first began in the 1880s and continued, in one form or another, until the

1970s (443).[1] A particularly gruesome example of this was La Matanza (1932), the brutal attack on peasants – most of whom were indigenous – protesting against the government of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez; the massacre killed an estimated 30,000 people – or roughly 4% of the country's population. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nicaragua found itself embroiled in frequent civil wars between the conservative elites of Granada and the Liberals of León. Regional *caudillos* contracted semi-autonomous "gang leaders" to attack opponents, leading to a political landscape built on murder, torture, and terror (445). In summary, state-sponsored violence in Central America as part of the nation-building process not only involved collaboration between elites and *caudillos*, as "the state in effect informally deputed subalterns to act on its behalf in return for protection and favours – a policy that reinforced a budding culture of violence, with disastrous consequences" (446). Finally, state-making in Central America during the final three decades of the nineteenth century coincided with the increasing dominance of US corporate interests and the US government, which both participated in the expansion of state violence by providing arms to interest-friendly parties, intervening militarily, and manipulating governments through nonviolent tactics such as threats and bribes (447). In summary, nation-building in Central America during the late nineteenth century was defined by the simultaneous development of a complex network of state-sponsored violence that would continue to resonate throughout the region well into the twentieth century.

Why dystopia?

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[1] Holden points to the appearance of paramilitary security groups in El Salvador by the 1950s. Tens of thousands of army reservists – those who had already completed their mandatory military service – joined the ranks of the security groups, incentivized, at least in part, by medical and economic assistance (444)

In order to understand the concept of *dystopia* – and, moreover, its relevance to Central American politics and literature – it is helpful to begin with a brief overview of the origins of *utopia*. The term first appeared in Thomas More's 1516 book of the same name, which refers to a fictional island that effectively represents an ideal state in which all property is public and basic necessities, such as food, are free. An important point about More's Utopia is its double meaning: derived from the Greek, it is basically the combination of "good place" (*eutopia*) and "no place" (*outopia*). For More, the inhabitants of Utopia lived in an ideal society, at least in comparison to early sixteenth century Europe. And yet, from our contemporary perspective, there are aspects of More's Utopia that appear to be far from ideal, such as the state of constant surveillance on the island.

Indeed, this final point about Utopia and perspective leads us to two key considerations regarding the relationship between what we commonly understand today as *utopia* and *dystopia*. First, as Ruth Levitas has keenly observed, "There can be no universal utopia, not just because needs are differently perceived by different observers but because needs actually do vary between societies. If needs are socially constructed, the project of trying to read off the good society from a definition of human nature and human needs is doomed to fail" (184). Second, as Gregory Claeys has argued, the realization of utopia at the same time implies the imposition of dystopia. In reference to More's *Utopia*, Claeys concludes that "Utopia's peace and plenitude now seem to rest upon war, empire, and the ruthless suppression of others, or in other words, their dystopia", and continues by pointing out that "Utopia provides security; but at what price? In both its external and internal relations, indeed, it seems perilously dystopian" (2006: 6). Put another way, one group's utopia often leads to another group's dystopia. We will return to this crucial point shortly with some brief illustrative examples.

We can expand our understanding of utopia here by considering several additional definitions. Jean Baudrillard has suggested that utopia is "always, from right now, what the center of the day is missing", and yet, at the same time, it is that which "is never spoken, never on the agenda, always repressed in the identity of political, historical, logical, dialectical orders" (62). Pablo Capanna makes a fairly helpful distinction between *eutopia* and *utopia*. The former, according to Capanna, involves the imaginary construction of a society that is perfect or at least otherwise superior to the one in which the author lives. The latter, on the other hand, "se trata de una sociedad alternativa que niega algún valor importante para el autor y es presentada como decididamente indeseable" (187). In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Fredric Jameson suggests that "Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, that the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation" (15). Elsewhere, Jameson has put it in slightly more concrete terms, particularly in relation to capitalism:

> What human relations might be without commodification, what a life world without advertising might look like, what narratives would model the lives of people empty of the foreign bodies of business and profit – such speculations have been entertained from time immemorial by Utopian fantasists and lend themselves to at least an a priori, external, and purely formalistic characterization (1994, 74).

And yet, at the same time, whereas a projected vision of the world outside of the centripetal force of capitalism may represent a sort of utopian ideal for some, capitalism also has its own imagined utopian ideals.

Ruth Levitas discusses the duality of utopia in relation to both neoliberalism and neoconservativism, once again highlighting the dissonance between vision and practice. Whereas

proponents of the free market, for example, point to the supposed benefits for all sectors of society, the realities of neoliberalism are quite different. Neoliberalism, as Levitas reminds us, "does not recognize the concept of relative poverty, nor is equality of outcome any part of the content of its utopia. The picture is of individuals employed in a free market in which they and the (small) firms which they work for compete and therefore maximize productivity" (186). There are, to be sure, some ideal aspects to this proposed vision of neoliberalism. However, Levitas points out,

> capitalism does not work quite like that. Monopolies manipulate markets. The pursuit of profit results both in the pollution and destruction of the environment and in the absolute as well as relative impoverishment of those less able to compete in the labor market. However, the fact that some may judge this as a situation which fails to maximize human happiness does not mean that it is not a utopia (187).

Once again, we can see here the tension between utopia and dystopia. Levitas explains this viewpoint by suggesting that, on the one hand, the proponents of neoliberalism would argue that it is the best possible system and that it helps out even the most disadvantaged groups. For the critics of neoliberalism, however, it would still be inaccurate to dismiss the above conditions as not being utopian, but instead, "we can only say that this is someone else's utopia" (ibid). In terms of capitalism, then, as we mentioned previously, what is considered utopian by one group may be viewed as quite the opposite for another.

Before turning to our analysis of *dystopia*, we can now briefly consider some more illustrative examples of the ways in which utopian politics can churn out unfavorable conditions in its wake. We can begin by examining a single political issue – in this case, the anti-immigration policies of a given administration. If we look at the rhetoric used to justify such a

policy, we can identify factors such as protecting jobs for citizens and keeping communities safe from violence. Leaving aside the obvious underlying issues – be they rooted in racism, Islamophobia, etc. – such an agenda could be read as aiming for a certain utopian outcome: a healthy state in which jobs are plentiful and neighborhoods are free of crime. But of course, what may represent a utopian vision for the privileged group of citizens, may conversely lead to a dystopian reality for marginalized groups: deportations, heavily policed borders, surveillance, racial profiling, etc., all become tactics employed by the state that are designed to uphold or support the proposed policy.

We can apply the same criteria to evaluate virtually any policy, economic or political. Supporters of President Nayib Bukele, for example, may justify the administration's aggressive anti-crime campaign in El Salvador over the past several years by pointing to the country's consistently high homicide rates and the impunity with which criminal gangs have continued to exert their influence. Security, in other words, might sound like an ideal scenario for a nation that has been dominated by extreme violence almost uninterruptedly for well over a century. And yet, the pursuit of such an outcome engenders its own conditions that, for many others in El Salvador, are very much not utopian: imposed curfews, indiscriminate arrests of anyone assumed to be even remotely connected to criminal gangs, increased surveillance, and, more recently, the inauguration of the nation's new mega-prison – designed to hold up to 40,000 inmates.

Whereas Bukele's security policies in El Salvador have a directly identifiable root cause in the statistically verifiable crime rates, in other cases the justifications themselves may simply be manufactured in order to support a specific ideological agenda. We can look to the alarming increase in anti-trans legislation in the United States in recent years as an example. In 2023 alone, there have been a total of 494 anti-trans bills introduced in 47 states across the country.

The extremely partisan issue has been aggressively promoted by conservatives, who have leaned heavily on a number of disparate arguments as a pretext for attacking and dismantling the rights of trans children and adults: the defense of Christian values, the protection of children from "brainwashing" and "grooming", keeping biological women safe in public restrooms, and leveling the playing field for competitive athletes in women's sports at the high school and collegiate level. The fervor has been amplified to the point at which even science and medicine no longer hold any intrinsic value. A particularly revealing and sinister example emerged in the aftermath of the recent mass shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville: as soon as it was disclosed that the shooter was a transgender man, conservatives used that information to further vilify the trans community as posing a violent threat to society. Regardless of the reasons, it can only be assumed that for conservatives, their campaign to control or erase trans identities in the US has a seemingly utopian – albeit twisted – vision in mind: a country in which women and children will be safe from harm, Christian values can be upheld, and violent "mentally ill" criminals can be prevented from carrying out further mass shootings. It should go without saying, however, that this new reality is quickly becoming a nightmare – not only for trans individuals, but also for teachers, parents, libraries and bookstores, churches, etc.

Defining Dystopia

Now that we have established a general description of utopia and considered the ways in which its pursuit can lead to situations and conditions that are decidedly not utopian in nature, we can now turn to the object of study in this project. To begin, we will review some of the formal definitions of dystopia, followed by a brief discussion of both its literary forms and the relevance of dystopia as a lens through which we can view the conditions of the present. In

Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia (2000), the prominent utopia studies scholar Tom Moylan states that

> Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic […] In its purview, no single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem, no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume. Indeed, with its unfashionable capacity for totalizing interrogation, dystopian critique can enable its writers and readers to find their way within – and sometimes against and beyond – the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live (xii).

Of particular significance here is the notion that dystopia relates not to a single issue or problem in society, but instead to something systemic. Indeed, as Moylan continues, a critical component of dystopia's vision "is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people" (xiii).[2]

In his review of three concepts of dystopia, Gregory Claeys challenges the simplified definition of dystopia as being merely the negative version of an ideal society. As Claeys argues, "just as one person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist, one person's utopia is another's dystopia. Dystopia, in other words, rather than being the negation of utopia, paradoxically may be its essence" (2013: 15). Another important consideration that Claeys establishes in relation to dystopia is its political – or, as he convincingly suggests, the post- and anti-political – dimension.

[2] At the risk of complicating matters further, it is worth noting that, as Moylan points out, there are a number of unique manifestations of dystopias: "In the anti-utopian dystopia, the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in; whereas in the utopian dystopia, a collective resistance is at least acknowledged, and sometimes a full-fledged opposition and even victory is achieved against the apparently impervious, tightly structured system" (ibid).

Indeed, one of the commonalities among the various definitions of dystopia is the description of societies stripped of their freedom and independent control by authoritative forces: "if utopia embodies ordered freedom, dystopia embodies unfreedom and exposure to the constantly capricious rule of a supremely powerful force, which may be human, natural, superhuman, or utterly artificial" (2013: 17). For Claeys, like many other utopia studies scholars, the idea of utopia and dystopia as being diametrically opposed is essentially a false dichotomy. Instead, it could be stated that the concepts exist on a continuum and in fact maintain a sort of symbiotic relationship with one another.

In the same collection of essays, Lyman Tower Sargent calls attention to the association between dystopia and the religious discourse of the jeremiad. In short, the jeremiad commonly argues that humans can potentially avoid punishment from God for their past, present, and future sins if they are able to change their ways. Similarly, he argues, "the dystopia, mostly without the religious element, does the same thing, although often only implicitly. The dystopia is presented as what has happened as a result of human behaviour, of people messing up, as, in the Old Testament version, sin" (12). Dystopia, then, serves as a reminder of the way things could be: how conditions could be better, if action is taken; or how our things can deteriorate even further if it is not taken. Indeed, as Tower Sargent concludes, "We need the dystopia to remind us that our dystopia could get worse, but we need the eutopia even more to remind us that better, while difficult, is possible" (12). This final observation is crucial for our understanding of dystopia's potential: by envisioning a worse world, it also reminds us how to correct course before it becomes too late. In that sense, then, dystopia most often carries with it an element of hope.

In the chapters that follow, we will be discussing contemporary works of dystopian literature from Central America. The objective of our analysis is not only to highlight why

dystopian fiction as a genre is an effective lens through which to examine the contemporary realities that exist in the region. It is also designed to invite us to reflect on those very conditions, particularly within the context of the postwar era, and in relation to global capitalism. And yet, as anyone familiar with Central America knows – and as I hope to articulate through this project – many of the challenges and problems that exist today are, in one form or another, the continuation of what has long been a cycle in the isthmus. With that in mind – and before we turn our attention to definitions of dystopian literature – it is worth reflecting on a crucial point that Ruth Levitas makes in reference to the concept of dystopia more broadly, in reminding us that dystopia is not necessarily restricted to fiction:

> neither predictions of the nuclear winter nor fears of the consequences of the destruction of the rain forests, the holes in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect and the potential melting of the polar ice caps are primarily the material of fiction […] A sense of decline is not in itself an obstacle to utopianism but it does require that any utopia involves the reversal of this decline and thus a radical break from the present system. This means that, again, the discontinuity between now and utopia has a certain freeing effect on utopia's content. But it is no longer obvious how the utopia is supposed to be arrived at from where we are (226).

Unfortunately, for several hundred years Central America has been the site of continual foreign intervention and exploitation, which have led to a perpetual cycle of the types of dystopian realities and conditions that we will discuss in the pages that follow.

Dystopian literature

One of the important aspects about dystopia to which we will continually return throughout this project is that although dystopian literature tends to explore worlds that are

necessarily worse than the ones in which we live, it is not a pessimistic expression of hopelessness about the state of the world. Instead, as we will see with the following definitions and the literary texts analyzed throughout this dissertation, the power of dystopian literature in fact lies in its ability to invite readers to reflect on the state of the world precisely by imagining where current conditions *could* lead us. As Amy Atchison and Shauna Lani Shames note in their aptly titled book *Survive and Resist: The Definitive Guide to Dystopian Politics* (2019), dystopian fiction "magnifies contemporary patterns or trends to warn us about what could result from them in the future" (36). Similarly, David Sisk has rightly observed that

> A dystopian narrative tries to warn, didactically predicting a coming evil while there is still time to correct the situation. Though dystopian fictions paint grim views, their political and moral missions are altruistic. Anti-utopias may succeed merely by criticizing utopian ideals: dystopias, however, always reveal (usually by ironic contrast) attitudes and suggest actions that can prevent the horrors they depict (6).[3]

That is to say, dystopian literature – while not always an explicit call to action – generally tends to leave open the possibility of hope, and, furthermore, may offer clues as to how to avoid future calamities.

Correcting course and avoiding future calamities both point to an important temporal characteristic that is generally true of dystopian literature. In order to highlight the urgency of present conditions and for readers to recognize the potential consequences of any failures to act,

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[3] Sisk highlights an important distinction by adding that the problems posed in dystopian works cannot be issues that "readers will perceive as beyond their ability to change: the mission is to motivate the reader, not merely to horrify […] Therefore, it behooves dystopian writers to base their hellish societies on concepts that will make most readers simultaneously feel personally threatened and empowered to resist" (11).

works of dystopian literature – perhaps unsurprisingly – tend to be set in the future.[4] Pramod Nayar rightly observes that "Dystopian texts are not simply the antithesis of the utopian: they speculate on the state of the earth if existing socio historical conditions – industrialization, hyperconsumption, unchecked pollution – continue unregulated" (48). In that sense, speculation can achieve what observation alone largely does not. If we consider, for example, the abundance of scientific data confirming the effects of climate change, as well as the very real impact of natural disasters that are both increasingly frequent and destructive, it should be clear by now that it is imperative that we take immediate and dramatic action. And yet, as Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler note, "Apocalyptic visions have the power to transfix their audience with horror, to command attention and shock people out of a position of comfortable apathy, in a way that strict adherence to the data cannot, even if the long-term implications of that data are terrifying enough in themselves" (2). Thus, we can conclude that dystopian fiction offers a useful framework for putting into perspective some of the most pressing issues of the day.

Finally, we can conclude our overview of dystopian literature with a brief taxonomy of forms and historical trends. Claeys makes the important distinction that unlike utopianism, "we do not normally speak of dystopian*ism*, and we recognize no dystopian ideologies as such" (2016: 5). Dystopia is generally associated with literature, but as we saw earlier with the point made by Ruth Levitas, dystopia can and does have non-literary uses – describing, for example, the current realities of the climate crisis. For his part, Claeys identifies three general forms of the

[4] There are, however, some exceptions: Philip K. Dick's alternative history novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), for example, depicts the world twelve years after the end of World War II, which the Axis Powers have won. The events of the novel, then, take place the same year as its publication. And while there is obviously no way to alter the past, particularly when it never took place to begin with, the novel nevertheless challenges the reader to consider, among other things, the fragility of freedom and the power of propaganda.

concept of dystopia, which he convincingly argues are typically interrelated: the political dystopia; the environmental dystopia; and the technological dystopia (2016: 5). Indeed, the literary texts analyzed in the chapters that follow contain elements of all three forms of dystopia. Historically, while dystopian literature first began to take shape in the nineteenth century – including a number of influential works, such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), among others – the genre became increasingly popular in the twentieth century. To be sure, some of the most significant dystopian novels of the twentieth century were published prior to World War II: Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908); E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909); Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921); Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); and *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), by Sinclair Lewis, are just a few titles that come to mind. And yet it is the end of the Second World War – with the horrors of the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the subsequent start of the Cold War – that ushered in a boom in dystopian fiction, which has continued almost uninterrupted through the present. To that end, Claeys has identified the five major historical trends that have contributed to the reshaping of dystopian writing after World War II: the perpetual threat of nuclear warfare; the climate crisis; significant advancements in mechanization and "an increasing blurring of human/machine identity"; the radical transformation of consumer culture vis-à-vis hyperconsumerism; and finally, the War on Terror and its associated domination of the 24-hour news cycle (2016: 447). As we will see throughout the chapters that follow, many of these same issues and trends are also relevant to the production of dystopian literature in Central America, which has also been informed to a significant degree by a history of foreign intervention and capitalistic exploitation.

Underneath the façade: challenging official discourse from both sides of the San Juan

Although this project examines contemporary Central American dystopian literature and politics more broadly, the emphasis in the three main chapters is specifically limited to novels written by two well-known authors from neighboring Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The novels analyzed in this project have been selected not only because they explore a wide range of the dystopian themes discussed above, but also because they represent the period of time between the official end of the civil wars in Central America, with Gioconda Belli's 1996 novel *Waslala*, to the present-day, with Fernando Contreras Castro's most recent novel, *Transhumano demasiado transhumano* (2019). What is more, I have decided to narrow the scope of the main chapters to Nicaragua and Costa Rica in particular for several reasons. First, despite sharing a border and having a number of historical, cultural, and linguistic elements in common, the two countries have followed very different paths in terms of their development over the past two hundred years in particular. The relative political and economic stability in Costa Rica, for example, contrast sharply with the economic and political precarity of Nicaragua, which has experienced numerous civil wars and authoritarian dictatorships. But perhaps most significantly, both Nicaragua and Costa Rica have, to differing degrees, self-fashioned an element of national identity around a sort of utopianism: Costa Rican exceptionalism and the utopian discourses of the Sandinista Revolution (see Daniel Chávez, Ch. 4). The works studied in this project not only challenge the historical underpinnings of utopian visions in the countries of their respective authors, but they also describe the dystopian realities that have emerged in the wake.

Pura vida: Costa Rican exceptionalism

The notion of Costa Rican exceptionalism has long been a fundamental part of national identity, at times serving as an ideological instrument designed to influence foreign investment and immigration in order to further fulfill its own vision. With that in mind, it is important to

note that Costa Rican exceptionalism inherently implies its positioning in relation to something, somewhere, and someone. In a geographically condensed region with a history of political and economic instability and a much more significant indigenous population, Costa Rica has historically promoted itself – both domestically and beyond – as a statistical outlier and an exception to conditions throughout Central America. Alexánder Jiménez Matarrita has succinctly summarized the ways in which Costa Rican exceptionalism is expressed:

> en diferentes rasgos virtuosos atribuidos a la nación o a la nacionalidad: país con una democracia perenne o en todo caso muy antigua, país homogéneo e igualitario de gente blanca, individualista y liberal, país con más maestros que soldados, país de paz, sociedad que resuelve de modo pacífico conflictos y desacuerdos, país de la amistad y el pura vida, paraíso en los trópicos y suiza centroamericana, sociedad incluyente e integrada, país de instituciones fuertes y de élites políticas benevolentes (27).

Jiménez Matarrita also points to the historical basis for the emergence of the Costa Rican myth of exceptionalism, noting that until the mid-twentieth century, Costa Rica was a country with a small, mostly rural population "con trabajos poco diferenciados, una población relativamente cohesionada por las marcas de una identidad nacional que la hacía imaginarse culturalmente homogénea, blanca, pacífica, igualitaria y eternamente democrática" (22). That myth, in turn, has emerged from and contributed to a politics of immigration rooted in whiteness.

The construction of the railroad in Costa Rica and the subsequent birth of the banana industry necessitated cheap labor, which was largely provided by Chinese and Jamaican immigrants, with the latter group primarily working and settling along the Caribbean coast.[5]

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[5] Dorothy E. Mosby has noted that "In the process of combating imagery that blacks in Costa Rica are 'foreign,' Afro-Costa Rican writers refute myths of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity through the expression of their cultural identity in literature" (238). In *El negro en Costa Rica,*

Similarly, both the coffee and banana industries in Costa Rica have historically been significant contributors to migration from Nicaragua. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, non-white immigration was only tolerated because of the country's need for cheap labor. However, as Patricia Alvarenga Venútolo has noted, official migration policy was implicitly premised upon the idea that "Una positiva inmigración debe provenir de poblaciones que compartan características culturales y físicas similares a las de los y las costarricenses (es decir, vallecentralinos) y esta inmigración ideal no se localiza en Centroamérica; es eminentemente europea" (6). And while the Central Valley, which is home to approximately 70% of the country's population, has long been a critical part of the myth-building of Costa Rican national identity, it has also increasingly come to exemplify a number of social issues incongruent with that very image, a point that we will return to shortly.

One of the other main elements of Costa Rican exceptionalism is the country's characterization as a nation of peace. Indeed, although the metaphor of Costa Rica as the Switzerland of Central America was initially made in reference to its pristine natural beauty, the description has, particularly in the years following World War II, been used more commonly to refer to Costa Rican pacifism in relation to its neighboring countries in Central America. In comparison with Nicaragua, for instance, Costa Rica has experienced very few military conflicts over the past two centuries. The very brief Ochomogo War (1823) between Republicans and Imperialists resulted in the transfer of Costa Rica's capital from Cartago to San José, which would go on to successfully defend itself against the militias of Heredia, Cartago, and Alajuela during the League War in 1835, which also lasted around one month. The pivotal role played by

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Carlos Meléndez Chaverri and Quince Duncan provide a comprehensive overview of Afro-Costa Rican history.]

Costa Rica in defeating William Walker during the Filibuster Wars (1855-57) became an enduring part of the national myth as defenders of democracy and freedom.[6] Likewise, Costa Rica's military conflicts during the twentieth century have been similarly brief in duration: the Coto War (1921) with Panama lasted only thirteen days; the Calderonista Invasion in northwest Costa Rica, which began on January 7, 1955, was over by the end of the same month. Even the Costa Rican Civil War (1948) only officially lasted a total of six weeks.

The abolition of the Costa Rican army soon after the end of the war in 1948 certainly played a significant role in the mythification of the nation's pacifist nature. However, Carmen Kordick has provided some crucial insight into that process by reviewing official civics textbooks from Costa Rican public schools from 1948 through the twenty-first century. Surprisingly, textbooks from as recently as the mid-1970s make no mention of the abolition of the country's armed forces or the civil war, and do not lay claims to any sort of entrenched Costa Rican pacifism. Instead, as Kordick notes, that narrative was first introduced to civics textbooks in the late 1970s, which coincided "with an escalation in militarization and violence throughout Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. In these decades, Costa Rica stood alone as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala all experienced bloody civil wars that left thousands upon thousands displaced" (123).[7] Nevertheless, historical texts written after 1948 tended to use the recent

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[6] Although Walker was indeed from the American South and did reintroduce slavery during his tenure as President of Nicaragua, he could not, as Arias has erroneously claimed, have "threatened to colonize the region in the name of the Confederate States of America", which was not formed until five months after his execution (Arias 2007: xviii).

[7] Rafael Cuevas Molina makes a related observation regarding the role of Costa Rican media during the 1980s, when the war in Nicaragua was a constant theme in newspapers such as *La Nación*: "La función simbólica que cumplieron los medios en el decenio fue importante: la imagen distorsionada de la realidad nicaragüense hizo que los costarricenses se sintieran muy afortunados de vivir en la 'mejor democracia del mundo'" (131).

abolition of the nation's military as a way of reframing Costa Rica's past and projecting its supposed commitment to peace back into the nineteenth century (124). Not long after the official narrative of Costa Rican pacifism started appearing in textbooks, further emphasizing the nation's pacifist ideals, a number of social and economic crises began to unfold, calling into question other elements of Costa Rican exceptionalism.

And yet, such a projection of Costa Rican national identity is precisely just that – a projection, intended not solely for the domestic imagination, but also as an instrument of self-promotion designed to attract positive international attention to the country. According to Yvette Aparicio, the perpetuation and dissemination of such a discourse is part of an effort to bring foreign investment to the country. If, on the one hand, politicians and business leaders are responsible for exporting such a utopian vision of Costa Rica, it is institutions such as schools and the media that promote the same image internally (104). However, as Carlos Sandoval-García has cautioned, such an emphasis on the perceived uniqueness of Costa Rica "may have activated various forms of exclusion and racialization", particularly evident in the extreme othering of Nicaraguans (62). Similarly, Aviva Chomsky argues that defining Costa Rican exceptionalism in relation to its Central American neighbors "has meant that historical phenomena that do not corroborate the picture of Costa Rica as a rural democracy have been bypassed in favor of those that more directly seem to 'explain' why peace and democracy have been less elusive in Costa Rica than in the rest of the isthmus" (169). Put another way, Costa Rica's perceived exceptionalism is reliant upon a system of racialized exclusion and invisibility.

Problems with exceptionalism

In the decades that followed the civil war in 1948 and the adoption of a new constitution in 1949, Costa Rica underwent a period of modernization that included, among other things, the

development of public education and higher education alike. The period culminated with the "golden years" of Costa Rican social democratic development during the 1970s, directly followed by the crisis of the 1980s. Towards the end of 1980, the Costa Rican economy was in disarray; by the following year, the average salary had fallen by 44% and the colón underwent a devaluation of more than 400% (Cuevas Molina 128). At the same time, prices increased by 65% (Edelman 1983: 166). The expansion of the private sector during this period coincided with an increasingly globalized consumer culture – for example, with the inauguration of the nation's first shopping mall in 1983. As we will see below in our brief summary of Costa Rican literature during the final two decades of the twentieth century, the economic crisis and the reconfiguration of consumer culture would leave a profound impact on Costa Rican society. As Jiménez Matarrita notes:

> El nuevo modelo global de acumulación atenta contra los procesos redistributivos y deja marcas en la estructura social. Hoy Costa Rica es una sociedad que empobrece y excluye a una buena parte de sus habitantes. Estos sectores que no gozan de ciudadanía social y que están condenados a una economía de miseria revelan fragmentaciones y desigualdades que ponen en entredicho la vieja creencia de ser una democracia eterna (24-25).

Similarly, Álvaro Quesada Soto points to the dissonance between the "official" image of Costa Rican exceptionalism and the realities of precarious citizenship. The passage below offers some useful insight for understanding the literary production in Costa Rica during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly as a sort of demystification of exceptionalism:

> Costa Rica tiende a dividirse en dos mundos superpuestos, coexistentes pero radicalmente distintos. Un espacio "privado" – el que privilegia la imagen oficial de la nación- que

> ofrece bienes y servicios de calidad a un alto precio, solo accesible a la elite, la clase media alta y el turismo extranjero; contrasta con un amplio espacio – semioculto en el discurso oficial – donde los salarios insuficientes, las condiciones de trabajo insatisfactorias, el deterioro o la eliminación de las instituciones y servicios públicos, un sistema impositivo que grava salarios y pensiones pero no grava las ganancias y fomenta la evasión y la corrupción, van delineando un mundo de excluidos o segregados, que ven decrecer su poder adquisitivo, sus esperanzas de mejoramiento y hasta sus posibilidades de sobrevivencia, mientras contemplan con estupor, con desesperación o con asco, la prosperidad, la corrupción y la impunidad de la elite (2001: n.p).

The image described here by Quesada Soto diverges significantly from the traditionally idealized vision of Costa Rica, particularly as a stable democracy with a strong middle class.

The crisis of the 1980s, along with the political insecurity throughout Central America resulting from the ongoing civil wars and refugee crisis, were followed in the 1990s by the rise of neoliberal policies in Costa Rica and elsewhere. The literature published during the final two decades of the twentieth century reflects this new reality. In their comprehensive study of Costa Rican literature, Margarita Rojas y Flora Ovares note that the narrative production that begins to appear in the 1980s with authors such as Fernando Contreras Castro is characterized by elements such as "el predominio de personajes derrotados, la violencia como forma fundamental de la relación social y la ausencia de salida ante los problemas vitales, todo lo cual configura, en la mayor parte de esta narrativa, un mundo hostil al individuo y hablan de su incapacidad para localizar el origen de la violencia" (892). For his part, Álvaro Quesada Soto has observed that "la tónica general de la narrativa de las décadas finales del siglo XX es la de una desilusión crítica con respecto a los grandes mitos fundadores de la nacionalidad: democracia, excepcionalidad,

progreso, optimismo" (n.p.). Quesada Soto also points out that "El mundo narrativo se torna grotesco o absurdo, amenazante o siniestro: adquiere los contornos de una pesadilla, un laberinto, un caos, una realidad incoherente, ajena a toda comprensión o sentido" (ibid). In response to rapid urbanization, moreover, Costa Rican narrative fiction after 1960 began to reflect the city "como un espacio caótico e inorgánico, sin identidad social e histórico y apropiado a partir de los discursos plurales de personajes incomunicados" (Molina Jiménez 91). The first two novels and collection of microfiction written during the 1990s by Fernando Contreras Castro (1963), whose later works will be analyzed in chapters 1 and 2, are clear examples of some of these trends. Indeed, *Única mirando al mar* (1993); *Los Peor* (1995); and *Urbanoscopio* (1997) all present visions of marginalized characters navigating the hostile social conditions of a chaotic, disordered San José.

From Sandino to the Sandinistas

On the other side of the San Juan River, the past two hundred years have been radically different. Unlike the relative stability enjoyed by Costa Rica, Nicaragua, since its independence in the 1830s, has been stuck in a nearly endless cycle of violence and political instability. Chapter 3 will explore some of that history in greater detail, but for now we can simply note that the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, the Contra war of the 1980s, the incomplete postwar transition and continued economic failures of the 1990s, and the increasingly dictatorial rule of Daniel Ortega during much of the twenty first century have all been part of a more enduring pattern of fractured politics and foreign intervention that began shortly after Nicaragua's independence in 1838.

As Elizabeth Dore has noted, the country experienced significant political instability for nearly a half century following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821: "first it was annexed

to Mexico, then it was a state within the Central American Federation. In 1838 Nicaragua became an independent republic. Until the 1860s, the elites of Granada and León were locked more or less continually in internecine warfare, and Nicaragua had no central institutionalized authority deserving of the name nation-state" (44). In fact, as Dore adds, "Prior to the 1860s, the Nicaraguan state ruled in name only, as intraelite warfare prevented consolidation of central political institutions deserving of the name nation-state. After Independence, intense partisan rivalry, family feuds, and personal reprisals perpetuated political instability and internecine warfare" (46). The following quote from Tomás Martínez, whose presidency began in 1858 in the wake of the Filibuster War, provides some clear insight into the state of chaos and insecurity in Nicaragua during the mid-nineteenth century:

> Our fields lie bleached by the ashes of our dead; our cities lie ruined, a reminder for many years to come of the horrors wrought by foreign invaders; even now, agriculture and commerce remain paralyzed as a consequence of a recent Costa Rican invasion; the public treasury is empty; private property is destroyed; the schools remain closed. Such is the present picture, sad as it may be, of Nicaragua (Spalding 34, cited in Burns 1991, 223).

This sort of fractured politics and chaos is particularly relevant to our discussion of Gioconda Belli's novel *Waslala* in Chapter 3.

During the twentieth century, Nicaragua did not fare much better. The country was ruled both militarily and economically by the US during the period from 1911-1933. After José Santos Zelaya – whose sixteen year Liberal rule of Nicaragua began when he led an armed uprising in 1893 – ordered the execution of two American soldiers of fortune serving with anti-Zelaya rebels in Bluefields, the US abruptly cut off diplomatic relations to the country in 1909 (Paige 157).

Zelaya ultimately resigned due to pressure from the United States; and, as Jeffery Paige has observed: “The Nicaraguan Liberal revolution had been ended by a note from the United States Secretary of State. It would prove to be the decisive act in twentieth-century United States-Nicaraguan relations” (161). The note from Knox, moreover, “was the ultimate cause of the Sandinista revolution, the contra war, and the current shaky peace in Nicaragua” (162). The country experienced two civil wars within the first three decades of the century: the first, in 1912, was aimed at reversing the overthrow of Zelaya in 1909; and the second, from 1926-1927, was essentially a continuation of the first. The occupying forces of the US Marines also created the Nicaraguan National Guard during this time, which was headed by Anastasio Somoza García, who quickly rose to power after ordering the execution of revolutionary leader César Augusto Sandino in 1934, with whom a peace treaty had been negotiated the previous year. The repressive Somoza dynasty would go on to last from 1937-1979, when it was brought down by the popular uprising led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), who then maintained control of the country throughout the 1980s, as they simultaneously fought an increasingly sophisticated war against the US-backed counterrevolutionary groups (Contras). The electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 effectively marked the end of the civil war in Nicaragua, and although “the FSLN remained an important political force in its new role as opposition party, it has been largely unsuccessful in defending the achievements of the revolution, already much eroded in 1990 by a decade of war” (Kokotovic 19). Three decades later, Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Americas, and – in keeping with its unfortunate history of despots – fallen back into a dictatorship under Daniel Ortega, who, ironically enough, was the leader of the Sandinista government throughout the 1980s.

Chapter 1. Out of the Rubble: Songs of the Future Past in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas*.[8]

Cuando lleguéis a viejos, respetaréis la piedra,
si es que llegáis a viejos,
si es que entonces quedó alguna piedra.
– Joaquín Pasos, *Canto de guerra de las cosas*

From the curse of the Fallout,
O Lord, deliver us.
From the begetting of monsters,
O Lord, deliver us.
From the curse of the Misborn,
O Lord, deliver us.
A morte perpetua,
Domine, libera nos.
– Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

In the preface to the 2014 edition of *Cantos de las guerras preventivas*, the Costa Rican writer Fernando Contreras Castro claims that the novel, originally published in 2006, responds to the permanent militarization of the global landscape that emerged during the post-9/11 dawn of the twenty first century.[9] Turning towards "la literatura fantástica de tendencia futurista" for his new work, Contreras Castro describes the novel as "una invitación a ponerse en la piel de las víctimas de dichas operaciones militares para el mantenimiento de la paz, tanto a la hora en sí de los ataques y bombardeos, como en el afán de reconstruir el sentido de la vida después de estos" (2014: 7). In many ways, Contreras Castro's preface reflects what Naief Yehya has noted about the significance of the War on Terror in his recent book *Drone Visions: A Brief Cyberpunk History of Killing Machines,* in that "narratives of agony, terror, hopelessness, and excess,

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[8] Some portions of chapters 1 and 2 were used to form my recently published article "The Future in Fragments: Three Critical Dystopian Works by Fernando Contreras Castro" (2023).

[9] The commentary here regarding Contreras Castro's preface comes from the 2014 edition of the novel. However, the textual analysis and page numbers cited throughout the rest of this chapter refer to the 2006 edition.

fundamentally structure the interaction between human nature and the significance of certain decisive technological changes" (11). The future worlds envisioned in the novel are also a response to the privatization of warfare and surveillance machines that were first put on display at the dawn of the War on Terror. As Yehya points out, the War on Terror offered a test trial for the use of Predator drones equipped with Hellfire missiles, and indeed that "the drone emerges as an armed, all-seeing, eye in the sky that never blinks, nor tires, nor becomes distracted […] The military drone, with its dozens of cameras, came to spread the notion of the world as a Panopticon, by filming in the most remote and inaccessible of places and, in this fashion, proving that no one, in any place, was safe from being spied on" (17). For his part, the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi suggests that "It would be inappropriate to name the current state 'world war' as with the conflicts of the past century. The causes of the current looming war lie in the past two hundred years of the colonial impoverishment and humiliation of the majority of the world's population, in the philosophy of neoliberal competition and in the privatization of everything, including war itself" (134).[10]

In his preface, Contreras Castro goes on to say that an additional consideration was how to approach these themes without regenerating or reproducing the science fiction and cyberpunk models from American writers such as Phillip K. Dick or William Gibson. Instead, he hoped to "mirar al futuro cercano desde las perspectivas y posibilidades de una América Latina que observa y padece las políticas depredadoras de quienes hacen la guerra" (7). In addition, Contreras Castro has added to the 2014 edition a seventh canto, written seven years later, that "responde a la necesidad de reflexionar sobre un posible nuevo orden social basado en la práctica de la solidaridad y en el rechazo rotundo de la competencia como forma de vida" (8). Taking this

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[10] Rather than a 'world war', Berardi argues, a more apt description for the situation in which humanity has found itself would instead be "fragmentary global civil war" (135).

final note from the Contreras Castro as my point of departure, in this chapter I will examine the novel *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* as a critical dystopia that presents a fragmented future world of destruction and discontent as a way of warning about the long-term consequences of global capitalism. I am interested in the ways in which writing and literature are used in the novel to paradoxically place the reader at the precipice of virtually unrecognizable and hostile, yet not-too-distant futures. As Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini note in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, "as a critical or open dystopia, with its disasters and representations of worse realities, maintains the potential for change, so we can discover in our current dark times a scattering of hope and desire that will arise to aid us in the transformation of society" (246). Given that *Cantos* presents future worlds that are run by the Mega Empresa Planetaria, the novel further reflects Moylan's assertion that critical dystopian works have been created by authors that "turn to the especial imbrication of the economy and culture that capitalism has achieved at the cost of diminishing…humanity and the earth itself" (2000: xii). In this chapter, I am particularly interested in two concepts of the critical dystopia that have been identified by Rafaella Baccolini and Jane Donawerth, among other scholars. For her part, Rafaella Baccolini has noted that critical dystopias often include open, ambiguous endings, and genre-blurring. Of the latter, Donawerth rightly points out that through genre-blending, "conservative forms are transformed by merging with dystopia, a merge that forces political reconsideration, and traditionally conservative forms can progressively transform the dystopian genre so that its pessimism shifts from being resigned to being militant" (29). The blending of genres and the ambiguous, open endings are characteristic of each of the three works by Fernando Contreras Castro analyzed in theses first two chapters.

The texts discussed in the next two chapters each present fragmented visions of a dystopian world scattered across the broken landscapes of a not-distant future. *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* (2004) leads us through a series of crises that have left the region in ruins, and is narrated retrospectively from the perspective of troubadours to a dying muse. As we will see in Chapter 2, *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* (2013) offers a text that appears to be even more scattered and fragmented, devoid now of any discernible narrative thread or spatiotemporal boundaries. Finally, *Transhumano demasiado transhumano* (2019) bears witness to this same period of future destruction, yet from the perspective of a chronicler residing in the privileged space of a walled, private city reserved for the elite. Unlike the previous two works, which explore the aftermath of ecological destruction and perpetual warfare, Fernando Contreras Castro's most recent novel instead focuses on the rapid acceleration of technological capabilities and transhumanism. Here, the evidence of ecological destruction and ensuing landscapes of scarcity and survival are present only tangentially. Of greater concern is the sudden obsolescence of humanity through the development of technology. The works examined these two chapters mark a significant shift in the author's overall body of work, both thematically and geographically. Whereas most of Contreras Castro's novels indicate a preoccupation with history and the distinct urban spaces of Costa Rica – most notably: *Los Peor, Única mirando al mar, Cierto azul,* and *El tibio recinto de la oscuridad* – these works instead look at a bleak future and expand outward to include Central America more broadly.

The shift away from nationalistic utopian visions reflects the overall character of Central American fiction after the end of the civil wars in the region, as well as the globalized landscape of the twenty first century.[11] As Amy Atchison and Shauna Shames have recently noted, "Many

[11] For more on postwar Central American literature, see Arias (2009).

modern dystopian works feature not communist or fascist governments but 'capitocratic' governments, meaning rule by capitalism/market forces" (36). For their part, Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler have pointed out that "Rapid advances in genetic research, the growth of the internet, and fears of pandemic viruses have each provoked a variety of responses in contemporary dystopian literature and cinema" (2). The works by Fernando Contreras Castro analyzed in this chapter and the one that follows all take aim at both of these issues by imagining a future world ruled by megacorporations that exploit their access to advanced technologies in order to consolidate power and maximize profits, all at the expense of humanity and the planet. And yet, as Edward Sisk rightly observes, "a dystopian narrative tries to warn, didactically predicting a coming evil while there is still time to correct the situation. Though dystopian fictions paint grim views, their political and moral missions are altruistic…[and] always reveal (usually by ironic contrast) attitudes and suggest actions that can prevent the horrors they depict" (6).

Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas

Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas (2004) is composed of six cantos that recount distinct moments in a post-apocalyptic world over an undetermined period of time. Although there are no temporal markers to indicate how much time has passed since the initial moment of catastrophe or between the different narratives, there is a linear – albeit disjointed – forward progression in time that can be pieced together from fragments and clues from each canto. The events of the post-catastrophe future seem to move society from a stage of technological advancement and mass consumption to a primitive period of subsistence living. While seemingly indiscriminate perpetual warfare appears to be at the root of the rapidly deteriorating quality of life, it is the increasing power and influence of international megacorporations that introduce and maintain

dystopian conditions in society. While the novel certainly explores the emergent issues of surveillance and security in a post-9/11 world and a postwar Central America, as illustrated in the opening paragraphs above, it also problematizes the impact of neoliberal policies in the region by imagining a future world in which corporations are all-powerful entities that exert influence over virtually every aspect of life. By shifting spaces and blurring time, the novel provides a disorienting glimpse into a wrecked future that is at once proximate and yet barely recognizable.

The sort of temporal and spatial disorientation at work throughout *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* becomes apparent from the very start with the paratextual elements that open the novel. By including verses from *Anales de Tlatelolco* at the beginning, Contreras Castro not only frames the events of the future as part of a cycle of continuous violence and destruction, but also places it in a distinctly Mesoamerican setting.[12] Moreover, the verses themselves serve to prefigure the testimonial nature of the six cantos,[13] each of which is narrated from a distinct perspective:

Y todo esto pasó con nosotros.

Nosotros lo vimos,

nosotros lo admiramos.

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[12] As Rodrigo Martínez Baracs explains, “Los *Anales de Tlatelolco* son un documento complejo y compósito, difícil, escrito en lengua náhuatl, con importantes materiales sobre historia prehispánica mexica y sobre todo tlatelolca, además de tepaneca (pues los tlatelolcas tuvieron una dinastía tepaneca), y sobre la conquista y los inicios del régimen español. Los *Anales* se componen de dos manuscritos en lengua náhuatl […] descubiertos y rescatados hacia 1740 por el milanés Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci y comprados en 1833 por el francés Joseph Marie Alexis Aubin, quien advirtió la complementariedad de ambos textos, que Boturini no había visto. Ambos manuscritos tienen roturas y lagunas y se completan mutuamente” (175).

[13] The intertextual nature of the novel is further emphasized here with the implicit allusion to Elena Poniatowska’s testimonial novel *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971).

Con esta lamentosa y triste suerte

nos vimos angustiados. (12)

The verses continue by describing horrifying scenes of blood and ruins of the Spanish conquest, which also serve as a sort of parallel to the post-apocalyptic chaos described in some of the cantos. Immediately following the verses from *Anales de Tlatelolco* is a “Preludio a la agonía de la musa”, which further dislocates the reader in time by bringing to mind classical antiquity. The narrator explains the purpose of the visit from a long queue of traveling singers, and – by extension – the contents of the subsequent text: “te vamos a contar de otras gentes y otros tiempos, ahora que […] tu memoria es un papiro indescifrable […] estamos aquí para contarte al oído las historias de los cobardes que hicieron de las gentes presa de perros y pasto de aves” (13-14). The cantos, then, are a form of preserving the records of past events, which are at risk of disappearing – or being erased – from the collective memory. The future world traversed by the wandering singers is bleak: towns razed by bombs, isolated communities scattered across the land, humans vulnerable to the threats of a hostile natural world. And yet, despite its apparent unfamiliarity, the future in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* is not very remote: the date listed at the end of the prelude is 2034. Because the prelude presents the cantos as accounts of events from another time, it can be surmised that the narration retrospectively recounts moments from the past. That is to say, all of the tremendous upheaval and the dramatic reorganizing of society, recounted in the six cantos, takes place over the brief span of a few decades. The prelude, therefore – just as we will see with the cantos – both expands and condenses time, making the events to come seem at once both remote and imminent.

Canto I: Future war

The first canto, “El sepulcro del último gerente general de la Mega Empresa Planetaria”, provides the background for the eventual deployment of the Guerras Preventivas that cause the mass destruction, death, and displacement described in the other cantos. The canto is divided into three parts, which include a decree, a rebuttal, and a formal plan for an alternative project. The decree lays out the elaborate plans for the entombment of the last general manager of the Mega Empresa Planetaria, while also revealing the sophisticated surveillance tools and security measures at the corporation’s disposal: nonstop closed-circuit monitoring of the surrounding areas, a system of satellites watching virtually every corner of the planet, a network of spies and public campaigns to identify the leader’s perceived enemies (16). In its response, the company’s assembly dismisses the projected plan as wasteful and shortsighted, particularly for the legacy of a leader that was nothing more than a power-hungry puppet. The response also details the new geopolitical landscape that has emerged after the dissolution of the old world order of sovereign nations, which have been replaced by corporations. There is also the implicit suggestion that the *guerras preventivas* are simply the latest among a series of twenty first-century conflicts, which frames the near future as already being dramatically reshaped by war: “como en tiempos no muy lejanos, cuando las guerras fueron por petróleo, como lo fueron después por agua y después, por mantener, por la brutalidad de la fuerza, el orden impuesto” (19). By connecting the *guerras preventivas* to the actual wars of the early twenty first century – most notably, the US-led War on Terror – while also inserting future wars over scarce resources and the restoration of order, Canto I presents the near future as being both vaguely identifiable, and yet also unfamiliar and insecure. The tension between a dystopian future that is at once urgently proximate to the present and yet seemingly very distant is one of the key themes that repeats throughout *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas.*

Whereas the rebuttal to the decree highlights a sort of continuity that stretches back in time to the early twenty first century, the *Proyecto alternativo* instead offers a sort of radical vision of a potentially hostile future. The project is ostensibly aimed at decentralizing power and democratizing warfare, and yet it also reflects a sort of resentment towards the historical and ongoing destruction of the planet and human life, as the manifesto sarcastically claims that “Exigimos el derecho efectivo de todo individuo a devastar los campos, a perder miserablemente a sus seres queridos, a separar familias, a envenenar los ríos y todas esas cosas que, hasta la fecha, se venían realizando con todo éxito pero exentas de una verdadera participación colectiva en igualdad de condiciones” (24). What is more, the plan proposes as its slogan “El historicidio”, both physical and textual: destroying genetic engineering labs, cleaning the oil from the sea, reforesting the earth, erasing all of the books, and forgetting all poetry. Moreover, the plan suggests that “Nadie conservaría su nombre y moriríamos todos en el anonimato” (26). However, the plan itself is not intended to be carried out, but instead represents an idealistic and symbolic – if not militaristically nostalgic – vision of democratizing decision-making in the newly established world order. The plan, which is widely circulated and edited further on the web, is never meant to be brought to action, but instead to somehow deter a seemingly inevitable war. In response, the Mega Empresa Planetaria proceeds with its own plan: *Las Guerras Preventivas*. All trees are to be burned – ironically, to avoid forest fires – and a decree is issued that the *guerras preventivas* will be used to avoid the rest of a war. Canto I concludes rather ominously, setting the tone for everything that follows in the subsequent cantos: “Así terminó el presente y comenzó el futuro. Así fueron arrasados pueblos y ciudades y no alcanzamos a saber cómo acabaron con el futuro también” (28).

Canto II: The Machine Stops[14]

If the first canto contextualizes the conceptualization of the *guerras preventivas*, the second canto – "'Dadá no significa nada' (o qué es exactamente una operación militar para el mantenimiento de la paz)" – provides an account of the actual launching of those wars, from the perspective of one of the cities destroyed by the first wave of attacks. Narrated in the first-person plural, the second canto details the events taking place in the city on the day of its destruction, and describes both the moment of impact and the immediate aftermath. The collective voice of the city and its inhabitants, then, offers an oral history of a civilization which, as we will see shortly, has been all but erased – buried underground and frozen in time for future generations to discover, like a nuclear Pompeii. The narration provides a brief glimpse of the forces of destruction that ultimately create the desperate conditions that emerge in the subsequent cantos, but it also serves as a sort of archaeological record of a lost civilization that is rediscovered in the final canto. The technological advancement in Canto II also contrasts significantly from the ways of life described in the later cantos, which I see as underscoring the cyclical nature of history that is first introduced with the paratextual elements mentioned above. The failures of technology in Canto II and the eventual restructuring of society in Canto VI suggest that another way of life outside of capitalism is possible.

Canto II begins by explicitly claiming to bear witness to the destruction of the anonymous, technologically advanced city as part of the initial bombing campaign of the *guerras preventivas*. The military attack, however, is not a remote event exclusively witnessed by those directly affected. Instead, the narrator notes that "Así presenciamos los acontecimientos, así presenciamos el fin en nuestra ciudad, pulcramente exhibido en las pantallas exteriores de la

[14] The final line in Canto II, "El mecanismo estaba arruinado" brings to mind the short story "The Machine Stops" (1909), by E.M. Forster.

Galería de Exposiciones Itinerantes. Fielmente transmitido también por centenas de canales de televisión, bajo el título de 'Ataque quirúrgico', como se supo después" (29). It is important to keep in mind here that Contreras Castro conceived of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* in response to the US-led War on Terror that began in the early twenty-first century. The narrator makes clear that although not everyone is killed in the initial attacks, it may as well have been everyone. Moreover, the weapons used in the attack are of the latest technology – low-grade nuclear bombs – which are designed to be part of a supposedly low-intensity military campaign: "¡guerra de bajo impacto, niveles de radiactividad más tolerables, protección de la naturaleza!... En fin, una guerra de caballeros" (ibid). The spectacle of war and its ostensibly reduced intensity bring to mind Naief Yehya's commentaries on the first Gulf War and the War on Terror. Echoing Baudrillard, Yehya notes that "Thanks to the CNN Effect, war was transformed into an illusion of technological confrontation, where human victims were not shown, while military paraphernalia – bombs, aircraft carriers, and military jets – were stars of the show, obsessively displayed and celebrated" (9). Referring to the efforts to minimize loss of life during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Yehya rightly argues that such claims were largely propagandistic. What is more, the deployment of new military technologies during the War on Terror marked a shift in modern warfare as we know it. In particular, "the drone became the emblem of a new war that George Bush Jr's regime wanted to fight: a paradoxical pacifying weapon, a patient and infallible vehicle that always eliminates villains, takes no hostages, and arrests no combatants; a robotized vigilante instilling respect and fear" (17). These aspects of the War on Terror are reflected in the title of Contreras Castro's 2006 novel and are explicitly explored in Canto II.

And while the novel certainly responds to the new geopolitical realities of the post-9/11 era, it also clearly engages with contemporary and historical relations between Central America

and corporate entities from the Global North. For example, the goal of minimizing damage to nature with the low-impact bombings exposes the sort of dual destruction that takes place in the Global South. Not only are populations significantly reduced and infrastructure demolished in a flash, but the precision strikes are also explicitly designed to preserve the integrity of green spaces for the purpose of resource extraction. The use of smart bombs is necessary to ensure that "las áreas verdes del planeta sufrieran lo mínimo posible", whereas cities are to be targeted for partial destruction, while bridges and roads would be wiped out entirely (36). I argue that this could also be read as a critique of the ecological impact of agroindustrial activities across Central America, which have historically been supported both overtly and covertly by military backing from the United States.[15] The repeated waves of foreign intervention in Central America – from the appropriation of land, to the proxy wars waged in the region during the Cold War era, and up through the rise of neoliberalism in the post-war era – are part of the cycle of violence that have profoundly affected the region, stretching all the way back to the colonial era. As we will see throughout this section, Contreras Castro's 2006 novel in many ways mirrors this cyclical nature of Central America's past, which is also projected forward onto an uncertain future.

Contrary to the established principles of the so-called low impact warfare – supposedly a keystone of international diplomacy – the attacks leave a path of widespread destruction. The urban spaces end up partially damaged, with the windows of every building shattered, everything slightly charred, streets and buildings partially wiped out, and the entire scene shrouded "en un

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[15] The most prominent example of this, of course, would be the United Fruit Company, which was founded in 1899 and exerted significant influence over politics and the economies across Central America for nearly half a century. As Steve Marquardt has noted, "UFCo's ravenous but fickle appetite for tropical lands – manifest in serial abandonment, from 1930 through the early 1960s, of vast, once-prosperous plantation enclaves in four Central American countries, ruthless tactics for acquiring new banana lands to replace them, and the enormous territorial reserves it held uncultivated, despite land-poor peasantries, against future disease losses – is central to the historiographic 'black legend' that surrounds the company's activities in the so-called 'banana republics' of Central America" (51).

espantoso espectáculo gris" (36). Moreover, the low-grade nuclear bomb creates considerable collateral damage: the contamination of air and water, and the creation of a mass casualty event: "las víctimas se contarían por miles, en caso de que alguien pudiera contarlas, y entre los sobrevivientes, los más eran los enloquecidos, los quemados, los lisiados, los cegados y los ensordecidos" (37). Even the city's most privileged inhabitants, who are attending a Dadaist exhibition as part of the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the Galería de Exposiciones Itinerantes at the time of impact, become unsuspecting and perhaps unlikely victims of the bombing. The attack instantly knocks out power throughout the city and triggers the gallery's emergency alert system, which broadcasts a message reassuring attendees of the extensive safety and security protocols integrated into the design of the space. Built to serve as an underground shelter, the gallery is located three floors beneath the surface and has access to the metro; it is powered by solar energy and has sufficient food and water supplies to last thirty days; and it is equipped with a smart system that will make decisions about reopening the doors based on its own analysis of conditions. Ironically, however, the smart system immediately fails: "En ese momento la energía suplementaria se cortó y los sistemas enmudecieron para siempre", and the gallery doors would forever remain closed with the attendees trapped inside (35).[16] The city's solar-powered subway system meets a similar fate, as it traps thousands of passengers below ground: "Engañoso mecanismo pensado para proteger a los usuarios en caso de desastre; trampa mortal que habría matado de claustrofobia a los que ahí quedaron atrapados entre sus kilómetros de túneles" (39). This ironic failure of technology that cements the fates of thousands of people

[16] The gallery is part of a vast underground city, none of which is saved from the impact of the nuclear blast. The doors to the underground buildings are designed to shut automatically in the event of an emergency, and indeed, "habían cerrado sus herméticas compuertas el día ultimo, cuando el cielo se rompió como un huevo de yema negra oscureciéndolo todo" (37).

below ground, inaugurates a new era of post-catastrophe life that unfolds in the subsequent cantos.

Canto II concludes with a somber reflection on what the immediate and distant future will look like for the recently bombed city. The subterranean urban infrastructure has been specifically engineered to withstand disasters and serve as a space of refuge, and yet it is ironically that very design which dooms the thousands of people trapped underground. What ensues is a conflict between fission and fusion: the nuclear blast blackens the sky and fills the air with particles that prevent the sun's radiation from charging the enormous solar batteries that power the subterranean city. The crowds of visitors packing the gallery at the time of the bombing, therefore, "Vivirían lo que durara el oxígeno, lo que durara el agua de los cilindros y el alimento, que sería poco. Después, sus cuerpos se pudrirían sin remedio en los pasillos, en las escaleras, en las salas y quedarían ahí como guardianes eternos de un desafío que adquirió estatus de obra de arte con la oficialización que quiso combatir" (38). What is more, the narrator considers what will become of the automatized city and its thousands of entombed corpses when the fallout eventually settles, offering a haunting and almost absurd image of a future without humans. When the sun finally emerges, the gallery's smart system "abriría sus puertas y una voz daría la bienvenida a nadie, y muchas voces ofrecerían doctas explicaciones e invitarían a nadie a pisar los interruptores que ponían en marcha los mecanismos del absurdo" (ibid). In my view, this hypothetical rendering of the future also predicts a posthuman world more broadly, as the narrator imagines wildlife eventually becoming accustomed to the sounds and repetitive schedule of the automated underground world. Similarly, the narrator wonders what effect the return of the sun will have on the frozen metro: "¿Echarían a andar los metros a lo largo del subsuelo de la ciudad, llevando sus cargas de cadáveres en un viaje absurdo que duraría lo que duraran las

baterías una vez recargadas?” (39). Canto II provides a snapshot of a world abruptly terminated by the launching of the *guerras preventivas*, preserved for future generations to rediscover. As we will see shortly, it is precisely this world – an underground land of the dead – that the survivors in Canto VI discover.

Canto III: Nuclear wasteland

Where Canto II recounts the moment of impact and the devastation unleashed by the low-intensity nuclear bombing campaign, Canto III offers an account of the aftermath of the attacks. Rather than a smart city run by the latest technology and comfortable crowds happily enjoying an art exhibition, Canto III instead unfolds in a smoldering world of blackened skies and scarce resources, where the maimed and shell-shocked survivors huddle together for warmth and scrounge through the rubble of the wrecked world for salvageable scraps of food and fuel. The narration shifts from the first-person plural to the first-person singular in Canto III, which is retold from the perspective of a priest tending to the needs of the miserable masses seeking refuge in the ruins of his church. At fifty pages, Canto III is by far the longest chapter of the novel, and it serves as a sort of final link to the world before the first wave of destruction. After Canto III, the past becomes increasingly distant and unrecognizable, interpreted by future generations through myths, songs, and artifacts. What is more, Canto III marks the end of writing and the beginning of widespread alienation from reading. The analysis below will center around several key aspects of the third canto: descriptions of the apocalyptic landscape; survival strategies and resource scarcity; the collapsing social order and rise of new institutions; and the blurring of time.

The post-apocalyptic setting of Canto III is immediately made apparent through the pervasive use of the color gray. The title of the chapter – “Juan de las Cenizas: también llamado

'El Cenizario', capellán de San Crisóstomo del Atardecer" – sets the tone by evoking images of death and ash, which are recurring themes throughout Canto III (41).[17] After introducing himself as "Juan de las Cenizas", the narrator opens his account by describing a world of gray in the aftermath of the bombing campaign: "El gris ceniciento era entonces el único color al que podían aspirar nuestros ojos, y era enloquecedor ver el mundo vuelto solo gris y negro" (ibid). I contend that the notion of the world being returned to gray and black, which can be read as an allusion to monochrome television and black and white film, foregrounds the ways in which the *guerras preventivas* send society back to earlier, more primitive ways of life – the near future, in other words, comes to resemble the distant past. As further evidence of this argument, Juan de las Cenizas describes himself as always having been "un ermitaño que nació con la television en blanco y negro y llegó a la madurez con Internet", which I read as a crucial detail that frames him as one of the last remaining links between a past that is familiar to the contemporary reader of Contreras Castro's novel and a hostile, scarcely recognizable future world (44).

But on a more immediate level, the color gray also emphasizes the catastrophic destruction unleashed by the low-grade nuclear weapons: a smoldering hellscape of dust and death and ash: "El aire era una pantalla granulada, era polvo gris que se amontonaba en el alma de la gente, en las calles de la ciudad, sobre los escombros, pero sobre todo, que se alojaba en los

[17] The reference to St. John Chrysostom in this chapter is ironic in that it paradoxically juxtaposes grey ash with the brilliance of gold, as evident in the etymology of Chrysostom. There are obvious parallels between the historical figure of the early church – renowned for his skills as an orator – and the fictional narrator of Canto III, who entertains the survivors of the nuclear blast with his sermons. It is also important to point out that while the title uses the spelling "Crisóstomo", the spelling throughout the rest of the chapter is "Grisóstomo", which further emphasizes the gray atmosphere.

pulmones" (47).[18] In addition, the color gray also speaks to the lack of warmth in a world of perpetual rain and the absence of sunlight. The darkness and cold, moreover, are associated with the pervasiveness of death: "Todo era gris como en el peor día de invierno: frío, desolación y los olores fétidos de la muerte" (72). In fact, such is the bleakness of the monochromatic post-apocalyptic world that death itself becomes a coveted escape from the harsh realities of life. When a group of engineers and technicians from among the survivors at San Crisóstomo designs a device that delivers an hallucinatory death to paying customers – and offers a form of entertaining spectacle to the public – it begins to lure long lines of pilgrims to the ruins of the cathedral, because "se había extendido la fama del aparato; la muerte colorida se había convertido en la última esperanza imaginable" (71). As the pervasive use of the color gray demonstrates, dreariness, desperation, and death become part of the norm in Canto III.

Not only does Canto III appear to jump slightly forward in time in comparison with Canto II, but there is also a spatial shift that moves the events away from the epicenter of nuclear destruction. Indeed, whereas Canto II provides an account of the moment of impact at an anonymous city that is all but wiped out, Canto III centers on a group of desperate survivors "lejos de los llamados 'puntos cero' de los impactos de baja intensidad" (47). And yet, such is the extent of the destruction that the narrator admits finding it impossible to imagine what would constitute a high intensity attack. And while Canto III largely focuses on what takes place within the ruins of the old cathedral, it also offers some grim snapshots of the wreckage outside in a world reduced to rubble and soggy ash. In short, the world has become virtually unrecognizable

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[18] While Contreras Castro claims in the preface of the later edition of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* that his goal was to imagine a future world without imitating American writers such as Philip K. Dick or William Gibson, it is worth comparing this description of the sky with the opening line from Gibson's well-known cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) : "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3).

– a shell of its past self, navigable only through the memory of what once was. Whereas the streets are littered with "rastros de cuerpos quemados, reducidos a cenizas entre los cascarones de los autos y de los edificios, de los vagones del tranvía, de todo lo que había resistido las temperaturas que los seres vivientes no pudieron" (47), the wandering survivors "Solo eran bultos bajo sus abrigos, que andaban entre ruinas desdibujadas, guiados a duras penas por el recuerdo de las calles y edificios de toda una vida" (56). The spectre of a world from before the most recent period of cataclysmic destruction is perhaps best illustrated by the uncanny remnants of the city's architecture. Whereas daily life inside of the cathedral has become a scene of the chaotic struggle for survival, the surrounding landscape is eerie and deserted: "Afuera, como ahorcados mecidos por ráfagas de viento a veces frío, a veces ardiente, cada tanto se veían las siluetas de los semáforos que aún colgaban sobre los restos de las calles. No faltaba quien se persignara al mirarlos, sobrecogido tal vez por la precariedad de los seres y las cosas" (67). The third canto, then, provides the architecture of a post-apocalyptic world from which the survivors of the *guerras preventivas* and their descendants must slowly begin to recover.

The devastated cityscape of Canto III also portends the coming of a posthuman world in a future filled with uncertainty. Whereas the cathedral serves as a temporary site of refuge for survivors seeking warmth and shelter from the harsh conditions brought on by the nuclear fallout, the world outside has been overrun by insects and other animals: "Miles de cucarachas corrían por las calles adueñándose de lo que antes era el mundo nuestro. Miles de moscas revoloteaban sobre los cadáveres lo mismo que sobre los vivos" (46).[19] And yet, as the situation

[19] It is worth noting here the presence of cockroaches, in particular. Not only do the cockroaches and flies bring to mind the repeated images of both insects in *Única mirando al mar*, but the cockroach has also been attributed – albeit incorrectly – with the ability to survive in the aftermath of a nuclear bomb. The myth, it has been suggested, arose from reports that insects

grows increasingly dire and death continues to spread, both animals and humans begin to abandon the destroyed city. The mass exodus in Canto III, in turn, anticipates the diaspora of survivors across the region, whose scattered communities the reader encounters in subsequent cantos. The narrator recalls observing the remaining birds as they “abandonaban la ciudad en bandadas enloquecidas”, along with stray dogs and all sorts of other animals (71). At the same time, he also notes what has become a common sight in the post-disaster world: “la gran marcha que abandonaba la ciudad y, como siempre, fijaba mi atención en lo que la gente llevaba consigo: infinidad de chucherías, inútiles, inservibles aparatos. Uno arrastraba un largo collar de discos compactos, otro llevaba atada al cinto, a modo de pistola, una secadora manual de pelo; entre muchos empujaban un destartalado vagón del tranvía hasta tumbarlo boca arriba” (ibid). As the flows of people, animals, and objects move outward from the site of the devastated city and forward into the future, Canto III bears witness to the beginnings of an estrangement from the past.

This sort of abrupt defamiliarization of otherwise ordinary objects which have been stripped of their utility is one of the ways in which Canto III serves as a liminal point between the quickly forgotten past and the unfamiliar future. As the subsequent cantos move forward in time without any recognizable temporal markers, it becomes increasingly difficult to gauge History in terms of any meaningful chronology. In that sense, Canto III plays a pivotal role in disrupting the reader’s perception of the passage of time throughout the rest of the novel. It is not that time has altogether ceased to exist, but rather that the survivors have been alienated from it. I read this as both a consequence of living through a mass trauma event and as a presage of their

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flourished in the radioactive environment at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the wake of the atomic bombings there (https://earthsky.org/earth/would-cockroaches-survive-nuclear-apocalypse/).

violent detachment from modernity.[20] At the more immediate level, the ability to keep track of time – made impossible by the perpetual darkness brought about by nuclear fallout and the loss of electricity, among other things – has lost all relevance and importance, as there are no longer jobs to hurry off to, bills to pay, birthdays to remember, or any plans whatsoever beyond survival in the immediate present. What is more, it serves to obfuscate any notion of future time in the subsequent cantos.

The bleak setting of Canto III – ruins smoldering in the mud beneath a dull gray sky heavy with perpetual rain – is an important factor in the blurring of time. Indeed, the faint light from the sun, which has been muted by the smoke, ash, and fallout particles that fill the atmosphere, makes it difficult to discern the dawning of a new day: "La luz de un moribundo crepúsculo era señal poco fiable de que un nuevo día había caído en la red de niebla" (59). The passing of time, as evident in the contrast between night and day, becomes indiscernible in a world of almost perpetual darkness: "El paso de los días a las noches se había convertido en una breve gradación de la penumbra de los días a las tinieblas de las noches" (46). Moreover, Juan de las Cenizas laments that this daily sight serves as a painful reminder of the permanent loss of an irrecoverable past. Each new dawn brings with it this recollection: "Cada amanecer, la mancha amarillenta en que se había convertido el sol me recordaba que ese día tampoco bebería las dos tazas de café de costumbre, ni comería la porquería de pan blanquísimo con que lo acompañaba, ni vería los noticiarios con la acostumbrada indiferencia" (49). All that was familiar has been forever erased, replaced in the interminable post-apocalyptic present by the omnipresence of death. The narrator notes this by suggesting that even "El tiempo había muerto y se pudría

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[20] The distortion of time has been widely reported as a common experience among survivors of traumatic events.

despacio entre los residuos de la ciudad" (68). This slow death of time in a time of slow death reflects the dissolution of the pre-apocalyptic past as the shell-shocked survivors migrate hopelessly and aimlessly towards a future unknown.

And yet, despite the apparent disappearance of a meaningful chronology in the period immediately following the *guerras preventivas*, there are some symbolic – if not futile – attempts to maintain some record of time. In terms of the framing of Canto III, it should be noted that the account appears to come directly from the chronicles that Juan de las Cenizas has been meticulously writing in his notebooks during the cold nights in the basement of the cathedral. In particular, the priest has been chronicling the events that have transpired since the time of destruction. In that sense, then, there is an implicit chronological order to the text, which itself serves as a record of the passage of time.[21] And while he notes that "Comenzaba la gente a perder el recuento del tiempo de la destrucción", the narrator himself appears to have a sense of how much time has passed (57). He attributes this in part to the fact that he has not stopped using a calendar, just in case it ever becomes necessary again in the future. By nature of his vocation as a Catholic priest, it is perhaps not surprising that Juan is able to keep track of time, considering the importance of the liturgical calendar. Even in the aftermath of the bombings, Juan's daily routine is to prepare a sermon and deliver a mass to entertain and ease the suffering of the survivors seeking refuge in the church.[22] And while he makes several references to specific

[21] At the conclusion of the chapter, the remaining survivors abandon Juan alone amidst the rubble of the cathedral, where he awaits his eventual death. There, amidst the mud and the rain, Juan observes swarms of termites as they devour the church's organ. He remains there, moreover, "para ver cómo las termitas babeaban mirando el rollo de hojas de mi crónica, preservada de sus fauces en una garrafa de vidrio de la que alguna vez bebí el vino" (82).

[22] The ceremony, it should be noted, is very much a farce: the crowd has dressed Juan in a nun's habit and placed upon his head a pair of donkey ears. His sermons are composed from any bits of surviving text that he is able to save from the bonfires.

intervals of time since the initial moment of impact from the bombs, it is unclear whether those references are literal or allegorical. As he notes at one point in his chronicles, for example, with an allusion to the book of Genesis: "Habían pasado seis días desde la destrucción… ¿descansaríamos al séptimo?" (46). In Canto III, the moment of destruction has become the new point of reference for marking the passage of time. The *guerras preventivas*, in other words, have ushered in a new period of post-history in which the old world exists only as a specter of itself.

This final point regarding time in Canto III is worth considering further, particularly as it pertains to the role that the chapter plays as a sort of testimony to the end of the pre-apocalyptic world and setting up the survivors' alienation from a once familiar past. As briefly mentioned above, the attempt to keep track of time has not been altogether abandoned, as "Algunos no habían perdido la costumbre de contar el tiempo aunque el tiempo ya no existiera" (62). Despite the apparent absurdity and futility of the efforts, the habit reflects a desire to hold on to the ways of the past. And yet, the ability to accurately gauge the passage of time and discern the distance between the apocalyptic present and the recent events of the *guerras preventivas* that have created such a hostile and unfamiliar world becomes increasingly impossible. Preoccupied as they are with the daily challenges of simply trying to stay alive, none of the survivors "hablaba de la guerra preventiva; eso ya a nadie le importaba…no había nada que hacer" (70). Even Juan de las Cenizas, who appears to have a better sense of time, is not completely certain of his exact age "cuando se detuvo la Historia" (74). It is not only the effects of trauma and the absence of any references for telling time, including clocks or the regular rising and setting of the sun, that seem to bring about the end of History for the survivors. All records of the past are rapidly disappearing into the flames of the future, and history becomes buried under the multiple layers of destruction that create the architecture of the new world.

The cathedral itself bears the scars of witnessing numerous cycles of destruction; one of the towers has collapsed, and many of the exterior features of the structure are now gone. Similarly, the interior of the cathedral has been all but gutted, reflecting once again the violence of destruction: “Al principio se usó como hospital hasta que un incendio dio con las pinturas antiguas que sus muros atesoraban. Su biblioteca sobrevivió por las precauciones con las que fueron diseñadas las compuertas añadidas al sótano” (55). And yet, as we will see below, even the precious contents of the library eventually disappear into the rapidly fading past as they become fuel for the futile fires that provide only minimum warmth for the shivering survivors in a damp and frigid world still smoldering in the shadow of a nuclear attack. Similarly, the surrounding cityscape becomes a symbol of the last bridge between past and future that has been set ablaze: “La ciudad era un portal de fuegos fatuos donde ardía fundamentalmente la memoria de lo que habíamos sido” (75). Unlike the underground city of Canto II, which has been suddenly frozen in time for future generations to rediscover, the city in Canto III is quietly and gradually erased from existence: slowly sinking into the black mud, consumed by flames and insects, and abandoned by the last remaining survivors. The only evidence that remains is preserved, ironically enough, in the surviving texts painstakingly produced and kept safe by Juan de las Cenizas.

Before discussing the two surviving texts left behind by the narrator of Canto III for future generations, it is helpful to first briefly consider the impossible conditions in which the texts have been written and kept safe from destruction. As detailed above, the post-apocalyptic world that Juan de las Cenizas is chronicling in his notebooks is extremely harsh. It is, as the priest recalls at the beginning of his account, a world without antibiotics and insulin. Moreover, food is so scarce that the survivors resort to hunting stray dogs and cats, and violent scuffles

frequently break out between desperately starving individuals over the procurement of rats, which are most often eaten raw (48). The scarcity of resources amidst the ruined landscape highlights the dangers and the precariousness of life itself in the post-apocalyptic world: "día con día, la noción del peligro cedía terreno: cualquiera estaba en disposición de jugarse la vida en cualquier momento por algo de beber o de comer, o por un fuego encendido en alguna cosa que ardiera, una puerta hecha astillas, lo mismo que una llanta, o hilachas de ropa" (50). It is, moreover, an extremely cold and damp world in which the rains never let up, and the heat from small fires is never sufficient to warm the shivering bodies of the sick and the dying. Fire, valued primarily for the insufficient heat that it emits, is a constant priority and a concern among the survivors huddled together in the San Crisóstomo del Atardecer cathedral, which is home to 724,000 volumes of books that are all potential sources of fuel (47). In his role as the chaplain, Juan de las Cenizas is responsible for providing the people with books and texts to burn. Part of his task, as we will see below, is to sort through the texts and salvage anything that he can for use in his daily sermons, before they are eventually reduced to ash.

It is worth noting that Juan spends a portion of each day wandering through the wreckage in search of anything combustible, in the hopes of delaying the eventual burning of books and other texts. Buildings are stripped bare, with doors, furniture, rugs, and anything else that can burn being sent off to the fires. Juan notes that in particular, "Las librerías y bibliotecas eran valiosas presas con las que mi feligresía alimentaba los fuegos rituales del Templo, no sin antes alimentar mis sermones" (52).[23] And yet the contents of Juan's sermons reflect both the absurdity of his daily masses in a world that has lost virtually all meaning. The words themselves

[23] Juan de las Cenizas laments that "Los libros enmudecieron para siempre entre las llamas de unos fuegos que no alcanzaban a librar a nadie del frío ni del horror" (47).

no longer matter to his congregation of moribund survivors, whose only interest in the sermons is the distraction offered from the harsh realities of trying to stay alive. Indeed, Juan's sermons are composed of "cualquier cosa legible que me cayera en las manos, libros, revistas, instructivos, manuales y panfletos, que después repartía entre los grupos para alimento del fuego" (50). In the age of destruction, moreover, everything has taken on a somber and serious tone. The congregation listens with great reverence to his absurd sermons, which include instructions for using a washing machine (52), various legal documents, instruction manuals for appliances, and "los diez nuevos mandamientos del tiempo de la destrucción" that Juan pronounces during the fifth week (53). However, Juan remains secretive and selective about the texts that he uses in his sermons, knowing that anything that he displays publicly will be destined for the fires.

Given the desperate conditions, there are also severe consequences for anyone who intentionally or unintentionally conceals materials that can be burned for heat. As such, Juan takes great risks in his efforts to preserve a record of the world for the future, particularly as all traces of the past are reduced to ash: "La mierda y maravilla de mundo que era nuestro se consumía en moribundas hogueras alimentadas con la consigna de matar a pedradas a quien ocultara algún material inflamable en vez de entregarlo al grupo al que pertenecía" (75). Nevertheless, Juan keeps his personal library secret for as long as he can, gradually and reluctantly letting go of one book at a time. Among the materials in his personal library are "las obras completas de Kafka, pastas duras, edición de lujo, The Beatles Anthology, primera edición, una pieza de coleccionistas, valía una fortuna. Las reproducciones facsimilares de los códices prehispánicos" (74). The final book that Juan releases from his personal collection is both the most sentimental object in his possession, and also the most important for future generations. The only book that remains from his childhood, "Cancionero de los Beatles" is not only

personally important because it has been with him throughout his entire life, but also because "era la garantía de que había sido joven alguna vez y de que, esa vez, la esperanza había cantado sus últimos cantos, porque lo que vino después fue 'el comienzo del fin', como se decía comúnmente" (75). When he finally throws the book into the fire, the crowd begs him to sing, prompting Juan to quickly retrieve the songbook from the flames. Together, the group begins an impassioned rendition of "All You Need Is Love", which leads to perhaps one of the most pivotal moments in the novel.

Moved by the unexpected miracle of the entire group briefly joining together in song, Juan suddenly realizes the importance of the songbook for future generations. With the approval of everyone present, Juan stores the songbook in his tattered cloak and renames it the "Códice Bitleriano", which he swears will stand the test of time (76). Shortly thereafter, someone catches Juan in the act of writing in a notebook and reports him for the violation that would ordinarily be punishable by death. Instead, perhaps with the Beatles songbook still in mind, the authorities do not punish the priest, who is allowed to continue writing freely and openly, rather than in secret. In the final scene of Canto III, Juan is left alone among the ruins of the cathedral as the remaining survivors prepare to join the mass exodus out of the city. As mentioned earlier, the dying priest watches the world fall apart around him, while the chronicles that he has been scribbling in his notebook since the time of destruction are kept safe in an old decanter. As the last group leaves, they ask Juan to give them something to believe in and hold on to in their new life in the mountains. In response, Juan presents them with "el último de mis cuadernos, donde había transcrito y reorganizado lo poco del cancionero de los Beatles que se salvó del fuego. Les di el cuaderno y les dije que aquello era el Códice Bitleriano con oraciones, cantos de amor y consejos para la vida. Pronto, el origen de aquellas letras caería irremediablemente en el olvido"

(83).[24] And, as we will see below, this is precisely what happens with Juan's text, which reappears in later cantos in multiple forms. The only record that remains from this period of destruction are the songs transcribed in Juan's notebook, which later become the prayers and sacred songs of future generations.

Canto IV: El Arca Mall

Whereas Canto II recounts the initial moment of impact from the launching of the *guerras preventivas* and the third canto serves as a chronicle of the haunting and harrowing aftermath, Canto IV lurches forward in time to focus on the establishment of new communities and the evolution of new traditions and customs. The title of Canto IV provides some insight into the priorities of the Mega Empresa Planetaria in their campaign of selective warfare by highlighting the special consideration afforded to sites of capitalism and consumption: "Arca Mall, centro commercial que se salvó de la destrucción dada la prohibición explícita de bombardear ese tipo de infraestructura" (91). Such protection has provided those inside the mall with the rare privilege of uncontaminated water supplies, energy, and food rations. As we will see below, this stewardship of resources and supplies enables the new custodians of the commercial center to accumulate and exert considerable power over the survivors living in the ruins of the surrounding areas. It is from the exchanges between the community of Arca Mall and the people beyond its walls that enables the foundation and standardization of a new organized religion that eventually spreads across the region.

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[24] The Codex Bitleriano, which appears between Canto III and Canto IV, is divided into several different groups. The "Himnos a los dioses" include, among other songs: "Himno al Dios Sin Lugar" ("Nowhere Man"); "Himno a la Diosa Madre" ("Let It Be"); "Himno al Dios Marino Octopus" ("Octopus's Garden"). The "Himnos al sol" include verses from songs such as "I'll Follow the Sun" and "Good Day Sunshine". Additional Beatles lyrics are included in the Codex, appearing under the categories "Canciones amorosas", "Fragmentos", and "Consejos a los más jóvenes". All of the lyrics in the Codex are written in Spanish.

The elite class that emerges in the post-apocalyptic future has formed not on the basis of familial lines or any other sort of historical ties to the past. Instead, the group of survivors based out of the Arca Mall have risen to the top of the social hierarchy in a world of disorder by coincidence. Indeed, they are beneficiaries of chance – being in the right place at the right moment: shoppers who

> transit[aban] sus pasillos el día que empezó el fin, la tarde que se cerraron las puertas y a nadie le importó, porque las ciudades y los pueblos vecinos quedaron reducidos a ruinas y sólo Arca Mall sobrevivió como una atalaya en el desierto, porque no fue solo concebido como una pequeña ciudad comercial, o un gigantesco centro comercial, sino también como un ostentoso refugio a prueba de todo, cuando faltaba poco para que la 'guerra preventiva' echara a andar su plan de purificación (92).

Unlike the automatic doors in Canto II, which trap everyone inside the underground city and turn the subterranean world into a mass grave, the doors to Arca Mall eventually open again after the bombing campaign ends. However, having realized that there are not enough resources or space in the mall to share with the survivors from neighboring cities, the people of Arca Mall make the collective decision to shut the doors to the outside world in order to increase their own chances of survival. Weeks after the bombing, when the hordes of unfortunate people who have been desperately waiting outside of the mall have been reduced to a few survivors among a growing mountains of corpses finally begin to withdraw from the area, the Arca Mall residents deliver a message over the loudspeakers: "*Déjennos a los niños y llévense los cadáveres*" (93). Thus, an arrangement is quickly reached that ensures the long-term survival of Arca Mall and establishes its regional dominance as a sort of theocratic power.

This new system is ostensibly designed to benefit both the residents of Arca Mall and the parents of the children who are entrusted in their care. The mall effectively becomes a monastery, and its original adult inhabitants serve as the new guardians of children brought to them from the surrounding communities. For parents, Arca Mall represents the only option to ensure a decent future for their children, who will be protected and provided for while receiving monastic instruction.[25] The world surrounding the sanctuary of Arca Mall is a hostile wasteland where resources are scarce, and children are sent away to meet an early death working in the mines and factories of the Mega Empresa Planetaria. The mall, then, represents an alternative space of hope where new generations of children can become well-respected prophets instead of disposable laboring bodies exhausted to death by the corporate state. In exchange for the protection and education of their children, the parents deliver cartloads of provisions as a sort of tribute or offering to the Arca Mall community – and – as the narrator notes, “Así fue como aprendimos a sobrevivir de lo que la gente nos trae con su infinito esfuerzo, a cambio del cuido y la educación de sus hijos” (94).[26] The tributes not only provide for the basic needs of the children, but also enable the mall to flourish long-term as a center of influence and a site of knowledge.

With their basic needs met by a continuous flow of provisions that arrive in the form of tribute, the inhabitants of Arca Mall are free to focus their energy on other projects. At the same time, the widespread nuclear destruction that has erased virtually all records of the past has

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[25] The name of the mall here is significant, as Arca, Noah's Ark, evokes the Biblical story of the flood, but also frames the mall as a sort of sanctuary designed to ensure the survival of humanity in a post-catastrophe future.

[26] It is worth noting here that the narration has once again shifted back to the first-person plural, as opposed to the first-person account of Juan de las Cenizas in Canto III.

necessitated the formulation of new myths and histories for future generations to understand the origins of this new world. Indeed, the narrator explains that “Puertas adentro, en Arca Mall, la historia la contamos de otra manera muy diferente; y los niños son los únicos que se la creen un tiempo” (94). What matters here is not necessarily a true account of the world, but instead a retelling of it that can be passed on; any memory of the pre-apocalyptic past, in other words, becomes blurred over time by the creation of new myths. The narrator proceeds to share some of the teachings of Arca Mall – which appear on the page in italics – and pauses intermittently to distinguish myth from reality. For example, the Arca Mall teachings describe the arrival of the prophets by referring to them as “*niños y adolescentes harapientos y temerosos que no tienen ni la menor idea de lo que se espera de ellos. Agresivos de día pero llorones de noche, y es cuando nos conmueven porque se refugian en los portales de nuestras casas*”, which the narrator clarifies in a subsequent paragraph by explaining that “Nuestras casas es un decir; se trata de las antiguas tiendas del centro comercial, pero a los niños se les dice que son nuestras casas en la Ciudadela Sagrada de Pleyazulera, que no significa nada pero ellos nos creen sin hacer preguntas” (95). What becomes clear here is that this first generation of children in the era of destruction has already lost a sense of the basic architecture of the world and the ways of life from the old world. The world outside of the protected area of Arca Mall has been reduced to ruins and rubble, whereas the education of the “prophets” within the sacred fortress of the mall reflects an attempt to preserve some memory of the past, where the spaces and objects found within mimetically represent the old world and are woven into a sort of post-apocalyptic creation myth of the new world.

One of the most significant ways in which the myth-building at Arca Mall attempts to make meaning out of a now-forgotten world is through the reframing of nature and its elements.

For example, whereas the teachings of Arca Mall state that "*[a los niños] los llevamos al fogón para que se calienten y les ofrecemos infusión de Lumaral, la hierba sagrada*", the narrator clarifies that in reality there are no fireplaces in their "homes", and that "tampoco tenemos ninguna hierba Sagrada: les damos de beber lo que tengamos a mano, un té, una sopa de paquete, lo que sea" (95). Similarly, it is written that on the second day, the children are taken to the sacred river to be cleaned. However, the narrator once again specifies that "tampoco hay río sagrado alguno", but instead the mall's public restrooms – "donde todavía hay agua corriente, como no la hay en las ciudades cercanas reducidas a ruinas" (ibid). At the same time, the old name the Arca Mall "ha ido desapareciendo del lenguaje popular, para dar cabida al nombre de Pleyazulera, la Ciudadela Sagrada" (97).[27] And while the meaning of Pleyazulera itself is never revealed, it does bring to mind several possible references to the natural world. The most obvious association here is the invocation of the color blue, which sets the space apart from the destroyed world of black and gray outside and evokes images of both sky and water. The name could also be read as a possible reference to las Pléyades, the Pleiades, a cluster of stars that have been known to cultures around the world since antiquity. What is more, the Pleiades cluster has been incorporated into a number of different mythologies, with the origin of the word believed to derive from the Ancient Greek verb meaning "to sail".[28] In my reading of the unclear meaning and origin of the place name Pleyazulera, I argue that it is precisely this sort of vague ambiguity that reflects the ongoing efforts throughout *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* to make meaning

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[27] It is worth noting that "Pleyazulera" is also the name of the nature reserve that appears in the novel *Transhumano demasiado transhumano* (2019), which is, along with the Mega Empresa Planetaria, one of the details that loosely connect the two novels.

[28] In Greek mythology, moreover, the Pleiades were also associated with rain. In that sense, then, the possible connection to the Pleiades brings to mind both the sea and rain.

out of a past that has been all but erased by the combined forces of nuclear destruction and global capitalism.

The children who are sent to the monastery of Pleyazulera to be trained as future prophets are said to be the chosen ones from their villages, but the actual reason for offering them up is to save the children from a premature death in the post-destruction world. And although the inhabitants of Pleyazulera are also desperately poor and rely on the contributions of people from the surrounding areas in order to survive, they do possess some luxuries no longer found in the outside world, as discussed above. Moreover, the status of prophet has been elevated to a highly respected position among the nascent societies emerging from the wreckage of the *guerras preventivas*. Among the diverse skills that the prophets learn during their training at Pleyazulera, it is speech and language that are the most appreciated by the communities of the surrounding areas: "sus tonos dulcísonos y envolventes, sus parabolas incomprensibles, sus metáforas innovadoras, sus arrebatos oraculares… en fin, la lengua del profeta que […] genera el oficio de los evangelistas, los escribas, los copistas, los exégetas y los detractores" (98). Pleyazulera, in other words, revives the traditions of writing and storytelling.

Unlike Canto III, where language is empty and texts are valued only for their properties of combustion, there is a significant shift in Canto IV, where language once again inspires hope among the survivors. Indeed, the words of the prophets are powerful because they promise to change the course of the stars and to move mountains. In turn, "Por ellas, las palabras de los profetas, pagan gustosos los pueblos las más diversas dádivas imaginables: hatos de ovejas, pájaros disecados, y libros, sus libros que apreciamos tanto; aceite que mantiene vivos nuestros fuegos eternos, armas antiguas y armas forjadas a mano; infinidad de cosas que al cabo, significan la supervivencia de Pleyazulera" (99). The establishment of a new religion – based on

myths created at the former mall – and its subsequent dissemination across towns throughout the region, guarantee the continued existence and dominance of Pleyazulera for the foreseeable future.

Finally, Canto IV concludes by introducing the new gods and myths that have been developed over an unspecified period of time and spread to the surrounding communities by numerous generations of prophets raised and trained at the Ciudadela Sagrada de Pleyazulera. After mastering the art of oratory, the next stage in the formation of the young prophets is also the most difficult: learning "el Discurso del Origen y Naturaleza de los Dioses" (99). Unlike the ancient gods, the new gods are instead said to be some sort of magnificent flying polymorphic creatures whose bodies light up the sky with a sort of ephemeral aurora borealis (101). The creatures are captured by special high priests known as "el Mshka-Mdiama (que significa 'El que Canta el Dulcísono Canto') le entona himnos sagrados para apaciguar su espíritu" (102). It is here that Canto IV appears to greatly expand future time, the passage of which had already been blurred and made ambiguous in Canto III.

Whereas Canto IV begins with an account of the origins of the Ciudadela Sagrada de Pleyazulera in the weeks immediately following the launching of the *guerras preventivas*, it concludes by describing a much longer history that unfolds during the time of priests and gods. It is revealed that the education of prophets takes years, as does the training of the captured creatures who are selected to become gods. Moreover, the existence of sacred songs and texts implies the development of religious traditions over a more extended period of time: "El canto del Mshka-Myama no puede ser modificado, se conserva idéntico desde tiempos inmemoriales y se adquiere a lo largo de los años" (ibid). What is more, the contents of the sacred books and songs seem to suggest a connection with a distant and forgotten past. In particular, I argue that

these texts establish a direct link with Canto III, while also appearing to underscore the significant temporal jump between the two cantos. While the narrator of Canto IV does not explicitly make reference to the Codex Bitleriano from Canto III, the songs of the Mshka Okanté – priests specialized in the sacred books – certainly seem to originate from the Beatles songbook transcribed by Juan de las Cenizas before his death in the ruins of the cathedral: “El Mshka Okanté entona himnos elaborados a partir de antiguas transcripciones de las últimas palabras de otros Dioses, himnos de los que él mismo no comprende nada en absoluto, pero que son de una gran delicadeza y tan tristes que hacen llorar al mismo Mshka-Okanté” (107). Whereas Canto III ends with the last of the survivors from the cathedral of San Crisóstomo del Atardecer taking Juan’s notebook of transcribed Beatles songs and joining the mass exodus of people disappearing towards destinations and destinies unknown, Canto IV concludes with prophecies regarding the eventual fate of the community of Pleyazulera: “*¿Cuánto tiempo le resta a Arca Mall? ¿Cuánto más alcanzaremos a vivir nosotros, hombres y mujeres de Arca Mall?*” (109). In that sense, then, Canto IV succeeds in further defamiliarizing the pre-apocalyptic past as the post-apocalyptic future continues to move both spatially and temporally away from the moment and sites of impact from the *guerras preventivas.* At the same time, the establishment of new gods and new religions anticipates the customs and traditions that take hold among the devout and subversive pilgrims in Canto V.

Canto V: “Intemperie” and seeds of the future

By Canto V, it becomes clear that the cantos that are being performed for the dying muse, as presented in the prelude, loosely follow a sort of chronological sequence of the post-destruction era, while at the same time geographically tracing the footsteps of survivors and their descendants as they wander across hostile landscapes and adapt to the realities of a new world.

With the exception of Juan de las Cenizas and the organist Daniel in Canto III, the characters in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* are nameless, making it impossible to trace any sort of genealogy across time. Similarly, the lack of any meaningful temporal markers, as we have seen above, has the effect of blurring the passage of time since the initial launching of the *guerras preventivas*. And yet, there are sufficient intratextual references and allusions throughout the novel to allow readers to identify meaningful connections between the six passages that describe seemingly disparate future historical periods and events. To review, Canto I provides the political and economic background of the *guerras preventivas*; Canto II offers an account of the moment of impact from the nuclear bombing campaign; Canto III is a firsthand chronicle of the dark and desperate days of the war's aftermath; and Canto IV focuses on the emergence of a new learned society based in the fortified sanctuary of the Arca Mall, along with the creation of new myths and gods. Canto V, in contrast, describes the outside world long after the fallout from the *guerras preventivas* has finally cleared. It is also important to note here that the title of Canto V provides the first explicit reference to the setting of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas*: "'Intemperie', refugio de disidentes oculto en algún lugar de la selva entre Puebla y Panamá" (111). The events of Canto V – and, by extension, the other five cantos – take place at various locations across an unrecognizable Central America at some point in the near future.

Canto V focuses on a pilgrimage site, located among the ruins of an ancient Mayan temple, that becomes a symbol of hope and a catalyst for resistance against the Mega Empresa Planetaria. The rumor that God, mortally wounded by a precision missile strike, has taken shelter beneath the hidden ruins, reaches the people of the newly established industrial cities. The news gives rise to a new cult that begins to draw workers away from the cities and into the prohibited zones of the mountains. At the same time, it poses a direct threat to the supreme authority of both

the Mega Empresa Planetaria and the Roman Catholic Church, both of which are among the few remaining institutions of power in the post-war future. This draws the ire of the Mega Empresa Planetaria in particular, which eventually responds by unleashing a bombing campaign that destroys the site and subsequently establishing a permanent military patrol of the area. Furthermore, the corporation makes a grave miscalculation by aggressively stepping up surveillance and security efforts throughout the industrial cities, a move that is met with fierce guerrilla resistance. The corporate state's brutal crackdown leads to increasingly brazen attacks on infrastructure and other strategic targets, which I read as a presage of another cycle of destruction that begins with the demolition of the Panama Canal that is mentioned in the final canto. As we will see in this section, while Canto V moves the storyline forward into the future, it also reveals a simultaneous return to the primitive. I argue that this shift to the future primitive further blurs the temporal boundaries of the novel, thus forcing the reader to consider the possibility of a proximate dystopian reality in our own world.

It becomes immediately clear in Canto V that the world remains a dangerous and hostile place for the survivors and their descendants. In order to reach Intemperie, the escaped workers must first pass through an inhospitable landscape that kills the vast majority of those who attempt to cross it. The mountains are both dangerous and barren: "No había animals salvajes que comieran carne humana; de hecho, ni siquiera había mosquitos, ni sierpes ni alimañas que acecharan a los viajeros; lo que pasaba era que costaba hallar agua potable y los montes estaban sembrados de minas antipersonales y otras trampas que esperaban la pisada de los cimarrones para explotar y desguazarles las carnes" (111). It is worth noting that Intemperie is not only a pilgrimage site, but also a destination that attracts new arrivals because it offers an alternative to the exploitative and hopeless world of the industrial cities, where workers are destined to die in

the corporation's mines and factories.[29] The ruins are initially discovered by the first group of survivors who flee the major cities of Central America – San José, Managua, Guatemala City – which are destroyed by the first wave of the *guerras preventivas* (112). It is only after the first group of settlers begins to clear the dense vegetation in the jungle that the pyramid, and the mortally wounded God sheltering among its ancient ruins, are discovered (113). Word eventually reaches the survivors who have been rounded up and sent off to labor in the industrial cities, leading to the rise of a cult and the beginning of mass pilgrimages to the site.

Initially, the Mega Empresa Planetaria decides that it is preferable to simply allow the workers to visit the site rather than to stir up resentment among them. Over time, however, Intemperie becomes a destination for dissidents seeking to begin a new life, as well as an unauthorized trading hub that spawns the growth of informal economies that exist outside of the control of the corporation. At Intemperie, for example, "Los que sabían cortar pelo llegaban con sus tijeras, un taburete, un espejo, y le cortaban el cabello a alguien que pagaba con una bolsa de arroz o una linterna", and the settlers who harvest wild fruits in the mountains make preserves "que cambiaban por una prenda de vestir o una herramienta sencilla" (115). The consumption of products originating in the mountains is not limited to Intemperie, but instead outsourced to the industrial cities and communities scattered across the region. A sort of black market soon emerges, which threatens the economic and political authority of the corporation: "De Intemperie volvían en pasta los productos de la tierra a las ciudades industriales y se vendían a precios razonables; ridículos si se quiere: conservas de frutas y de vegetales transitaban las maquilas y las minas sin que la policía pudiera interceptar más que una pequeña parte de los envíos" (125).

[29] In addition to the mines and factories of the industrial cities, the survivors also labor in "las zonas pesqueras y agrícolas", along with oil rigs, "donde estaba prohibido cantar siquiera en las horas de descanso" (116).

Where the corporate police state is unable to stop the flow of illegal goods, propaganda is used to indoctrinate the children of the industrial cities to dissuade future use of the prohibited products. At school, where children learn the trades of their parents to become future workers for the corporation, they are also taught "que el consumo de productos naturales dañaba seriamente la salud de la gente y del sistema" – an effort that ultimately fails to make any lasting impression (126). It is not only the flow of illegal materials from Intemperie flooding the industrial cities that begin to concern the Mega Empresa Planetaria, however. It is also the smuggling of certain prohibited items to Intemperie from the productive zones that begins to threaten the corporate state.

Further excavations at Intemperie eventually uncover ancient canals that have been buried beneath the jungle for centuries. An old historian that is present among the dissidents confirms that the canals were once used by the original Maya inhabitants to irrigate their crops, and urges the community to waste no time in putting them to use once again. In my view, it is this development that marks a turning point in relations between the Mega Empresa Planetaria and Intemperie. It is at this point "cuando aún desde los más insospechados rincones de las ciudades industriales, de las minas, y de las zonas pesqueras, comenzaron a llegar a Intemperie reservas de semillas celosamente guardadas y conservadas desde principios de siglo, cuando se penalizó su utilización" (123). Not only does this suggest that food sovereignty represents a direct threat to the Mega Empresa Planetaria, but it also clearly recalls the rising monopolization of seeds by companies like Monsanto during our own time. Indigenous groups are the first to begin illegally sowing seeds in Intemperie because of their expert knowledge of seed conservation methods. Eventually, however, "de todas partes llegaban semillas dispuestas a resucitar del largo sueño de más de un cuarto de siglo, sedientas de lluvia y dispuestas a vivir del

precario sol que las nubes manchadas de humo dejaban pasar bajo el cielo centroamericano" (ibid). In an effort to protect the intellectual rights of the major agroindustrial corporations, the Mega Empresa Planetaria begins to threaten the community of Intemperie with the possibility of chemical attacks to destroy all vegetation in the region, as well as additional bombing campaigns to destroy all plant and human life.[30] Ultimately, however, the corporation decides against taking any direct military action against the community. Instead, the police begin to aggressively pursue and prosecute the *agrotraficantes*. Similarly, the military begins using dogs to detect seeds being illegally smuggled into Intemperie by groups of pilgrims (124). Fed up with the transgressions perpetrated by the increasingly bold community of Intemperie, however, the Asamblea General de la Mega Empresa Planetaria eventually decides to take definitive action that once again changes the course of history.

After a series of talks between the settlers of Intemperie, representatives from the official Roman Catholic Church, and delegates from the Mega Empresa Planetaria proves unsuccessful, the dissident community is warned that it is under the watchful eye of the corporation. And despite the inevitability of an imminent military attack, the residents of Intemperie continue to flaunt their free way of life that threatens the authority of the Mega Empresa Planetaria. Despite demonstrations and pleas throughout the industrial cities, mines, and other official zones urging the corporation not to carry out the *guerra preventiva* against an innocent population, a military strike is eventually launched against Intemperie. The attack finally kills the mortally wounded God taking refuge in the rubble of the Templo Mayor, leaving him "mortalmente herido y

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[30] The planting of illegal seeds and the return to traditional agricultural methods in Intemperie contrasts greatly from "las zonas oficiales, donde las semillas daban una sola cosecha y las plantas resistían el embate de cualquier plaga" (134).

desgarrado como los campesinos que cosechaban en los alrededores del observatorio, desangrado como los canales que habían vuelto a irrigar los campos" (140). The destruction of Intemperie not only ushers in a new era, but it also signals the cyclical nature of the region's violent history.[31] In less than an hour, the entire area becomes engulfed by a fire that continues to burn for several days. Nothing is left in the wake of the attack, except for "un silencio impenetrable, un silencio que nunca antes se había escuchado", and "Poco tardó la selva en recuperar lo que Intemperie le había ganado" (141). Access to the area is restricted, the region is guarded by armed patrols, and constantly surveilled from the air. However, the damage to the reputation and authority of the Mega Empresa Planetaria is irreversible.

Despite imposing an indefinite curfew, doubling military patrols, and ramping up the surveillance activities of the secret police, the Mega Empresa Planetaria is unable to stamp out the rising resistance that has spread throughout its official areas. It is calculated that at some point "Centroamérica no sería más que un camino polvoriento entre Puebla y Panamá, sembrado de ruinas, ríos secos y selvas vencidas" (143). Faced with the certainty of such a future, the dissidents begin a campaign of sabotage and violent resistance, beginning with the destruction of the hydroelectric dam at the mouth of the Térraba River in Costa Rica. More attacks eventually follow: "Una central de telecomunicaciones explota, un oleoducto explota, una patrulla de soldados es abatida por niños que parecían dirigirse a un taller de entrenamiento. La resistencia está en todas partes y en ninguna" (145). In response, the corporation continues to employ

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[31] The image here brings to mind the passage from *Anales de Tlatelolco* that appears at the beginning of the novel:
"Gusanos pulalan por calles y plazas,
y en las paredes están salpicados los sesos.
Rojas están las aguas, están como teñidas
y cuando las bebimos,
fue como si bebiéramos agua de salitre" (12).

repressive tactics against the population, and even begins to regulate the movement of workers between different industrial cities to restrict the ability to organize any further meaningful resistance. Giant walls are constructed around the industrial cities to protect them from outside attacks, and the military makes regular patrols of the mountains to hunt down any resistance.

The repressive regime of the Mega Empresa Planetaria following the destruction of Intemperie has made the world almost unrecognizable for older generations born before the time of destruction, and impossible for those born afterwards to imagine another world. It is important to note here that Canto V explicitly acknowledges the distortion of time in the post-apocalyptic world: "Es poco el tiempo transcurrido desde el inicio de las grandes destrucciones hasta ahora; pero suficiente en términos de las vidas humanas" (144). The chapter concludes by describing the prevailing myths about the future: "Se cree que las gentes volverán a buscar en el polvo sus viejas ciudades y que al no hallarlas, las levantarán de nuevo. No se dice en cuánto tiempo, pero qué le importa eso a una fábula" (149). The closing line not only brings to mind the destroyed cities mentioned in the previous cantos, but it also directly links Canto V to the final canto. Thus, once again, we have clear evidence of continuity – albeit fragmented – between the different periods recounted in the novel.[32]

Canto VI: After the flood

"El discurso de los brujos", the sixth canto in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas,* presents a profoundly altered future world that has been reshaped by catastrophe. Set in the coastal fishing community of Talamanca, the final canto of the first edition of Contreras Castro's novel takes place at an unspecified point of time in the future. Not only does the title explicitly

[32] There is also mention of returning "a Intemperie a desenterrar la Ciudadela Sagrada", which reminds the reader of Arca Mall in Canto IV (144).

state that “se ignora cuántos años más tarde” that the narration occurs, but the anonymous narrator also radically condenses the past and strips History of its context by ascribing to local toponyms new etymologies born out of a single cataclysmic event in the future past: the destruction of the Panama Canal, which marked the end of the old world and the beginning of the new (151). With no point of reference other than oral histories from post-flood generations, the narrator asserts that “Talamanca, en lengua de los antiguos quiere decir ‘el lugar donde fue desencadenado el mar’”, and that “en lengua de los antiguos [Canal de Panamá] quiere decir ‘puerta falsa’” (ibid). Here, the narrator has combined the histories of US imperialism in the early twentieth century, sixteenth-century Spanish colonialism, and Costa Rica’s indigenous past.[33] This conflation of distinct periods of history, all subsumed under the broad category of the ancient times, has the effect of framing the future as distant and remote. And yet, as we will see shortly, the final canto also reminds readers of the framing of the cantos introduced in the prelude, which is dated to the year 2034 (14). This sense of the circularity of History and the temporal ambiguity throughout the six cantos leaves the distinct impression that all which has been recounted in the text – the destruction, the turmoil, and the dramatic cultural shifts in society – have perhaps unfolded over the span of several decades. That is to say, the reader must confront the possibility that such a radically different and uncertain future is perhaps not a distant reality.

If the destruction of the Panama Canal marked the beginning of a new historical era, it also signifies the end of a previous one. The survivors are separated from the past, which has

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[33] While the region was home to the Cacicazgo of Talamanca, which included the Costa Rican indigenous groups of the Bribris and Cabécares, the name Talamanca was imposed by the Spanish colonizers (Solórzano Fonseca and Quirós Vargas 176). However, the original toponym of Talamanca dates back to at least the ninth century CE in Spain.

been all but erased in the aftermath of the catastrophic flooding unleashed by the sudden convergence of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, which "inundó pueblos y ciudades, y volvió a ser uno solo, sin divisiones" (152). It is in this sense that the Central American isthmus, through violent force, has been returned to its ancient form.[34] By wiping out entire populations and historical records of the past, the disaster has been remembered in the form of a flood narrative. The flood effectively cuts off the region from the rest of the world, while also leaving behind only ruins of the past. What is more, "las puertas de la gran pared después de los desiertos se cerraron para siempre", suggesting that the Global North has shut itself off from the Global South (ibid). There is further mythification of the antediluvian past in the narrator's description of the victims and survivors of the flood – "las últimas generaciones del mundo ya cumplido" – the majority of whom died by drowning.

Those who did survive initially, the narrator explains, attempted to escape the rising waters by heading for higher ground in the mountains. According to the accounts of traveling traders, most of the people who made it to the mountains also died, and the few who did survive "se convirtieron en enormes animales de metal, tan pesados que no pudieron irse con el mundo […] y agregan que en las ruinas de las selvas se pueden ver todavía los esqueletos de aquellos

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[34] It is commonly accepted by geologists that Panama and Colombia were separated by deep ocean until around 3.5 million years ago. And while numerous attempts to find or create an aquatic route across the isthmus had been made since the European colonization of Central America – most notably in Nicaragua – it was not until the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 that such a vision was fully realized. The destruction of the canal, then, represents not only a reversal of the early twentieth-century American imperialist engineering project, but it also returns the region to a period of geological history that predates the arrival of humans to the Americas by well over 3 million years.

animales" (153).[35] The defamiliarization of wrecked and rusted automobiles deposited in the mountains after the flood waters receded serves several functions at once. In the first place, it explains the mysterious disappearance of the lost generations of humans from the past world. Secondly, it ascribes meaning to material objects with which future humans have no experience or connection. Finally, the disappearance of the automobile vastly expands the spatial distances of the postdiluvian landscape. What emerges in Canto VI, then, is a world that has been returned to an earlier state, both in terms of technology and human knowledge.

The return to earlier states of society, technology, and nature is a common theme that often appears in works of dystopian literature and science fiction (*sf*) more broadly.[36] As the prolific American *sf* author Kim Stanley Robinson – recipient of two Hugo Awards and two Nebula awards – notes at the beginning of the 1994 anthology *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias*,

> the science fiction responding to the latest advances in contemporary science is beginning to look different, less 'hi tech,' more various. All manner of alternative futures are now being imagined, and many of them invoke the wilderness, and moments of our distant past, envisioning futures that from the viewpoint of the industrial model look 'primitive.' […] they attempt to imagine sophisticated new technologies combined with habits saved or reinvented from our deep past, with the notion that prehistoric cultures were critical in making us what we are, and knew things about our relationship to the world that we should not forget. (11)

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[35] Later in the chapter, the troubadour known as El Brujo explains that "no hay animales de esqueletos metálicos sino máquinas medio enterradas, porque ese era el mundo antes de que la selva lo devorara" (158).

[36] In line with standard terminology commonly used by scholars of utopian studies and science fiction, I have adopted the acronym *sf* to refer to science fiction.

For Stanley Robinson, such visions of the future are not pessimistic expressions of hopelessness, but instead "utopian statements of desire, full of joy and hope and danger, re-opening our notion of the future to a whole range of wild possibilities" (ibid). Taking into consideration the destructive toll that late-stage capitalism has taken on society and the environment, a return to pre-industrial ecologies and ways of living can be seen as both nostalgic longing and as a blueprint for alternative strategies for resisting humanity's always accelerating path towards self-annihilation and eventual extinction.

In his recent book *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019), Pramod K. Nayar outlines several key features of ecodystopias and what he refers to as the "ecological uncanny", which are extremely helpful concepts for understanding the three works by Contreras Castro analyzed in this chapter. Of particular relevance is what Nayar calls the antiquarian uncanny, which "recalls an older age, in terms of ways of life, lifeforms, and belief systems" (59). To begin, Nayar argues that the antiquarian uncanny points to the possibility of primitive wilderness returning to the planet under certain conditions in the future. In such cases, he suggests, "the coexistence of primitive wilderness and human life becomes a fraught exercise in species survival. The boundary between human civilization, the contemporary and the ancient wilderness, these texts suggest, is accidental, and could be reversed at any time" (53).[37] The antiquarian uncanny is not limited to the return of wilderness and primitive lifeforms to the planet, however, but instead also refers to an earlier period in human history. Indeed, Nayar also sees the antiquarian uncanny as "the effect generated in many of these texts through a return to

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[37] The coexistence of primitive and human lifeforms associated with the antiquarian uncanny can be clearly seen in the reanimation of dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, but it is also present in other ways. The opening scene of the *I Am Legend* (2007), for example, introduces viewers to a post-plague near future in which the deserted streets of Manhattan – which are littered with abandoned automobiles – have been reclaimed by all sorts of vegetation and fauna.

older non- or premodern ways of life, including ways that include extreme violence, agricultural methods, cultish-groupings, and animism" (54). A key characteristic of the antiquarian uncanny is the mixing of the future with the premodern, which can be seen in future survivors who resemble their ancient ancestors, in terms of beliefs and ways of life (59). In effect, this sort of blending renders the future as both familiar and unfamiliar at once.

Another relevant concept discussed by Nayar in relation to the blending of premodern and future elements is that of the architectural uncanny, which generally applies to urban spaces in the future. In ecodystopian texts, Nayar contends, although the city "appears like home, it emphatically is not so because the ecosystem is no longer safe. That is, the architectural uncanny is the effect of a shift between the certainty of a recognizable cityspace/landscape and the ambiguity of its unrecognizable inhabitants, secret spaces and crypts" (60). The architectural uncanny entails empty and abandoned spaces that were previously filled with human life and activities; and while it is not always clearly marked by graves or the visible remains of the dead, the post-catastrophe dystopian landscape is a site of the disappeared – a point that is particularly helpful in analyzing the final chapter of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* (62). History and memory are both important in the architectural uncanny, as Nayar convincingly argues: "the depiction of empty streets, deserted public spaces and open-but-empty homes in the ecodystopian text forces us to acknowledge that this emptiness was preceded and produced by a history. The collective memory of malls, cinema houses, parks and homes is encoded in the material artefacts that now lie around in ruins" (60). As we have already seen above, ruins and defamiliarized landscapes are central components of the post-crisis geographies throughout *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas*, but it is in the sixth and final canto that the past is confronted

by the survivors of a future primitive world who stumble upon the buried remains of lost civilizations.

The survivors of the catastrophic flood in Canto VI live in small communities that are geographically dispersed throughout the region and involved in subsistence living practices tied directly to the land. The coastal communities harvest salt and fish from the sea; groups of traders salvage items from the ruins of the past to exchange with other communities; and in the mountains, where food is scarce and the landscape littered with the wreckage of the old world, "solo viven en las ruinas gentes hoscas comedoras de frutos amargos, que añoran el mundo ya cumplido y atesoran sus restos. Entre las ruinas nacen y se mueren, y defienden con la vida los objetos que extraen del mundo de los muertos, porque con ellos comercian con los miles de pueblos que habitan las costas" (158). They are, moreover, completely shut off from the rest of the world: the towering border walls in the North have been permanently shut, and the land connecting Central and South America has been swallowed by the violent sea.

Whereas the initial narrator in Canto VI begins by claiming that the world begins in Talamanca, it is later revealed by a second narrator – El Brujo – that the older generations are intentionally withholding the truth from younger generations in the hopes of protecting them from potential danger: "Los viejos no quieren que los jóvenes sepan que el mundo no termina en Talamanca, donde se juntan los océanos, porque temen que un día se les ocurra a los pescadores adentrarse en el mar en busca de lo que resta de la Tierra" (159). And although there are legends of a people that inhabit the deserts, sleeping during the day and eating insects for sustenance, neither the people of the mountains nor the coastal communities have ever encountered them. The former isthmus of Central America has become, in the future, an enormous island. For the inhabitants living in scattered communities across the region, it is the only world that exists.

Not only does the rest of the world cease to exist for the future generations of Central America, but they have also been isolated from the past. Addressing the coastal community of Talamanca, El Brujo remarks that "Gentes supersticiosas son ustedes, buenas gentes pero expulsadas de la historia, dejadas del mundo, devueltas en el tiempo, porque el futuro sólo podía quedar en el pasado" (157). For the coastal communities, the past and future are realms that belong to the dead, which they learn about secondhand from El Brujo and the traders who bring books and other relics from the ruins of lost cities. El Brujo is one of the few survivors in the future who is able to understand the forgotten languages of the old world, and, by extension, the words in the books recovered from the lost cities. Moreover, El Brujo claims to have visited the world of the dead, which is located "Bajo las ruinas del mundo ya cumplido, más abajo de las raíces de los árboles" (155). El Brujo's description of the subterranean world initially seems rather cryptic, but it soon becomes clear that what he is describing, in particular, is the underground city from Canto II.

The underground world of the dead is constructed of steel and connected by a network of tunnels. What El Brujo believes to be the living spaces inhabited by their ancestors are in fact the remains of an old shopping center:

> Vivían los muertos en casas con ventanales de cristal, atiborradas de los objetos que en vida utilizaron y que entonces atesorarían como recuerdo nada más, y se dedicaban como único entretenimiento a su clasificación: en unas casas se guardaban sus zapatos, clasificados por tamaños y colores; pulidos como se veía después de soplarles el polvo. En otras casas guardaban sus ropas con el mismo cuido y esmero, y en otras, sus libros (155-156).

In addition, El Brujo and his companions also discover "bodegas de alimentos delicadamente envueltos" (ibid). This sort of defamiliarization with common objects from the early twenty first century serves to further emphasize the apparent chasm in time between the future world and the seemingly distant past. It is, perhaps ironically, only as a result of the explosion of the Panama Canal that the lost world of the past is once again discovered by future generations: "grandes sectores de aquel inframundo quedaron expuestos; pero la mayoría de los barrios subterráneos había sido sepultada por los escombros o, como se supo después, encerrada herméticamente y sin oxígeno, porque los mecanismos fallaron" (162). El Brujo's description, then, aligns perfectly with the account provided at the end of Canto II.

What stands out here, however, is the idea that the cause of the city's collapse is revealed at some point in the future. Considering the fact that El Brujo has access to books and records from the past and can still understand the languages in which they are written, it is not entirely unreasonable to conclude that perhaps a written account of the attack and subsequent destruction has somehow survived over time. And while the inhabitants of Talamanca are unable to read the words of the past, it is quite clear that the Codex Bitleriano has indeed survived and has been passed down through the generations by way of oral tradition. As the initial narrator of Canto VI points out, the fishing village has, for many generations, recited the same prayer: "Deseo estar bajo el mar en el jardín de Octopus" (153). Records of the past have not been entirely destroyed in the future, but instead have become unfamiliar; history, in other words, lies buried beneath multiple layers of the ruins of several different periods of destruction.

For the inhabitants of Talamanca, the past remains a mystery that belongs to the dead. And while the communities scattered throughout the region in Canto VI appear to be content leading peaceful lives that are seemingly removed from the upheaval that destroyed previous

societies, El Brujo also warns them about the future: “Porque esa felicidad no durará por siempre, porque los recursos se agotan, porque en pocas generaciones más comenzarán las guerras intestinas por el espacio, por el mar y por la tierra” (169). The end of the world is a common theme of discussion among some of the communities, as El Brujo points out. Among some of the fishing villages, in particular, it has become common to decorate barges with scenes that imagine the end of the world. El Brujo describes a house that is locally known as “la casa del fin del mundo” that has been built by young people who have decorated it in a similar style, depicting “una tierra que comienza con una pared y termina como un muñón en el mar. Como una columna vertebral se imaginan ellos la selva a lo largo de la tierra. Y el resto es mar. En el mar dibujan enormes peces en los que han creído siempre los pescadores y, esparcidos, unos cuantos buques” (170). Incidentally, El Brujo notes, the scenes depicted in the illustrations very closely resemble “a algunas que tenemos en los libros del mundo ya cumplido” (ibid). There are also conflicting theories among the younger generations as they imagine what the end of the world will look like. Whereas some believe that they will be sent to live with the dead beneath the ruins of the industrial cities, “Otros más ambiciosos piensan que el verdadero reino de los muertos queda detrás de la gran muralla que nos separa del mundo, y han comenzado a sentar la esperanza de una vida futuro del otro lado de la pared” (171). Driven by this almost idealistic hope for discovering a better world, a delegation of young people is sent forth to explore the unknown lands and to look for the great wall described in the legends. That dream is ultimately crushed when a group of people from the mountains visits Talamanca one morning with sixteen swollen and decomposing corpses, which belong to the delegation of young people sent out to explore.

Finally, Canto VI concludes with the inhabitants of Talamanca attempting to make sense of their own world by looking back into the past. As relations between the coastal communities and the mountain communities improve, so too does the collective understanding of the geography and history of the world, as well as forecasts about the world to come. For the people of the mountains, who make a living by salvaging and trading ancient objects from the lost world, garbage is the key to understanding the past.[38] What is more, they claim that "La basura es lo único que queda del mundo ya cumplido. Porque es claro e innegable que hubo un mundo antes que el nuestro, y otro antes que el anterior" (178). The revelation causes alarm among the inhabitants of Talamanca, particularly when it is revealed that they are currently living in the fourth era of a world whose cycle will conclude with the completion of the fifth era. What comes after, they are told, is still unknown.

It is from this knowledge that the people of Talamanca decide to study the objects of the past that are brought to them by the people from the mountains, with the certainty that the past will also reveal secrets about the future. They dedicate themselves to this new task "para comprender mejor los mundos pasados, para tratar de adivinar en ellos fundamentalmente qué los llevó a la destrucción, porque es seguro que las mismas causas nos llevarán a nosotros a correr la misma suerte, sin que podamos hacer nada por evitarlo" (180). Finally, it is important to note the source of their knowledge about the cycles of the world and about time itself. It is from "un pueblo más antiguo que nosotros, que habita las últimas selvas del mundo y se llaman nahuas a ellos mismos […] Ellos saben trabajar la tierra y miden el tiempo de una forma muy

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[38] As William Rathje and Cullen Murphy have noted on the subject of waste disposal and landfills, "In many respects, then, our own civilization carries on the tradition passed along by previous ones: Rather than being buried by our garbage, we are rising above it" (92). That is to say, civilizations have been built and rebuilt right on top of the remains of previous ones ever since antiquity.

difícil" (179). Thus, the novel concludes by returning the reader to the beginning: the connection between the Nahuas of the post-apocalyptic future and their historical apocalyptic account of destruction at the hands of Spanish colonialism reflects the circular pattern of history and the cycles of violence that have left their marks on the region for many centuries and in many forms. And while the groups of the future world work to uncover the mysteries of the past to hopefully avoid the same mistakes that could lead to their own destruction, the novel itself presents the reader in the present with a clear warning about how to avoid such a future altogether. The *guerras preventivas* and the Mega Empresa Planetaria might seem, on the surface, like improbable events and agents in a distant future, and yet they are projections of realities that already exist in the present world, where wealthy megacorporations wield more power and influence than many countries, and the US-led War on Terror has expanded into virtually every corner of the globe. The prelude of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* further highlights this urgency by setting all of the events described above in a future that is mere decades away from the time of publication.

Chapter 2. Where Have All the Humans Gone? The Precarious Future of Humanity in Fernando Contreras Castro's *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* and *Transhumano demasiado transhumano*

In many ways, *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* – first published in 2012 – takes an even more radical approach in its textual subversions and fragmentated visions of the future. The future worlds in *Fragmentos de la Tierra prometida* are conjured in part through the economy of contrast and juxtaposition. Rather than detailed, narrative descriptions, it is instead through intertextuality and intratextuality – and indeed through the piecing together of seemingly disparate details – that the dystopian conditions and landscapes are fully realized. The pieces of microfiction offer flashes of the future: glimpses of a world that has been dramatically altered by the effects of climate change and advanced technological development. Scarcity, surveillance, and memory are some of the themes present in this collection of microfiction, which is comprised of 103 unique and seemingly disparate titles. Unlike the clear textual interventions at play in both *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* and *Transhumano. Demasiado transhumano*, the titles found in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* lack any discernably identifiable narrator or cohesive narrative thread. Instead, it is a collective cacophony of anonymous narrators who appear to lead the reader through seemingly disparate moments of space and time, weaving together the barely recognizable debris of a future world that at once recalls the familiarity of the early twenty-first century, and yet has been all but stripped of any meaningful resemblance to the present.

Throughout Contreras Castro's collection of microfiction, the present is estranged by future reflections on a seemingly unfamiliar past. The title of *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* foregrounds the ways in which the fragmented landscapes of a definitively dystopian future will be conjured. To begin, the clear Biblical reference to the Promised Land at once evokes images

of wandering, home, salvation, and unparalleled abundance, while also reducing the Promised Land to bits and pieces. Moreover, the title both suggests the Promised Land as somewhere in the past and the future: broken remnants of the precious past, or the scattered seeds of hope in an endangered future [Well put]. There are, in fact, very few temporal or spatial markers in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*. Indeed, time and space are largely described in relation to the lost worlds of a pre-crisis past, which is often revealed through the constant tension between nostalgic longing and a sort of collective forgetting that tends to highlight the intergenerational differences between perspectives on a world that has been reshaped by interrelated economic, ecological, and humanitarian crises. As we also see in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* and *Transhumano. Demasiado transhumano*, the testimonial voices of witnesses serve as links to a past that recalls the contemporary reader's own world of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, the extreme contrasts between the older and younger generations underscore the relative suddenness with which the unnamed crises have reshaped the landscape of a dystopian future. It is, as we will see throughout this section, a world of walls and drowned cities, a world in which even the most ancient celestial markers of time no longer exist. This disorienting effect of placing the reader on the precipice of a dramatically unfamiliar and hostile future is a common strategy in the critical dystopia.

In addition to the spatio-temporal and narratological ambiguities in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida,* there is also a constant disruption of form and structure that represents a fundamental questioning of traditional literary genres. First, the weaving together of seemingly disconnected *microrrelatos* itself serves as a sort of parallel to the fractured and fragmented dystopian landscapes presented in this collection and reflects the work's postmodernist elements. As Lauro Zavala has noted about different variations on microfiction, "todas estas formas de

minificción pueden ser consideradas como parte de la producción simbólica posmoderna, al poner en juego recursos de carácter architextual" (33). Additionally, Contreras Castro's work should not be considered as merely a random collection of stories. Instead, as Teresa Gómez Trueba has observed of recent collections of microfiction, "la disposición de los textos viene determinada por la voluntad previa de componer un conjunto organizado y no una mera reunión más o menos azarosa de microrrelatos […] ya no se habla solo de unidad temática, sino de una nueva estructura narrativa […] a partir del ensamblaje de unos determinados microrrelatos" (40). The arrangement of some of the titles in the collection suggests that the stories are in dialogue, and often at tension, with one another. For example, "Crimen y castigo" (234) and "Ante La Ley" (235) not only reference two titles of world literature, but they also share a thematic focus on the legal aspects of labor and production.[39]

Whereas the first ironically notes that the legal problem of child labor was finally resolved by simply decriminalizing it, the second notes that "La Ley existe para proteger ciertas zonas" and does not exist outside of the Protected Zones (235). Similarly, "El suelo que pisamos" (210) and "'San Francisco caminó sobre las aguas'" (211) both invoke through their titles images of walking – albeit across different surface types – and describe buried or forgotten worlds. The former ends with the exclamation that "¡No sabíamos que había un cementerio bajo el lodo donde jugábamos" (210), whereas the latter describes masses of people surviving a catastrophic earthquake by "caminando sobre la capa espesa de basura que cubría el mar" (211). What is more, the layer of trash that covers the sea in "'San Francisco caminó sobre las aguas'" finds some resonance later in the collection with "Mitos de las gentes de los mares del norte",

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[39] The first is title is simply the Spanish translation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), whereas "Ante la Ley" ("Before the Law") is a parable included in Franz Kafka's posthumously published novel *The Trial* (1925).

which states that "Debajo de esta capa espesa de petróleo hay un mar azul en verano, y en invierno, gris" (229). Numerous other intratextual connections exist throughout *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*, which supports the argument that it is not simply a random collection of microfiction.

Another way in which *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* resists categorization is the integration of different literary forms and genres. The collection weaves together elements of prose, poetry, drama, and philosophy, while also incorporating myths, aphorisms, legal and corporate statements, recipes, anecdotes, and an assortment of other types of textual fragments. As Jane Donawerth argues, "dystopia as a genre is the ideal site for generic blends. Conservative forms are transformed by merging with dystopia, a merge that forces political reconsideration, and traditionally conservative forms can progressively transform the dystopian genre so that its pessimism shifts from being resigned to being militant" (30). Similarly, Raffaella Baccolini has noted that by blending different genre conventions, the critical dystopia becomes a site of resistance and opposition, arguing that "The notion of an impure genre, one with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction" (521). In *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*, Contreras Castro radically resists traditional genre categorizations through the blending of different forms and techniques.

The result is a disorienting text that invites readers to pick their way through the fragments of a fractured and mostly unfamiliar future. The collection begins with a "Teoría del micro relato", which establishes that "No es un haiku. No es un koan. No es un teorema" (179), and yet both a koan (267) and a theorem (280) explicitly appear under those respective titles towards the end of text. The next two titles, "Coordenadas espaciales" and "Coordenadas

temporales", are the only entries in the entire collection that appear on the same page, which leaves the reader with no choice but to view them together (180). Together, the two entries give the textual impression of a dramatic work by outlining the different settings and cast of characters that will appear in the collection. Some of the settings, incidentally, situate the events in a dramatically altered future world that differs from the space of "El que era nuestro mundo", including "Las Zonas Protegidas" and "Las ciudades abandonadas" (ibid). The cast of characters is divided into two seemingly oppositional groups: "los nómadas" and "los sedentarios" (181). Despite the apparent differences, there is some overlap between the two groups, which both contain "Los niños. Los adultos. Los viejos" (ibid). Both "Coordenadas espaciales" and "Coordenadas temporales" are significant because they introduce the spaces and characters that will appear throughout *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*, thereby foregrounding the interconnectivity of the fragments. This is further evident in the title "Padre e hijo #1", which is typographically formatted to resemble dialogue from a script. Moreover, the humorous tone of the dialogue appears to be at odds with the desperate state of affairs in the future:

> **Hijo:** – Papá, ¡dicen que somos nosotros los que pagamos la crisis!
>
> **Padre:** – ¡Es verdad!
>
> **Hijo:** – Entonces, ¿La crisis es nuestra?
>
> **Padre:** – ¡Así es, la crisis es toda nuestra!
>
> **Hijo:** – Papá, ¿Qué es la crisis? (185)

The continuity between different fragments and the genre-blending that occurs throughout *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* can be seen in the subsequent title, "Estadísticas elementales": "Dicen que desde que comenzó la crisis, los muertos se cuentan por millones. No es cierto…¡nadie nos cuenta!" (186). And while the question regarding the nature of the crisis

itself remains unanswered, “Estadísticas elementales” sheds some light on the situation by revealing the cost of the crisis in human lives.

The cost of the crisis is similarly mentioned several other times in the collection, but again without ever revealing the actual circumstances. There is, moreover, confusion regarding the timing of the crisis. In “Crisis de la crisis”, the crisis is set to occur in some undefined future: “En las zonas protegidas la gente vive más o menos como se va a vivir después de la gran crisis. ¿Es una promesa, o una amenaza?” (236). In “American Dream”, on the other hand, the crisis is set in the past: “Cientos de *containers* fueron abandonados en medio del desierto cuando comenzó la crisis” (205). The same is true in “Cien años de perdón”, which states that after the great crisis began, “los gobiernos de los países en bancarrota comenzaron a invertir en armamento” (264).[40] Together, these fragments suggest both continuity and contradiction, while at the same time highlighting the diverse ways in which a single issue or event is explored in the collection. The blending of genres in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida,* moreover, challenges conventional literary forms and textual authority, while also leaving open the possibility of hope in spite of the profound pessimism.

As we have seen above with titles like “Mitos de las gentes de los mares del norte”, myth and oral stories are an important part of *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* and serve to reveal the depths of ecological destruction at work in the future. In particular, it is the contrast between the grim realities of the post-crisis future and the nostalgic longing for a nearly forgotten past obscured by the consequences of conflict and climate change. “Luna rupestre” is one of several entries in this collection that point to the generational differences in perceiving the post-

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[40] The reference here is to the popular saying “Ladrón que roba a ladrón tiene cien años de perdón.” My thanks to Gustavo Pellón for bringing this to my attention.

apocalyptic natural world, as it describes an old man's longing for the sky to clear up long enough to see the moon, which now only exists in a book of photographs (227). Similarly, "Ojos de perro azul" paradoxically warns of both the immediacy of future ecological destruction and the slow violence of climate change.[41] The narrator questions "esa obsesión de los viejos con el color azul" – specifically for being the color of the sea, the mountains, the sky. For their part, the narrator prefers "los ojos grises del abuelo, son como el mar, como las montañas, como el cielo" (193). A similar sense of a lost past can be seen in "You may say I'm a dreamer," as the anonymous narrator invites us to imagine "un cielo azul, un sol brillante, una temperatura de 28 grados, una playa nudista…ahora que no hay cielo, ni sol, ahora que la lluvia perenne no nos deja estar desnudos" (250).[42] The dreary and unfamiliar climate of the future differs significantly from the hopeful message in the lyrics of Lennon's "Imagine". This sort of blending of the familiar and unfamiliar is one of the techniques repeatedly employed throughout *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida.*

The use of popular song lyrics further distorts the temporal distances between past and future, but it also ironically points to a world of silence. For example, in "The piper at the gates of dawn", the narrator explains that "Una flauta es lo más cercano a la naturaleza de los pájaros. Como ya no hay flautas, ni pájaros, el flautista imagina el ocaso, porque tampoco hay ocaso" (254).[43] Similar to the paradoxical absence of music in a fragment named after a Pink Floyd

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[41] García Márquez's book of short stories of the same name is just one of many references to literature, music, and film incorporated as titles in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida.*

[42] A similar statement can be seen in the fragment "Ricardo III", which reimagines the famous line from Shakespeare's play: "'¡Mi reino por un día de sol!', decís, pero no tenés reino, ni importa, porque los reyes tampoco tienen días de sol" (260).

[43] In total, *Fragmentos* only contains four titles that are explicitly in English, including the two titles mentioned on this page. The other two titles include "American Dream" – which reveals

album is the defamiliarization with a technological artifact from the present in “Silencio de corchea”, in which the narrator states that their grandmother “dice que es sagrada esa cajita plástica que cabe en la palma de la mano, y dice que tiene miles de canciones adentro como las que canta el abuelo con los tíos…¡Pobrecita!” (215). This apparent mythification of the past highlights both the collapse of technology in the future, as well as the tenuous nature of individual and collective memory: indeed, what will remain after the older generations disappear?

Where digital technology fails to maintain a record of the past, there is alternatively an effort to preserve memory through collective action. The piecing together of old songs in “Arqueología del saber” calls to mind the invocation of the English nursery rhyme “Oranges and Lemons” as a way of recovering the long-lost names of churches in Orwell’s *1984*: “Entre todos vamos reconstruyendo las viejas canciones. Nadie recuerda una completa. A veces logramos varias versiones de una misma y las conservamos todas…nada nos asegura que podamos recordar una más” (239). However, if “Arqueología del saber” offers a flash of hope for the possibility of recuperating fragments of the forgotten past, “Los cantos perdidos” stands in diametric opposition by instead championing resignation and the acceptance of hopelessness: “¡Es inútil! Dejá de buscarlas, dejá de arrastrar la mirada por el océano. ¡Las mataron a todas! Eso que escuchás es un eco cada día más tenue” (257).[44] Similarly, the very brief fragment “Réquiem” draws a clear parallel between the tragedies of death and a future without music:

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the discovery of hundreds of abandoned shipping containers, many of which turn out to be “las tumbas de cientos de ilegales” (205) – and “Before Vendetta”, which alludes to the dystopian novel and film *V for Vendetta* in terms of both the content and the approximation between the written representation – “before Vendetta” – and the spoken – “*V for Vendetta*”.

[44] The title of Foucault’s 1969 treatise is among the several references to philosophical works that appear throughout Contreras Castro’s collection of microfiction.

"Nos dejó sin guitarra. ¡Se ahorcó con las cuerdas!" (262). As the body of the guitar is rendered useless in the absence of strings and stripped of its functionality, there is also an implicit allusion to material scarcity with the apparent suggestion that there are no other intact guitars available. The paradoxical abundance of references to technologies of music and the persistent absence of music-playing and music-making presents the future as a destination that is both far removed from the present and yet imminently close.

The continued estrangement of the present in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* is further emphasized through the defamiliarization of otherwise recognizable references to the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries more broadly. There is a sense of individual despair echoed in "Como cuando parpadeaban las luces a lo lejos", as the narrator laments missing alcohol and drugs, music, city life, TV and the internet, and "a la gente que sabía qué era todo eso" (248). In this direct appeal from a narrator who appears to be familiar with technologies and comforts of the pre-crisis past, the reader becomes aware of their own obsolescence in the future. Another form of estrangement can be seen in the title "Fronteras sin médicos", which inverts the name of a well-known humanitarian NGO that exists in the present as a way of emphasizing an extreme alternative reality in the future (192). The consequences of the future failure of present efforts at curbing climate change are evident in "Protocolo de Kioto", in which both the memory of one of Japan's largest cities and the 1997 international climate treaty that was adopted there have been erased by the effects of climate change: "'Protocolo de Kioto,' así se llama la ciudad submarina que construyeron los japoneses" (250). Kyoto exists in the future only in mythicized form, stripped of its history over the course of several generations. While the inherent brevity of microfiction as a form does not allow for detailed descriptions of setting or character, Contreras

Castro succeeds in mapping the fractured landscapes of the future by invoking and drawing contrasts with a forgotten past.

In addition to cultural and historical references, the past is present in the future by way of remnants and relics, which serve as a sort of foundation for the post-crisis world. In the aptly titled "451F", the narrator reflects on the increasing difficulty of locating libraries and bookstores, which presumably have been long ago looted – not for the legacy of literature or the preservation of literacy, but instead for the basic means provided by the materiality of books: "Encontrar una biblioteca pública ya es imposible. Encontrar una librería es muy difícil. Rara vez encontramos una biblioteca personal en una casa abandonada y durante varios días tenemos con qué calentarnos" (223).[45] Once again, what is significant about this fragment is that it very efficiently and effectively depicts a future landscape of societies in shambles, of abandoned public and private structures, of hostile environmental conditions, of resource scarcity, and the primal importance of survival strategies. This theme also appears in "Dialéctica de la ilustración", which takes a more humorous approach: "Siempre se dijo que era importante tener títulos de propiedad y diplomas universitarios. ¡Y era cierto!, fueron los últimos papeles que aportaron los abuelos al fuego común para calentarnos una madrugada fría" (206).[46] What stands out here is the question of intergenerational differences, as it is the elders who provide their once highly valued documents as a sort of sacrifice made in desperation for the common good. Documents that were formerly appreciated for their symbolic or legal functions are valued in the

[45] In Ray Bradbury's novel, books have been outlawed as part of a larger political culture of censorship in a future version of the US that has criminalized free thought and privileged mass consumption of television.

[46] The title of the 1944 book by Horkheimer and Adorno is one of several references to philosophical works to appear in *Fragmentos.*

future strictly for their materiality as combustible objects that promise immediate but temporary relief from the cold.

Throughout *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*, the sometimes radical differences between generations distinguish the varied ways in which the fragmented future is experienced by the survivors. In “La marca hace la diferencia”, there is a genealogical progression of corporeality that marks the passage of time: “En los hombros de nuestros niños no se le ve la cicatriz que llevan sus padres donde, de niños, les insertaron el chip de identificación y localización por radio frecuencia, entonces obligatorio…Ni la que llevan sus abuelos donde, de niños, les aplicaron las vacunas, entonces obligatorias” (p. 198). Similarly, there is a disconnect between the experience of the narrator of “Orgánico certificado” and his grandfather, whose daily ritual is to take out “esa bolsita que dice ‘café orgánico certificado’, la desenvuelve, la estira y la huele un buen rato. Después la guarda cuidosamente. A veces le corren las lágrimas” (218). Not only does this reference echo references to persistent rain and similar climatic changes in some of the other entries, “Orgánico certificado” also brings to mind Victory Coffee in Orwell’s *1984*, which adds yet another layer of interpretation to the collection. For its part, the story “George O.” by alluding to Orwell, underscores the fact that in spite of the apparent chaos and instability in this future world, there is still, importantly, an inescapable element of surveillance and control: “Más allá de las fronteras, las cámaras con que vigilan nuestros movimientos ya no son para su seguridad, sino para su entretenimiento” (245). Finally, in “Las nobles verdades”, the elders discuss the ways in which they teach the younger generations the “artes fundamentales: Hacer el fuego. Filtrar el agua. Acertar con la flecha. Memorizar las canciones. Consultar el Oráculo” (213). Here, the preservation of the past and the pursuit of the future are valued among the vital skills of survival.

Survival strategies in a world of scarcity is a common theme that plays out in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida*, and it effectively underscores the strangeness of the post-crisis future. With limited resources available, survivors must find creative sources of sustenance, which establishes a parallel between future humans and their ancient ancestors. In "Vacas flacas", the narrator describes the nomadic lifestyle of a group that appears to be following the trail of cattle. What is important to point out here, however, is that the cattle are already dead: "Algunas están descompuestas y apestan, otras no tanto. Las comemos una por una. Después bajamos las tiendas y seguimos caminando" (221). Whereas the once domesticated cattle appear to be heading to extinction, dogs take their place as valuable objects of consumption and exchange. In "El mejor amigo del perro", the narrator addresses the important role that dogs play in dealing with the food and fuel shortages in the post-crisis future: "Criamos perros porque por un perro vivo nos dan una llanta, y una llanta arde varias horas, las necesarias para asar un perro" (273). Persistent hunger and the scarcity of food lead to survivors taking even more desperate measures, such as stealing an elephant from the zoo (231); a beach battle between humans and equally ravenous seagulls over precious meat (246); and a man literally surviving on his savings, who "se comió los billetes que guardaba en una caja fuerte" (270). "Receta para una mermelada de hormiga" outlines a rudimentary technique for capturing ants that brings to mind the tools utilized by chimpanzees for catching insects (233). The development of new strategies for finding food reflects the hostile conditions faced by the survivors. In the post-crisis future world, however, food scarcity is also a direct consequence of privatization and tight control over the use of land and access to seeds.

Much like *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* and *Transhumano demasiado transhumano*, the post-crisis future landscape in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* includes

large swaths of land that are restricted areas known as *zonas protegidas*, which are specifically designated for production activities. In contrast with the scenes of decomposing cow carcasses mentioned above, the *zonas protegidas* are rumored to have potable water, solar energy, and grazing livestock (230). Outside of the protected zones, survivors must fight hunger and colder temperatures while also being denied both the means for growing their own food and a space for cultivating crops. Seeds are stored in hidden bunkers that are protected by armed guards (214), and the possession of seeds is illegal (241). Nevertheless, both the sedentary groups and nomads work clandestinely to preserve seeds for the future. The sedentary communities, for their part, establish themselves in mountain clearings with the seeds that they have kept illegally (238), whereas the nomads carry sacks of soil on their backs and place seeds in their ears, where the body warmth eventually allows them to germinate (232). And while the issues of food scarcity, *zonas protegidas*, and seed monopolization may seem like an exaggeration, there are clear historical precedents that implicitly inform Contreras Castro's imagining of the future. In particular, one need only to consider the extensive history of land appropriation in Central America by multinational agroindustrial corporations. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that Monsanto alone currently controls over one third of the global seed market.[47] The situations and conditions of the post-crisis world in *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* are projections into the future of existing realities in the present. And yet, as we see with the illicit activities of the sedentary communities and nomads who attempt to preserve seeds and cultivate crops, the ongoing efforts to remember a forgotten past through stories and songs, as well as the often humorous and ironic tone of the narration, the collection of fragments keeps a horizon of hope.

[47] For more on Big Ag and the monopolistic control over world food supplies, please see https://geneticliteracyproject.org/gmo-faq/does-big-ag-dominate-crop-research-and-the-global-seed-supply-controlling-the-world-food-market/.

Transhumano demasiado transhumano [Give date of publication?]

In *The Ecological Thought,* Timothy Morton argues: "Imagine the air we breathe becoming unbreathable. There will be no more environmental poetry because we will all be dead. Some ecological language appears to delight in this, even sadistically, by imagining what the world would be like without us. Some deep ecological writing anticipates a day when humans are obliterated like a toxic virus or vermin" (31). *Transhumano demasiado transhumano* does precisely this: the novel is presented as an anthology of chronicles written by Antonio La Puente, whose writings explore the transformation of Central America into "un gigantesco proyecto urbanístico. Dos tipos de ciudades privadas fueron los elegidos para la zona: las ciudades tipo VIP, para 'vivir como en siglo XXII', con todos los lujos de una 'ciudad inteligente', y las 'Zonas Protegidas', zonas de producción, maquilas, zonas agrícolas y ganaderas" (13). This division of the landscape into privileged, protected cities of consumption and spaces of production, reflects what Franco Berardi sees as the fundamental separation in contemporary global society between "the inside-the-bunker social sphere and the outside-the-bunker social sphere" – where the bunker is the site of "the function of the financial decisions that dominate and exploit the whole cycle of production and the function of cognitive labor," and where the extra-bunker space is reserved for people whose "subsistence is based on a direct relation to the physical matter of production. This is the unprotected territory of the metropolis: industrial workers, the unemployed, migrants, refugees" (p.138).

Published in the year 2127, the book contains columns written by La Puente between the years 2023 and 2073. And while the original publication dates of the individual columns are not included in the anthology, there is a sort of chronological sequencing evident in the themes

covered within the chronicles, particularly through the progressively more advanced technologies that are presented and critiqued in each one. Perhaps just as importantly, the anthology marks the first time that the columnist's work – which "estuvo censurada para los habitantes del exterior de las ciudades privadas a lo largo de varias décadas durante el último dominio humano" – has appeared in print (ix). In that sense, then, the publication provides a degree of permanence to a record of the past that has been controlled by authorities and restricted by technology.[48] As a collection, La Puente's chronicles bear witness to the tremendous technological, social, and biological changes that take place over the course of the twenty-first century by providing an account of major historical events, from the inauguration of the high tech private city of Lempira Siglo XXII in the year 2022 to the eventual expulsion of the last humans from private cities across the globe following the introduction of the first generations of transhumans. This ongoing oscillation between present and future, as well as the reversion of humanity back to a less technologically developed, predigital state, creates a sort of disorienting expansion and contraction of future history that serves to remind the contemporary reader of *Transhumano demasiado transhumano* of the approaching crises brought about by globalization.

The world from which the private city of Lempira Siglo XXII emerges is one marked by violence, economic insecurity, and political instability. La Puente frames the founding of the city within the context of a series of destabilizing historical events – in particular, Hurricane Mitch (1998); the military coup in Tegucigalpa (2009); and having the world's highest murder rate (2012) – that would eventually lead to Honduras becoming "el infierno fértil que se andaba

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[48] It is worth noting here Justin Joque's discussion of cyberwar, wherein "the whole structure of knowing and observing is opened as a site of direct military intervention. It is not only a question of interpretation and selective archives. The entire archive and our ability to comprehend the archive may be attacked at any moment" (7).

buscando para plantar una semilla nueva en el planeta" with Lempira Siglo XXII (7). Initially financed by South Korea and a number of powerful transnational corporate enterprises, the private city represents "la máxima realización de las ideologías neoliberales del último cuarto del siglo XX" (15). Built on a parcel of land in expropriated indigenous territory and purchased directly from the Honduran government, the city takes a total of ten years to build. La Puente suggests that the region was already priming itself for foreign investment and megaprojects thirty years before the planning of Lempira Siglo XXII. While he does not explicitly name the peace accords of 1992, it is clear that the "pacificación" and "estabilización" mentioned by La Puente refer to the postwar period in Central America, which was in many ways shaped by the neoliberal shift (13).[49] It is against this backdrop, and under the pretense of safety and security, that the city of Lempira Siglo XXII is conceived and constructed.

And although Lempira Siglo XXII is an innovative urban project designed, in part, to serve as a model for future private cities, it should be noted that it is part of a larger trend that points to the imminent and inevitable collapse of geopolitical borders and sovereign nations. The future, as La Puente points out in his early chronicles of the city, will be dictated by access to advanced technology: "Poco a poco los antiguos estados van desapareciendo, y el mundo se dividirá por las murallas de las ciudades privadas en un interior altamente avanzado en tecnologías y modos de vida, y un extramuros donde las gentes más dispares vivan de maneras cada vez más primitivas, reducidas a reservas genéticas y manos de obra esclava" (15). Beyond

[49] As Misha Kokotovic has convincingly argued, "The parties of the former guerrillas have had little success in slowing the implementation by Central American governments of the free market, neoliberal economic and social policies promoted by the United States in Latin America and throughout the world. […] Though intended to bring about socialism, the revolutionary wars of the 1970s and 1980s may instead have facilitated the hegemony of transnational free-market capitalism in Central America" (17).

the walls of Lempira Siglo XXII, the population of the former republic of Honduras is essentially divided into two main groups: employees of the private city, and the unemployed, which consists of "los desempleados que no abandonaban el país y conservaban la inútil esperanza de convertirse en empleados, y los que se sumaban a las interminables filas de los 'sin tierra' centroamericanos, que ya constituían una aplastante mayoría" (5). It is worth noting here that Lempira Siglo XXII represents one of two types of private cities. Developed as a "ciudad inteligente" with all sorts of luxuries and comforts, it is a city that caters to the wealthy. In contrast are the *zonas protegidas*, which include "zonas de producción, maquilas, zonas agrícolas y ganaderías" (13). This second class of private cities in many ways encapsulates the exploitative and extractivist development of Central America throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

If Lempira Siglo XXII exemplifies the more luxurious and secure variety of private cities – indeed, a "VIP" city – it still manages to conceal some problematic plans for its clients, and by extension all of humanity. During the ten years of city planning, a select team from the Department of Eugenics and Genetic Engineering – named after the Spanish conquistador and governor of Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras – has worked on "la elaboración de las políticas de eugenesia, salud pública e higiene de la ciudad" (11). At the same time, one of the preliminary requirements for becoming a member of Lempira Siglo XXII is to have a neural interface implanted behind the ears, which enables users to connect virtually with the digital city. From the beginning, then, La Puente implicitly calls into question the motives of the megacorporations and presents the reader with a view of an uncertain future where both bodies and minds are to be closely surveilled and controlled. While La Puente's chronicles take aim at a wide array of cultural phenomena and social issues, what remains consistent is a certain degree

of apprehension towards the rapid advancement of technology and the potential consequences. As someone living within the walls of the *ciudad inteligente* – a physical city that is interlinked with a virtual network to which members must be connected – La Puente has the privilege of being present to witness technological and social developments in real-time. And despite having free rein to publish his columns within Lempira Siglo XXII and other private cities, La Puente's work is censored for readers beyond the walls for several decades – presumably because of the questions raised and his critical approach to the operations and intentions of the Mega Empresa Planetaria (ix). Indeed, La Puente's columns raise questions about the ethics of scientific experiments and projects that are undertaken for the sake of profit potential and the creation of new markets. There is, more importantly, the increasingly relevant and urgent question about the future of humanity in a digital, genetically engineered world.

The first of La Puente's chronicles included in the anthology explores the possibilities and limitations of technology in the new city. Focusing on the inauguration of Lempira Siglo XXII, the columnist covers some of the early milestones that seem to point to a promising future offered by the technological advancements of a digitally-integrated city. When one of the spectators enjoying the virtual fireworks display as part of the inaugural festivities suddenly suffers a brain aneurysm, the emergency leads to a series of firsts for the city and the new technologies that support it. First, a biometrics app instantly transmits the patient's vital signs to the local hospital, which immediately sends an emergency transport vehicle in response. Meanwhile, an urgent message is delivered to a 17-year-old neurosurgeon, who performs the first successful virtual surgical intervention from a distance of several kilometers. The operation not only successfully demonstrates the practicality and effectiveness of virtual reality in an emergency medical setting, but it also serves as a sort of proof of concept for the myriad uses for

the smart lenses that connect the members of Lempira Siglo XXII, all of whom have simultaneously observed the nearly three-hour operation. This singular event in the inaugural moments of the city points to issues of security, surveillance, and virtual commodification that reappear throughout La Puente's chronicles. And yet behind the ostensible promise of a future world vastly improved by technology, the smart lenses and the inaugural festivities at Lempira Siglo XXII hide a darker side of reality. La Puente is sternly reminded by the city's disciplinary council that "aquí no hay ciudadanos, pese a ser esta una ciudad. Aquí solo hay clientes. La gente como usted y su familia vive aquí porque pudo pagar la membrecía, eso es todo" (14). This shift from a society of citizens to a society of consumers has been taking place for some time, as Néstor García-Canclini has noted:

> The relation between citizens and consumers has been altered throughout the world due to economic, technological, and cultural changes that have impeded the constitution of identities through national symbols […] For many men and women, especially youth, the questions specific to citizenship, such as how we inform ourselves and who represents our interests, are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities and media offerings than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations (5)

This point is particularly relevant to the founding of – and future plans for – the private city of Lempira Siglo XXII, an urban development built exclusively for a mostly young population of applicants from families with financial means.

Connected to the city through virtual reality, its clients have little to no agency when it comes to navigating a new world that is filtered through technology. When the young neurosurgeon briefly disconnects his smart lenses during the celebratory fireworks display, the

city's virtual facade immediately vanishes: "había oscuridad y silencio donde un segundo antes había habido el más estremecedor espectáculo de fuegos artificiales desde la escena de los hobits manipulando las pólvoras de Gandalf en el inolvidable clásico del rudimentario cine de principios de siglo" (4). Members of Lempira Siglo XXII and other private cities are lulled into accepting an altered version of reality, while at the same time being influenced by content controlled by megacorporations. Similarly, while Lempira Siglo XXII appears, at least from within, to be a city illuminated from all sides by a spectacular fireworks display, seen from beyond its walls, "la ciudad privada se veía como un oscuro ajedrez de sombras y silencio" (ibid). And although La Puente's chronicles focus on issues and current events taking place within the walls of the city, he is also unwavering in his insistence on reminding readers of the existence of a world beyond its borders, suggesting that "el mundo era eso que no tenía acceso a Lempira Siglo XXII" (5). This dichotomy is one that resurges towards the end of the novel, when the last humans, including La Puente, are expelled from the private cities. The social, economic, and political disparities between the walled city and the outside world is a theme that Contreras Castro explores in earlier works, such as *Única mirando al mar* (1993), *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* (2006), and *Fragmentos de la Tierra Prometida* (2013), and I would argue that it reflects a certain apprehension about the future implications of the ongoing consolidation of power among megacorporations, particularly in relation to citizenship.

While La Puente's chronicles document the innovative technological advancements at the core of numerous ongoing projects, they also express a certain degree of anxiety regarding the growing influence exerted by megacorporations for us in the twenty first century. As John P. Clark has recently observed,

> Today, we're faced with the dominance of late capitalist pseudo-topias and pseudo-utopias, spaces that fake place and fake goodness. They are the spaces of economistic, bureaucratic, and technocratic domination. They are the spaces in which the imitation of life replaces life, and a simulacrum of society devours community. They are the spaces in which nihilism, the loss of faith in life and community, is internalized so completely that those who rebel against the ruling version of utopia can only do so through a reactive nihilism (287)

Indeed, while Lempira Siglo XXII and the numerous private cities around the planet that are modeled after it promise their members security and a better world vastly improved by technology, the true intentions of the powerful corporations gradually come into focus. On the subject of the Silla de Dios, an enormous throne being built in the desert for God's return on Judgment Day, La Puente considers it to be a "proyecto perverso, con fines hegemónicos y comerciales" that invites every sort of investment – including taxes, tithes, and donations (33). Moreover, the media's concocted stories about crusades and holy wars waged over the throne, as well as reports of terrorist attacks, are designed to "enardecer las masas y provocar el deseo de cada devoto de colaborar en favor del trono que ocupará su Dios", with the ultimate goal being "el aniquilamiento de las fronteras geopolíticas del mundo y la consolidación de la Mega Empresa Planetaria" (34). Similarly, in his coverage of the global campaign to elect a suitable candidate from a pool of pre-selected deceased women to be medically resurrected from the dead, La Puente criticizes the commodification of corpses by corporations "en vallas publicitarias, en anuncios comerciales en todos los medios, y agregando los rostros de las chicas al lado de los logotipos de las etiquetas de sus productos" (46). The contest, as La Puente observes, threatens to devalue human life and trivialize death, but it also raises critical questions

about consent and the commercialization of private information after death. The end goal of the global competition is twofold. On the one hand, the emotion and drama surrounding the contest "es el medio buscado por sus viles organizadores para el fin último de comprometer al inadvertido consumidor en una guerra mediática que, como resultado positivo, redundará en ganancias millonarias para las firmas patrocinadoras" (49). On the other hand, the competition serves as a proof of concept for the previously theoretical idea of reversing the natural cycle of life. Once resurrection has been demonstrated successfully, La Puente warns, it will become a private service available only to the wealthy, "con lo cual se deja a la muerte reducida a uno más de los padecimientos de clase, como ocurre con las enfermedades cuya cura, en vez de democratizarse, se vende a precios impagables para los sectores desfavorecidos" (51). Both of these projects push the boundaries of technology while capitalizing on the emotions of members in order to drive media traffic and to maximize profits.

In La Puente's chronicles that explore issues related to the further integration of the biological with the technological, the future trajectory of Lempira Siglo XXII and other private cities comes into perspective. Each new campaign and technological innovation is informed – at least to some degree – by previous projects and discoveries. And while technology promises to deliver exciting, new possibilities to members that had previously only existed in the realm of science fiction, as La Puente observes on several occasions, these chronicles raise questions about the implications of both surveillance and the commercialization of the body. Given that the implanting of a microchip is one of the conditions for membership in Lempira Siglo XXII and other private cities, it is not surprising that corporations continue to explore and exploit ways of further integrating technology with human consciousness. La Puente supports the Programa Borges, which consists of a "libro incorporado, o interiorizado" that transmits "al cerebro

humano el contenido puro y puntual de un texto literario" (35). The technology, which has been in the testing phase for three decades and remains mostly classified, allows its users to become "el autor definitivo y soberano de la obra que lea" (39).[50]

Rather than passive readers who simply absorb information, as was the intended outcome, the inner-book instead produces active creators, as each subject experiences something uniquely different from the original text and from other subjects exposed to the same material. What makes the Programa Borges a threat to the newly established social order is its inability to be standardized and controlled, a point that highlights the Mega Empresa Planetaria's ongoing objective of one day being able to control, manipulate, and monitor the minds of its members by taking advantage of the embedded neural chips.

Unlike the Programa Borges, which feeds information into the user's smart lenses and deposits vast volumes of hyper-compressed information into the brain, the "Imperativo de la verdad" is a procedure designed to facilitate in the interrogation of suspects by prompting the forced recall of a specific memory, using a device the width of a human hair that is attached to the brain. The procedure, which has yet to be proven successful, operates under the fallacious assumption that memory is a faithful reproduction of past events. While the procedure highlights the tenuous nature of testimonies, accusations, and sworn oaths, La Puente speculates that perhaps it "solo sirve de base y fundamento positivo a la vieja sospecha de que son las leyes las

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[50] I read this as having two open interpretations, which are not necessarily mututally exclusive. On the one hand, it brings to mind the memorization of texts in dystopian futures that view books as an existential threat, such as Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, in which the protagonist Guy Montag discovers at the end of the novel that he has partially memorized "Ecclesisastes", and Denzel Washington's character in the 2010 film *The Book of Eli*, in which the title character's closely guarded copy of the Bible turns out to be in Braille, which he has also memorized in its entirety. On the other hand, this also points to digital dystopias such as William Gibson's *Johnny Mneumonic* (1981), upon which the 1995 film of the same name was based.

que crean al infractor" (58). La Puente concludes his column by noting that the project suffers from the very same deficiencies as its unreliable predecessors – the truth serum and the lie detector (61). Nevertheless, despite its documented ineffectiveness, the enterprise is ready to finalize the device's rollout and begin implementing the procedure as soon as possible. La Puente's column hints at the inevitable misuse of the technology in the misappropriation of justice. With each new device or experiment, it seems, there arise greater opportunities for controlling the minds of members and collecting an enormous pool of data.

The issues of surveillance, security, and citizenship become even more urgent with the launching of Cerebro 2030, a massive prison complex orbiting the planet.[51] Although it is ostensibly constructed with the intention of making cities safer and lowering the crime rate, La Puente decries the idea of "la justicia en manos de una megacorporación que no debe explicaciones a nadie", particularly in light of the topics covered in his earlier chronicles (63). If the Imperativo de la verdad recalls, to some degree, the application of mind-reading capabilities and law enforcement activities reminiscent of *Minority Report*, the enormous penitentiary brings to mind the sort of body-mind harvesting seen in *The Matrix* trilogy. Prisoners are condemned to a permanent dream state, as their bodies are "alimentado[s] y cuidado[s] por un sistema de entubamiento gástrico, conexión intravenosa, electroestimulación muscular y, finalmente, cada cerebro es monitoreado desde el procesador central por una interfaz encefálica" (66). Financed by both politicians and corporations, the 52-story prison has taken 16 years and a total of 1.2 million workers to construct and is now entirely maintained by robots and monitored remotely by

[51] One of the themes that I hope to explore in greater depth as I develop this project further in the future is the apparent shift from Contreras Castro's earlier works – which included numerous references to Greek mythology and showed a strong interest in the architecture of the historical and contemporary representations of San José alike – and his most recent, which tend to explore unrealized spaces and are informed more directly by philosophers such as Foucault.

humans on Earth. At the center of the colossal circular structure is an enormous database powered by the most advanced processor available, which is critical for supporting the corporation's ambitious project of building "una verdadera **gramática de los sueños** con miras a su total comprensión, en una primera etapa, para llegar posteriormente a su manipulación y dominio" (66, emphasis in the original). The project requires not only adequate processing power to store the endless streams of data, but also a steady supply of human subjects from which to extract data.

This demand for more inmates can only be achieved by streamlining the judicial process and broadening the definition of punishable crimes, which results in not only adults being incarcerated, but also children and newborns. To justify such a clear violation of human rights, the Corporación Cerebro comes up with new classifications, such as "criminales por defecto", and exploits statistics to identify appropriate target populations from which to select its juvenile test subjects. As a result, "Miles de niños, provenientes en su mayoría de regiones pobres, conflictivas, o superpobladas del planeta, arriban a Cerebro 2030 y son introducidos a sus 'féretros', víctimas de juicios sumarios, condenados a salir del mundo de la vigilia e ingresar al sueño forzado como sujetos experimentales" (69). The project, moreover, is one that will require many generations to complete, which in turn necessitates that the public accept the increasingly aggressive approaches to law enforcement and strict sentencing guidelines for even the most insignificant or imagined infraction. Thus, the general population is suddenly turned into a pool of potential test subjects for the prison: "todo ciudadano es susceptible, sin excepción, de calificar como criminal e ir a parar a ese gigantesco cementerio donde los muertos flotan vivos alrededor del planeta" (73). La Puente laments that humanity has not learned any lessons from historical events such as the Holocaust or Abu Ghraib, preferring instead to buy into the promise

of technology as a suitable solution for perceived societal problems. The goal of Cerebro 2030 is not to make society more secure or to reform criminals, but instead "lo que se sigue condenando es la pobreza, y que el objetivo sigue siendo el control cada vez más minucioso de las poblaciones" (ibid). This last point is particularly relevant considering that it is unclear who will access and act upon the data generated from the perpetually dreaming inmates. Regardless, as Justin Joques has noted of complex systems of computation, "these systems aggregate code written across the globe and parts manufactured outside the purview of their owners into complex networks that belie attempts to control them" (5). As artificial intelligence continues to become more advanced, humanity's control over data will become increasingly tenuous.[52] Moreover, corporate control over the human body and mind via technological devices and systems of surveillance has potentially far-reaching implications for the real future of humanity.

The commercialization of technologies ostensibly designed for altruistic purposes continues to be the focus of La Puente's attention in the column "Cinco segundos y cuarto bien valen 'su peso' en oro", which discusses the development of a liquid chip of virtually infinite storage capacity. While the chip offers a number of promising benefits, such as "ubicación inequívoca de los sujetos, biometría infalible, alerta instantánea ante la aparición de la más insignificante 'anomalía' en el organismo", the true purpose of the chip is in fact to copy "cuantas cadenas sinápticas fuera posible, con el fin de 'cartografiar' una sensación" (75). And while the project ultimately falls short in its objectives of replicating sensory experiences between subjects, the development of a database of synaptic maps takes humanity one step closer to being reproducible and synthesizable. It is precisely this shift that La Puente covers in his final

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[52] See Delbert, Caroline. "There's a Damn Good Chance AI Will Destroy Humanity, Researchers Say in a New Study", *Popular Mechanics*, 14 October 2022.

two columns, which chronicle the introduction of transhumans, which are intended to be the link between a human past and a posthuman future.[53] The public unveiling of the first generation of transhumans takes place on March 3, 2070 – nearly half a century after La Puente's initial chronicles about the inauguration of Lempira Siglo XXII. The city, along with hundreds of other private cities around the planet, is presenting this first cohort of 1,200 transhuman children – who are born genderless and with skin tones not found among human populations – as "el máximo logro de la ingeniería genética alcanzado hasta la fecha" (85). Given that genetic engineering was part of the original planning process of Lempira Siglo XXII even before its inauguration, it can be inferred that the plans for developing transhumans were present from the very beginning, and that all of the projects and experiments over the years have been leading up to this: "son el resultado de más de cien años de experimentos y son el sueño realizado de la antigua ciencia ficción" (88). While the peculiar and exceptional transhuman children are initially met with awe and curiosity, their arrival also poses a direct threat to the future of humanity. The writing, it seems, has long been on the wall: "entendimos por qué se cernían sobre nosotros aquellas gigantescas cúpulas sintéticas: en diez años no habrá bajo las cúpulas un solo ser humano, la presión atmosférica se elevará a un nivel insoportable para nuestros débiles cuerpos" (87). The city, ostensibly built for the security of its paying members, will gradually become inaccessible to all humans, who have come to rely on chips and other devices to interact with the virtual interface built into the private cities. The transhumans, in contrast, "pueden interactuar con la realidad virtual de manera incomprensible para nosotros, sin prótesis, sin

[53] The evolution of transhumans in Contreras Castro's novel can be understood in relation to Max More's definition of transhumanism as a movement that "recognizes and anticipates the radical alterations in the conditions of our existence resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, space habitation, and so on" (6).

interfaces” (88). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that humans will become increasingly dependent on transhumans as they suddenly find themselves to be “una especie en extinción” (ibid). With the birth of transhumans, humans have been cast out of the future, relegated to their new role as the providers of genetic material.

By the final column in the anthology, it is unclear how many humans actually remain on the planet. La Puente never explains what became of the “millones de personas” who had been excluded from the VIP private cities in the 2020s, noting only that “las reservas genéticas est[á]n pobladas por miles de seres humanos” destined to serve as the gene pool for transhumans (91). The countless children and adults who have been rounded up and sent to the prison complex in space would account for some of the reduction in the population of humans on the planet, as would the aftermath of the false flag attack that destroys the Panama Canal in 2037, which “fue el inicio de una serie de bombardeos a varias ciudades latinoamericanas cuyos pueblos no renunciaban aún la idea de república soberana” (90). La Puente writes this final series twenty years after the introduction of the first transhumans, and five years after the last humans are evactuated from the now uninhabitable private cities. Humans have now been rendered utterly obsolete by transhumans, who continue to develop new technology for their own use and cut humans off from accessing virtual reality and other technologies that they had previously enjoyed in the private cities. Instead of a high-tech future world, the surviving humans are returned “a las formas de vida de finales del siglo xx, sin las pesadillas de la época” (95). And yet, far from living in miserable conditions, the remaining humans are well taken care of, as they continue to serve as the raw materials for transhumans. Deprived of access to the high-tech devices and virtual reality found in the private cities, the surviving humans do have access to books and other relics of history: “las bibliotecas, monumentos y museos de las antiguas

ciudades" become their pilgrimage sites (97). Despite their apparent freedom, however, the future for humans has become increasingly uncertain.

The end of La Puente's column finds humans comfortable, and yet both oblivious and mere steps away from obsolescence. They are under constant surveillance, with even the most mundane details of everyday life being tracked and recorded. And while the transhumans have acquired virtually everything they could take from humans, including genetic material and the sum of all human knowledge, "no cesan de observarnos, de analizar los datos que tienen de nosostros…como si de alguna manera, desearan algo que aún poseemos y de lo que no hubieran podido apropiarse" (98). And yet, as La Puente points out, it would be an error to assume that transhumans are a continuation, or an evolution of humanity. Unfortunately for the remaining humans, the transhumans owe them nothing: it was machines that made transhumans possible, and supercomputers which designed their genetic code and functionality. And despite the fact that they are allowing humans to live in comfortable conditions, there is simply not enough known about the transhumans to be able to determine whether their intentions are innocent or sinister – a quandary that only grows more puzzling with time. La Puente makes an important point about future relations between human and transhumans: "cuando muera el último humano portador de intelilentes, el mundo de los transhumanos será invisible para los sobrevivientes. No se volverá a saber de ellos" (100). That world is already one that is impossible for humans to comprehend: transhumans are able to perceive other planes of reality without the aid of technology; their surveillance devices and systems are increasingly imperceptible to humans; and the walls of the private cities begin to blend into the landscape. The transhumans, in other words, have rendered humans obsolete and themselves practically invisible.

La Puente concludes by speculating about the nature of the future relationship between humans and transhumans. Will they let humanity die out once they no longer need human DNA? Will they continue to intervene in human affairs, or will they forget about humanity altogether? Will humans continue to provide vital genetic information, or will transhumans figure out how to take the next evolutionary leap to posthumanism, abandoning their need for organic bodies? La Puente predicts that transhumans "¡Serán mitología! Nuestras crónicas, o lo que de ellas sobreviva, hablarán de seres magníficos con habilidades extraordinarias que sacaron a la humanidad de la edad oscura de las guerras y la destrucción, que limpiaron nuestros estanques, que mataron a los monstruos que nos acosaban, que limpiaron el aire y sanearon la Tierra" (102). La Puente's columns appear to be documenting both the final chapter in the history of a disappearing human race and the rapid evolution of a now invisible transhuman species. And yet the chronicles have been posthumously anthologized for the human reader by some form of nonhuman entity, which leaves a glimmer of hope for the future.

Conclusion: The future familiar

This dystopian trilogy by Fernando Contreras Castro imagines near-future worlds in which the combined effects of corporatization, climate change, and advanced technology bring humans to the brink of extinction – indeed, of being written out of the future history of a planet in peril. While these works do not explicitly ask us to take action, it is clear that they are drawn from the real conditions of the present and invite readers to reflect on the future consequences of actions and conditions in the present. As Amy Atchison and Shauna Shames rightly remind us, dystopian fiction "magnifies contemporary patterns or trends to warn us about what could result from them in the future" (36). Adam Stock similarly observes that modern dystopian fiction "often projects action forwards into the future in order to look back at the present, self

reflexively emphasizing the question how did we get here?" (1). And yet, when we examine actual existing conditions of the present, it becomes clear that the future dystopian worlds in Contreras Castro's works are not unimaginable or beyond the realm of possibility. The post-9/11 global landscape has become one of security, surveillance, and a constant state of war. The idea that artificial intelligence can soon destroy humanity is no longer the subject of science fiction. We are now entering an era in which the deep-fakes from five years ago seem so primitive, as AI can now, among other things, create frighteningly realistic images and videos from a written prompt. Our every movements are tracked and recorded, and we willfully sign away our rights to privacy for the sake of the newest app. Corporations now have ownership of the DNA data of millions of people across the planet, and gene editing technologies such as CRISPR – despite the promising applications in the medical field – pose serious questions about what sort of genetic manipulations will be performed in the future. And finally, the devastating effects of climate change are being felt with alarming frequency across the globe. The futures described in the works of Fernando Contreras Castro are no longer futures of fiction, but are instead increasingly reflections of our present reality. As critical dystopias, these works do not condemn us to an unavoidable fate, but instead offer reflections on how to change course.

Chapter 3. Rewriting the Revolution: Genre and Gender in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*

Algún día los campos estarán siempre verdes
y la tierra será negra, dulce y húmeda.
En ella crecerán altos nuestros hijos
y los hijos de nuestros hijos…
[…]

Algún día…

Hoy aramos los campos resecos
pero cada surco se moja con sangre.
- Daisy Zamora, "Canto de esperanza"

Crees que la vida es incendio,
que el progreso es erupción,
que en donde pones la bala
el porvenir pones.
No.
- Rubén Darío, "A Roosevelt"

Earlier this year, Daniel Ortega – president of Nicaragua for the past sixteen consecutive years – ordered the deportation of 222 political prisoners, as well as permanently removing their Nicaraguan citizenship. The following week, the former revolutionary leader stripped an additional 94 individuals of their citizenship and ordered any of the property held in their names to be seized by the state. Among the 94 Nicaraguan citizens targeted by Ortega were the journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro Barrios, the son of former president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, whose assassination by the Somoza regime in 1978 sparked widespread rioting and unrest in Nicaragua; the prominent writer Sergio Ramírez, who headed the Group of Twelve leading up to the Revolution in 1979 and later served as Ortega's vice president from 1985-1990; as well as the poet and novelist Gioconda Belli, who first joined the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in 1970 after befriending Daniel Ortega's younger brother, Camilo. It is worth noting that both Belli and Ramírez had

been forced into exile during the 1970s because of their involvement with the mounting opposition to the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

The move by Ortega to remove the national citizenship of his former comrades, functionaries in the Sandinista government during the 1980s, and global ambassadors of Nicaraguan culture – whom he accuses of "traición a la patria" and labels as "prófugos de la justicia" – is a clear reflection of the increasingly isolated leader's intolerance for any form of political criticism, particularly in the wake of protests against his regime that broke out in 2014.[54] What is more, it underscores Ortega's radical departure from the Sandinista politics of the Revolution and the country's return to authoritarianism under his rule. Finally, I would add that in attempting to erase Nicaraguan history, Ortega in fact steers the country further towards the very same dictatorial past from which he and other members of the FSLN, including Belli and Ramírez, had worked so hard to liberate the country.

This chapter examines Gioconda Belli's 1996 novel *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* as an expression of her disillusionment with the movement that Ortega ultimately hijacked and that Belli officially left in the early 1990s. I argue that as a critical dystopian text, *Waslala* reflects on the failures of the past and projects anxieties about the neoliberal present onto a future world that both serves as a warning and offers a vision of hope. In a world choking on trash, where violence and instability are rife, liberation is still possible by returning to the values of the Revolution, embracing communitarianism, and rejecting global capitalism. What is more, the prominent role of female protagonists in the novel seems to suggest that a future world without the active

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[54] The protests initially broke out in response to the start of construction on the Nicaraguan Canal project. Plans to build an interoceanic canal through Nicaragua, as we will see in this chapter, have been the source of conflict and continual episodes of foreign intervention for at least the past three centuries.

membership and participation of women is stagnant and unsustainable. Finally, the feminist reappropriation of traditional genres serves as a strategy of opposition and resistance.

Bending gender roles and blending genres

According to Ilja Luciak, the participation of women in the Sandinista movement can be divided into three distinct historical phases. First, from the movement's founding in 1961 to the early 1970s, there were relatively few women in the FSLN; even fewer served in combat roles. It was not until 1967 with the founding of the Alianza Patrótica Nicaragüense, which was organized by women sympathetic to the movement's revolutionary goals, that female figures in the FSLN first began to emerge. Nevertheless, the FSLN still did not accept women as full-time members for several more years (18). During the second phase, from 1973 to 1977, women began to join in much greater numbers – although primarily in support roles – as the guerrilla movement continued to expand. Finally, as popular uprisings against the Somoza regime erupted around the country between 1977 and 1979, the incorporation of women into the Sandinista movement increased significantly (21). It is estimated that during this final stage, women represented between 25 and 30 percent of the insurgent combatants, which was not only "extensive by Nicaraguan measures, it was also unprecedented in the history of the Western Hemisphere" (Chavez Metoyer 3). Similarly, Pilar Moyano notes that few places in Latin America have benefited from the commitment of women to "la lucha política y social de sus pueblos tanto como en la Nicaragua de la Revolución Sandinista […] Pertenecientes a diferentes clases sociales, campesina, trabajadora, profesional y burguesa, un número considerable de estas mujeres eran también escritoras cuyo trabajo ha constituido una parte integral de su militancia política" (319). The ousting of Somoza in 1979 was the culmination of nearly two decades of

resistance efforts in Nicaragua, which would not have been possible without the significant contributions of women from all sectors of Nicaraguan society.

The 1979 Revolution had two major effects on the state of gender equality in Nicaragua. First, by participating in the movement to overthrow Somoza, whether as combatants or in support roles, women broke the traditional patriarchal mold of Nicaraguan society. Second, the victory of the FSLN, which was in principle in favor of equal rights for women, led to immediate structural changes aimed at making gender equality a reality. In particular, the Sandinista government worked to reverse the commonplace and codified gender discrimination concerning the domestic roles and legal rights of women, as well as labor. One of the main issues to be addressed was the status of women in family relations, which was doubly discriminatory. Not only were women traditionally expected to provide domestic labor, such as child care, but they were also disadvantaged in terms of legal rights regarding divorce, custody, and property ownership. As Cynthia Chavez Metoyer notes, “In the Sandinista government, the pursuit of political legitimacy for its revolutionary agenda and an expanded social base led it to encourage women’s participation in the public sphere and to expand health, education, housing, and welfare services conducive to greater work participation by women” (15-16). The legislative efforts by the FMLN targeted the systemic gender inequities that dominated Nicaraguan politics and society under the Somoza dynasty.[55] Under the new government, the legal and social status of women, as well as conditions at home and in the workplace, promised to improve significantly.

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[55] Some of the policies introduced by the Sandinista government included the creation of public services designed to help women with domestic work, such as child care; granting women the right to divorce and inherit property; and, in the rural sector, making payments available individually rather than to the male head of household (Chavez Metoyer 20). Additional policies included the reduction of the workday, the improvement of health and safety provisions, a total of twelve paid weeks of maternity leave for women, and the right to child care (ibid, 23-24).

In practice, however, the realization of the Sandinista government's ideological goals for gender equality soon proved to be more challenging than anticipated. While the introduction of policies such as the ones listed above did indeed improve conditions for women in Nicaragua, there were, at the same time, some barriers to progress. As Chavez Metoyer explains,

> Few concrete public policies were implemented to support women in their new public roles or to foster change in the sexual division of labor within the home. Although state ideology provided some space to challenge various forms of machismo and raise gender consciousness, the existence of a single, officially approved framework for analyzing gender relations surrounded the debate in terms that were not always compatible to women's interests or failed to capture the complexities of women's interests (24).

Similarly, official Sandinista ideology dictated which issues related to women's rights could be debated, as well as the range of potential approaches or proposed solutions to those issues (38). An even greater obstacle, however, was the increasingly intense armed conflict against the US-backed Contra groups, which lasted through the end of the decade and stymied the ability of the Sandinista government to successfully carry out its agenda. As we will see below, not only did the war siphon the already limited national budget, but it also exposed lingering gender-based discrimination among the FSLN.

The Nicaraguan economy under the Sandinista government during the 1980s was, even without the war against the Contras, in a state of crisis. While the US government had initially provided Nicaragua with nearly $20 million in emergency relief funds in 1979, as well as approving an additional $75 million aid package the following year, President Carter decided to suspend economic assistance in early January 1981 in response to intelligence indicating that the Sandinista government was smuggling arms to leftist groups in El Salvador, where a 12-year

civil war between the government and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) first broke out in October 1979 (Leogrande 330). For its part, the Reagan administration took a much more openly hostile position towards Nicaragua; whereas Carter had suspended aid, Reagan cut it off permanently soon after taking office in 1981. As a result, $9.6 million in food aid was withheld and the final $15 million of Carter's $75 million aid package was canceled, except for a few million earmarked for opponents of the Sandinistas in the private sector (Leogrande 331). That same year, the Reagan administration began lobbying against new loans to Nicaragua from international agencies and private banks, thus further weakening the country's economy. Under Reagan, the US government set out to destabilize the Sandinista government by any means necessary.

As a result of the mounting pressure from the US, as well as a number of questionable economic policies implemented by the Sandinista government, the Nicaraguan economy grew increasingly precarious. The combination of skyrocketing inflation and stagnant wages caused a significant increase in poverty levels, which prompted the Sandinista government in 1985 and 1989 to introduce austerity measures, such as cutting jobs and eliminating social programs (Chávez Metoyer 32).[56] What is more, the escalation of the war against the US-backed Contras forced the Sandinista government to divert funds from the national budget to pay for national defense spending (33). The economic crisis inevitably limited the ability of the Sandinista government to fund certain programs and services, and prevented the full implementation of all of its proposed public policies. As the conflict dragged on, men were increasingly mobilized into military service by the Sandinistas; for their part, women were left to take care of the household,

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[56] By 1987, inflation was at 5,000 percent; however, within a year, it had risen to a high of 33,000 percent (ibid).

raise children, and enter into jobs traditionally reserved for men as the country faced a noticeable labor shortage (ibid).[57] While the war in some ways introduced women to roles that had traditionally been reserved for men, at the same time, it perpetuated existing inequalities and, in some respects, increased the burden on women. Indeed, as Chávez Metoyer concludes, the Sandinistas

> wanted to increase women's confidence in their abilities to take on new roles in the labor force […] At the same time, however, the Sandinistas stressed the compatibility of women's employment and family and the importance of women's roles as mothers. This one-sided emphasis on women's economic roles and the lack of change in the household division of labor doubled the workload for women; and for those women also involved in political party and labor union activism, the work burden tripled. Hence, although the Sandinista revolution and contra war enabled Nicaraguan women to enter the workforce, their involvement in productive work did not automatically lead to emancipation. Lacking training and experience and limited by their child care and domestic work responsibilities, women entered the workforce on an unequal footing with men (35).

Following Daniel Ortega's electoral loss to Violeta Chamorro in 1990, the Nicaraguan state returned to a more conservative view of women's roles in society and domestic life.

The FSLN's defeat in 1990 reflected a general sense of weariness from a decade of civil war, as well as disillusionment with the numerous failures of the Sandinista government. The ongoing economic crisis and the implementation of a mandatory military draft were some of the factors that led to a continued sense of disenchantment leading up to the 1990 elections. It is

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[57] It is worth noting here that despite having served as combatants in the fight to liberate Nicaragua from the Somoza regime, the Sandinista government was unwilling to include women in the military draft (Chavez Metoyer 25).

perhaps not surprising that in her electoral campaign, "Violeta Chamorro consciously manipulated her identity as a reconciling mother and widow, stressing how she had managed to unite her family in spite of their political differences. The implicit suggestion was that her brand of maternal politics could reconcile and heal the entire nation" (Cupples 9). The Chamorro government's embrace of neoliberalism made an exception to its otherwise conservative views on gender roles. Unlike the Sandinista government, which encouraged women to join the workforce and expand participation in the public sphere, the Chamorro government avoided encouraging women to participate in the paid labor force, making exception for work in the *maquilas* of the free trade zones (Chávez Metoyer 16).[58] The postwar transition was a difficult period for all of Nicaraguan society in general: the economy was still in bad shape, and mounting debt forced the state to continue cutting jobs; recently demobilized ex-combatants had difficulty finding employment; the somewhat chaotic Sandinista land redistribution policy led to disputes; and local instances of political violence were not altogether uncommon. And yet, as Luciak points out, women on both sides also faced discrimination during the reintegration phase:

> Their experiences during the war had raised the expectations of many female combatants as to their role in the construction of their postwar societies. Having experienced the relative freedom and equality of combat, which was characterized by the predominance of nontraditional values, many women were reluctant to return to the straightjacket of

[58] In a 2007 interview, Gioconda Belli reflects on the impact of the 2004 Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), noting that "nos están convirtiendo poco a poco en países maquiladores. La única manera en que vamos a poder tener empleo y salir de esta situación va a ser con la maquila y con la cantidad de gente que se traslada a los Estados Unidos y otros países y que manda remesas familiares. Vamos a ser países de servicio, países que venden mano de obra barata. Nos han asignado el rol de mano de obra barata" (2004: p. 142).

> gender inequality imposed by traditional societal norms. The former combatants paid a high price for their newly acquired gender consciousness (30).

Thus, while the elections of 1990 and the defeat of the FSLN signaled an official end to a decade of warfare, a number of new and existing political, economic, and social problems combined to create a postwar period marked by instability and uncertainty.

One of the consequences of the conditions of the postwar period was a general sense of frustration and disenchantment: the 1979 Revolution that ousted Somoza, followed by the ten years of civil war between the Sandinistas and the various counter-revolutionary groups failed to achieve much of anything. Following its electoral defeat in 1990, the FSLN retained its political importance as the new opposition party. Nevertheless, due to a general unwillingness to adapt itself to the new realities of the postwar era, the FSLN began to lose its relevance and many of its former supporters. As Gioconda Belli recalls ten years after the end of the war,

> Entonces se comienza a dar esa dispersión, ahí es donde la gente que estaba más golpeada buscó cómo hacer su propia vida. También hay que ver la parte práctica, mucha gente se quedó sin trabajo, sin fuentes de ingreso, tuvo que buscar cómo hacer su vida o sea tuvo que buscar como ganarse la vida, pero no hubo la capacidad del otro lado, de la gente que se quedó en las estructuras, de funcionar en esa otra realidad, flexibilizar el partido, dejar de funcionar como una estructura de poder, porque eso es lo que nos pasaba, que nosotros, el partido se estructuró después del triunfo de la Revolución a partir del poder. Entonces, cuando el poder del Estado deja de ser parte del partido, el partido trata de ir funcionando con una estructura como si estuviera en el poder y esa estructura ya no sirve, entonces esa estructura se va burocratizando y congelando y eso yo pienso que es lo que ha cambiado dentro del Frente Sandinista, que hay muy poca discusión (2001, n.p.).

For Belli, who left the FSLN in 1993, the party no longer resembles the Sandinista movement to which she had committed three decades of her life. She goes on to draw a distinction between the "official" Frente Sandinista that has emerged in the postwar era and its earlier ideological version: it has become a hodgepodge of everything, with no clear vision; its claims of being leftist and the voice of the poor in Nicaragua are no longer valid (ibid).[59]

Belli's statements above are reflective of a sort of postwar mentality that began to take shape across the region in the 1990s as the conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala all drew to an indecisive close. In his insightful article "After the Revolution: Central American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism", Misha Kokotovic notes that the official end of the civil wars in Central America and the integration of the Left into mainstream Central American politics "have done little to improve the economic and social conditions that motivated armed struggle. Though revolutionary movements have won inclusion in the political process, to date their participation in electoral democracy has done little to bring about the changes for which the wars of the 1970s and 1980s were fought" (20). In response to the new realities of the postwar era, he argues, the utopian ideals and political optimism associated with the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s began to break down. In turn, this led to "widespread distrust of political parties and institutions and a generalized disbelief in organized, collective projects of social change" (21). Perhaps unsurprisingly, postwar Central American fiction often expresses

[59] In a more recent interview, Belli explains the reason for her departure in much more direct terms:

> Dejé el Frente en 1993, precisamente cuando Ortega empezó a revelar quién era él realmente y usurpó el Frente Sandinista que tanta gente habíamos construido con tanta sangre y esfuerzo. [Ortega] Quería usurpar el poder, quería seguir siendo violento, recuerdo a Doña Violeta [Chamorro] que se le armó ese gobernar desde abajo con asonadas, barricadas y acciones muy violentas en las calles. Gran parte de nosotros no queríamos seguir con esa violencia, queríamos hacer una oposición más constructiva, el pueblo estaba realmente cansado y por eso el Frente Sandinista se dividió (ibid).

disillusionment with the utopian political projects of the past, while also resisting the new neoliberal state of the 1990s (24). As we will see in this chapter, Gioconda Belli's 1996 novel *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* is one such example.

Belli's novel blends together several different genres and forms, incorporating elements of science fiction, the Latin American *novela de la selva*, and, to some degree, the bildungsroman. Vaughn Anderson has convincingly argued that in *Waslala*, Belli "utilize[s] the science fiction genre to update and reactivate the *novela de la selva's* critique of an imperialist legacy by exploiting tensions that arise between these two disparate literary forms whose central tropes nevertheless so often coincide" (94).[60] In "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia", Jane Donawerth considers the dystopian genre as ideal for genre blending, convincingly arguing that "Conservative forms are transformed by merging with dystopia, a merge that forces political reconsideration, and traditionally conservative forms can progressively transform the dystopian genre so that its pessimism shifts from being resigned to militant" (30). As Raffaella Baccolini explains, science fiction as a genre can be considered as a counternarrative to hegemonic discourse:

> In its extrapolation of the present, it has the potential to envision different worlds that can work as a purely imaginative (at worst) or a critical (at best) exploration of our society. Science fiction has then the potential, through estrangement and cognitive mapping, to move its reader to see the differences of an elsewhere and thus think critically about the reader's own world and possibly act on and change that world (519-520).

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[60] Anderson further notes that "By adapting the ecologically aware New World imaginary peculiar to the *novela de la selva*, in which positivist ambitions of nationalist expansion are checked by a forest that nevertheless becomes part of a national imaginary […] Belli fundamentally alter[s] the New World imaginary that underwrites science fiction narratives of exploration and expansion" (ibid).

In the analysis that follows, we will consider the ways in which Belli's novel appropriates generic forms as a way of both questioning official narratives of history, while also serving as a site of resistance against both capitalism and patriarchal hegemony.

Digging up the past in *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*

While many scholars rightly observe that *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* represents the quest to rediscover and recover a lost utopia, I propose that it is instead through the dystopian elements of the novel that Belli's critique of crises past and present becomes most apparent. Moreover, the adaptation of the critical dystopia makes possible the thread of hope manifested by the recuperation of the lost community of Waslala. Taking into consideration the publication date of Belli's third novel, which was released six years after the electoral defeat of the FSLN and only two years after her departure from the party that she had served for nearly a quarter-century, *Waslala* also represents both a nostalgic longing for the spirit of the Revolution and disillusionment with its many failures. As Werner Mackenbach has rightly pointed out, in contrast with many Nicaraguan novels that reference the Revolution,

> con la excepción de varias alusiones, no se basa en hechos o datos históricos del proceso revolucionario, sino trata de reconstruir/mantener el 'espíritu' de la Revolución, su contenido utópico. Tematiza la sobrevivencia de la utopía revolucionaria bajo condiciones posrevolucionarias […] 'Waslala' es un lugar mítico, idílico, estéril e inverosímil, sin existencia terrenal, incluso sin habitantes: una utopía deshabitada (84).

In the analysis below, I will focus on the ways in which Belli's 1996 novel offers a critique of global capitalism and hyperconsumption, the long history of foreign intervention and extractivism in Nicaragua, and the ongoing political instability of the postwar era.

In terms of its overall structure, *Waslala* is a fairly conventional novel centered around the quest of, in this case, an unsuspecting heroine. The third-person omniscient narrator follows the redhaired Melisandra as she travels to the interior of the fictional war-torn country of Faguas in search of her parents and the lost utopian community of Waslala, where they have allegedly been residing since her early childhood. For the otherwise war-weary and impoverished people of Faguas – which is, much like Nicaragua itself, described as a country of poets – Waslala as a tropical Cockaigne founded by a group of poets, including Melisandra's grandfather, represents the rare beacon of hope. When a motley crew of foreign smugglers make their annual stop at the riverside estate of her poet grandfather, don José, Melisandra takes advantage of the opportunity to travel upriver with them. Leaving behind the safety of her family home, Melisandra eventually finds herself in the middle of an ongoing conflict between the Espada brothers – the violent and corrupt de facto rulers of the politically unstable Faguas – and the local oppositional leader Engracia, who controls the lucrative garbage import and incineration business. Melisandra also unexpectedly falls in love with Raphael, an American video journalist who has come to Faguas to investigate the production of *filina*, a genetic hybrid of marijuana and coca that has led to an addiction epidemic among the youth in the Global North. After the Espada brothers and Engracia are killed in a dramatic explosion, Melisandra toils tirelessly in the rebuilding of Faguas. At the urging of her compatriots, the protagonist finally resumes her journey and eventually wanders into the lost village of Waslala, where she finds that her mother is the only remaining inhabitant. The novel ends with a packed rally at which Melisandra publicly confirms the existence of Waslala by presenting physical copies of its annals. The event is filmed by Raphael and broadcast globally, leading to an influx of curious tourists hoping to discover the fantastical site for themselves.

The novel is divided into 51 chapters, which are organized into four sections that also serve as a sort of map for the physical journey through Faguas. The first section, "Viajeros en el río," consists of eight chapters, all of which take place at don José's riverfront estate.[61] Due to its proximity to the port city of Greytown and its location along the river, the estate is a convenient stopping point for smugglers and other traders on their way to the country's interior. At the same time, due to its geographical remoteness, don José's estate is also largely insulated from the seemingly unending wave of violence and chaos engulfing the rest of the country. However, despite the idyllic setting and apparent tranquility, the opening section of the novel includes numerous indications that things are not going well elsewhere, both within Faguas and in the outside world. Maite Zubiaurre rightly suggests that the story of *Waslala* revolves around two seemingly antithetical states situated within the fictional nation of Faguas: on the one hand, the lost mythical community of Waslala as utopia, and on the other hand, the garbage dump of Cineria as dystopia. In her article, Zubiaurre proposes a reading of Belli's novel as a metaphor for "el papel que dentro de las relaciones Norte-Sur y de la política medioambiental desempeña Latinoamérica, sobre los distintos mitos – América como utopía, y aún como distopía – que todavía se ceban con ella y, finalmente, sobre las alternativas que el feminismo y su vertiente ecológico ofrecen a un modelo social enquistadamente androcéntrico" (76).

From the start, Faguas is presented as a country that is both exploited and forgotten by the rest of the world. As don José explains, the only outsiders who even remember that the country still exists are the smugglers, whose infrequent visits are the only contact the citizens of Faguas have with the outside (loc. 125). The country joins a long list of regions throughout the

[61] In a note at the end of the novel, Belli makes it clear that the character of don José is based on her mentor, the Nicaraguan vanguard poet José Coronel Urtecho, who passed away before the manuscript was completed.

Global South that are cut off from development and technology, and instead have been "reducidas a selvas, reservas forestales, a función de pulmón y basurero del mundo desarrollado que las explotó para sumirlas después en el olvido, en la miseria, condenándolas al ostracismo, a la categoría de *terras incognitas*, malditas, tierras de guerra y epidemias adonde últimamente sólo llegaban los contrabandistas" (loc. 143). And while the smugglers serve as a link to the rest of the world and provide the people of Faguas with items such as weapons, tools, and outdated goods – which are coveted in a country characterized by corruption and scarcity – they also participate, at least to some degree, in the same sort of plundering that has been taking place in the country over the course of several centuries.

The activities in which individual members of the latest group of visitors to don José's estate are involved include goldmining, the trafficking of the drug *filina*, and the selling of archeological artifacts. Importantly, the narrator observes that don José has, on innumerable occasions, witnessed in these modern explorers "la codicia con que surcarían el río los filibusteros, los comerciantes, el comodoro Cornelius Vanderbilt, cuando instaló su Compañía del Tránsito para transportar a los buscadores de oro por una ruta corta y segura del Atlántico al Pacífico y extender su imperio naviero" (loc. 134). It is worth noting here how the omniscient narrator, by way of don José's thoughts, highlights the consequences of foreign intervention and extractivism for Faguas and its people:

> Río abajo, río arriba viajaban los extranjeros cargando delirios de grandeza, sueños, quimeras de canales interoceánicos, mitos de lo que se podría hacer con ese país si sus habitantes se traicionaban los unos a los otros y se vendían al mejor postor, ofertas sin descanso que invariablemente resultaban en guerras, guerras que ya para estos tiempos eran endémicas, que empezaban y terminaban en ciclos inagotables y cuyas causas ya ni

> se indagaban, ni parecían tener importancia. Se le cansaba la memoria tratando de sacar cuentas y recordar el inicio del caos, la transformación del país en campo de batalla, nación de guerreros, de caballeros andantes y maleantes. No le era posible definir con exactitud el momento en que el desarrollo de Faguas empezó a involucionar y el país inició su retorno a la Edad Media (loc. 137)

The above passage illustrates one of the points that I wish to examine in depth throughout this chapter. In my reading of *Waslala*, I argue that by engaging with a number of recognizable moments from Nicaragua's history, Gioconda Belli offers a critique of the failures of the Revolution and the neoliberal postwar transition as representing a continuation of the country's violent and exploitative past. By setting the novel in an undefined future world in which conditions have continued to deteriorate, Belli also warns about the lasting consequences of the present. However, the rediscovery of the lost utopian village of Waslala, the triumph of female protagonists over a violent patriarchal regime, and the novel's open ending all reflect an underlying element of hope and suggest that a better future is still possible.

While the narration begins and ends in two seemingly idyllic locations that are largely untouched by the ongoing violence of endless warfare, thirty seven of the novel's fifty one chapters take place elsewhere in Faguas, where the reigning instability and insecurity become increasingly palpable. In order to reach the utopian space of Waslala, in other words, Melisandra must first journey through the dystopian landscape of a country that is grossly mismanaged by a violently oppressive and corrupt regime. What is more, the relative safety of both don José's riverfront estate in the Atlantic region and the lost village of Waslala deep within the jungles of the country's interior is tied directly to both domestic and foreign policies that appear to devalue Faguas and deprioritize the future of its people. The questioning of Waslala's very existence,

along with the obfuscation of its approximate geographical location, have been strategies successfully implemented by the Espada brothers with two primary goals in mind. First, by erasing any hard evidence of the collective community founded by poets, the Espada regime consolidates its political control over the country and limits the potential for unified oppositional resistance. Second, by restricting access to the region in which Waslala is rumored to be, the brothers also protect one of their most crucial investments, as the village is located in relatively close proximity to the secret plantations where their lucrative *filina* crops are grown and harvested. Similarly, the relative tranquility at don José's estate is, above all, a reflection of the strategic importance of Faguas to corporations in the Global North. As Melisandra explains to Raphael in response to his observation that life at the river estate seems quite peaceful: "El río es neutral […] Hace años se llegó a un acuerdo tácito de no guerrear por aquí. Tendría efectos nefastos sobre las reservas forestales y usted sabe que eso está prohibido por las corporaciones ambientalistas" (loc. 256).[62] The importance of protecting the natural resources of Faguas, as we will see below, also hints at the precariousness of life in the wealthier nations of the Global North, whose survival and preservation depend on extracting resources from countries of the Global South.

The dangerous security situation in Faguas and the precarious conditions in the wealthier and technologically advanced United States are made apparent early on in the novel, particularly through Raphael's video call with his editor after getting settled at don José's place. After expressing his enchantment with the scenery of the river and the unique characters with whom he

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[62] Worth noting here that the route between Greytown and don José's finca, located near the Castillo de la Inmaculada Concepción, effectively follows the southern border of the Reserva Biológica Indio Maíz, which was established in 1990 as part of the SI-A-PAZ agreement between Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

will be traveling, Brad – his editor – urges Raphael to remain cautious throughout his trip, reminding him that the Department of State has explicitly warned about the risks of violence and disease outbreaks in Faguas. When Raphael brushes off the warning, Brad responds by adding that "ni siquiera las patrullas de la Policía Ambiental tocan tierra" (loc. 228). For his part, Raphael marvels at the abundance of what Faguas does have: dense jungles replete with trees, thousands and thousands of insects chirping in the background, and "oxígeno para rato. Podés respirar tranquilo" (ibid). The primitive wilderness that Raphael encounters in Faguas contrasts dramatically from the crowded urban environs of New York, but perhaps more important here is the implication that breathable air is at a premium in the polluted cities of the Global North.[63]

The six chapters in the aptly titled section "Río arriba" follow the group's two-day riverine expedition into the country's interior. The voyage along the river is also, in a sense, a journey back in time. As we will see below, the passengers move through a primitive setting littered with relics from Nicaragua's violent colonial past before entering into the hostile and violent environment of a corrupt and chaotic contemporary Faguas. It is also here that the novel begins to clearly parody the Latin American *novela de la selva*, elements of which are mixed with numerous references from Greek epics. Furthermore, this section frames the exploitation of Faguas from within and without as the continuation of a virtually uninterrupted historical cycle of foreign intervention, armed conflict, and the impotent governance of political factionalism. At the same time, the chapters in this section also anticipate the sort of foundational reconstruction of Faguas following the toppling of the Espada regime – which takes place under the spontaneous leadership of the novel's heroine, Melisandra.

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[63] Faguas exports air to and imports garbage from the Global North.

One of the immediately noticeable shifts that occurs in the "Río arriba" chapters of *Waslala* is the parodic adaptation of elements from the Latin American *novela de la selva*.[64] Vaughn Anderson has convincingly argued that in her third novel, *Waslala*, Gioconda Belli "utilize[s] the science fiction genre to update and reactivate the *novela de la selva's* critique of an imperialist legacy by exploiting tensions that arise between these two disparate literary forms whose central tropes nevertheless so often coincide" (94).[65] While I certainly agree with Anderson's assessment, I would simply add that the return to an earlier literary genre further reinforces the sort of temporal disorientations that are constantly at play in the novel. As I will discuss in greater detail below, this blurring of the past, present, and future serves to underscore the characterization of Faguas as a country that has long existed under the perpetual cloud of political corruption, violence, and foreign intervention. What is more, I also view the use of the *novela de la selva* as anticipating the eventual refounding of Faguas around the utopian spirit of Waslala.[66]

To begin, it is helpful to consider the significance and relevance of the *novela de la selva*, particularly as it relates to Belli's third novel. Despite being a distinctly Latin American literary

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[64] As Lesley Wylie defines the genre, the *novela de la selva* is an offshoot of the *novela de la tierra* that "proffered a vision of the rainforest as a locus of terrifying Otherness – of man-eating insects, whirlpools, tropical diseases, and human transgression" (2006: 728).

[65] Anderson adds that "By adapting the ecologically aware New World imaginary peculiar to the *novela de la selva*, in which positivist ambitions of national expansion are checked by a forest that nevertheless becomes part of a national imaginary…Belli fundamentally alter[s] the New World imaginary that underwrites science fiction narratives of exploration and expansion" (ibid).

[66] As Werner Mackenbach has astutely noted, Belli's novel "trata de reconstruir/mantener el 'espíritu' de la Revolución, su contenido utópico. Tematiza la sobrevivencia de la utopía revolucionaria bajo condiciones posrevolucionarias […] 'Waslala' es un lugar mítico, idílico, estéril e inverosímil, sin existencia terrenal, incluso sin habitantes: una utopía deshabitada" (84).

phenomenon, the genre responds to and parodies European narratives of the tropics as part of the construction of new regional and national identities from within. As Lesley Wylie notes,

> The *novela de la selva* can be seen as the literary coming of age of a tropical stylistics that had been initiated in the first years after independence. By the time the *novela de la selva* came into vogue in the 1920s and 30s, geographical writing was a well-established genre in Latin America. The imperative to inscribe space began in the immediate aftermath of the wars of independence, when various Latin American republics began to map their territories and commission lengthy and detailed descriptions of their terrain (2).

In the case of Nicaragua, there are two important distinctions to be made here. First, due to a number of factors – such as low literacy rates and the almost uninterrupted political conflict between the Liberals of León and the Conservatives of Granada during the nineteenth century – the history of the novel in Central America's largest country is comparatively brief.[67] It is perhaps not surprising, however, that the homeland of Rubén Darío – whose works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Nicasio Urbina has suggested, placed both Nicaragua and Latin America at the center of European culture and succeeded in "independizar a Nicaragua

[67] This is not to say, however, that the Nicaraguan novel was entirely absent during this period. Hernán Robleto's 1933 novel *Sangre en el trópico*, which is widely considered to be the first Nicaraguan novel to receive attention internationally, is often categorized as a *novela bananera*, which in turn is traditionally viewed as a subgenre of the *novela de la tierra.* For more on the *novela bananera*, please see Glinberg Pla and Mackenbach (2006).

y a América Latina, dándoles su carta de emancipación y demostrándole al mundo la capacidad cultural y artística de estos pueblos”[68] – has proudly embraced its identity as a nation of poets.[69]

The second point worth mentioning here vis-à-vis the significance of the adaptation of elements from the *novela de la tierra* in Belli’s *Waslala* pertains to the literary and cartographic representations of Nicaragua from the outside. In particular, as we will see throughout this chapter, the country’s unique geography is both a symbol of its identity, as well as the source of violent conflict and foreign intervention for nearly five centuries. The San Juan River, upon which the unnamed river in *Waslala* is clearly based, has historically provided a natural boundary between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, leading to numerous conflicts between the neighboring countries. Moreover, because the San Juan River flows into the Caribbean Sea from the large freshwater Lake Cocibolca along the Pacific coast, Nicaragua was of strategic importance to both the British and Spanish empires, which openly fought for control. Despite its proximity to the Pacific Ocean, the city of Granada developed into an important Atlantic port, which in turn made it the target of numerous attacks by Caribbean pirates. As Sergio Ramírez notes in the *Enciclopedia de Nicaragua*, the conflict between the Spanish and English crowns “crea una dualidad de vivencias, de las que no podemos separar las aventuras de estos corsarios, que dejaron testimonio de sus aventuras en libros cargados de valor literario” (2015, n.p.). Among the texts mentioned by Ramírez are John Esquemeling’s *The Buccaneers of America,*

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[68] Urbina (892). In his comprehensive review, Urbina traces the history of Nicaraguan poetry, beginning with the pre-Columbian poems of Nicaragua’s principal indigenous groups, and ending with a postwar poetry that is markedly uncommitted politically that begins to emerge during the Chamorro administration.

[69] It is important to note that this sort of national identity is at the core of Belli’s novel, in which the utopian community of Waslala is founded by a group of poets which includes don José. As mentioned previously, the character of don José is based on José Coronel Urtecho, one of the most influential figures of the Nicaraguan avant-garde movement.

originally published in Dutch in 1678, and *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697), written by the English pirate William Dampier. The text by Dampier, who participated in the burning of Granada in 1685, includes descriptions of both the inhabitants of the Corn Islands and the Miskito people. Perhaps more importantly, Dampier's travel narrative also recounts the story of a Miskito man left alone for three years in the remote Juan Fernández Islands off the coast of Chile. The account, Ramírez points out, must have certainly influenced the writing of both Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe. Taken together, these texts not only illustrate the ways in which Nicaragua was viewed and reconstructed from the outside, but they also serve as an example of Nicaragua's impact on the rendering of tropical spaces and identities within the European imaginary more broadly.

If the *novela de la selva* served to imagine national identities, cartography was an important tool for establishing the boundaries of national territories. As detailed above, Nicaragua's strategic location made it the target of European colonial ambitions, which were quickly superseded by foreign business interests, particularly in establishing a quicker route between the Atlantic and Pacific – either by rail or through the construction of an interoceanic canal.[70] The ongoing tensions between the Liberals and Conservatives that dominated Nicaraguan politics in the second half of the nineteenth century in many ways reflect an acknowledgment of the newly independent nation's attractiveness to foreign investment, as we

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[70] While interest in developing an interoceanic canal in Central America dates back to the mid-sixteenth century, including a proposal by Thomas Jefferson in 1788 for the United States to use the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua to construct a canal, it was not until the discovery of gold in California in 1848 that efforts truly began in earnest. Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company facilitated the journey to San Francisco by shuttling passengers via steamship from the East Coast to Greytown, from where they traveled up the San Juan River and across Lake Nicaragua, followed by a short overland passage via stagecoach to the Pacific coast, where another steamship took them north to San Francisco.

will briefly see below. In his comprehensive study of Nicaraguan cartography and national identity in the nineteenth century, Brian Davisson has convincingly demonstrated that “Si los demás países [centroamericanos] intentaron demostrar su autonomía durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX por medio de la producción cartográfica, la producción de mapas en Nicaragua tuvo otro efecto: el de invitar al involucramiento extranjero en tierras nicaragüenses” (80).[71] In my view, Belli’s adaptation of the *novela de la selva* also serves to contest historical cartographic erasures of Nicaragua and to reclaim Nicaraguan identity under the country’s post-dictatorial and post-revolutionary nascent democracy.[72]

A quick note is in order here regarding Nicaragua’s foreign investment potential during the nineteenth century. First, whereas the transformation of Costa Rican society as a result of the establishment of a coffee-based economy began as early as the 1840s, the industry did not take hold in neighboring Nicaragua until much later (Gudmundson 430). For his part, Jeffery M. Paige attributes the ongoing conflicts between the Conservatives of Granada and the Liberals of León as the main cause for the delayed development of the coffee industry in Nicaragua. The intense rivalry between the two groups and the corresponding instability in the young nation ultimately opened the door for the invasion by, and subsequent two year “presidency” of American filibuster William Walker (1855-1857). As Paige notes, by the time a fairly stable government was restored in Nicaragua, “the country was “far behind its Central American rivals in the transition to coffee” (155). Jeffery L. Gould, on the other hand, argues that the disruption

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[71] Davisson goes on to argue that the inclusion of contour lines serves to “indicar la utilidad del territorio de Nicaragua para intereses extranjeros como el mejor sitio de construcción de rutas permanentes que crucen el istmo” (91).

[72] In his conclusion Davisson convincingly suggests, “Que los mapas presenten una Nicaragua vacía, sin fronteras claras y con tierras desconocidas y carentes de interés nacional, configura el país como una entidad política que carece de control de su propio territorio” (105).

to the coffee industry in Nicaragua was largely affected by the 1881 Matagalpa Indian rebellion, which was launched in response to a series of abuses, including mandatory and underpaid labor during the construction of the telegraph from Managua; census-taking; and the prohibition of the production of *chichi*, a traditional alcoholic drink (57-59). Nevertheless, coffee eventually became an important export crop in Nicaragua.[73]

Keeping in mind the issues outlined above, we can now return to the "Río arriba" section of *Waslala* and consider several key points that are important to our discussion in this chapter. To begin, there are a number of ways in which the *novela de la selva* is incorporated into the novel and parodied. First, the makeup of the expedition is both a nod to the aforementioned imagining of Nicaragua by European writers historically, as well as a critique of the ongoing extractivism and private exploitation by state and corporate entities from the Global North. In addition to Melisandra and Raphael,[74] the other passengers on Pedro's *bongo*[75] include Morris, an American scientist with a robotic arm whose periodic trips to Faguas are ostensibly for the purpose of monitoring the effects of garbage incineration; the Argentinian contrabandist

[73] Foreign resource extraction began along the Atlantic coast region of present-day Nicaragua as early as the seventeenth century, and has included raw materials such as gold, mahogany, rubber, and bananas (Offen 59). However, the Miskito Territory was not officially incorporated into Nicaragua until the 1890s.

[74] A clear example of the novel's self-reflexivity are the explicit references to More's *Utopia* (1516). The first instance of this is in the opening epigraph, which includes a definition of *utopia* that specifically mentions Thomas More. Any lingering doubt regarding *Waslala* as a sort of parody of More's work is eliminated in chapter 3, when don José, speaking with Melisandra about the visitors, notes that the American journalist "Se llama Raphael. El de Tomás Moro, el que descubre la isla llamada Utopía, se llamaba Raphael también" (loc. 339).

[75] The *bongo* was a type of large canoe traditionally used in Nicaragua to navigate large rivers, such as the San Juan, and the vast Lake Nicaragua. *Bongos* became a particularly common sight in the nineteenth century. A visual example of a typical nineteenth century *bongo* can be viewed here: http://historia.ihnca.edu.ni/baltodanocantarero/component/joomgallery/nicaragua-vista-por-viajeros-del-siglo-xix/nicaragua-sus-gentes-y-paisajes/1002009-10-737.

Maclovio, who traffics weapons into Faguas and transports both archaeological objects and the hybrid drug *filina* out of the country; Hermann, a gold prospector from Germany who regularly travels deep into the interior of Faguas; and finally, Krista and Vera, a blonde lesbian couple from the Netherlands. Not only do the travelers embody historical and contemporary ambitions of the Global North within Nicaragua, as we will see below, they also echo – and in some ways, renew – the discourses found in travel narratives and other writings about the tropics.

There is a sort of othering and exoticization of Faguas that is present in the characterizations of its people and landscapes, which I see as particularly relevant to the novel's underlying critique of the historical pattern of exploitation and intervention in Nicaragua and its continuation into the neoliberal postwar present. In addition to Raphael's aforementioned wonderment at the abundant trees, oxygen, and nocturnal insects in Faguas, Krista similarly expresses a sense of awe. In this case, however, her reaction upon arriving to don José's picturesque estate explicitly betrays a sort of nostalgic longing that is firmly rooted in an exoticized past: "Me recuerda tanto los grabados antiguos de las colonias en los trópicos" (loc. 199).[76] Both of these reactions take place at don José's estate, which offers the North American and European passengers a first glimpse into an environment that is both starkly different from the Global North, but also a setting that appears to be frozen at some undefined moment in the past – reminiscent of Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*.

The characterizations of Faguas and its people as being both exotic and belonging in the past become more pronounced once the expedition departs from don José's estate and resumes its upriver journey. As the flow of the river slows down, it also turns into a somnolent space;

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[76] I am grateful here for Gustavo Pellón's insight regarding the 16th-century Dutch engraver, Theodore de Bry.

Melisandra and several other passengers doze off, while the *bongo* “vadeó los islotes poblados de manatíes durmiendo desmadejados bajo el sol. Río abajo el túnel de árboles entrecruzados semejaba un pedazo escapado de la noche, misterioso” (loc. 659).[77] The thick jungle envelops the river beneath a vibrant green archway of interwoven branches that cast their dark shadows across the water (loc. 661, 701). For Hermann, it is precisely this mix of tranquility and wilderness along the river that has become the source of nostalgic longing when he is back home in Germany, which represents a stark contrast to Faguas: “En los campos de Alemania, era todo tan civilizado: los bosques moribundos circunscritos rígidamente a límites impuestos, las verdes extensiones de pasto cultivadas y aradas, los parques cuidosamente conservados. En cambio aquí uno sólo tenía que remontar el río para recuperar la perspectiva perdida y constatar la pequeñez del hombre” (loc. 704). The dialectical opposition between civilization and barbarism that is evoked by Hermann’s admiration for the wilderness of the river is even more explicit in one of Maclovio’s anecdotes about his previous visits to Faguas.

Because of his involvement in various smuggling operations, Maclovio – who acts as a sort of unofficial leader of the party – appears to be the member of the group with the most familiarity of Faguas as a whole. When the expedition makes its first stop along the shore for lunch, Maclovio recalls a previous occasion at the same spot, when he “trató de abrirse paso a través de las palmas sin poder avanzar ni dos pasos” (loc. 708). According to Maclovio, the only people who lived in the jungle were members of the Guatuso tribe, who he equates to monkeys for supposedly traveling in packs between the treetops, where they allegedly live during the rainy

[77] The soporific effects of the river on its passengers bring to mind – among other texts – the 1986 novel *La nieve del almirante*, by Álvaro Mutis; and, to some degree, Homer’s *Odyssey.*

season.[78] In his description of the Guatuso, Maclovio recounts an historical anecdote that brings to mind Latin American texts from the late nineteenth century, such as *Cumandá* and *Tabaré*: two centuries before – presumably during the nineteenth century – an American from California taken prisoner by the Guatuso is saved from certain death by marrying the cacique's daughter, who has fallen in love with him. The Californian traveler, however, decides to flee at the start of the rainy season, when the group once again returns to the forest canopy. Maclovio concludes his unofficial history of the Guatuso by amusedly sharing the very likely embellished rumor that "Hay contrabandistas de animales que se han llevado niños guatuzos y los han vendido como chimpancés por equivocación – dijo –. Los compradores no se percatan hasta que los 'monitos' empiezan a pedir los bananos hablando…" (loc. 715).[79] By relegating the people and landscapes of Faguas to the past – particularly by echoing discourses from the nineteenth century – Maclovio's brief commentary highlights the persistence of a colonial mentality among the foreign agents who continue to profit from the resources of Faguas.

Before turning to the ways in which the narration in the "Río arriba" chapters blurs the lines between past and present through an engagement with literature and history, it is worth reviewing very briefly the descriptions of both the crew and the vessel. Pedro, the skipper of the *bongo*, is strong and stout, dressed in khaki pants, rubber boots, and a sleeveless white t-shirt "que dejaba ver sus brazos musculosos y la barriga protuberante producto de su afición por la

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[78] The Guatuso people, also known as the Maleku, are an indigenous group of northern Costa Rica whose territory traditionally extended from the Arenal volcano northward into the area of the Río Frío, which empties into Nicaragua's Lake Cocibolca, not far from the San Juan River.

[79] In my view, Maclovio's dubious suggestion that the Guatuso children are mistaken for chimpanzees – a species clearly not native to the Americas – underscores the dehumanizing manner in which he views the indigenous peoples of Faguas. Morris – who is Black – sternly responds to Maclovio by saying that his comment is not something to laugh about: "Temo ese tipo de estupidez. No me río de ella" (loc. 719).

cerveza" (loc. 180). The crew is composed of ten oarsmen, of whom "La mayoría no pasaba de los treinta años, pero el sol y la vida al descampado daba a la piel de sus rostros una consistencia rugosa que los avejentaba. Ninguno superaba a Pedro en estatura, lo cual no era mucho decir. Poseían los brazos musculosos de fornidos levantadores de pesas" (loc. 758). While the descriptions of the anonymous oarsmen are relatively limited, the narrator makes several observations that would almost seem to frame them as an extension of this environment that is, at least for the foreign travelers, a sort of anachronism within a world of technological advancement and hyperconsumption: they prepare a rustic dish of beef, rice, and plantains over an improvised campfire; in the evening, they smoke hand-rolled cigarettes while sharing stories about the river; they take a break from their rowing, which is accompanied by a "melodía antigua y misteriosa", to recite a "Hail Mary" and "Our Father" (loc. 725). When Melisandra joins the group of rowers for an afternoon swim in the river, Hermann "Observó a los demás pasajeros contemplando la escena y pudo comprobar, aun en Maclovio, cierto traspasado pudor. El inocente disfrute de los marineros y la muchacha despertaba en ellos, extranjeros, la memoria de una espontaneidad perdida" (loc. 895). For the foreign travelers passing through Faguas, Melisandra and the crew embody a sort of uncomplicated life reminiscent of a forgotten past.

The *bongo* in which the group is traveling further exemplifies the ways in which the past and present are blurred throughout the journey. Despite numerous efforts at modernizing modes of transportation on the river, the traditional *bongo* remains the preferred vessel specifically because of its durability and its unique design that make it suitable for navigating the peculiarities of the river. Seated on an elevated platform that offers unobstructed views of the water and any potential hazards, Pedro pilots the vessel by using a conch shell as a horn to communicate with the team of oarsmen below. Overall, Pedro's *bongo* and the others like it in

Faguas – with the exception of a few modern updates, such as a clear plastic roof and a string of lights powered by a rechargeable battery – "sobrevivían casi inalterables" and have remained otherwise virtually indistinguishable from the *bongos* that had appeared in travel narratives from the nineteenth century (loc. 642). In contrast, "Una compañía de inversionistas norteamericanos, muchos años atrás, había intentado introducir lanchas con motores de avión que se alzaban a ras del agua pero de ellas sólo quedaban, aquí y allá, los cascos olvidados, donde se divertían las algas y los niños" (ibid). Whereas the *bongo* and its crew members hark back to an earlier way of life and further underscore the sort of anachronistic existence of Faguas in comparison with the outside world, the wrecked motorboats represent the pattern of repeated incursions into the country by foreign powers in search of profit.

The remains of the wrecked boats that American investors had unsuccessfully tried to introduce to Faguas are only the most recent relics in a river that has been the site of foreign intervention and violent conflicts for several centuries. The most prominent and permanent reminder are the towers of the Castillo de la Inmaculada Concepción, which don José first points out from the shore of his property, explaining to Raphael that "Desde esa posición, los españoles controlaban el tráfico e impedían que los ingleses pasaran río arriba a sus territorios. Los ingleses dominaban Greytown, donde ustedes desembarcaron. Ése era su puerto en el Atlántico. Inicialmente fue guarida de piratas. Allí tuvieron su reino los corsarios hasta que el mismo lord Nelson se personó por aquí" (loc. 390).[80] Later, Raphael gets a much closer look at the

[80] As this passage clearly illustrates, Belli establishes the fictional Faguas within a geographical and historical setting that is unmistakably that of Nicaragua. While the name of the river is never revealed, the identification of the Castillo de la Inmaculada Concepción as one of the landmarks serves as further evidence of its association with the San Juan River. Further examples of how Belli invokes Nicaragua in her description of Faguas include the aforementioned reference to the Guatuzo people in the surrounding forests, the proximity of the fortress to the powerful vortex – which aligns with the actual site referred to locally as the "Raudal del Diablo" – and the white

seventeenth-century fortress when the group passes nearby on the river: rising above the thick vegetation of the surrounding hillsides, the towers appear, "como una visión de otra realidad, montado sobre una lengua de tierra que bajaba en pendiente hacia el agua. La bandera blanca de territorio neutral ondeaba en la más alta de sus torres" (loc. 746). A monument to a violent past that has been carved into the landscape of Faguas, the fortress also serves as a reminder of the ongoing armed conflict in the present, from which it is protected due to its proximity to the vast forest reserves nearby.

With its combination of endless untamed wilderness and vestiges of past conflicts, the river takes on a sort of spectral and mythological aura. The memory of English domination in the Atlantic region and numerous incursions into the country's interior has reverberated through the generations in Faguas. Filemón, one of Pedro's oarsmen, entertains the passengers one evening by recounting his own particularly fantastical experience: while paddling alone upriver towards the town of Las Luces, a violent earthquake generates a powerful wave that sends Filemón's canoe crashing into the shore of the small island of La Bartola, where he is later awakened by the ghost of Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, who is hiding out from "ese enano con ínfulas" that has been chasing him century after century (loc. 794).[81] When the expedition passes by a small island the following day, the travelers are surprised to see the oarsmen repeatedly yelling "Mueran los ingleses", which, as Hermann explains to Krista, is a tradition that began after

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flag of neutrality that places the fortress close to the protected area of the biological reserve. A brief history of the site can be found here: http://www.ecured.cu/Castillo_de_la_Inmaculada_Concepci%C3%B3n.

[81] Filemón notes the local legends about "los marineros ingleses, que están enterrados en la isla y que, según se dice, aparecen en la noche a trabajar en un barco fantasma para regresarse a su país" (loc. 777). For her part, Melisandra explains to the seemingly skeptical Maclovio that "lord Nelson sí peleó en el río. La batalla de La Bartola sucedió en 1780. Está en los libros de historia" (loc. 809).

English attacks along that stretch of river caused many casualties among the people of Faguas in 1800 (loc. 888).[82] The intense violence that has taken place along the river over the span of several centuries is also alluded to when Raphael awakes early one morning to find that the entire river has turned red: “No un rojo café o púrpura, sino sangre, encendido, de una textura orgánica, densa” (loc. 822). While acknowledging that the scientific explanation for the phenomenon is a certain type of flower that grows along the Colorado River, he adds that “sobra quien diga que es la sangre de todos los muertos que han perecido aquí” (loc. 828). Finally, as the expedition nears the entrance to the lake, Melisandra “vio los restos de barcos antiguos balanceándose sobre las grandes rocas que conformaran antaño los peligrosos rápidos que debían atravesarse para salir al lago. Terremotos sin cuento se encargaron de abrir la tierra hasta que el río pudo fluir sin obstáculos, pero los esqueletos de los infortunados navíos quedaron allí como testimonio de lo que fuera una empresa plagada de riesgos” (loc. 1167).

Tierra adentro (Las Luces, Cineria, Timbú)

Despite the abundant reminders of the violent history of foreign interventions throughout the Atlantic region of Faguas and the inherent dangers posed by nature, the journey upriver from don José’s estate has taken the travelers through an idyllic landscape and neutral zone that has remained virtually untouched by the ongoing conflict in the rest of the country. The subsequent thirty chapters in the section “Tierra adentro” instead follow Melisandra and her fellow travelers into the country’s insecure interior, which is characterized by corruption, violence, crumbling infrastructure, and the accumulation of waste. Whereas the first two sections of the novel offer a sort of cartography of the distant colonial past in Faguas – and, by extension, Nicaragua – the

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[82] In response to Hermann’s assertion that the tradition is “parte de la herencia antiimperialista de esta gente”, Pedro explains that they don’t like colonizers, who “Han sido peor que una plaga en este país. Primero nos arruinaron y luego se olvidaron de nosotros” (ibid).

chapters in the third section shift to an equally disorienting present. In my view, Belli frames her critique of post-revolutionary and postwar Nicaragua as a continuation of a virtually uninterrupted cycle of exploitation and conflict over the course of several centuries. At the same time, as we will see below, the turmoil in the dystopian landscape of present-day Faguas justifies the continued collective belief in the existence of Waslala and sets the stage for the sort of radical liberation and egalitarian restructuring that it represents.

The town of Las Luces,[83] which is the final stopping point along the river before it enters the vast inland lake, marks a drastic change in both the scenery and mood. Described as "realmente la primera ventana para ver la realidad de Faguas", Las Luces and its inhabitants are essentially frozen in the past and cut off from the outside world (loc. 1001). Immediately upon arrival, the group is surrounded by a horde of excited children in rags, who follow them to the inn. The town itself is both a reflection of the lack of investment in infrastructure and a testament to the ingenuity of its inhabitants, who make use of the discarded items that are exported to Faguas from countries in the North. A combination of rain and lack of repairs have destroyed much of the asphalt covering the town's main road, which is now littered with potholes that have been partially refilled with rocks. While there are a few old models of electric jeeps gingerly navigating the treacherous roadway, the most common modes of transportation are by horse-drawn carriage and bicycle. The homes are constructed of earthquake-resistant adobe and equipped with windows fashioned from old computer screens and other recycled materials; and all of the homes have aluminum doors that are made from items such as airplane wings, old car bodies, and even the heavy hatch from a submarine. For Raphael, the city of aluminum and mud

[83] Although Las Luces appears in chapters 12-13, I have included it in this section because of its relevance to the themes found in the "Tierra adentro" chapters.

represents “Un cruce entre hábitat humano y depósito de chatarra” (loc. 1010). The city shows signs of past destruction and gradual deterioration due – at least in part – to the seismic and tropical nature of Faguas, as well as a communal effort at rebuilding with whatever materials are available.[84]

The resilient architecture of Las Luces in response to past disasters is reflected in the tenaciousness and idealism of its inhabitants, who are simply fighting to survive in an impoverished country that is ineptly and violently controlled by the corrupt regime of the Espada brothers. When Raphael and Hermann head to the local bar, El Equilibrista, Hermann explains that “La gente está ávida de saber qué ha pasado allá afuera aunque ya no posean ni las palabras para comprenderlo” (loc. 1040). In that sense, the news from the outside world serves more as a distraction from the difficulties of everyday life within Faguas, a country in which “sucede cualquier cosa…Los Espada siguen mandando y los demás nos defendemos de cualquier manera” (loc. 1053).[85] The harsh realities faced by the residents of Las Luces – and Faguas more broadly – contribute to the popular myths created about Waslala, the lost utopia that most people believe in unconditionally, despite having no concrete evidence of its existence.

In Waslala, the bar patrons point out, people are happy; they never experience war or conflicts, and children are completely unaware that violence even exists; people never get sick, are unafraid of death, and can live for up to two hundred years (loc. 1057). While Raphael remains skeptical of Waslala’s existence, all but writing it off as a fantasy created by don José

[84] As Melisandra explains, they use recycled materials instead of wood for construction, specifically because it is important for the trees to continue producing oxygen. We will return to this point shortly.

[85] It is worth noting here that the inhabitants of Las Luces claim allegiance to Engracia, the only notable rival to the Espada brothers.

and other poets, the patrons of the bar insist that they both believe in poets in Faguas – and, by extension, in Waslala itself. The bar's owner, Florcita, sums up the sympathy by saying that "Nosotros creemos en Waslala. Al fin y al cabo en algo tenemos que creer en este país de desgracias" (loc. 1075). Florcita concludes by informing the pair of outsiders that there is no map that can lead them to Faguas; instead, she recommends that they meet with Engracia in the city of Cineria. Just as the residents of Las Luces depend on the traders for information about the outside world, the travelers also receive updates from the locals about current events in Faguas – which is particularly significant given the fact that international journalists have long ago abandoned any coverage of the war-torn country. Maclovio, who has spent his time in Las Luces with the mayor, shares the news of the most recent wave of ecoterrorism, in which terrorists have set fire to several hectares of forest, noting that "la Policía Ambiental, con sus helicópteros, logró apagarlo rápidamente. Esto afectará, sin embargo, los próximos convenios. Cuando vengan los ejecutivos de la Corporación del Medioambiente exigirán patrullas armadas de guardabosques…" (loc. 1145).[86] The stopover in Las Luces represents a significant shift as the internal conflicts and the many difficulties faced by the people of Faguas come into view for the first time.

Corruption and chaos in Faguas

Before turning to an analysis of the city of Cineria, in which a significant portion of the narration takes place, it will be helpful to first discuss conditions in Faguas more broadly under the Espada brothers. It becomes clear early on in the novel that the Espada brothers are business

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[86] For his part, Morris points to the local rumors that the Espada brothers are secretly funding the ecoterrorists responsible for burning the forests, the conservation of which is one of the conditions for the continued importation of electricity and other goods from the Global North (loc. 1148).

associates of Maclovio: in exchange for the weapons that Maclovio traffics into the country, the Espada brothers allow him to operate the *filina* plantations and to smuggle the drug out of the country to his buyers in New York (loc. 484). Their business interests and control over the distribution of goods in Faguas extend well beyond the trafficking of arms and drugs, however. In addition to controlling the very popular gambling industry, the Espada brothers are also in charge of the numerous gangs operating throughout Faguas, and have expressed interest in trafficking orphans out of the country from the war-ravaged region of Timbú. Unlike their rival Engracia, as Melisandra notes, "Los Espada no trafican con basura; trafican con cosas nuevas, con medicinas, con repuestos, con vacunas, con abono, con semillas…Obligan a la gente a ser sus policías, sus aliados incondicionales, les cobran tributos, los echan a pelear…" (loc. 1598). What is more, the Espada brothers ensure their financial fortune by exerting absolute control over rivals and the population of Faguas more broadly, who remain in poverty and in a state of perpetual violence at their expense.[87] Not only do they have a history of installing and overthrowing governments to suit their own needs, but the Espada brothers are also "infatigables atizadores de las guerras de toda intensidad. La guerra era su medio de subsistencia, lo que les permitía acumular y usar su poder. Su organización militar se encargaba de azuzar y mantener en perennes escaramuzas a grupúsculos cuyas querellas manipulaban y provocaban subrepticiamente" (loc. 865).[88] What is more, their authoritarian rule is rooted in discourses that

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[87] When Raphael asks Melisandra what the Espada brothers do with all of the goods that Faguas receives in exchange for providing the oxygen reserves upon which the wealthy nations depend, she explains that they sell everything on the black market (loc. 1595).

[88] The opportunities for making a living in Faguas are also extremely limited. For example, when Maclovio pressures him to pick up the shipment of arms from the port and transport them upriver to Las Luces, Fermín expresses concerns about Melisandra finding out and expelling him and two of the other workers from don José's estate, noting that "Si eso sucedía tendrían que irse a la ciudad y enrolarse como mercenarios" (loc. 474).

distract from or contradict their actions: they use nationalist language to frame their exploits as part of a crusade of honor, and Damián Espada preaches about the redemption of the poor and oppressed, despite the fact that "en la práctica hacía hasta lo imposible para asegurar que nunca dejaran de serlo y que más bien se convencieran de que ésa era la única manera digna de existir" (loc. 870). As we will see below, the environment created and maintained by the Espada brothers underscores the importance among the general population of Faguas of finding Waslala, the existence of which the regime continues to actively deny and conceal.

As mentioned above, one of the ways in which the Espada brothers protect their business ventures is by instigating conflicts and ensuring that Faguas remains unstable. Moreover, as Morris explains to Raphael when preparing him for what to expect of the people in Cineria, the people want modernity but lack the means of acquiring it: "Los únicos 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. Las guerras eran difusas, los bandos se alternaban y no obedecían más que a causas arbitrarias" (loc. 878). Later, when Raphael and Melisandra are speaking to people on the streets of Cineria, Raphael learns that although Engracia is generally associated with the idea of building a community that is open to the world, and the Espada brothers with nationalism, there is a tendency among the general population to conflate the ideologies of both groups. Consequently, there appears – at least on the surface – to be a very limited sense of commitment to either cause; as Raphael observes, "nadie está con nadie y todos están con todos. Las enemistades o lealtades dependen de cómo piensan obtener un balance entre las relaciones con uno u otro lado" (loc. 1889). In my view, the commentary on this sort of political ambivalence in Faguas recalls the tensions between Liberals and Conservatives in Nicaragua during the nineteenth century, as well as the more recent

deradicalization of the FSLN, particularly under the leadership of Daniel Ortega. Through the pursuit of Waslala, Belli's novel suggests that the revolutionary spirit of Nicaragua – land of Sandino and poets – still endures and offers hope for a better future.[89]

Cineria: Epicenter of destruction

The city of Cineria is significant not only because it is the location in which both Engracia and the Espada brothers are based, but also because it is the oldest city in Faguas. Moreover, as we will see below, it epitomizes the historical and ongoing violence and insecurity in the country, while also illustrating the impact and influence of wealthier nations in Faguas. Engracia, as we will see throughout the sections that follow, is a pivotal character who has already been recommended to both Melisandra and Raphael – each at different moments and by different people – as the key to finding Waslala. Not only does she oversee the business of importing garbage from the Global North and decides what to save and what to burn, but Engracia is also the main political rival to the Espada caudillos. What is more, she is Morris' long-time romantic partner, and had also followed don José to Waslala in her much younger days. Finally, there is also a clear association between the incineration of garbage that takes place at her compound and the name of Cineria itself.

To begin, it is worth pointing out that Cineria is clearly modeled after the Nicaraguan city of Granada. As Melisandra notes, Cineria is "la gran ciudad señorial, la más antigua de Faguas, quemada y reconstruida varias veces, saqueada por los piratas", as well as the birthplace of her

[89] For Melisandra, what matters the most here is the realization that "cada quien pensaba que sólo el descubrimiento de Waslala redimiría a Faguas de su maldición bélica y les permitiría dedicar su heroísmo a una causa honorable. Waslala era considerada el ultimo reducto del orden, lo único que podría devolverle a Faguas la perspectiva de una manera alternativa de vivir" (loc. 1892).

grandfather (loc. 1291).[90] In my view, the name of Cineria itself could be read as a sort of aftermath of Granada – in the sense of a *grenade*, of course: ashes left in the wake of a violent cycle of fiery destruction. Like the actual city of Granada, Cineria is also an important Atlantic port, despite its location on the far side of the large inland lake. As such, it is also the site at which large shipments of garbage arrive from the Global North and offloaded at Engracia's compound, where materials are meticulously sorted for repairs and reuse or incineration. If the dense tropical forests of Faguas serve as the lungs of the Global North, then Cineria has become its trash pit. Perhaps most importantly, the oldest city in Faguas ultimately becomes the epicenter for the nation's rebuilding following the violent explosion that destroys the Espada compound and creates a sudden power vacuum. In the paragraphs that follow, we will briefly examine the dual role of Cineria as a critique of both the postwar instability in Nicaragua and the destructive legacy of global capitalism's logic of waste.

Cineria as a symptom of the chaos in Faguas

Although there is some prior anticipation regarding what to expect in Cineria, the extent of the chaos and disorder does not become clear until Melisandra and Raphael make their first trip into the city by motorcycle. For Raphael, in particular, the scenery represents a completely alternate reality: raising his camera to film the lake and the rows of shacks flanking the road, he notes to himself that "Calles así de miserables ya no quedaban ni en el recuerdo del mundo desarrollado. Los medios solo se ocupaban de las plagas y catástrofes de estas zonas descalabradas, estas 'naciones productoras de oxígeno', como las llamaban ahora" (loc. 1528).

[90] In addition to the burning of Granada mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is also worth noting that the city is also the birthplace of José Coronel Urtecho – who, as previously noted, is the basis for the character of don José in *Waslala*.

Similar to Las Luces, the buildings in Cineria have been repaired using salvaged metal and other materials. In the colonial city, however,

> Consignas patrióticas, slogans de productos, nombres propios, mensajes de amor, citas de negocios y religiosas, anuncios de misas de difuntos, de alguien que vendía todo su mobiliario a cambio de una dosis de penicilina, vivas y condenas a los Espada, mensajes ambientales escritos unos sobre otros en las paredes constituían una narración, una historia de imágenes aparentemente inconexas que a través de cuadras y esquinas relataban su espontánea crónica (loc. 1545).

The tree-lined sidewalks and the abundant colorful graffiti further add to the city's unique charm. The marks left by constant warfare, however, can be seen everywhere:

> Cineria parecía haber sido construida, como los templos mayas, sobre ruinas sucesivas que súbitamente asomaban sus contornos: allá alguien había improvisado una ventana y hasta puesto cortinas en el agujero de una bomba, aquí una pared medio destruida servía de línea divisoria entre dos casas. Al fondo de un patio, niños jugaban en lo que debió haber sido una capilla. En numerosas paredes o clavadas en las aceras se veían cruces con nombres escritos toscamente sobre el travesaño horizontal y coronas de flores marchitas o de papel. Muchas viviendas habían sido reparadas con planchas de zinc o pedazos de carrocerías fijados sobre los agujeros mientras otras lucían sus boquetes sin vergüenza, de manera que el transeúnte podía ver en lo profundo del aire interior de las casas a las familias ocupándose de sus vidas, totalmente indiferentes a la curiosidad de los paseantes (loc. 1554).

At night, the city is tense as the sounds of gunshots and the exchange of machine gun fire between rival gangs ring out through the streets (loc. 2307). The cityscape of Cineria, then,

reflects both the historical processes of colonial violence and cyclical warfare, as well as the ongoing chaos and insecurity in a country ruled by internal corruption and forgotten by the outside world.

Perhaps the most evident site of the dystopian conditions in Faguas can be found in Cineria's main park. When Raphael and Melisandra arrive to the park for the first time, the narrator makes note of the queue of bizarre taxis and the people passing by as if they existed along their What is more, the abundant and overgrown vegetation blurs the boundaries between the park and the urban cityscape beyond, making it "imposible determinar con exactitud dónde terminaba el parque y empezaban los edificios que lo flanqueaban, algunos de los cuales no eran más que ruinas donde crecían a su antojo enredaderas de buganvillas" (loc. 1568). And while there is considerable activity at the park, the majority of the people are engaged in activities that are controlled by the Espada brothers. Whereas the older people busy themselves by conversing, reading, or knitting, the younger generations of Cinerians play cards, dice games, and chess. By far the busiest area, however, "estaba dedicada a los juegos de azar: ruletas, máquinas traga monedas, backgammon, juegos de mesa, dados, parchís, monopoly, canicas, juegos electrónicos" (loc. 1571). What is more, girls and women of all ages walk amongst the players, who in turn use their bodies as wagers. Finally, the narrator points out that "La escena del parque con su combinación de ocio y vicio resultaba más punzante por la presencia de una desproporcionada cantidad de lisiados que se asoleaban o movían de aquí allá en toscas sillas de ruedas" (loc. 1577). The chaotic scene in the park reflects quite clearly the control that the Espada brothers maintain over the citizens of Faguas – particularly by way of distraction – while also hinting at the collateral damage inflicted by the seemingly indiscriminate violence.

Indeed, as mentioned previously, perpetual warfare is one of the principal strategies used by the Espadas to ensure instability through hostile factionalism in order to protect their financial interests and expand their personal wealth at the expense of the people of Faguas. When Raphael and Melisandra meet privately with Antonio Espada, the de facto head of state explains that

> Antes las guerras se ganaban o perdían […] Ahora es un asunto de continuidad, de conservar lo Ganado. Ya no hay ni amigos ni enemigos claramente definidos. La información es primordial. La estrategia es más compleja. Se combate en muchos frentes al mismo tiempo y por razones distintas. Los contendientes de hoy pueden ser los aliados de mañana. 'Guerra fluida', lo llamo yo. Requiere de mucha memoria (loc. 1807).

When Melisandra accuses the Espada strategy of being an outdated model that has become a self-destructive cycle of violence, Antonio Espada responds by criticizing the notion of Waslala itself as being the product of overly idealistic poets, of which Faguas has too many: "En un país maldito como éste, es una noción irresistible. Sólo que es una mentira. La única verdad posible, la única certeza, es tener poder, ser fuerte para imponer las reglas del juego, para ser el principal jugador" (loc. 1829).[91] Ultimately, however, it is the rival faction headed by Engracia that brings down the Espada regime, the memory of which is overshadowed by the rediscovery of Waslala.

From waste to Waslala

If Faguas under the rule of the Espada brothers represents a dystopian world of disorder, it is the utopian spirit of Waslala and, more specifically, the active role of women, that offers a sense of hope and the promise of liberation from authoritarian patriarchal rule. Whereas the

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[91] When Raphael asks about the rumors regarding the trafficking of human organs and experiments involving deadly viruses in Faguas, Antonio Espada responds that the country "no tiene condiciones para ese tipo de industria. Recursos, sí […] pero la logística es complicada. Hace mucho tiempo que no vemos ni siquiera un avión. El aeropuerto está lleno de maleza" (loc. 1840).

Espada brothers govern in a way that exclusively serves to maintain their control and advance their own self-interest at the expense of the people of Faguas, the female characters that we will discuss below have no express interest in political power and are instead motivated by a selfless desire to nurture and sustain community. Equally important is their shared anti-capitalist stance, which privileges sustainability over waste, and highlights a radical vision for an alternative future in which Faguas can emerge from isolation peacefully. A common theme in both *Waslala* and in Belli's 2010 novel *El país de las mujeres*, as we will see in the following sections, is the development of a political system in which women are not only included equitably, but indeed take a leading role in determining the direction of the country's future. While this is certainly consistent with the feminism that permeates Belli's work as a whole, in my view, the two novels also specifically reflect the author's disenchantment with the FSLN vis-à-vis the party's failure to secure women's rights and incorporate them fully into the Revolution as promised.

To begin, although the Dutch couple Krista and Vera – who travel upriver on Pedro's *bongo* with Melisandra and the others – do not actually reside in Faguas, they have strong ties to its people. In particular, over the course of their travels to Faguas, they have developed a close relationship with the community of Timbú, where they have recently adopted a six-month-old child. The dual maternal figures are particularly significant, given the town's history: "en una de las guerras más largas, Timbú había quedado desolado. Los huérfanos, abandonados a sus propios recursos en el orfelinato, crecieron, hicieron funcionar el pueblo y se casaron entre ellos. Para reproducirse, en vez de procrear, decidieron formar sus familias con niños que nuevas guerras u otras circunstancias habían dejado sin padres" (loc. 2406). Unlike Maclovio, who continues to do business with the Espada brothers even after rejecting their business offer to participate in the trafficking of orphans out of Timbú, Krista and Vera are fiercely protective of

the community. They repeatedly prevent Raphael from submitting his report about Timbú or the *filina* fields, emphasizing that the indiscriminate bombings from the environmental police will occur without warning and annihilate everything. They have also vowed to eventually burn the *filina* plantations themselves in order to somehow free the community of orphans from the control of the Espada brothers.

Another character with a strong commitment to Faguas, despite her almost complete absence throughout the course of the novel, is Melisandra's mother. As noted in the opening chapters, Melisandra has spent the majority of her life waiting for news from her parents, who have been missing since they set out in search of Waslala during her childhood. For Melisandra, the quest to find Waslala is as much about finding her mother as it is about confirming the existence of the lost utopian community. When Melisandra finally discovers Waslala, hidden in its own sort of magical space-time deep within the jungle, her mother is the only inhabitant remaining in the village. The arrival of Melisandra's parents to Waslala was itself a rather coincidental event. During one of the previous wars in Faguas, Melisandra's parents were on the verge of abandoning their long and unsuccessful search for the community established by Melisandra's grandfather and other poets of Faguas; believing that they could make an impact and work towards peace by mediating between the two sides, they are accused of being double agents and are subsequently ambushed. After Melisandra's mother is sexually assaulted and her father kills two soldiers in self-defense, they eventually manage to make it to Waslala, where they are given refuge. Not long after their arrival to Waslala, Melisandra's mother gives birth to a pair of twins who "habían nacido con la carita peculiar de quienes viven para siempre en un mundo infantil y desvalido" (loc. 3551). Unwilling to leave the twins behind or remove them from Waslala, Melisandra's parents remain in the village, where they take care of the children

until their premature deaths as adolescents. And while the need to nurture her own offspring is the initial factor that influences the decision by Melisandra's mother to stay in Waslala, she soon finds another purpose that is even more enduring.

As the daughter of one of the founders of Waslala, and as an adult member of the community herself, Melisandra's mother becomes part of a movement to preserve its future legacy. In Waslala, she explains, "se profesaba la noción de haber sido elegidos para una misión que trascendía lo individual, para experimentar un modo de vida que, de ser adoptado por los demás, no sólo cambiaría la faz de Faguas, sino la faz de la Tierra" (loc. 3558). However, the implementation of abstract ideals proves more difficult in practice than they had anticipated. Nevertheless, the founding poets reassure Melisandra's parents and others that their role is to simply plant the seeds, and that it will be the new generations who overcome the obstacles and realize the utopian vision of Waslala. Ironically, the women in Waslala are somehow unable to become pregnant, which Melisandra's mother attributes to the fact that "Waslala existe en un interregno, una ranura en el tiempo, un espacio indeterminado" (loc. 3572). And yet, despite its supernatural location outside of time and space, the occasional chance arrival of outsiders who have somehow succeeded in crossing the Corredor de los Vientos – bringing with them news of the difficult realities faced by the people of Faguas – highlights the paradox that Waslala has come to represent:

> ya no era solamente el vacilante experimento que habíamos construido. Era una leyenda, un punto de referencia, una esperanza. Aun antes de que se comprobara su eficacia, se había convertido en un paradigma. Cumplía la función de un sueño capaz de movilizar los deseos y las aspiraciones de quienes ansiaban un destino colectivo más acorde con las

> mejores potencialidades humanas. Comprendimos entonces que la fantasía había adquirido tanto valor como la realidad (loc. 3582).

It is this realization of the power of hope that the idea of Waslala holds within the imaginary of Faguas that becomes the new raison d'être of Melisandra's mother.

Indeed, the task of reconciling the ideals of Waslala with the reality of Faguas represents a new chapter for the people of Waslala, who set about fashioning a sort of utopian aesthetic. As Melisandra's mother explains, the community decided to "crear la ilusión de un lugar cuya belleza, armonía y perfección quedaran grabadas de forma indeleble en aquellos que, en los caprichos del tiempo y sus ranuras, lograran encontrar el paso por el Corredor de los Vientos" (loc. 3588). Visitors are invited to spend the night in Waslala, where they are administered a sort of narcotic mixture of flowers before being transported back across the Corredor de los Vientos in the midst of a drowsy stupor. At the same time, the villagers of Waslala also set about dramatically altering the appearance of the community in a way that is consistent with the image they hope to project to the outside world. The description offered by Melisandra's mother is worth including here in its entirety, particularly as it presents an alternative vision that contrasts significantly from the wrecked and smoldering scenery of Faguas under the corrupt Espada brothers:

> Para empezar, trabajamos los jardines y el paisaje de manera que las impresiones visuales fueran absolutamente memorables. Waslala se convirtió así en un sitio de flores, de enredaderas de rosas trepadoras, buganvillas incandescentes, calles con pérgolas enredadas de jazmines, balcones de donde se desgajaban las campánulas, los heliotropos y huelenoches, veredas de anturios apretados y lirios, macizos de claveles y camelias. Cada casa era un espectáculo; la profusión de flores hacía que el viento oliera a memorias

cálidas, a ternura o embriaguez y que uno pudiera cerrar los ojos y remontarse en la evolución hasta épocas vegetales cuando el sólo toque de la luz bastaba para alegrar la piel (loc. 3592)

The village of Waslala, in other words, has been explicitly molded by its members in a way that will convince visitors of its unique perfection: an Edenic refuge that exists outside of time and which remains insulated from the violence and chaos of Faguas.

There is, then, a clear trajectory that Melisandra's mother follows, which we can identify briefly here. First, she leaves her daughter in search of the lost utopian community founded by her own biological father. After being sexually assaulted by a militant, she then gives birth to a set of twins with an unspecified congenital disorder. Despite the fact that the twins look nothing like her or Melisandra's father – and the possibility that they are the offspring of her attacker – Melisandra's mother commits to their care and remains in Waslala indefinitely rather than returning home to the daughter that looks like a mirror image of her younger self. The maternal instinct to nurture defenseless children who are likely born out of violence leads to Melisandra's mother determining to stay in Waslala, where she discovers a new purpose and finds meaning in the communal project of building a utopian vision for future generations. Indeed, as she explains to Melisandra,

La razón por la que yo sigo aquí es porque pienso que Waslala, como mito, como aspiración, justifica su existencia. Es más, considero que es imperativo que exista, que vuelva a ser, que continúe generando leyendas. Lo más grande de Waslala es que fuimos capaces de imaginarla, que fue la fantasía lo que, a la postre, la hizo funcionar. Hay quienes, aunque nos quedemos solos, tenemos que seguir manteniendo las Waslalas de la

imaginación. Imaginar la realidad sigue siendo tan importante como construirla (loc. 3627)

That vision takes on even greater urgency and becomes more difficult as the situation in Faguas deteriorates further under the Espada regime. The more successful the campaign to mythicize Waslala became, the more the numbers of visitors from the outside dwindled: "Nos quedamos sin la posibilidad de cumplir el propósito por el que tanto nos esforzamos. Entramos en crisis" (loc. 3609). The crisis, brought on by the aggressive campaign waged by the Espada brothers to prevent anyone from finding Waslala and to convince the people of Faguas that it doesn't exist, ultimately sets in motion the gradual abandonment of Waslala by its community members. After Melisandra notes that the people of Faguas have not forgotten about Waslala – and indeed, are eagerly awaiting her return with proof of its existence – her mother's trajectory seems to come full circle, as she explains that "Por eso tu padre y yo permanecimos aquí esperando el día en que Waslala se repoblaría, creyendo contra viento y marea que ese día tendría que llegar. Quizás haya llegado. Quizás ése sea tu llamado, tu herencia" (loc. 3637). Indeed, as we will see below, Melisandra's dangerous quest, and even her very identity, are deeply connected to the legacy and destiny that she had unknowingly inherited from her missing mother.

Melisandra

As the granddaughter of one of Waslala's founders, and the daughter of parents who left in search of Waslala and never returned, it is not surprising that Melisandra has spent much of her life dreaming about one day finding the lost community. Growing up in don José's riverfront estate, she has been surrounded by the memory and myth of Waslala since childhood. Her poet grandfather's obsession has convinced Melisandra of its existence: "Las vívidas evocaciones que dibujaba con la maestría de sus palabras provocaban en quienes lo oían un anhelo tan intenso que

ella al fin llegó a comprender, y hasta perdonar a sus padres por abandonarla y salir en búsqueda de ese mítico paraje" (loc. 104). Melisandra's resolution to leave the safety and comfort of don José's home in search of Waslala is not an impulsive decision, but instead the product of years of planning that began soon after her grandmother's death.[92] The annual visit from the group of foreign smugglers offers Melisandra an opportunity to finally travel to the country's interior for the first time; more specifically, it is Raphael's apparent need for a guide and his expressed interest in finding Waslala that serve as Melisandra's excuse for making the journey.

And yet, throughout much of the novel, the two are at odds in terms of their approach to Waslala: whereas Melisandra's conviction is grounded in the fantastical storytelling of her grandfather, Raphael's skepticism is born out of his positivist demand for truth and journalistic evidence. Early on during their journey upriver, Melisandra confronts Raphael directly about his intentions: "¿Así que veniste a Faguas a buscar Waslala para poder blandir ante el mundo la idea de que en este desamparo se ha podido construir una sociedad perfecta? No sé por qué […] percibo cierto cinismo en tu intención" (loc. 691). Indeed, Raphael initially has no genuine interest in Waslala, which he is using as his cover in order to track down the location of the *filina* plantations for his report. For Melisandra, however, her discovery of Waslala serves as the fulfilment of a lifelong quest; upon entering the abandoned homes in the village and imagining the faces of the people who had lived there, she realizes that

> Por esas caras vivió ella hasta ese día con la obsesión de Waslala a cuestas, como una vestal en el templo Luminoso de aquella idea redentora, preparándose secretamente, urdiendo el hilo que la llevaría hasta allí, sacándose del estómago como una araña la

[92] Melisandra likely would have begun the search much sooner, were it not for the fact that "Su abuela siempre se opuso a que ella se marchara en busca de sus padres y mientras estuvo viva jamás se atrevió a desafiarla" (loc. 163).

> determinación para dejar el río, el abuelo, Joaquín, dejarse ella misma, su lado racional, práctico, para buscar el Santo Grial a través de selvas de caballeros muertos y cadáveres en la explosión. Había luchado por encontrar y aceptar la otra piel suya: su piel de heroína romántica, creyente, ardiente, fiel al deseo oscuro de buscar sin descanso por qué aquel sueño utópico recurría siempre, tenaz (loc. 3470).

What begins as a personal journey for Melisandra has quickly become a cause for the collective good of Faguas, turning the novel's protagonist into the protagonist of the fictional nation's post-authoritarian future.

Melisandra's first visit to the interior of Faguas is met with anticipation by many people who eagerly welcome her quest to find Waslala. As the granddaughter of don José, who is a legend in his own right in a country where poets are practically universally admired, Melisandra – by extension – represents hope in a land of despair. And yet, to the Espada brothers, her determination to pursue the search for Waslala presents two direct threats to their regime. Given its proximity to the *filina* plantations, in which her American video-journalist companion has repeatedly expressed interest, the potential discovery of Waslala would potentially jeopardize a significant source of their income. In addition, the confirmation of Waslala's existence would also offer evidence to Faguans that a radically different form of governance and improved quality of life could be possible. Moreover, Melisandra's growing suspicions towards Maclovio's arms trafficking has the potential to disrupt his largest shipment yet of weapons into the country. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Melisandra is kidnapped and thrown into a dungeon at the Espada compound.

After her daring rescue, just before the series of explosions that destroy the sprawling fortress, Melisandra seamlessly assumes a leadership role in the rebuilding of Cineria, and the

country more broadly. In the immediate aftermath, "La gente, desconcertada y sin rumbo, vagó por la ciudad no bien amaneció, descubriendo que, de la noche a la mañana, se habían quedado sin mandamás ni mandamenos; sin los Espada, sin Engracia, sin armas y sin chatarra porque bien pronto se corrió la voz de que algo había sucedido en el depósito de basura y que nadie debía acercarse allí al menos por un buen tiempo" (loc. 3020).[93] For her part, Melisandra becomes swept up in the frenzied activity of public service and reconstruction, which serves as a much needed catharsis amidst the personal trauma of her detention and the tragic deaths of Morris, Engracia, and most of her young followers. Indeed, as Melisandra observes of the ensuing chaos, "En este desconcierto podemos reorganizar el país" (loc. 3024).

Melisandra's natural propensity for leading and inspiring others suddenly becomes clear when Faguas finds itself in need of someone to fill the void left by the Espada and Engracia, as the following passage illustrates:

> Recorrió las calles con Josué en un afán de solidarizarse, ser útil. Sin percatarse empezó a disponer, a pedir consenso, ella la primera asombrada de que la escucharan con avidez, le pidieran consulta, hasta que se vio prácticamente a cargo de la situación: la ciudad de plastilina fue lentamente retornando al orden, las cuadrillas en los barrios limpiaron las calles, los alimentos – papas y verduras al menos – volvieron a ser accesibles, se repararon las tuberías del agua rotas, las pandillas se quedaron en calma luego de aceptar un alto al fuego, el hospital volvió a funcionar cuando se descubrió el sitio donde estaban almacenados los medicamentos que los Espada destinaban al mercado negro (loc. 3064).

[93] Following the explosion, "el gobierno, con todo su gabinete de oportunistas y vividores, desapareció como tragado por la tierra, temiendo represalias o que se les acusara de haber sido los causantes de la debacle" (loc. 3024)

Having set Faguas on the path to recovery and stability, Melisandra is then encouraged by the residents of Cineria to continue her search for Waslala. The novel ends with Melisandra holding a sort of impromptu press conference at Engracia's compound, where she publicly confirms the existence of Waslala by revealing the written record that the Espada brothers had challenged her to bring back: the annals of Waslala. The scene, filmed by Raphael and transmitted around the world, is a juxtaposition that neatly summarizes one of the ongoing conflicts throughout the novel: "La muchacha alumbrada por viejos faros de barco y de estadio, hablando apasionadamente de ese lugar ignoto y feliz, mientras a su alrededor se apilaban en desorden los desechos de las grandes urbes cuanto el ser humano había creado buscando siempre la elusiva y efímera felicidad" (loc. 3739).[94] Thus, the novel concludes with both a rejection of consumer capitalism and the promotion of communal governance and environmental sustainability as a model for a better world.

Engracia: Working class heroine

It is fitting that the novel should end at Engracia's compound: while the narration undoubtedly centers around Melisandra's quest, it is Engracia's selfless act of courage, her outright resistance to the Espada brothers, and her role in guiding don José's granddaughter to Waslala that ultimately make her the heroine, without whom Faguas would not have been able to free itself from authoritarian rule and its endless cycles of violence. Engracia, more so than any of the other characters in *Waslala*, embodies a sort of radical matriarchal alternative to the

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[94] It is also worth noting here that Waslala is soon repopulated by the families of orphans from Timbú, who will inevitably be unaffected by the effects of Waslala on the ability to reproduce. What is more, the idea of Waslala as a utopian community hidden deep in the jungles of a tropical land that has, until the death of the Espada brothers, effectively been a prohibited zone for outsiders, inspires visitors from around the world to arrive to Faguas, where they "se internaron en sus paisajes en búsqueda de Waslala" (loc. 3739).

corrupt, vindictive, and patriarchal Espada regime. What is more, Engracia best illustrates the argument at the core of this chapter: that the novels *Waslala* and *El país de las mujeres* both offer a critique of the failures of the FSLN – and, more specifically – the Revolution's failure to fully incorporate women into the movement or to seriously pursue any meaningful gender equality. The paragraphs below will focus on three interrelated roles played by Engracia: as the main rival of the Espada regime; as the head of Cineria's waste import operations; and, finally, as an integral link to Waslala.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Engracia is an important and influential figure in the country's interior. Before the group begins their upriver journey, don José advises Melisandra to look for Engracia when she arrives in Cineria. Similarly, when Hermann and Raphael ask Florcita, the bartender in Las Luces, if she can tell them the best way to get to Waslala, she responds by urging them to visit Engracia, whom she identifies as their leader while "rápidamente se adentraba en un estado de feliz embriaguez" (loc. 1089). Not only does the woman described by the narrator as a contemporary Amazon have a base of loyal supporters, but she also has a system of informants and spies who provide her with vital intel about her enemies.[95] And while the Espada brothers are the primary buyers of the weapons trafficked into Faguas by Maclovio, Engracia reveals that, unbeknownst to the regime, she has also been promised a share of the latest arms shipment. For their part, the Espada brothers have a history of ambushing the cargo loads of imported garbage en route from the Pacific to Engracia's compound on the lake. Not only are the offices of their otherwise outdated bunker outfitted with pieces of furniture specifically selected "para crear un efecto *high-tech*", but the raids are often

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[95] The six-foot tall Engracia, with her oversized hands and feet, was also given the nickname "La Giganta" during her childhood.

cause for celebration. In particular, "Las hijas de Damián Espada eran famosas por sus indumentarias estrafalarias, sacadas de los botines de basura a los que los hermanos lograban echar mano" (1650). The irony here, of course, is that the actions of the Espada are incongruent with their supposed ideology, which is little more than a strategy designed to distract the people of Faguas from the inequities perpetuated by their corrupt rule.

Despite routinely robbing the containers of garbage and stockpiling critical supplies such as medication that are provided to Faguas by wealthier nations in exchange for its oxygen production, Damián Espada claims that the only way the regime could even conceive of the existing garbage trade with the Global North would be if it benefitted everyone. Feigning outrage, Damián claims that "Ya es suficientemente indigno el hecho de que nos la envíen…pero, ¿hacer negocio con ella? ¿Enriquecerse aprovechando la miseria de los demás? No podemos estar de acuerdo con eso. Hemos dedicado nuestra vida a luchar por la dignidad del pueblo" (loc. 1630). As we will see below, Engracia does indeed make a decent living by trafficking garbage and toxic waste from wealthy nations in the North, but the contributions of her group do in fact benefit the community at large. In a country of constant conflict, there are certainly overlapping interests between the two rival groups, but their ideologies are diametrically opposed, leading to simmering tensions. Whereas the Espada brothers secretly orchestrate disputes between different community leaders, Engracia often finds herself intervening as a sort of intermediary. What is important to note, however, is the source of Engracia's influence "que la permitía interceder y mantener un mínimo de consenso. Era su control sobre el recurso de la basura, la dependencia que logró crear a través de los años, la que le confería autoridad" (loc. 2249). And yet, unlike the power-hungry Espada brothers, Engracia

does not abuse her authority at the expense of the people of Faguas, but instead uses her influence to help the community.

Engracia and her crew of mostly teenagers operate out of the dilapidated school that she settled in upon arriving to Cineria years before. Having been issued a license to manage the unloading and burial of uncompacted trash sent to Faguas by corporations, Engracia eventually earns the respect of Cineria's residents by salvaging and repairing discarded objects that arrive in the containers, turning them into highly coveted merchandise in a country that has been virtually cut off from the outside world. It is Morris, a scientist from the US sent to inspect waste incineration in Faguas, who initially teaches the basics of mechanics to the group of teenagers at Engracia's compound and "les montó el taller para que repararan y rehabilitaran los aparatos extraños y obsoletos que venían por montones en los contenedores, revueltos con el desperdicio cotidiano de las sociedades de la abundancia" (loc. 1235).[96] As a result, the endless stream of discarded useful objects from wealthy nations that make their way to Engracia's compound accrue value through the skilled and arduous labor of her crew. In the words of Josué, Engracia's most senior assistant, the garbage "es una mina de oro. La extracción es difícil, pero lo que se colecta es muy valioso" (loc. 1409). The metaphorical mine, however, does not exclusively provide for Engracia and her team, as we will see below, but it also serves a critical role for Faguans more broadly that has been altogether neglected or denied from them by the Espada brothers and the altogether absent puppet government. In particular, Engracia's business democratizes access to goods and products that can, at least to some degree, improve daily life in

[96] In a sort of parallel, after the liberation of Faguas and the discovery of Waslala, Maclovio "se las ingenió para hacer un floreciente negocio: objetos olvidados y viejos, empacados en cajas pintadas por los sobrevivientes muchachos de Engracia, se vendían en Nueva York, Londres y Beijing como 'recuerdos de Waslala': la basura, acicalada, retornaba a su lugar de origen" (loc. 3742).

a country of insecurity, insufficient resources, and crumbling infrastructure. Indeed, as Josué points out, “Si no fuera por esta mercancía de segunda, como bien dice Engracia, ya hubiéramos vuelto a la Edad de las Cavernas” (loc. 1420).[97] Unlike the Espada brothers, who outsource their criminal enterprises and stockpile critical supplies destined for the people of Faguas, Engracia and her assistants do the difficult and dirty work themselves, while also distributing the wealth with the community.[98]

Given the nature of work undertaken by Engracia and her crew, the conditions at the dilapidated school are somewhat precarious. The compound’s lakeside location presents its own set of challenges. In the winter, for example, swarms of *chayules* rising from the surface of the lake become a constant nuisance: “había que envolverse en trapos para evitar que los minúsculos insectos se les metieran en la boca, en las fosas nasales y en las orejas” (loc. 1232). What is more, the sorting and processing of the various forms of garbage and waste that arrive in shipments from wealthy countries significantly impacts the quality of the air at Engracia’s compound. Wafting throughout the grounds is “un humo acre” emitted by the rudimentary incinerator located at the far end of the schoolyard, where all of the items not salvaged by Engracia’s crew are burned (loc. 1395). The school, having been converted into a waste processing center, is also permeated by the noxious odors of decaying garbage circulating through the building.

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[97] It should be noted that this reference to a potential return to the Paleolithic would represent a significant regression from the already anachronistic state of Faguas, which both Engracia and don José have separately described as being stuck in the Middle Ages.

[98] A particularly relevant consideration here is the social value of Engracia’s operation for Cineria as a whole. As the garbologist Sonia Maria Dias has observed, “Waste pickers protect the environment by enabling materials to be reused or reprocessed”, and in the Global South in particular they are “an intrinsic part of urban economies and the urban social fabric” and “protect the streets while performing an important economic and environmental activity” (377-378).

Whereas the large items remain outside, the more compact bundles are taken inside to be sorted by Engracia's team of workers, who move the items between three main rooms. The odor is the most pungent in the first room, where the bundles are opened and all degradable materials removed. The remaining garbage is sorted further as it moves through two additional rooms, where it is stored until Engracia can personally inspect it and designate the items to keep and those for incineration. As the group tours the facilities, Raphael and Melisandra are visibly overwhelmed by the stench, and although Josué seems to be unaffected, he admits that it is a dirty job. For the teenagers sorting the trash, the work is harsh and unpleasant: "Los adolescentes, cuyo número era difícil de calcular, se movían con gran energía entre cutaro y cuarto, en un ambiente de papeles estrujados, latas aplastadas y pelusa pestilente. Algunos llevaban máscaras sobre la nariz y la boca, otros simplemente se habían amarrado un pañuelo al estilo de los viejos bandoleros del Oeste" (loc. 1430). While the waste disposal business proves lucrative for Engracia and her followers, it also creates both living and working conditions that are hazardous and unhealthy.

Within that hostile and otherwise unwelcoming environment, however, Engracia builds a refuge for herself with items salvaged from the garbage. Engracia's personal quarters deep within the abandoned school building that serves as her compound reflects the complexity of her situation more broadly:

> Era un *budoir*, pero también una tienda de beduino en el desierto, o de califa de las *Mil y Una Noches*. Había sillones recubiertos con damascos desteñidos, divanes, poltronas, mesas de bronce con patas de elefante, lámparas con sombreros Tiffany y art-déco, manos iluminadas, candelabros dorados, una araña de cristal en el techo. En el centro de la sala, la cama tenía pilares de bronce y un dosel del que colgaban telas con dibujos de

> arabescos. Por todos lados, macetas con plantas. Un loro se paseaba por entre los muebles (loc. 1481).

Indeed, the mood inside Engracia's room offers an explicit contrast to the dirt and decay throughout the rest of the compound. As she explains to Melisandra, "vivir en un lugar como éste puede ser cabrón […] Hay que saber aislarse del conjunto, crearse las condiciones para imaginarse uno muy lejos" (loc. 1484). While the place to which Engracia is ostensibly referring here is the harsh environment of the dilapidated school filled with rotting garbage and hazardous waste imported from wealthy nations, the waste processing center by extension represents the state of Faguas: wrecked, ruined, and discarded. And yet the endless flows of garbage also reveal the destructive forces of global capitalism more broadly, as Engracia points out to Morris: "Mientras más basura veo más comprendo que tan desgraciados son los que todo lo tienen como los que solo tenemos sus desechos" (loc. 1376). For Engracia, Waslala represents the only hope for an alternative future outside of capitalism and corrupt authoritarian rule. As we will see shortly, it is this conviction and belief in Waslala as the key to a better future for Faguas that drives her resolution to destroy the Espada regime directly.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Engracia and the Espada regime is her interest in community building rather than the consolidation of wealth and power. The clearest example of Engracia's commitment to the community of Cineria in particular is the bazaar hosted in the schoolyard. The market, which encourages a free and open exchange of materials among the people of Cineria and surrounding areas, stands in stark contrast to the strict control that the Espada regime maintains over the flow of goods into Faguas. Unlike the paranoid Espada brothers – who are rumored to never sleep, and generally remain out of sight in the safety of their heavily guarded and fortified bunker – Engracia frequently and openly meets with the

public. At the bazaar, Engracia sits with her assistants behind a large wooden table, where she decides whether “lo que se ofrecía de una parte equivalía a lo que se obtenía de la otra. Las transacciones se llevaban a cabo con gran celeridad entre conversaciones a través de la mesa donde, además de pedir rebaja y discutir, se le referían a Engracia noticias de conocidos, fechorías de los Espada o relatos de muertos, heridos y escaramuzas” (loc. 1507) Groups of buyers move between the mountains of objects, pushing old shopping carts filled with the goods that they’ve brought for trade. The bustling, chaotic scene combines elements of global capitalism’s fallout with the sights and sounds evocative of lively rural markets: “El ruido de las voces de quienes regateaban, de los críos llorando o gritando, se mezclaba con el cacarear de gallinas, los gruñidos de cerdos y los balidos de terneros. El olor rancio, a basura seca, se confundía ahora con el de hierbas, legumbres y flores que los clientes llevaban de aquí allá esperando el momento de completar el trueque” (loc. 1507).[99] The market exemplifies Engracia’s open opposition to both global capitalism and the corrupt authoritarianism of the Espada regime.

Engracia’s compound at the abandoned school – and by extension, the future of Faguas – is antithetical to the wasteful and destructive cycle of hyperconsumption characteristic of late-stage capitalism (quote?). Rather than simply burning or burying the discarded waste sent by

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[99] In my view, the bazaar brings to mind the late-nineteenth century market scenes of the Danish-French Impressionist painter, Camille Pissarro. It is helpful here to consider the following description from the Clark Museum’s 2011 exhibition guide:

> For Pissarro and other anarchists of the period, the “ideal market” was agricultural: producers sold their fresh, locally produced food at a fair price directly to the consumers. These markets were the opposite of government controlled urban markets (such as Les Halles, the central food market in Paris). Pissarro’s many images of marketplaces, in a full range of media, offer a panorama of specific sights, odors, and sounds. His compositions are invariably jammed with people, almost always women, who during this period were largely responsible for shopping and preparing meals. They chat, jostle, bargain, call out, and gossip in an endless variety of poses and groupings (https://www.clarkart.edu/microsites/pissarro-s-people/rural-markets).

wealthy countries, Engracia and her crew instead restore functionality of material objects and democratize access by offering them to the community in exchange for whatever the interested buyers bring with them to trade. As don José points out at the beginning of the novel, "en Faguas ya casi no se utiliza el dinero. No se hace mucho con dinero en una sociedad desorganizada por la guerra" (loc. 266). Instead, Engracia and her team receive as payment from their shoppers a variety of local goods, such as "vegetales, huevos, telas, animales, jarras de leche, quesos, contenedores con mantequilla, tortillas, pan, confecciones de repostería, cestos de naranjas, mangos y aguacates, bloques de hielo, jarras de refrescos" (loc. 1507). Not only does their operation provide for the community in the immediate present, however. There is also, as we will see below, an effort to preserve the memory of the past for future generations of Faguans.

Among the many miscellaneous discarded items that arrive in the garbage shipments are books of all types. Following a recommendation from Morris, Engracia and her team have created their own library. The significance of the library is illustrated by the fact that it is located at the end of a long hallway, in a room secured by a large padlock on the door and windows that are closed off to the outside. To begin, the collection represents the obsolescence of traditional analog technologies in wealthy countries, and the conversion of intellectual material into a commodity designed for detached mass consumption. Raphael, for example, has never encountered so many physical books in one place, because he "Visitaba las bibliotecas virtualmente. Ya no era necesario hacerlo de otra manera. Se accedía a los libros vía Masterbook, matriz electrónica con la ductilidad de un libro, cuyo texto se podía proyectar en la pared – para leer mientras se tomaba un baño, por ejemplo – o convertir a audio, si es que debía uno realizar otra actividad, como conducir o cocinar" (loc. 1437). For him, both the time and space required to store and read physical books, as well as the natural resources required to produce them, are

all inconceivable. In contrast, the Masterbook eliminates the need for physical storage space, paper for printing, and allows for time to be compressed, in that it allows for the act of consuming a text to take place concurrently with other activities. Nevertheless, I view the Masterbook as a subtle allusion to the ongoing crises facing the Global North, which we have already touched on briefly in this chapter. In particular, the Masterbook reflects the anxieties of a time-obsessed culture in which consumption must be maximized and made more efficient; where the scarcity of resources and the shrinking of space both speak to issues such as overpopulation, urbanization, and the privatization of land. And yet, in Engracia's library, Raphael is able to physically touch the book spines and leaf through the pages – each with their own unique textures – and concludes that "Ciertamente que pasar la mano por las páginas era más sensual" (loc. 1444).[100] The scene, then, not only highlights Raphael's ongoing internal conflict, as the accumulation of experiences in Faguas forces him to reevaluate his own priorities. It also emphasizes the ways in which Engracia – and, by extension, the future of Faguas – offer a viable alternative to the forces of global capitalism.

If Engracia's library is the product of disposability and the commodification of thought for the wealthier societies that have dispensed with conventional texts in favor of new technologies, the presence of physical books in Faguas represents a form of resistance and hope. In particular, they offer a degree of permanence that makes possible the preservation of the past for future generations. Whereas the Masterbook privileges quick and convenient consumption of texts, the physical books are valued in Faguas, at least in part, for their experiential quality,

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[100] There is a prescient and, for the reader now in the 21st century, a very familiar scene as Raphael interacts with the books: "Al tomar los primeros ejemplares, Raphael se encontró buscando el control para ampliar la página y verla mejor. Se burló en silencio de su reflejo automático" (ibid).

providing a comforting and nostalgic link to the past. When Raphael asks Josué who reads the books from the library, Josué explains that he personally likes coming to the library to smell the books: "Me gusta mucho su olor. Me calma. A veces me pongo a hojearlos pero la verdad es que aquí queda muy poco tiempo para leer" (loc. 1451). And although the books largely remain unread, they possess a latent political power as tools of resistance against the existing power structures, both within Faguas and beyond.[101] The Espada campaign to invalidate the existence of Waslala is, above all, an effort to disempower the people of Faguas by suppressing the ideas that influenced the poets who founded the utopian community in the middle of the jungle. The collection of books, then, presents a philosophical threat to the future of the Espada regime.

It is important to note here, however, that the oldest books in Engracia's library only date back to 1980. This obvious reference to Nicaragua's recent past, in my view, exemplifies the novel's ambivalent approach to the Revolution and the Sandinista movement. Whereas Maite Zubiaurre broadly describes the tyrannical government of the Espada brothers as an "espejo y parodia indudable de una dictadura latinoamericana" (76), Barbara Dröscher makes a more explicit comparison by referring to the brothers as "caudillos (que recuerdan *nolens volens* a los hermanos Ortega)" (160). In that sense, then, this chronological detail about the books in Engracia's library could be read as a critique of the pre- and post-Revolution governments in Nicaragua, both of which routinely employed censorship in order to restrict public criticism. The publication dates of the books also reveal the ways in which the novel critically envisions a near-future world marked by the continued expansion of American hegemony across the globe. As Melisandra browses the bookshelves, she hopes to find books in Spanish, French, or Italian for

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[101] Maite Zubiaurre, for her part, cogently argues that the "vertedero es la gran biblioteca en la que Engracia descifra, airea y recicla los secretos/las intimidades/las vergüenzas del occidente" (91).

her grandfather, noting that "estos ejemplares databan en su mayoría de fechas anteriores a la adopción del inglés como lengua oficial universal" (loc. 1448). The two references to publication dates – one a precise year in the recent past, and the other a more vague geopolitical shift that, at least at present, has not yet occurred – set the narration somewhere in an undefined near future which is still familiar to the contemporary reader.[102]

In addition to the collection of books, the library also houses a rather unexpected group of objects rescued from the trash. The drawers of a large storage cabinet contain countless anonymous family photos, featuring a wide variety of subject matters. For the people of Faguas, which has been cut off from the outside world for an extended period of time, the photographs offer a rare opportunity to travel far beyond the borders of the precarious present and to imagine another world. As Josué explains, "Hay quienes se pasan horas y horas hojeándolas. A mí me gusta ver la ropa que usa la gente, imaginarme sus vidas. Es muy entretenido. Hay paisajes muy hermosos y ciudades increíbles" (loc. 1458). For Raphael, there is nothing inherently extraordinary about the discarded photos; in contrast, both Melisandra and Josué instantly find themselves lost in the mosaic of other lives in what may as well be an entirely different planet. Melisandra begins to sort through polaroids of

> familias congregadas, perros, bebés gordos gateando, parejas frente al vasto paisaje de un pinar, una mujer cruzando la calle en Nueva York. Se inclinó y pasó los dedos por las fotos arrugadas, de esquinas rotas, descoloridas, antiguas fotos desenfocadas, algunas más recientes. Ninguna de las personas en las fotografías habría sospechado que

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[102] Worth noting here is one of the photos on the wall at Jaime's hotel in Cineria, which features "Gerard Shummer, el primer hombre que pisó Marte y que luego, en misión de buena voluntad del propio presidente de los Estados Unidos, viajó por las principales regiones olvidadas del mundo, hablando sobre las maravillas del cosmos", which presumably explains his visit to the boutique hotel in the interior of Faguas (loc. 1926).

> compartiría la intimidad de sus bodas, de sus cumpleaños, sus vacaciones, con estos jóvenes habitantes de la basura. Sintió el pecho oprimido. Era absurda la biblioteca con libros que nadie leía y absurda la idea de conservar esas viejas fotografías. Era absurdo pero hermoso, dulcemente triste (loc. 1465).

The library, with its collection of salvaged books and miscellaneous family photographs, offers visions of the outside world from which the people of Faguas have long been isolated. The repurposing of waste, then, represents a sort of radical reconfiguration of global capitalism, in that the discarded scraps from the hyperconsumer societies of the Global North serve as a means of exchange in a country where money is almost nonexistent; democratize access to goods and knowledge; and provide hope for a better future amidst the chaos of the precarious present.

The garbage paradox: excess in the land of scarcity

In order to understand the role of Engracia's processing center and the ways in which it links Faguas with the wealthier nations of the world, it is helpful to consider the nature of consumerism and the culture of waste that it produces. Gilles Lipovetsky has divided the history of consumer capitalism into three distinct phases. The first phase, from the 1880s through the end of the Second World War, was characterized by the emergence of both mass marketing and the modern consumer. Innovations in packaging, the first major national advertising campaigns, and the dawn of brand names all came to define this new form of capitalism. The second phase, from 1950 through the end of the 1970s, was characterized by the appearance of the mass-consumption society and the beginning of buying products strictly for pleasure. According to Lipovetsky, we are currently in the third phase of the consumer economy: the hyperconsumption society, which began in the late 1970s and is characterized by hyperindividualism and the "personalized use of space, time, and goods" (26-27). Under the logic of hyperconsumption, the

process of consuming is no longer a response to our needs, but instead a way of forming what we believe to be an individualized and distinct version of our unique selves, expressed through what we consume.

Zygmunt Bauman further explores the role of consumerism in contemporary life in the aptly titled *Consuming Life* (2007). To begin, Bauman notes that

> consumerism, in sharp opposition to the preceding forms of life, associates happiness not so much with the *gratification* of needs […] as with an *ever rising volume and intensity* of desires, which imply in turn prompt use and speedy replacement of the objects intended and hoped to gratify them […] New needs need new commodities; new commodities need new needs and desires; the advent of consumerism augurs the era of 'inbuilt obsolescence' of goods offered on the market and signals a spectacular rise in the waste-disposal industry (31).

What Bauman describes here is particularly relevant to our discussion of excess consumption and waste in *Waslala*. Indeed, under the logic of consumerism, production and waste are part of a seemingly endless loop. Bauman goes on to point out that in a society of consumers, "the pursuit of happiness […] tends to be refocused from *making* things or their *appropriation* (not to mention their storage) to their *disposal* – just what is needed if the gross national product is to grow" (37). The consumerist economy, he continues, "has to rely on *excess* and *waste*", with the vast majority of new products ending up in the dump before they have even found customers: "But even the lucky few that manage to find or conjure up a need, desire or wish for those whose gratification they might demonstrate themselves to be relevant (or eventually to become relevant) soon tend to succumb to the pressure of further 'new and improved' products […] well before

their working capacity has come to its preordained end" (38).[103] Indeed, the accumulation of waste is symptomatic of our desire for disposability, which in turn drives more production and more waste.

In *Waslala*, while the business of importing garbage from other countries does have some positive aspects, it is also a glaring reminder of the stark differences between cultures of abundance and societies suffering from corruption and scarcity. As Nancy Gates Madsen rightly points out,

> while the novel strongly criticizes human exploitation of natural resources and the resultant differential development and economic inequality, at the same time it affirms access to and control of resources as a fundamental 'human right.' By critiquing consumption rather than property, *Waslala* demonstrates the paradoxes that arise when human rights are predicated upon the control of nonhuman 'resources' (135).[104]

For Melisandra, the sight of discarded objects such as appliances that are otherwise still completely functional represents an unfathomable degree of wastefulness, which she asks Raphael to explain. His response highlights the relationship between producers, consumers, and waste in the hyperconsumption society: "Porque cada año los fabricantes ofrecen máquinas más sofisticadas, con nuevos aditamentos, y la gente tiene por lo nuevo, por lo último" (loc. 1414). Whereas Melisandra views this as an unnecessary waste of resources, Raphael instead considers

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[103] In a sense, Bauman echoes Vance Packard's best-selling book *The Waste Makers* (1960), in which he distinguishes between three types of obsolescence: obsolescence of function; obsolescence of quality; and obsolescence of desirability (54).

[104] Gates Madsen goes on to argue that the novel "illustrates not only how global ecology and human rights are fundamentally interconnected, but how the universal ideals underpinning both concepts pull in opposite directions […] prompting a rethinking of the definition and practice of human rights within the context of global ecology" (136).

it to be natural and necessary for the smooth functioning of capitalism. Indeed, not only does obsoletion drive the endless cycle of production, but, as Raphael suggests, the hyperconsumerism that has come to characterize wealthier societies simultaenously creates perpetual demand that in turn necessitates greater supply, arguing that “Si la gente no estuviera dispuesta a cambiar lo viejo por lo nuevo, los fabricantes no tendrían estímulo para producir mejores máquinas” (ibid). Under this model, endless waste is not only a byproduct, but in fact a key part of the formula.

The irony, however, is that Faguas imports trash from wealthy nations, while at the same time supplying them with oxygen, of which there is a shortage in the Global North. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, don José’s finca has largely been spared from the ongoing violence in Faguas due to its proximity to the protected forest reserves of the Atlantic region. There is, then, constant tension between nature and waste, both of which have become commodified in the age of global capitalism. That relationship is best captured in the initial description of the repurposed schoolyard at Engracia’s compound, which is quoted below at length for several reasons. First, the use of nature metaphors to describe the piles of trash highlights the ecological implications of global capitalism. Second, I read this passage as one of the clearest examples of Belli’s poetic intervention in the novel. Finally, the chatoic cataloging of the discarded items underscores the dizzying scope of the unending waste crisis. Still half-asleep after waking up on their first morning at the school, Raphael and Melisandra stumble upon

> un patio enorme que parecía la playa donde la civilización moderna depositara los despojos de su naufragio. Restos de cuanto objeto cupiera en la imaginación yacían apilados en grandes montañas, componiendo esculturas caprichosas, entes de otro mundo que sólo después de una larga observación se relevaban como amontonamientos de

> marcos de miles de puertas y ventanas, estructuras de incontables camas de hierro, pilas de colchones, montañas de aparatos sanitarios, llantas, rines de llantas, electrodomésticos computarizados, antiquísimas lavadoras, secadoras, refrigeradores, televisores, monitores de computadoras voluminosas, paneles de plasma de modeles en desuso, sillas de ruedas, toneladas de botellas de vidrio escapadas del reciclaje, mobiliario de oficina, carrocerías, exhibidores de mercancías, maquinaria industrial, calderas, purificadores de aire, candelabros, lámparas (loc. 1389).

Not only does the above list give a sense of the magnitude of the waste crisis and its inevitable ecological footprint, but it also highlights the challenges faced by Engracia's team in trying to identify and safely dispose of all potential sources of hazardous waste.

In addition to his official duties as a scientist assigned to inspect the incineration of trash in Cineria, Morris has been an important figure at Engracia's compound in other significant ways, such as teaching the basics of mechanics to the young workers, establishing a repair workshop, and suggesting the idea of the library. Because of his romantic relationship with Engracia, Morris displays a deep affection for the youth at the compound, who in turn refer to him as professor. When Melisandra and the others first arrive on Pedro's *bongo*, Morris asks Josué if the team has followed the safety protocols that he taught them during his previous visit. In response, Josué explains that "Se nos murieron todos los gatos el año pasado luego que pasaron la noche jugando en un contenedor recién llegado […] Por ellos nos dimos cuenta de que algo peligroso venía allí. Nos vestimos con los trajes amarillos, las máscaras y todo lo que usted nos dio y enterramos el contenedor y los gatos. Hemos tenido más cuidado desde entonces" (loc. 1238). The exchange foreshadows what essentially turns out to be the plot twist that sets in motion a sequence of events that ultimately lead to the liberation of Faguas from the Espada.

Although Morris feels personally responsible for the tragic accident that takes place at Engracia's compound, the circumstances leading up to the event seem to suggest that it was predestined to occur in order to make possible Melisandra's unimpeded search for and eventual discovery of Waslala. On the evening of the accident, Morris is with Melisandra and Raphael in Cineria, where he is introducing them to the hotelier, Jaime, with the hope that he can connect them to someone in his extended network that can guide them to Waslala. Throughout the meeting, Morris constantly glances at the watch on his robotic arm, anxious to return to Engracia's compound. Prior to meeting up with Melisandra and Raphael, Morris had spent the afternoon with a skilled watchmaker "utilizando sus finas herramientas para calibrar sus instrumentos y poder evaluar adecuadamente el cargamento que a esa hora ya los muchachos debían estar descargando en el muelle" (loc. 1943). Because of the unanticipated meeting at the hotel, which is prolonged even further by Jaime's propensity for conversation, Morris is delayed in his return to the compound. Upon their arrival to the former school that night, the trio are alarmed to discover the building empty and in complete darkness. After an increasingly frantic search for signs of Engracia and her team of teenagers, Melisandra spots something odd from the window: "Al fondo del patio, cerca del incinerador, algo resplandecía: objetos brillantes, pequeños, redondos, se movían emitiendo una luz azulada, irreconocible" (loc. 1979). As they race outside through the nocturnal obstacle course of pipes and motors and appliances, Morris repeatedly tries to convince himself that it can't be what he thinks it is. Guided by the sounds of laughter, they finally find the group "reunidos en un círculo alrededor de un resplandor fosforescente. Hombres y mujeres iluminados. Muchachos. Sus manos, sus caras resplandecían azuladas. Alguien se inclinaba y sacaba los brazos espolvoreados de luz del recipiente de metal al centro" (loc. 1997). What unfolds next is the most emotionally-charged moment in the novel,

which I view as both anticipating the extreme sacrifice that Engracia makes for the future of Faguas, as well as calling attention to the ecological and biological consequences of unregulated industrial waste disposal in Latin American countries, in particular.

When his worst fears are confirmed, Morris flies into a brief but violent rage, striking Engracia in the face multiple times, and knocking one of her young assistants to the ground. His anger clashes with the festive atmosphere of the circle of laughing and dancing blue bodies, who, as Engracia innocently explains, were simply trying to have some fun after decorating themselves with a phosphorescent paint. After checking the readings from the instrument panel on his robotic arm, Morris tries to calmly explain to the group the cause of his violent outburst:

> Les pido disculpas por haberme violentado, pero les dije tantas veces que tuvieran cuidado. Se lo dije precisamente para evitar un accidente como éste. Ese polvo brillante que tanto les ha divertido es cesio 137. Es un isótopo radioactivo. La dosis letal varía entre 500 y 600 rems. Calculo que cada uno de ustedes debe haber recibido al menos eso. Se van a poner muy enfermos. En unas cuantas horas sufrirán de vómitos, fiebre, dolor de cabeza, quemaduras, la piel les arderá. Perderán fluido y electrólitos en los espacios intercelulares, sufrirán de daños a la médula espinal, se les caerá el pelo…¡Qué estupidez, Dios mío, qué estupidez! (loc. 2014)

Based on the extremely elevated radiation levels to which they have been exposed, Morris calculates that they only have, at most, two weeks to live. The source of the highly radioactive cesium illustrates the asymmetrical relationship between Faguas and the Global North: the group collected the bright blue dust after breaking the cylinder that they have removed from "una de las máquinas que se habían utilizado para irradiar enfermos de cáncer antes de que la recién descubierta terapia genética permitiera aislar y neutralizar el gen en los recién nacidos" (loc.

2024). Having been rendered obsolete in wealthy nations by a recent scientific breakthrough, the medical equipment has become yet another discarded object bound for the distant wasteyards of a forgotten country. Later, while Morris lies next to Engracia and contemplates his own imminent death,[105] he quietly reflects on the fact that

> A nadie le espantaba la muerte impersonal de un desconocido, de cientos de desconocidos. Mucho menos aún les importaba la muerte de los que habitaban estas regiones. Por eso había sido tan difícil convertir en crimen penable la introducción de sustancias letales en la basura. Con tal de que no se contaminaran los países ricos, mientras sólo afectara a quienes, de todas formas, tenían una muerte prematura en agenda, era un mal menor. Qué más daba que murieran de una u otra forma. El mundo 'civilizado' no podía admitirlo, por supuesto, pero eso era lo que subyacía en sus razonamientos (loc. 2093).[106]

The accident is the consequence of the logic of global capitalism, which views the disposability of both bodies and material objects as equally necessary.[107]

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[105] On the night of the accident, Morris discreetly reaches into the container of Cesium 137 and paints his body with the radioactive powder while everyone is distracted, thus accepting the same fate as Engracia and her followers.

[106] From Engracia's perspective, "Ciertamente que la muerte no era gran acontecimiento en Faguas. Nadie esperaba llegar a viejo, ni hacía planes para futuros distantes. Eso es lo que Morris no podía comprender viniendo como venía de una sociedad donde la muerte era una preocupación, donde la gente se ocupaba con toda seriedad y esmero por vivir el mayor tiempo posible" (loc. 2142).

[107] As Belli reveals in her note at the end of the novel, the Cesium 137 episode at Engracia's waste facility is based on a real event that took place in the Brazilian city of Goiania in 1987. After finding a metal tube, two trash pickers sell it to a scrap metal dealer, who used a hammer to bust it open in the hopes of selling the lead. Inside, he discovered a brilliant blue dust that radiated in the darkness; fascinated by the magical substance, he gifted containers of it to friends and family. The exposure sickened a total of 129 people, sending 20 to the hospital and killing 6 – including a young girl exposed to the radioactive material at her own birthday party, where it was featured as part of the celebration (loc. 3761).

Engracia's commitment to community and hope for the future of Faguas are not dampened by the accident and her impending mortality. Instead, death becomes her most radical form of resistance, as she resolves to weaponize her own body for the liberation of Faguas from the Espada regime. Engracia's plan is not simply a matter of exacting revenge against her enemies, but rather it is driven by the urgency of ensuring the success of Melisandra's quest to find Waslala. Indeed, as we will see shortly, Engracia is effectively the last living link to the mysterious utopian community; by extension, the future of Faguas rests almost entirely on her shoulders. It is this sense of selfless purpose for the greater good that calls Engracia to action. As her health rapidly deteriorates and she begins planning the suicide attack on the Espada compound, Engracia observes that "La sociedad también tenía derecho a protegerse. Más tarde, si Melisandra y Raphael encontraban Waslala, quizás las cosas cambiarían, quizás se instituiría la magnanimidad; pero mientras los Espada estuvieran vivos, nadie descubriría Waslala. Ni siquiera Melisandra. A esas horas ya los Espada debían haber sembrado el camino de trampas" (loc. 2242).

As the leader of what amounts to the only opposition to the Espada brothers, Engracia understands what is at stake for Faguas if the regime is left unchallenged. In particular, if the control over trash is the source of Engracia's authority and influence, "Cuando ella desapareciera y la basura quedara en manos de los Espada, como indudablemente sucedería, el Comunitarismo se acabaría.[108] La única esperanza de Faguas de algún día recomponerse se haría trizas" (loc.

[108] Although references to any clear political philosophies are virtually absent throughout the novel, Engracia's association with Communitarianism in particular reinforces the novel's resistance to neoliberalism.

2249).[109] It is fitting, then, that Engracia's vision for liberating Faguas involves clearing the way to Waslala, which in turn begins with a plan of action modeled after "los Fantasmas de Wiwilí (loc. 2252). The connection between Wiwilí and Waslala – indeed, between spaces of resistance from Nicaragua's revolutionary past, is further emphasized by Engracia's argument that "Basta que una sola persona lo atribuya a los Fantasmas de Wiwilí, para que nadie dude que fueron ellos los que hicieron justicia. Será un castigo divino, una señal inequívoca […] de que el camino a Waslala ha quedado abierto" (loc. 2259). Engracia's plan of action acknowledges the importance of both superstition and the persistence of collective memory of the past.

Taking down the regime

Rather than waiting around for their bodies to fail completely, Engracia and her followers make the decision to turn their deaths into an act of resistance, as well as a sort of street performance. What is more, recognizing that it is her final night in the world of the living, Engracia decides to make herself beautiful. Using the brilliant blue cesium as her medium once again, she decorates her skin with spirals and circles; attaches a powerful explosive device to her groin; wraps a brocade fabric around her body like a toga; and, finally, braids and coats her hair with more of the cesium dust, which she also applies on her face as makeup. The description of Engracia in her final form ties in with the other mythological imagery that appears throughout the novel. Viewing herself in the mirror, "Se vio bella como una amazona mítica, como el imponente mascarón de proa de algún navío descarriado y fantasmagórico" (loc. 2783). Similarly, during the jeep ride into Cineria with Morris and five of the teenagers contaminated with cesium, Engracia's appearance is described as adding an atmosphere of wonder and

[109] Whereas Morris questions Engracia's proposed plan, arguing that the only thing that could possibly come out of such an act would be more violence, Engracia responds by suggesting that "Habrá un vacío. Se podrá hacer boron y cuenta nueva" (loc. 2275).

supernaturalism: "Envuelta en brocados, con el cuerpo monumental refulgente pintado con astros, cometas, órbitas luminosas y su cara de rasgos amplios alzada y desafiante, Engracia personificaba el poder telúrico de una tormenta eléctrica y el oscuro misterio del vientre femenino. Lucía mayéstica y evocó en todos el dolor por la madre y la nostalgia por la amante" (loc. 2800). Engracia's appearance not only serves as a disguise that successfully frightens away the majority of soldiers posted around the perimeter of the heavily guarded Espada compound, but it also adds to the mystery of a night that will be memorialized in Faguas for generations.

Prior to reaching Cineria, the group is intercepted by Jaime, who delivers the *filina* that Raphael brought back from his clandestine trek to Timbú. The hybrid of marijuana and coca plants instantly relieves their pain and provides a sort of spiritual clarity: "La filina los había trocado en criaturas leves, afables, desalojadas de miedo, de terror, de dudas, listas para lanzarse en su procesión de fantasmas radiantes a través de Cineria" (loc. 2878). Due to the nightly violence between rival gangs, the group finds the streets of the city silent and empty upon their arrival. As they approach the first checkpoint, Engracia gives the signal for the drummer and flautist in the group to begin playing, which instantly changes the atmosphere in Cineria:

> Por los boquetes de las bombas, las ventanas, las hendiduras de las puertas, se asomaron las caras atónitas a ver pasar aquel cortejo de seres de otro mundo que transformaba la noche en un líquido verde, resplandeciente, en el que brillaban cometas, soles, órbitas de otras constelaciones, inmersas en la música de marcha infantil que a ratos sonaba a melodía traviesa y a ratos tenía la punzante calidad de una protesta rasguñando una parte dormida del alma (loc. 2885).

For the residents of Cineria, their final memory of Engracia is thus this ghostly, otherworldly spectacle that both physically and metaphorically begins to awaken people from the darkness.

Like the victims of the Wiwilí massacre in 1934, Engracia and her crew are gunned down by the regime. However, whereas the Guardia Nacional destroyed the entire compound at Sandino's cooperative after murdering 300 men, women, and children, it is instead Engracia's group that wipes the Espada regime's compound from the map. Indeed, what Engracia had not anticipated when detonating the explosives attached to her body was that the Espada brothers had been secretly stockpiling their own weapons and explosives because of their paranoia: "no guardaban las municiones, las armas, las bombas de sus múltiples guerras donde se decía las guardaban. Temerosos de la deslealtad que ellos mismos se encargaran de fomentar, las conservaban enterradas en los sótanos de la fortaleza en que vivían, conspiraban y transcurrían sus horas de ocio en compañía de familias" (loc. 3011). As a result, Engracia's wish for Faguas to have a fresh start in the aftermath of her suicide mission also comes to fruition. Rather than a single explosion, it is instead "una miríada de explosiones las que detonaron esa noche apocalíptica en Cineria. El cielo, volteado al revés, se tiñó de café, de tierra, como si un volcán, que aún no se supiera volcán, hubiese despertado eructando piedras, los cimientos, las fundaciones del antiguo fuerte, desplazándolos a cientos de metros a la redonda. El cielo se enrojeció con las llamaradas" (3013). Incidentally, it is this unexpected collateral damage on the city of Cineria itself that pushes Melisandra into an unexpected role as community organizer as she leads the cleanup and relief efforts. In turn, Melisandra gains the trust of the survivors and residents of Cineria, who encourage her to continue the search for Waslala.

It is through her heroic death that Engracia's true connection and commitment to Waslala finally come into focus. Once the work to rebuild Cineria is underway, Melisandra and Raphael return to the old school, where they learn that Engracia has left all of her possessions to Melisandra, including books in Spanish for don José, as well as her pet parrot. Most notably,

Engracia has written a letter to Melisandra in which she divulges important information about her own past, including her connection to Waslala and her relationship with don José. In her letter, Engracia provides a firsthand account of the founding of Waslala, as well as some insight into its initial stages of development, all of which she had witnessed in her youth while serving coffee at the meetings between don José and other poets from Faguas. It is not until a coup d'état takes place in Faguas, however, that the group ultimately decides to relocate to Waslala. The young Engracia, who is in love with don José at the time, begs him to let her accompany them to Waslala. It is here that both the reader and Melisandra learn for the first time that Engracia, contrary to her statement earlier in the novel, has in fact been to Waslala in person.

What is significant about Engracia's letter to Melisandra is the alternative perspective that it offers regarding the national myth of Waslala. It is important to keep in mind that when we first meet Melisandra at the beginning of the novel, it is at don José's estate, where she has been living since childhood, when her parents set out on their own journey to find Waslala and never returned. As a result, Melisandra has grown up surrounded by a memory of Waslala that has been informed by the absence of her parents and filtered through the nostalgic writings and monologues of her grandfather. Recognizing this when writing her letter, Engracia notes that "Imagino que él te habrá contado algunos pormenores sobre la fundación de Waslala, pero, conociéndolo, estoy segura que omitió todo lo negativo y, por supuesto, cuanto sucedió entre nosotros" (loc. 3130). Her letter to Melisandra, therefore, demythifies the founding of Waslala, much in the same way that Belli's novel engages with the evolution of the Sandinista movement following the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979: by acknowledging both the failures and successes, it resists a totalizing account of the movement.

On the one hand, Engracia recalls listening to the poets as they discussed their plans for establishing "ese mundo igualitario y grácil donde el amor, la cooperación y el bien común serían los pilares para erigir una felicidad que ni ellos ni yo habíamos jamás conocido" (loc. 3125). And yet, as she explains further, cracks in the foundation soon began to appear once the community attempted to put into practice the political philosophy of Waslala:

> Empezamos queriendo ser muy democráticos. Nombramos una directiva compuesta por los poetas, cada uno de los cuales supervisaba un área de la vida comunal. El poder, sin embargo, residía en una asamblea compuesta por todos los miembros de la comunidad mayores de dieciséis años […] Las cosas anduvieron muy bien por un tiempo, pero pronto nos dimos cuenta de que el funcionamiento de la comunidad requería muchas reglas y regulaciones. Cada quién entendía la responsabilidad a su manera. Cuando nos pusimos a definir los límites y las obligaciones, la asamblea se tornó en un pandemónium. ¿Qué clase de democracia podía existir, Melisandra, entre intereses tan disímiles? A muchos les interesaba resolver los problemas cotidianos de la comida, el vestido, el cuido de los niños, las viviendas; mientras para los poetas lo importante era la creación de nuevos hábitos de vida, nuevos valores, un nuevo lenguaje y nuevas formas de relación (loc. 3130).

At odds in the early days of Waslala, in other words, are utopian theory and praxis; concrete demands and abstract ideals; the urgency of the immediate present and the foundations for the future. The internal conflicts and contradictions only continue to grow until eventually, as Engracia recalls, "La asamblea se convirtió en un pequeño monstruo, una dictadora arbitraria, impulsiva, inconsciente, fácilmente manipulable por las cabezas más calientes o los mejores oradores" (loc. 3150). The community ultimately decides to dissolve the assembly and begin

again under a new model in which the poets are granted almost absolute authority. In my view, Engracia's letter – and, in particular, her recollection of the founding of Waslala – can be read as a reflection of Belli's own ambivalence towards the recent past in Nicaragua and the general sense of disillusionment with the Sandinista movement after its failure to achieve or uphold many of its intended revolutionary goals, such as expanding and protecting the rights of women.[110]

And yet, for Engracia –as with Belli – the political failures from Waslala's past do not define the entire movement or negate what has been accomplished. Nor has Engracia lost sight of the utopian ideals of Waslala, which have guided her own brand of activism and radical resistance to the authoritarian regime. With her selfless commitment to community and unwavering willingness to sacrifice, Engracia represents the antithesis of the cruel and corrupt Espada brothers. Even their names are in dialectical opposition: whereas the name *Espada* inherently implies violence, *Engracia* instead alludes to divine grace. Perhaps most importantly, even through the thick clouds of chaos and the endless cycles of violence in a long-forgotten country plagued by poverty – while at the same time surrounded by the toxic and rotting reminders of global capitalism's culture of excessive waste – Engracia continues to maintain a sense of hope for the future liberation of Faguas. The following passage, which appears at the end of her letter to Melisandra, is helpful for understanding the profound impact that Waslala has made on Engracia's life:

> Waslala fue lo más hermoso que me sucedió en la vida. No puedo imaginar qué hubiera sido de mí sin esa experiencia. Por Waslala conocí lo inefable que es tener fe, creer en las

[110] It is worth noting here that don José is the only one out of the group of poets who treats Engracia with kindness and respects her as an equal, whereas the others repeatedly ridicule her.

> inmensas posibilidades del ser humano y participar en la realización de sueños impracticables, tiernos y descomunales. Quizás Waslala nunca llegue a ser el ideal que nos propusimos, es lo más probable, pero la vida me ha convencido de que la razón de ser de los ideales es mantener viva la aspiración, darle al ser humano el desafío, la esperanza que sólo puede existir si pensamos que somos capaces de cambiar nuestra realidad y alcanzar un mundo bienaventurado en donde ni Morris ni mis muchachos, ni yo ni tantos y tantos tengan que morir y vivir entre los desechos y los despojos (loc. 3165).

What Engracia's letter reveals, moreover, is not only her vision of an alternative future of liberation for Faguas, but for all dispossessed and marginalized communities throughout the world. Her persistent efforts to aid Melisandra in her search for Waslala are influenced by her own experiences and understanding of the transformative power of the community's ideals. In that sense, Waslala holds the key to a better future for Faguas, which can in turn offer a model for the rest of the world, which is confirmed in the epilogue as the scene of Melisandra's presentation of the annals of Waslala is filmed by Raphael and transmitted around the globe. And while Melisandra's quest to find Waslala is ultimately the main focus of the novel, it is because of Engracia that Waslala as both an ideal and a community has been able to survive long enough for Melisandra to find it.

In addition to providing Melisandra with some basic directions to help her find the way to the general vicinity of Waslala, hidden deep in the jungle, Engracia has also instructed Melisandra to take her pet parrot with her on the journey. Melisandra and Engracia's parrot, accompanied by Hermann, Raphael, and a local guide named Pascual, embark on a multi-day trek on foot through the thick jungle. Along the way, the group encounters a number of auspices that Waslala is nearby. Some of those signs include natural elements of the jungle that have an

air of supernaturalism to them: a lone jaguar that silently watches them pass, and exhaustion that "les hacía ver en la neblina imágenes de sus sueños, sus pesadillas y sus remordimientos" (loc. 3339). Other signs clearly recall the long history of armed conflict in Faguas; in particular, the images highlight the interior jungles as a site of guerrilla resistance. Towards the beginning of their trek, Pascual mentions that "Los guerrilleros, que antes vivían años en la selva, salían de allí con la piel tan transparente […] que era posible verles el corazón a través de las costillas" (loc. 3336). The reference here to the *guerrilleros* is at once vague and yet clearly legible within the context of Nicaragua's numerous resistance movements, from Sandino's army to the Sandinistas. In contrast, the group's arrival to what remains of Wiwilí once again underscores the novel's explicit engagement with the revolutionary past of Nicaragua.

Wiwilí as a landmark on the trail to Waslala recalls Engracia's plans for the procession to the Espada compound, which center around the assumption that the people of Cineria will associate the unlikely defeat of the regime with the actions of the ghosts of Wiwilí, which in turn will serve as evidence that the path to Waslala remains open. As we have seen in numerous instances throughout the novel, the description of Wiwilí combines elements of nature, architectural ruins, and references to ancient history. In the middle of the jungle, the group suddenly arrives to "un claro misterioso donde adivinaron cimientos en medio de pinos y cipreses", where they find an old wooden carousel horse sitting alone in the middle of what was at one time a plaza, as well as "los muñones de muros y casas" hidden beneath the overgrown weeds (loc. 3370). Pascual's recounting of the legend of Wiwilí is framed as a sort of contemporary version of the Trojan War, in which "la ciudad resistió 416 días, hasta que un estratega imitó a los aqueos y entró a Wiwilí en el caballo de madera. Fue en las primeras guerras"; over time, the memory of the attack became immortalized through the same popular

legend that Engracia exploits in her attack on the Espada: “A los Fantasmas de Wiwilí se les atribuían desde entonces hazañas heroicas inexplicables, golpes de suerte en las batallas” (loc. 3374). Further evidence of the mystical power of Wiwilí is the sudden change in behavior of Engracia’s parrot, which becomes increasingly excited as the group approaches the abandoned village. What is more, the parrot’s mysterious disappearance while they are camping at Wiwilí is what draws Melisandra deeper into the jungle and leads her into Waslala.

It is, as Melisandra later acknowledges to her mother, because of Engracia that her quest to find Waslala has been successful. Without Engracia’s directions to the area, her local contact Pascual to act as a guide, and her pet parrot to lead Melisandra the rest of the way from Wiwilí, it is unlikely that she would have ever found the notoriously elusive village, which is surrounded by a sort of magical perimeter and exists in its own spatiotemporal plane. Most importantly, Engracia has achieved what no one else in Faguas has even dared to attempt. By eliminating the Espada brothers, who would have continued to take every possible measure in order to prevent Melisandra from continuing her search, Engracia essentially reopens the path to Waslala. Engracia’s final act in life – the radical resistance through the weaponization of her own body against the regime – is driven by a desire to give the people of Faguas hope for a better future by granting them evidence of, and eventually, access to Waslala.

And yet, as Melisandra discovers from the conversations with her mother in the final chapters of the novel, Waslala would have never been able to survive without Engracia’s support. Surprised to learn that Waslala has electricity powered by wind and solar energy, Melisandra wonders how the community was able to source the raw materials and objects necessary to build the infrastructure. As her mother explains, Engracia “los suplía. Una de las razones por las que se marchó fue ésa. Sin su ayuda, la comunidad habría fracasado al no poder

agenciarse de ciertas cosas básicas. Lo demás lo suplió el ingenio" (loc. 3523). In a country ruled by a corrupt patriarchal regime interested only in protecting its own interests at the expense of the people of Faguas, it is this coalition of women who have, each in their own ways, held onto hope and a belief in Waslala, that is able to finally break the endless cycle of violence and instability. Set in the near-future in a fictional country that is also an amalgamation of distinctly recognizable landmarks that provide a map of Nicaragua's turbulent history marred by a seemingly endless cycle of civil wars and foreign intervention, Belli's novel imagines a path forward for a better future in Nicaragua that can only be achieved by challenging the parties in power that have shed the revolutionary ideology from Nicaragua's past in favor of a neoliberal agenda.

With the triumph of its female protagonists over patriarchal authoritarianism, *Waslala* also envisions a future in which women in Nicaragua are finally granted the equality and full participation in society that the Sandinista Revolution had promised but failed to deliver. The sacrifices that Engracia, Melisandra, and her mother make for the good of Faguas bring to mind Belli's understanding of her own relationship with Nicaragua: "Para mí, mientras exista Nicaragua, mientras existan necesidades en Nicaragua, mientras yo tengo un hálito de vida en mi cuerpo, yo voy a seguir tratando de poner mi contribución en esta lucha. Ahora mi contribución es a nivel de las ideas, de las palabras, de la poesía, de la prosa" (2001, n.p.). Indeed, unlike her former comrade who has, along with his wife as vice president, now ruled Nicaragua for the past sixteen consecutive years, Belli's vision for Nicaragua is one that is still grounded in the spirit of the Revolution.

Epilogue. New Dystopias and Dystopian News: The State of Dystopian Literature and Politics in Contemporary Central America

The analyses in the preceding chapters have introduced us to some of the common themes in dystopian literature more broadly. At the same time, they have served as a point of departure for a greater discussion on the dystopian realities that exist across Central America. I have focused my study on two established authors from neighboring countries for several reasons. Each of these authors offer a critique of the official, or traditional, narratives of national identity vis-à-vis utopian projects in their respective countries – which, despite sharing a border and several historical similarities, have followed vastly different political, social, and economic trajectories over the past two centuries.

For his part, Fernando Contreras Castro's fragmented post-catastrophe narratives present visions of wrecked near-future worlds of scarcity and uncertainty. In these future worlds ruled by multinational mega-corporations, humanity itself appears to be on the brink of extinction; climate change, perpetual warfare, and rapidly advancing technological developments all appear to simultaneously pose a threat to the survival of the human species. What is more, while the majority of Contreras Castro's other novels and short story collections specifically focus on the urban spaces of San José, the trilogy of works analyzed in this project departs from that model by instead exploring transnational space within Central America more broadly.

Ciudad Lempira Siglo XXII, the private smart-city featured in Contreras Castro's most recent novel, *Transhumano, demasiado transhumano*, is located in present-day Honduras. The various settings in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* include an underground art gallery, a bombed-out church, a shopping mall, the ruins of a Maya temple located somewhere in the Central American jungle, and the coastal Costa Rican village of Talamanca. It is worth pointing out that the two novels move in opposite directions in terms of the specificity of settings.

Whereas Antonio La Puente's chronicles in *Transhumano* begin in the newly inaugurated private city in Honduras, they eventually detail the departure of the last humans from the walled city out into the uninhabited wilderness after being rendered obsolete by the introduction of transhumans. In contrast, while the initial chapters in *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* are set mostly indoors in unidentified geographic locations that could be almost anywhere on the planet, the final chapters become increasingly specific in terms of geography.

Both *Cantos* and *Transhumano*, moreover, also appear to present increasingly anachronistic visions: as the narration moves forward in time, the situations begin to resemble a more primitive past. In *Cantos*, as we may recall, it becomes clear that the world of the dead described by El Brujo may very well be the underground city from the opening chapter, or at the very least, another city like it. There is, in that sense, a sort of circular rhythm to time, which I read as a reference to the seemingly repeating cycles of violence and destruction throughout Central America for the past six centuries. What is more, the novels both begin with an indication that the future has already been written: a narrator opens *Cantos* by addressing the muse, whereas *Transhuano* begins with a direct appeal to the reader by describing the physical materials of the book and its construction. Finally, the dates included at the beginning of these works further blur the boundaries between the future and the present, which I argue as highlighting the urgency of the issues that we face in the present. The future, then, is upon us; what happens moving forward depends on how we respond as individuals and as a society.

In Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*, the narration moves along the San Juan river, tracing Nicaragua's distant colonial past, before shifting to spaces that recall the country's more recent Revolution. The layers of history throughout the novel again serve as a reminder of the seemingly never-ending cycle of violence and instability in Nicaragua. What is more, we have

two communities that represent different chapters in the history of Nicaragua: Wiwilí was the communal village that was created by Sandino but later destroyed by Somoza's national guard. Waslala, on the other hand, was, for the most part, fiercely anti-Sandinista during the Contra war. Ultimately, however, the novel suggests that a more hopeful future is still possible. Each of these two authors, in other words, present alternate visions that conflict with the official national narrative. Their works remind us that the current issues in Central America are, in fact, a continuation of a long-standing cycle of violence and exploitation. What is more, these novels imagine the future consequences of global capitalism: ecological destruction, labor precarity, privatized violence, etc. And yet, they both offer room for hope.

The state of dystopia in contemporary Central American cultural production

Perhaps two of the most well-known Central American dystopian novels published during the first decade of the twenty-first century are *El sueño de Mariana* (2008), by the Salvadoran poet and novelist Jorge Galán, and the posthumous *Tikal futura: Memorias para un futuro incierto* (2012), by the Guatemalan-Nicaraguan writer Franz Galich.[111] The two novels were both published by F&G Editores, an independent publishing house in Guatemala that has become one of the premier publishing companies in Central America. Thematically and stylistically, both *El sueño de Mariana* and *Tikal futura* clearly reflect elements of the cyberpunk current of dystopian fiction. What is more, both novels are set in the relatively near future and take place in megacities where the privileged and marginalized members of society are physically separated from one another by urban architecture and infrastructure.

[111] *Tikal futura* was published five years after Galich's death in 2007.

In *El sueño de Mariana*, for example, the megacities are divided into circles and megastructures:

> los círculos eran donde habitaban los que no podían pagar para vivir en las espléndidas ciudades formadas por redes de megaedificios, esos armatostes de cientos de pisos de altura que acogían centros comerciales, apartamentos, oficinas de gobierno, museos, parques, zoológicos, restaurantes, cines, discotecas, y que servían incluso para hacer una separación entre lo que era y lo que no, entre los seres humanos prósperos que podían disfrutar a plenitud de los avances científicos, comprar una unidad robótica o mandarse hacer un clon a la medida de sus necesidades o viajar a la estratosfera o a Marte o a ver de cerca los anillos de Saturno, y los que vivían casi enteramente de la beneficencia, pues en los círculos no había casi nada que hacer y los trabajos sencillos y poco remunerados en las megaciudades eran realizados por unidades robóticas (42).

The narrator in Galich's novel describes a similar future reality:

> Ciudad de Arriba fue construida sobre Ciudad de Abajo. Villa Progreso sobre Villa Miseria. Súper ciudadanos sobre descartables. Hipergea contra hipogea. Ciudad de Arriba se a yergue mil metros más arriba para no mezclarse con los descartables de Ciudad de Abajo. Arriba el aire es limpio y transparente. La región más transparente le dicen sus aduladores y poetas, que para el caso, son lo mismo. A quinientos metros más abajo, el horizonte color Coca Cola, la bebida exclusiva de los de arriba. Los de abajo sólo agua contaminada y Rogua, la ínfima bebida embriagante (125).[112]

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[112] In *Tikal futura,* construction of the city began in the year 2100, following the earthquake of 2068 and the rebellion of 2078, which in turn was the culmination of a nearly 40-year insurgency (ibid). This is just one of many examples in which the recent past in Central America is reimagined or projected into the future.

Whether imagining a distinctly futuristic world of technological advancements such as clones, programmed dreams, and simulated nature – as *El sueño de Mariana* does – or engaging with the recent and distant past in Central America – as *Tikal futura* does with its explicit references to specific characters and scenes from the *Popol Vuh* – these novels reflect anxieties about a future characterized by widening inequities; technology and hierarchal power; as well as resource scarcity and ecological destruction. As with most works of dystopian fiction, these novels also invite the reader to think about conditions in the present as a way to evaluate an alternative path forward that can potentially avoid the impending crises of the future. Like we have seen with the works analyzed in the previous chapters, the exploitative nature of global capitalism is one of the main underlying issues critiqued by these novels.

The influence of cyberpunk can also be clearly found in the novel *Ciudad radiante* (2015), by Luis Chacón Ortiz, who belongs to a younger generation of Costa Rican writers who engage more directly with contemporary themes such as urban life, technology, violence, and drug use. The novel, which is entirely narrated in the present tense, is divided into thirty six chapters that shift between the first-person perspectives of at least fourteen different narrators. The various settings in the novel include San José, Puntarenas, and a completely virtual city – La ciudad radiante – that is a sort of fully immersive form of the metaverse. While it is still a familiar representation of Costa Rica, the novel takes place in a near future in which technology has become a part of the biological self; the environment shows obvious signs of distress; and traditional social structures are on the verge of extinction. Some of the technological advancements not only speak to a bleak future, but are themselves bleak objects: the new mechanical trees that line the roadways in San José are "apenas unos postes grises con un poco de ramas. Dos hojas verdes procesan el óxido de carbono, lo convierten en oxígeno" (17). The

most significant development in technology, however, is the introduction of nanochips in the brain – which, along with the pill L30 – allows people to connect directly to the internet without the use of devices or WiFi.

In addition, Christianity has been virtually eliminated, replaced instead by new religions such as the Church of San José, whose members worship the Costa Rican capital in rituals very much reminiscent of a Catholic mass. The faithful decorate their walls with maps of the city; at Church, they recite a creed in which they profess their belief in the street corners, sidewalks, and trains of the city; and, when they are out in the streets, they wear t-shirts with the phrase "Yo Amo Chepe" – which they also spray-paint on buildings across the city. Despite abstaining from the use of L30 as part of their religion, they nevertheless agree to sell an illicit new form of the substance, which is a much more powerful injectable liquid. The novel is, on the one hand, a veridical reflection of contemporary youth culture in Costa Rica; it is steeped in references to local and global brand names, and the descriptions throughout the novel reveal an intimate familiarity with the urban streets of San José. At the same time, however, the novel also offers an alarming view of a future in which the pursuit of ever more realistic representations of the world and the simulation of emotions and experiences through the use of technologies that are increasingly integrated into the human body, while tempting, also poses an existential threat. While both the access to cyberspace and the architecture of the rapidly expanding metaverse in *La ciudad radiante*, in my opinion, are reminiscent of William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Idoru* (1996), one of the compelling aspects of Chacón Ortiz's novel is its treatment of trends that are already part of our current reality. In particular, it calls attention to our increased screen time brought about by the ubiquity of smart phones, as well as the consumption of violence as a form

of entertainment, which has become increasingly popular and problematic, due in large part to social media algorithms that amplify violent content to drive traffic for the sake of ad revenue.

Finally, one of the more innovative and prolific writers from Central America over the past two decades is Mauricio Orellana Suárez (San Salvador, 1965). While he is still not well known or widely read in the US market, Orellana Suárez has been involved in the literary scene in Central America since the late 1990s. As fellow Salvadoran novelist Jacinta Escudos has noted, "Mauricio ha tenido siempre la generosidad de compartir sus novelas inéditas con los amigos y conocidos, quizás con la esperanza no perdida de encontrar una manera de publicarlas. Y aquí es donde se puede hablar de injusticias editoriales. Porque la verdad es que la obra de Orellana Suárez ha incomodado a más de alguno por su temática" (2005, n.p.).[113] In particular, it is the openness with which Orellana Suárez approaches the subject of gay marriage, which remains a controversial and stigmatized issue within El Salvador. Nevertheless, his sprawling novel *Heterocity* (2010, Ediciones Lanzallamas), which won the Premio Centroamericano de Novela Mario Monteforte Toledo in 2010, explores the subject directly. More to the point, Orellana Suárez explicitly critiques the repressive politics and violence against LGBTQ people in El Salvador. As if to eliminate any doubts regarding the subject matter of *Heterocity*, the epigraph that appears at the beginning of the novel is a selection from Articles 32 and 33 of the

[113] It should be noted that Orellana Suárez is also the founder and director of the independent publishing house Editorial Los Sin Pisto (El Salvador), which publishes works by authors from El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America. With their corrugated cardboard spines, the handmade books stand out both materially and symbolically, as they embody small batch production in a world of excess and waste.

Constitutional Reforms approved in El Salvador in 2009, which ban both marriage and adoption by same-sex couples (10).[114]

While queer identities and the open critique of anti-LGBTQ politics are central, recurring themes in a number of his novels, Orellana Suárez also explores a number of other critical issues, such as consumerism, class, and surveillance technology. In *Cerdo duplicado* (2014, Uruk Editores), the protagonist, Xand, is a wealthy and influential business executive who bumps into Boris – one of his old classmates from high school – during his lunch break from work. Boris, who has always been a sort of bohemian aspiring poet and artist, is shoddily dressed and habitually unemployed. As the former classmates catch up over lunch at a fast food restaurant, Boris explains that he makes a living by selling exotic herb infusions, which Xand reluctantly agrees to buy out of pity. When Xand later prepares and consumes the infusion in the kitchen of his luxury condo, it produces an intense hallucinogenic effect. When he awakens the next morning, Xand finds himself in a rundown rented room in the poor neighborhood of an unfamiliar city. Without money, power, or influence, Xand must navigate a world that is the antithesis of the materialistic world of the upper class to which he had belonged. Instead, it is a society in which artists and writers are the most influential and powerful. In a way, the reversal of class roles and Xand's sudden anonymity in his new life is quite reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's dystopian novel *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974), which takes place in a police state and follows a protagonist who is one of the most watched and well-known television personalities in the world, and who wakes up one morning in a world where he is a complete

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[114] As the Human Rights Watch notes in a 2020 report, members of the LGBTQ community in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador regularly face violence and discrimination, which is one of the many factors that compel people in Central America to flee to the US. https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/07/every-day-i-live-fear/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-el-salvador.

unknown and all traces of his former fame have suddenly vanished. Orellana Suárez's novel explores, among other things, class relations, the superficiality of hyperconsumption, and the devaluation of the arts by contemporary societies.

Finally, in his most recent novel, *Dron* (2019), Orellana Suárez explores, among other things, the role of surveillance technologies in exposing the intimate details of private lives for the purpose of public consumption. What stands out in *Dron*, aside from the obviously dystopian themes, is the experimentation with language. The flow of the first-person narration is constantly interrupted by words that appear in superscript, which mark the narrator's frequent asides and intrusive thoughts. What is more, dispersed throughout the novel are a series of official documents, all of which are printed with a font that is different from the main narration. Each of the documents begins with the same heading, which begins with a unique case number; followed by the phrase "Título de reconocimiento: Imaginario distópico-progresivo" ; "Especificación: Apuntes en voz corporativa" ; and, finally, the note's number within the sequence. Each of the official texts are written in the first-person plural and use a formal register that contrasts sharply from the oral nature of the main text. Each document, moreover, lays out in great detail a specific policy or ideology of the corporation, which is essentially a future version of a technological authoritarian state. *Dron*, like many of Orellana Suárez's other novels, is as much concerned with language and writing as it is with exploring the many pressing political, technological, and social issues of the twenty first century.

While Orellana Suárez is one of the few contemporary Central American writers whose works consistently veer into the dystopian realm, the proliferation in recent years of explicitly dystopian short story collections highlights the relevance applicability of dystopian literature to address contemporary issues across the region. A few of the recent single-author titles include *El*

muro abierto (2021), an illustrated collection of microfiction by the Nicaraguan writer Jorge Campos (1987); *Teoría del caos* (2012), a collection of short fiction written between 1987 and 2012 by the Costa Rican author Alexánder Obando (1958), whose immense 2001 novel *El más violento paraiso* has been celebrated for its innovative postmodern style and the blending of various genres, including science fiction; *Distopía: Cuentos de ciencia ficción del tercer mundo* (2020), by the Honduran writer and filmmaker Javier Suazo Mejía; and *Cuentos del fin del mundo* (2021), the first collection of short stories from the Panamanian writer Lina Mariana Calvit. There have also been a number of collections published in recent years featuring science fiction and dystopian short stories written by various authors. The 2019 collection *Protocolo Roslin y otros relatos de ciencia ficción* (Editorial Costa Rica), for example, includes eight stories from Costa Rican authors, including, among others, Rafael Ángel Herra; Uriel Quesada; and Anacristina Rossi. More recently there have been several digital collections published during the COVID-19 pandemic, including *Refugio Asistido 1: Una colección de los autores de Editorial Los Sin Pisto para compartir en cuarentena* (Editorial Los Sin Pisto) and *Retorna la peste: Microrrelatos covidianos* (Centro de Investigaciones Históricos de América Central), both published in 2020. As these examples illustrate, dystopian literature has become an increasingly popular mode among contemporary Central American authors as they continue to explore ways to represent and respond to the varied social, political, technological, and environmental realities of the twenty first century.

To conclude, I would like to point to two interrelated issues that underscore the significance of this work. First, while there is certainly no lack of dystopian titles by Central American authors – particularly as the genre becomes increasingly popular as a response to actual, existing conditions across the region – it remains difficult, nevertheless, to access

contemporary works of fiction. Even in the case of more established writers, such as Fernando Contreras Castro, it can be challenging to find copies of titles that may either be out of print or distributed by smaller publishing houses. As an example, after returning a borrowed copy of *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas* through the interlibrary loan system, it took me well over six months to find and purchase my own secondhand copy online, which turned out to be an entirely different edition altogether.[115] To be sure, some of the more established companies, such as Editorial Costa Rica, which was created in 1959, have modernized the marketing of their titles: not only do they ship internationally, but they also offer many titles in a digital format that are instantly downloadable. For the most part, however, distribution continues to be extremely limited to within the region itself, particularly among smaller publishing houses.

There remains, moreover, a problem with representation. Whereas writers from Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador continue to dominate the crowded regional market, comparatively few writers from Honduras, Panamá – and, in recent years – Nicaragua, have the same sort of visibility. And while there are obviously some exceptions, Black, Indigenous, and queer voices have largely been relegated to the periphery. What is more, the availability of English translations of contemporary Central American fiction lags far behind the potential demand; not only are there numerous English-speaking communities throughout Central America, but there are also growing numbers of English speakers with Central American roots across multiple generations in the US. Finally, in the case of *sf* and dystopian literature from Central America, the lack of English translations contributes to the continued exclusion of writers and texts from the scholarly discourse on literature and utopian themes.

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[115] This is why, for example, I was unable to include in my analysis the seventh canto from *Cantos de las Guerras Preventivas*, as it simply does not appear in the edition that I own.

We return now to the question of why we read, or should read, contemporary Central American dystopian literature. At the most basic level, one could respond that many of the works are original, innovative, engaging, and simply entertaining to read. But, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, the power of dystopian literature lies in its ability to invite us to reflect on the conditions of the present, and, hopefully, to consider ways to change course in order to avoid the impending catastrophes of the near future. In the case of Central America, that remains as urgent as ever, particularly when we have been recently witnessing future and past catastrophes playing out in the present. From the resurgence of authoritarianism in Ortega's Nicaragua, and Bukele's El Salvador – where the recently completed 40,000-inmate capacity super-prison is already in use, and the Salvadoran online newspaper *El Faro* recently moved its headquarters to Costa Rica in response to a new reality under a regime that has led to "El desmantelamiento de nuestra democracia, la falta de controles al ejercicio del poder de un pequeño grupo, los ataques a la libertad de prensa y el cierre de todo mecanismo de transparencia y rendición de cuentas en El Salvador amenazan seriamente el derecho ciudadano a estar informado".[116]

Global climate change, exacerbated locally by the effects of agroindustrial practices, rapid urbanization, and a booming tourism industry, has made life even more difficult for some of the most vulnerable communities. Climate activists, particularly those from primarily Black and Indigenous communities defending their water and land rights from large multinational corporations, are increasingly the victims of harassment, forced disappearances, and targeted killings. For many Central Americans, dystopia is already here. The question posed by dystopian literature is: what can be done about it?

[116] https://elfaro.net/es/202304/columnas/26804/el-faro-se-cambia-de-casa.

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