Geographies of Violence and Extraction in the Cultural Production of the Mexican Late Neoliberal Period

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Abstract

This thesis refers to a body of contemporary cultural works that variously consider the socio-ecological transformations in the current phase of neoliberalization, whereby intensified forms of extraction appear interoperative with the Mexican drug interdiction military-security campaigns officially initiated in 2006. The cultural works here assembled focus upon geographies of heavy narcotraffic and military activity. Yet, the ecological matters of concern these text foreground such as the exploitation of nature (human and nonhuman), land-grabbing, rural-out migration, and the murderous energies of capitalist development, suggest a shared critique of the imperceptible neoliberal extractive and exploitative thrusts that structure the disparate geographies depicted. This thesis therefore proposes that the rubric of extraction – a term that has gained significant valence in the energy and environment-oriented fields in the humanities – as a productive lens from which to engage the cultural production related to the deadly socio-political crisis affecting Mexico. While not previously grouped together by critics and despite their many differences, the cultural texts this thesis explores share a concern with peripheralized geographies – i.e. the Southwestern highlands or the Mexican Gulf coast – that have been swept into the maelstrom of militarization, extra-legal violence and ecological extraction, but that, far from the dominant narco-spectacle, have been often overshadowed, underemphasized, or ignored entirely. To excavate the occluded yet material socio-ecological transformative effects of drug-war polices in contemporary literary and cultural works, this study draws from an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding, bringing together insights from fields such as political ecology, cultural geography, and anthropology and building upon existing materialist cultural critiques that have already engaged with neoliberalism and its socio-ecological degradations. Reading for the linkages between the brutal socio-political and ecological conditions in Mexico

and the accumulation dictates of global capital in the work of nonfiction filmmakers such as Betzabé García and Tatiana Huezo and writers such as Fernanda Melchor and Hubert Matiúwàa, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which contemporary cultural practitioners engage formal experimentation to bring to the fore the interlocking structural and historically-shaped causes of violence, displacement, and turmoil experienced across a regional and global scale. Narrowing in on a particular form of appropriation and capitalization of environments and their inhabitants – 'drug war capitalism' – to trace how these fault lines are registered in contemporary cultural outputs, this thesis suggests that such focus can shed light on the dominant discourses through which neoliberal securitization helps move capitalism's logic of extraction forward.

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Contents

Introduction

In light of the countless sacrifice zones given over to the 'Leviathanic capitalist state system and its expanding grid of extractive infrastructures' (Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020, p. 1), the spectrum of violence associated with extractivism and the uneven allocation of its harm has made it even more pressing to grasp its systemic logics and the less visible trails of its impacts. In its most common usage, 'extractivism' functions to name past and current modes of capital accumulation which are based upon the large-scale removal of natural resources from the earth's soil 'to cover the demands of central countries' (Acosta 2017, p. 12). Across Latin America, where, as Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra argue, 'the intensification of extractive activities primarily linked to the non-renewable resources – from megamining to agribusiness […] (with the corresponding logistical infrastructures) – have returned the region to the classical role as provider of raw materials' (2017, p. 579), a burgeoning literature on extractivism has emerged to describe these present developments (Gudynas 2009; Svampa 2013; Petras and Veltmeyer 2014; Riofrancos 2017). The term, while surfacing out of a Latin American development studies framework, has been also adopted by energy and environment-oriented fields in the humanities, tracking the imprint of capitalist extraction in literary and other cultural texts.[1] Extractivism, as it is deployed in these critical and cultural debates, however, moves beyond the erstwhile insular focus on the extraction site and the operations that transform raw materials into commodities to include far-reaching practices that make possible the withdrawal of extractible surplus value from marginalized sites and over-taxed bodies. As the practices suggested by this term exceed the enclosed spaces where resources are wrestled from the earth, extractivism has become the

[1] See Imre Szeman. 2017. On the Politics of Extraction. *Cultural Studies*, 31 (2-3): pp. 440-447; Amatya, Alok and Dawson, Ashley. 2020. Literature in the Age of Extraction: An Introduction. *Modern Fiction Studies* 66 (1): pp. 1-19.

identifying name for the dominant logic of growth and acceleration that drives neoliberal capitalism whereby spaces, infrastructures, bodies, environments, and nonhuman life forms can all be violently subjected to the devouring logics of capitalist valorization.

It is to this hyper-destructive imperative of growth of extractive capitalism that many of the works that I discuss in this thesis respond, though, as we will see, not always in a straightforward manner. The cultural texts here assembled cohere around the brutal socio-political and ecological crisis currently affecting Mexico, but their engagement with extractive violence involves practices not readily registered as such. In the sites depicted, which range from the remote sites of poppy-cultivation in the mountains of Guerrero to the privatized ports and prisons in the main cities of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, the neoliberal extractive encroachment upon lands and labour is both openly and indirectly addressed. In many ways, the more oblique references might be read as bearing a causal relation to the insidiousness with which the violence of extraction tends to manifest itself across Latin America. For instance, while the securitization of extractive enclaves has taken on highly discernable forms such as the brutal use of force and crackdowns against frontline land and water defenders, such violence has also adopted devious methods that are not always so readily visible or identified as part of what allows extractivism to proceed. In studying the extractive landscapes of South America, Macarena Gómez-Barris has importantly noted how corporate entities, states and their military/extra-judicial forces have become 'indistinguishable in their economic interests' as they advance in the so-called peripheries of late capitalist activity, a ruinous nexus that has served both to hide and normalize the violence inflicted (2017, p. xviii). In the case of Mexico, as Dawn Paley has prominently identified, these synergistic efforts take on a more radical form to operate through a neoliberal form of warfare that, 'combining terror with policy making', has functioned to 'crack open' territories and social spaces previously out of reach for global capital (2014, p. 33). The so-called

War on Drugs, serving as a 'fix' to capitalism's 'woes', has sanctioned the full spread of neoliberal extractive capitalism, benefitting energy, hydrocarbons, mining, private security, finance, retail, and arms trade sectors by terrorizing and dispossessing populations in cities and rural areas to make way for the enactment of policies aimed at expanding foreign investment and territorial expropriation (Paley 2014, p. 33). Through the 'War on Drugs' misnomer, however, neoliberalism hides its more-than-incidental role in the violence narcotrafficking currently wreaks across the country, a headline-grabbing phenomenon that has readily lent itself to obfuscate the underlying interests that fuel the now decade-long U.S.-funded anti-narcotic operation.

The cultural texts examined in this thesis variously consider geographies of conflict in the rural and urban peripheries of Mexico where neoliberalization operates through the appendages of drug war violence. Yet, in their depictions of such militarized ecologies, these texts mediate dynamics and operations of extraction and narcotrafficking that exceed the spectacular manifestations often linked to these activities, registering also the impacts of the securitized borderization at the country's fringes (Chapter Three) or of the submergence of coastal towns to make room for supposedly green fixes (Chapter Two). As I explore, however, the pernicious effects of these practices and the distinct signatures it leaves upon both bodies and landscapes prove particularly important in registering what Christopher W. Chagnon et al. recognize as 'the existence and prominence of less visible and tangible extractivist thrusts' behind all sorts of tangible developments in the new millennium (2021, p. 177). Hence, while the cultural texts I study take viewers and readers through areas of heavy narcotraffic and military activity, the ecological matters of concern such as the exploitation of nature (human and nonhuman), land and water grabs, and rural-out migration that they foreground suggest a shared critique of

the imperceptible neoliberal extractive thrusts that structure these disparate geographies and ecosystems.

This study therefore takes as its exploratory premise the analysis of cultural productions that attend to the socio-ecological transformations in the current phase of neoliberalization, whereby intense forms of extraction appear interoperative with the drug interdiction military-security campaigns officially initiated in 2006. This particular arrangement, which, after Paley, I refer to as 'Drug war capitalism' (2014), has been marked by the deepening of U.S.-driven policies that link the transnational military/industrial/security complex with neoliberal reforms, further intensifying the neoliberal processes of deregulation, financialization, and expulsion priorly spearheaded through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The processes of state-corporate expansion and militarization of everyday life have thus ranged from the increased policing of resource-rich areas, heightened border surveillance and targeting of migrants, the criminalization and terrorizing of peasant and labour movements, and the massive displacement of local dwellers (Paley 2014). In light of this context, while I follow cultural critic Amy Sara Carroll's injunction to read the temporality of NAFTA as 'exceeding its January 1, 1994, one minute after midnight claim to fame' (2016, p. 10), I also argue that attention to the specific forms neoliberalism has taken since the beginning of the 'War on Drugs' can help make visible how the extraction of value from life and labour brutally figures in the country's evolving politics of neoliberalization and how these destructive transformations are registered in contemporary cultural outputs.

Coming at the end of the oil-fueled crisis that led to the implosion of the so-called 'Mexican Miracle' (a period I further delineate in Chapter 1), NAFTA was crucial to lock in the socio-ecological asset-stripping, to follow Jason W. Moore's world historical account of capitalism (2015), necessary to revive accumulation. Restraints to the accumulation of capital

and the commodification of human and non-human nature that had endured the post-revolutionary period, such as the *ejido* and *comunidades indígenas* systems, were therefore loosened to allow for capitalism, 'born of the prodigious and violent effort to produce Cheap Nature through global expansion' (Moore 2015, p. 11), to appropriate the low-cost raw materials, energy and labour it required. The separation of Mexican peasants, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities from the land was resourcefully achieved via the amendments to the agrarian reform law (Article 27), which sanctioned the transfer of land and water commons (and, consequently, of the humans and non-humans who inhabited them) into private hands (Narchi 2015, p. 11). As with prior stages of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003), the predatory enclosure of these formerly non-commodified zones opened up new wards for the expanded accumulation of capital and rendered the necessary human labour-power from the ravaged rural countryside to the gates of the export-oriented assembly plants springing up on the U.S.-Mexico border. Neoliberalism, to borrow Moore's definition, was officialized then as a new 'ecological regime' to stabilize nature-society relations and ensure 'adequate flows of energy, food, raw material and labour surpluses to the organizing centres of world accumulation' (2010, p. 392). To be sure, the reorganization of nature for plunder not only refers to the 'forests' and 'soil exhaustion and species extinction' but also to 'factories', 'shopping malls, slums and suburban sprawls' (Moore 2010, ibid.). In the Mexican context, the production of neoliberal landscapes therefore became every bit as tangible in the croplands of tropical lowlands of Veracruz and mountains of Oaxaca as in the shantytowns, industrial parks and logistical hubs in the Northern border cities, as both rural and urban environments were readjusted for the interests of big national and transnational capital.

Yet, as Paley observes, by the turn of the twenty-first century 'Mexico's territory and economy still weren't fully open to foreign investors' (2014, p. 47). Many of the 'compromises

and concessions that had been imposed by working and popular classes and national governments in the preceding epoch' survived the imposition of NAFTA, as well as the country's mineral-rich territory – much of which remains communally owned by peasants – whose enclosure was largely resisted through the 1990s Zapatista uprisings (Paley 2014, ibid.). This arrangement, however, turned out to be brittle against a global backdrop where the neoliberal accumulation regime, as Moore delineates, had already reached a tipping point, marked by its inability to deliver the conditions for accumulation of previous eras, as the abundant environments from which capital could plunder and yield its low-cost inputs became scarce, making necessary for capital to turn to the extraction of 'as much wealth as quickly as possible from inside the existing container' (2010, ibid.). The signing of the Plan Mérida (Merida Initiative) in 2008, referred by its U.S. architects as 'NAFTA Plus' or 'Armoring NAFTA' (qtd. in Carlsen 2008, n.p.), was therefore instrumental to open this profitable container further and faster. As Laura Carlsen documents, the extension of NAFTA into the security arena was first proposed, as described on the website, as a 'Washington-led initiative among the United States and the two nations it borders–Canada and Mexico–to increase security and to enhance prosperity among the three countries through greater cooperation […] based on the principle that our prosperity is based on our security' (qtd. in Carlsen 2008). As an openly touted successor of Plan Colombia, in which drug-war dollars were used for counter-insurgency measures, aerial fumigation and 'alternative development' programs giving funds for agribusiness partnerships with campesinos to wean them from cultivating illicit crops (Ballvé 2009, n.p.), the Mexican iteration was similarly proposed as a means to 'confront the violent transnational gangs and organized crimes syndicates that plague the entire region' (US Department of State). Much like the Plan Colombia, as Carlsen notes, the Initiative encouraged however 'a crackdown on grassroots dissidents to assure that no force, domestic or foreign, effectively questioned the

future of the system', boosting securitization with particular intensity in 'ecotourism sites and zones believed to contain important biodiversity resources' (2008, n.p.). Intensified modes of militarism, operating hand in hand with neoliberalism's 'radicalized' dispossession dynamics, according to Mina Lorena Navarro, were therefore turned into the nodal strategy to 'produce territorial orderings and model ecosystems according to the logic and demands of the world capitalist market' (2019, p. 16). Coercive violence and social pacification, as Alexander Dunlap and Jostein Jakobsen argue, came to function as the 'teeth and claws' of neoliberal capital (2020, p. 9), as efficient technologies that engineer the conditions for extraction to proceed apace.

To excavate the occluded yet material socio-ecological transformative effects of these policies in contemporary literary and cultural works, this study draws from an interdisciplinary methodological and theoretical grounding, bringing together insights from fields such as political ecology, cultural geography, and anthropology and building upon existing materialist cultural critiques that have already engaged with neoliberalism and its catastrophe-bound environmental degradations. Rob Nixon's ecocritical approach to literary production, for instance, calling for a focus on the 'geographies of concealment' where one can trace the hidden nature of the violence of 'U.S. foreign policy' over 'socioenvironmental landscapes' (2011 p. 32), resonates with the interests of this project. As this thesis offers close readings of cultural texts concerned with the deep entanglements between neoliberal drug war policies and socio-ecological devastation in Mexican peripheralized regions, Nixon's engagement with the 'spectacle deficient' and 'attritional' forms of violence – slow violence – (2011, p. 8) with which neoliberalism unevenly advances across territories of the outcast poor provides a useful lens. In this regard, this thesis feeds from a growing critical field within Latin American cultural studies, where debates over past and present socio-ecological ruptures in relation to capitalist cycles of accumulation have gained significant traction. Edited volumes such as Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora's *Ecological*

Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America (2016), Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore and Dayron Carrillo Morell's *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape* (2018) and Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis and Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli's *Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World* (2019), have saliently analyzed the hemispheric imprints of capitalist development over its *long durée* as staged not only within the confines of literature but also in film, theater and visual culture.[2] Kressner, Mutis and Pettinaroli, for instance, propose to rethink Nixon's slow violence concept in the context of the Americas' 'ecocidal unfolding', arguing for its usefulness to help grapple with cultural artifacts that mediate the transhemispheric and local manufactured spatial asymmetries that have rendered working class, poor and indigenous communities in near proximity to industrial waste, climate disasters and extra-judicial violence. As Anderson analogously contends in his own intervention, attending to Latin American cultural texts and contexts allows us to better understand local and regional environmental destructions as part of a global ecological crisis directly linked to the ascension and expansion of liberal capitalism. Sharae Deckard, for her part, in her contribution to Anderson and Bora's volume, (2016), traces the historical positioning of Latin American environments as the perennial 'open veins' of the capitalist world-system and makes the case for a 'world-ecological' reading of Latin American cultural forms as indexing and responding to capital's systemic extractivism and its current permutations. 'Finance and *maquiladoras*, *haciendas* and mass urbanization, free trade agreements and resource nationalism, global empires and world markets', Deckard underscores, 'are all forms of environment-making which knit together human relations and extrahuman processes' (2016, p. 4) and as such, are ultimately imprinted on the region's cultural production.

[2] For works that focus strictly on literature see also: Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. 2011. *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction*. Miami: University Press Florida and Beckman, Ericka. 2012. *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age*. University of Minnesota Press.

My methodological approach is informed by the overarching claim that unites these studies: reading with an eye towards the linkages between socio-ecological transformative events in Latin America and the accumulation dictates of global capital can help bring to the fore the interlocking structural causes of violence, displacement and turmoil experienced across a regional and global scale. Spurred by the ecological-oriented work of these critics, I focus on cultural texts that respond to the current form of environment-making (and destroying) in Mexico – drug war capitalism–, so as to weave together a different reading of Mexican culture, one that is interested in analyzing how cultural practitioners shed light on the more brutal socio-ecological arrangements through which neoliberalism helps move capitalism's logic of extraction forward. If under late neoliberalism 'armed violence plays a critical role in fostering environmental degradation and ecological unequal exchange' (Downey et. al 2010, p. 443), this thesis suggests that attention to how these dynamics are mediated in cultural form can make legible the shifting socio-ecological realities under neoliberalism that often escape analysis. This project is hence conceived in dialogue with scholarship that has zoomed in on the imbrication of neoliberalization and the expansion of the anti-narcotic military-security apparatus in Mexico but also beyond it, as militarized drug eradication efforts have equally sat alongside hyper-extractivism in other geographies across the region. Within the so-called post-conflict Colombian cultural studies, for instance, critics have offered significant insights with respect to modes of artistic representation that have emerged to foreground the socio-economic and territorial reconfigurations produced by the armed conflict, especially in the rural regions where the expansion of extractive economies and militarization continues through the post-accord era. In this respect, Colombian scholars such as María Ospina (2017), Camilo Malagón (2020), and Juliana Martínez (2020) have argued for an engagement with Colombian films and novels that have turned the focus beyond the capital city of Bogotá towards the rural countryside where

agribusiness interests and high-impact tourism projects have perfectly aligned with the histories of war and displacement that have shaped the violence in Colombia. As they all observe, more recent works have favoured aesthetic strategies that starkly depart from the neo-realist modes and fixation with drug-related violence in urban areas that have dominated the Colombian cultural landscape since the 1990s, bringing instead the structural violence and the pillage in rural regions to the forefront of thinking about the country's past and current social ailments.

Taking my cue from these cultural critics, I have chosen to focus on filmic and literary geographies that, although operating beyond a rural/urban binary, are also foregrounded by cultural practitioners in ways that bring into stark relief the environmental dimensions of the dispossessive dynamics wrought by hyper-capitalized forms of extraction, only thinly veiled as securitization schemes. Scholars such as Oswaldo Zavala (2014; 2018), Andrés R. Guzmán (2016) and Juan Llamas-Rodríguez (2018) have already mobilized important critiques of the common understandings and entrenched depictions of the drug-war in the Mexican cultural landscape, framing the focus upon the grisly antics of drug-traffickers and depictions of cartel-subsumed Mexican regions as obscuring the way material deprivation and extreme conditions of insecurity have advanced capital accumulation across militarized territories. The abject topographies being mapped in the expansive and broad corpus of cultural production that relates to the drug war, Zavala has prominently contended, have been central for the 'failed state' narrative that has long been a motif of neoliberal governance, naturalizing the militaristic expansion upon supposedly ungoverned territories (2018, p. 87). The emphasis on the most explicit expressions of violence and the attribution of these actions to the pathologies of drug lords, he argues, has made mainstream cultural production operate in a problematic alignment with the official discourse of law enforcement agencies, effectively relegating the nexus between the violence of cartels, capitalism, state power and resource extraction into a blind spot (2018).

Andres R. Guzmán and Juan Llamas-Rodríguez, focusing each on more recent filmic registrations of drug-war violence and labour precarity in Mexico's rural northern geographies, propose therefore to look precisely at how contemporary works forefront those blind spots through aesthetic strategies that do not privilege epistemic and visual clarity but promote instead a more active engagement with what remains unseen. For Guzmán, formal cinematographic elements deployed to engage extreme violence without making it visible, for example, by juxtaposing the violence pushed off-screen with images that show 'its effects on the built environment' – in this case, the cemetery construction boom in war-ridden Sonora and the precarious labour that fuels it – can bring into awareness the 'current configuration of capitalism in Mexico' (2016, p. 7). Llamas-Rodríguez, for his part, puts films about narcotrafficking into productive dialogue with Nixon's conceptualization of slow violence, ultimately suggesting that strategies of representation through which films mediate both spectacular and unspectacular moments of brutality can open a potential for a 'conscious critical orientation' (2018, p. 9) towards the pervasive and insidious effects of narcotrafficking that remain overlooked in current debates about the phenomenon.

Zavala, Guzmán and Llamas-Rodriguez's insights about how the violence of narcotraffic interlocks with questions of capital accumulation, labour exploitation and spatial inequalities predicate the way I conceptualize the potential of the cultural works discussed here to help grasp the neoliberal extractivist violence that underpins the contemporary social order in Mexico and beyond. My analysis therefore proceeds in the theoretical register of these works, but also broadens their purview by bringing into the analytical scope other cultural artefacts that are not only varied in medium but that are also not necessarily 'narco-themed'. Furthermore, I argue that a more sustained engagement in Mexican cultural criticism with the rubric of extraction can further extend the view not only towards effects that are not readily captured as part of the anti-

narcotics phenomenon, but also to the overlooked spectrum of environments (the *provincia*, hinterlands, other(ed) borders, Indigenous territories) where the wars around illicit drug trafficking have created ideal conditions to deepen the patters of capital and land accumulation. The overwhelming focus in cultural analysis on representations of violence that narrate the experiences of specific Northern cities has conspicuously left out the literary and cultural texts that have contended with the violence upon other territorialities, especially those where socio-ecological degradation and the plundering of its resources have long been naturalized. For example, as the anthropologist Daniel Nemser notes, southern Mexico today retains still, as if it was a physical infrastructure that 'stubbornly persists in the landscape' (2018, p. 187), the 'infrastructures of race' that first made possible colonial modes of human and environmental exploitation and which continue to make way for present 'machineries of extraction and accumulation' (p. 5). The uneven employment of violence and care across these geographies, as the anthropologist Mariana Mora has therefore explored, has been underpinned by social imaginaries that represent the south – which is predominantly inhabited by Indigenous and peasant populations – as innately 'backward and violent' and consequently in need of intervention and punitive surveillance (2017, p. 71). The de facto 'criminalization of racialized poverty', as Mora argues elsewhere, attaches itself to the historical legacies of exploitation and territorial plunder to not only justify the 'removal of dehumanized bodies and the dispossession of their geographic regions' but also the production of social lives and environments as 'utterly disposable' (2017, p. 239). While the prominence of certain northern spaces in Mexican cultural analyses might respond to the more noticeable function of northern areas as the traditional corridors of drug production and trafficking, to follow these official mappings might also hinder the ability to fully capture the configuration of capitalism, as well as the long-standing struggles against it, across and beyond the national territory.

The works under examination rather than aligning with a particular trend or forming part of a coherent corpus, have been selected from the broad and extensive cultural production on violence over the last decade because of their particular engagement with geographies that have been either absent, or when present, depicted as spaces of pure abjection and dangerous transit. While not previously grouped together by critics and despite their many differences, these works share a thematic concern with peripheralized geographies that have been swept into the maelstrom of militarization, extra-legal violence and ecological extraction, but that, far from the dominant narco-spectacle, have been often overshadowed, underemphasized, or ignored entirely. Moreover, faced with new arenas of extractivism that have emerged within the neoliberal accumulation regime, I wish to extend the notion of what qualifies as an extractive geography by choosing works that register militarized spaces connected not only to the 'extraction of raw materials and foodstuff from the soil' (Arboleda 2020, p. 2) but also to the extractive dimensions at work within capitalism in general, whereby sacrifice zones, logistical corridors, city slums and carceral spaces are brought up to ever-enlarge these interlocked operations. By drawing together works that deal more directly with the violence of hydro-extraction or agribusiness, such as *Los Reyes del Pueblo que no existe* (2015) and *Tsína rí nàyaxà'/ Cicatriz que te mira* (2019), with other less obvious examples, I hope to show how a variety of cultural practitioners are working to negotiate with the affordances of literary and cinematic genres so as to give form to the less-than-visible processes wrought by neoliberalism's hyper-extractive and ever-expansive predatory activities.

To explore how the aesthetic and formal features of the works give expression to the overlooked relation between the extractivism-vulnerable landscapes of the Mexican peripheries and the military, police and extrajudicial violence that clusters around them, I have organised this thesis in four chapters corresponding to different genres of cultural representation: *crónicas*,

socially-engaged documentary, experimental poetics and Indigenous poetry. In each chapter, the key role of setting in the selection of texts for comparison– the crimes on logistical corridors and ports of the Mexican Gulf in chapter one or the militarization of North and South borders in chapter three– intends to engage not only the specific and maniform operations through which extractive capitalism transforms socio-ecological relations across a number of geographical sites, but particularly, how this setting informs the ways in which each genre of cultural representation uses and/or destabilizes the affordances of their medium to bring these dynamics into view. In the first two chapters, close readings of texts and analyses of the visual and sonic elements of cinematic scenes thus seek to address how the stark alterations produced in peripheralized regions where terror advances neoliberal resource control and commodification in increasingly insidious ways are given form through experimental aesthetics or the destabilization of traditional narrative forms. For instance, works of cinematic non-fiction, as I explore in Chapter two, while still adhering to objective vérité style of the socially-engaged documentary that has traditionally been used to register the injustices of rural México, has borrowed from popular cinematic genres such as the road film and its 'stylistic shots of a variety of Mexican landscapes, using impeccable, National Geographic-style cinematography' (Oropesa 2016, p. 2016) to offer rather unsettled visions of a surveilled, exploited and exhausted provincial landscape. In this way, I argue, contemporary filmmakers seek to mediate the social and ecological ruptures experienced under drug war capitalism and cast into doubt the narratives of frictionless transformation that project security and economic development where dispossession, expulsion and brutality occur.

My first two chapters therefore look at how the replacement of the evidentiary techniques and informative registers linked to nonfiction with obliqueness and visual obfuscation (in the case of the documentary) or the locational shift towards provincial spaces (in

the case of the *crónica*) are mobilized to bring forward the stark yet strange, complex, novel and inscrutable operations that characterise neoliberal extractive practices, especially as these are implemented with particular brutality in the peripheralized areas of the country. As the format of extraction, like Saskia Sassen diagnoses, is 'no longer something like the enclosure of farmer's fields so that wool-bearing sheep can be raised there', formal experimentation and alternative narrative registers, these writers and filmmakers seem to say, are required to give shape to the 'enormous technical and legal complexities now needed to execute what are ultimately elementary extractions' (2018, p. 14). If as Alok Amatya and Ashley Dawson observe, many contemporary have thus increasingly turned towards nonfiction narrative forms to explore new ways to 'fac[e] up to the burning issues of environmental harm and accountability that have proliferated alongside the expansion of extractive industries' (Amatya and Dawson 2020, p. 10), chapters one and two seek to engage the innovative ways in which these cultural practitioners create new frameworks for thinking though these new ills.

This study also brings forward nonfictional forms in relation to other cultural texts that have emerged to grapple with geographically specific areas of military-security intervention wherein resource-seeking industries, paramilitary squads (cartels), and security forces coalesce in the service of nonstop accumulation, but also where communal alliances and crucial resistances arise in response to neoliberalism's socio-ecological plunder and destruction. Setting becomes then the connective thread that weaves together the texts selected for analysis in the initial chapters centred on works of non-fiction and the last two chapters, which offer readings of experimental/documentary poetry and Indigenous literary works that explore the marks left on peripheralized territories by the infrastructures and technologies of extraction across capitalism's *long durée*. Thus, while the first two chapters chart geographies where capitalism has opened up 'breathing-space for its own survival' (Harvey 2001, p. 338) through new predatory forms of

profit-making, in chapters three and four, the text selected look at spaces where the structure of colonial conquest has continually worked to advance scarring forms of capitalization. Here, the focus on Mexico's border and Indigenous territories allows us to trace how contemporary poets make use of documentary/protest poetry's long concern with 'cultivating historicity' (Nowak 2010, p. 10) to foreground the militarized neoliberal environment-making and destroying of these sites as the latest phase of a long militarized march to transform materials into commodities and people into commodified labour. These chapters therefore seek to offer a reading of texts that engage the systemic cycles of accumulation and pillage that structure the neoliberal present, as well as the historical and current practices through which communities refuse to cede to extractive capitalism's logics and totalizing spread.

Chapter one offers then a critical evaluation of two works of literary nonfiction that register the violence embedded in the expansion of extractive capital upon the resource-rich Mexican Gulf region: Fernanda Melchor's *Aquí no es Miami* [This is not Miami] (2013) and Óscar Martínez's *Los Migrantes que no importan* [The Migrants that Don't Matter] (2010). Both nonfiction *crónica* collections share an interest in uncovering the political and historical density of the unsettling Mexican towns, ejidos, and peri-urban environments along the Gulf states they examine, which for the past decades have not only been transformed into hubs for migration, petty commerce and drug trade but also into important corridors, special economic zones, and logistical nodes that are crosscut by capital's predatory extractive operations. Following Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's contention that logistical and extractive zones represent 'paradigmatic sites that render visible complex connections between patterns of dispossession and exploitation' (2016, p. 24), this chapter argues that these *crónicas* take this crime-ridden region as a privileged location from which to bring into focus the operations of capital that facilitate the control of Mexico's energy, land and labour. Moreover, I attend to these *crónicas'* deployment

of a noir sensibility and its thematic hallmarks of legality and power, which as I contend, allow these writers to query the legitimacy of the neoliberal militaristic social order in the oil-rich Mexican hinterlands. I suggest that Martínez and Melchor's representations of an uneven and ruptured Gulf coast region, a geography already voraciously transformed by capital-intensive infrastructures, offer significant insights into the deep nexus between capitalist accumulation and the criminal realms hidden behind the zones of enclosure and transnational corporate rule.

Chapter two focuses on the experimental cinematic forms deployed in two nonfictions films to deal with distinct yet interrelated facets of extractive phenomena: the making of a sacrifice zone for hydraulic schemes and the production of devalued labour and nature through the well-established strategies of disappearance and carcerality. Looking first at Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2016), I explore the ways in which the film captures the socio-ecological vulnerability of a submerged rural village located in the North-eastern Pacific costal region of Sinaloa, a state often considered as the violent cradle of drug trafficking in the country. García, however, moves away from spectacular displays of violence and opts rather for surreal still shots to capture life in a landscape haunted by rising waters and nightly terrors from unseen actors, which evoke the extractive operations and paramilitary violence that have ruptured these lands. Drawing on Warwick Research Collective (WReC)'s conception of irrealist aesthetics (2015) and Nixon's concept of slow violence (2011), this chapter argues that García aesthetic departure from the conventions of documentary realism operates to render apprehensible the not immediately visible processes that structure not just the town's socio-ecological fallout but also the communal efforts performed to rebuild it. The socio-ecological devastation nourished by Mexico's militarization is likewise discussed in this chapter by turning to Tatiana Huezo's road-documentary *Tempestad*. The film also departs from a strictly realist mode of documentation and presents a disjunction between sound and image, making the testimonies of carceral

conditions, forced labour, and enforced disappearance narrated by the protagonists echo over the desolate storm-battered landscapes and highways fraught by checkpoints taken by police and army. Placing emphasis on the documentary's upturning of the ideas of progress and modernization embedded in the road film genre, the visuals of highways, checkpoints, oil-fields, logistics industries, fish processing plants that appear affixed to the brutal testimonials of bodily harm can be read instead as mediating Mexico's unjustified mayhem as the lethal, structural, and constitutive feature of the country's capitalist modernity.

Chapter three continues these previous discussions by examining literary works published over the last decade and written about (and from) the country's northern and southern borderlands that allow me to examine how recent texts might bring to the fore the extractive logics that underpin the militarized regime of border and mobility control taking shape across these territories: Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* (2012) and Balam Rodrigo's *Libro Centroamericano de los Muertos* (2018). The first portion of the chapter draws upon Teo Ballvé's conceptualization of frontiers to delineate the continuous space-making maneuvers deployed throughout the Americas to violently transform its racialized ecologies into resources available for global capital. Through this lens, I discuss the Mexican borderlands and the narratives about their unruliness as a tactic that has historically worked to open up these spaces to the demands of the extractive economy across multiple cycles of accumulation. Echoing Harsha Walia's call to approach the contemporary border regimes as a key stratagem for the maintenance of capitalism's systemic inequalities, I explore how Uribe and Rodrigo's collections engage the violent political disorder at the Texas/Tamaulipas and Chiapas/San Marcos borderlands less as a marker of poor state provision and more as integral to global accumulation dynamics. In both of these borderscapes, the technologies enlisted to execute border management and uphold the logics of exclusion came swiftly after anti-narcotic operations designated these sites as criminally-strategic areas for

human smuggling and drug-trafficking, bringing about the espousing of neoliberal economic policies and logics with hemispheric security agendas. These texts' depictions of the Mexican borderlands as spaces saturated by death and disappearance, I argue, showcase therefore the anxieties arising from a bolstered and expanded border securitization regime that will enable the colonization and full spread of capitalism over the borderlands' natural and human environments. Finally, I claim that the processes that these texts amply document, which exhibit the expendability of those living and crossing through the arid shrublands of Tamaulipas or through the putrid rivers of Chiapas, effectively capture the layered residues of the brutal histories of accumulation that have taken place within and beyond these uneven border geographies.

Finally, the fourth and last chapter of this thesis, examines the poetry collections of Irma Pineda and Hubert Matiúwàa, which explore the geographies of present-day extractive capitalism in the Southwestern Mexican highlands as shaped foremost by prior colonial and genocidal/ecocidal apocalypses. Building on the work of scholars such as Gómez-Barris (2017) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), the first section of the chapter turns to the work of Binnizá writer-activist Irma Pineda, as she traces the deep and multilayered histories of colonization, sexual and extractive violence that have long taken place within Binnizá territories of the Oaxacan Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as well as the programs of counterinsurgency backlash and war-making that currently fuel neoliberal dispossession. In view of the present onslaughts of wind energy development upon the Isthmian territories, Pineda's poem mediates the violence that has been historically meted out against Indigenous rebellious bodies in order to produce the Isthmus as a *terra nullius* and convert the life within it into extractible commodities for transnational capital. Against the naturalizing logic of extractivism, Pineda's poetry collection gives privilege to the Binnizá epistemologies and knowledge systems that differently

conceptualize land and nature, making visible the resistant histories within the Isthmus that continue to give shape to the still unfolding struggles for demilitarization and ecological renewal. Similarly engaging the long-drawn-out enshrinement of terror by the state-military-corporate nexus upon the region known as La Montaña in the state of Guerrero, Matiúwàa's essays and poems reflect on the development-inflicted destitutions and the ecological scarcity produced by the encroachment of Mèphàà landholdings, which have pushed Mèphàà communities to the transnational and inherently extractive economy of the heroin trade. Matiúwàa's poems thus lay bare the persistence of a historically-produced 'extractive optic' (Gómez-Barris 2017), by which Indigenous bodies and lands are crafted and recrafted into a commodity-like status by the state-aligned megaprojects and drug-fuelled economies that currently intersect in La Montaña, a brutal arrangement that has deep connections to the low-intensity strategies priorly waged against peasant guerrillas in the countryside of Guerrero. Therefore, excavating these protracted histories from the Mèphàà oral archive, Matiúwàa's writings not only foreground the present counter-narcotic operations in the mineral-rich territories of La Montaña as part of a quest to accelerate new dispossessions and enclosures, but also point towards the historically built relationships with land and the struggles to defend it that have persistently worked to nourish political horizons in the face of the many-tiered onslaughts of late neoliberal accumulation.

Chapter one:

Crime, feral accumulation and the Mexican Gulf: The noir plots of late neoliberalism in Fernanda Melchor's and Óscar Martínez's *crónicas*

Midway through *La Cabeza de Hidra* (*The Hydra Head,* 1978), a thriller novel set in the context of Mexico's newly discovered oil supply, Carlos Fuentes offers a thorough survey of the transformative impact of the chaotic and rapacious rush of the Mexican oil boom upon the Gulf coastal lowlands. In this section, his protagonist descends by plane upon the region and his aerial view allows to perceive the expansion of Petróleos Mexicanos' (Pemex) onshore processing refineries in Minatitlán, Veracruz. He observes the 'modern fortress of towers and tubing and cupolas glinting like tinfoil toys beneath a storm-sated sun', and 'the busy port with its railroad tracks extending onto the docks, and long, black, sleek-decked tankers' (Fuentes 1978, p. 121). Approaching then the 'industrial citadel' of Coatzacoalcos, views of 'the coconut palm-forest' and the 'zebu cattle grazing on brick-colored plains' promptly yield to the 'low, ugly buildings of the port […] a whole consumer society installed in the tropics, supermarkets, television-sale and repair shops, and in the foreground the everlasting Mexican world of tacos, pigs, flies, and naked children in mute contemplation' (Fuentes 1978, p. 122). Charting a space shaped by the rapidly advancing oil-fueled development, Fuentes's dystopic description of the Mexican Gulf pre-empts what six years later the geographer Neil Smith would define as a 'social inequality blazoned into the geographical landscape'(Smith 1984, p. 155), an 'uneven development' that anticipates many of the uneven contours that now mark the post-NAFTA neoliberal present. As Fuentes shows, the Gulf coast region appears since the 1970s as a forceful signifier of the contradictions

of global capitalism, a territory that has been arguably shaped by the same transnational forces of capital that turned Ciudad Juárez into 'Mexico's violent cradle of modernity' (Matthews 2016, p. 402). Yet, given its geographical location, functioning now 'as a natural corridor for trade flows and people (including migrants), as well as drugs and weapons' (Arroyo Fonseca and Rebolledo Flores 2019, p. 4461), the Gulf coast region, much like the sacrificial border free trade zone, has also made profoundly tangible the sinister pressures that the globalizing process of NAFTA and the ongoing War on Drugs have exerted upon the Mexican tropics.

Not coincidently, one of Mexico's most prominent and acclaimed writers in recent years, Fernanda Melchor (1982-), has been heralded for her fictional and nonfictional incursions into this less-explored 'trópico negro' [dark tropic]–as Melchor herself refers to it. Born in the state of Veracruz, located along the Gulf of Mexico, her life and artistic process have been seen as a reflection of the drastic changes in this geographical space. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues, Melchor's development as a writer 'has run parallel to the quick progression of the state into one of the most intense sites of violence and political corruption in the country' (2020, n.p.). Her most widely celebrated work *Temporada de Huracanes* (2017), whose English translation (*Hurricane Season*, 2020) was shortlisted for the 2020 International Man Booker Prize, has been described in the *New York Times* as a 'Gulf Coast noir' (Lucas 2020, n.p.), since the novel takes as its focus the murder of an outcast figure, known only as 'La Bruja' [The Witch], in a fictional village in rural Veracruz. As many critics have noted, however, Melchor's novel is not a whodunit in the traditional sense. Making use of what some critics have called 'nightmarish realism', the novel leaps from the Witch's death to a succession of single-paragraph chapters narrated by the villagers in a 'a churning chorus of unreliable narration, composed of equal parts rumor, speculation [and] fear-mongering' (Trela 2020, n.p.). In this way, the witch's murder ultimately serves as a gateway into the history of violence in Veracruz and in Mexico in the late twentieth

century, laying bare 'the violent mythologies of a Mexican village and reveal[ing] how they touch the global circuitry of capitalist greed' (Lerner 2020, n.p.).

As the plot unravels, hitting the 'checklist of social ills' (Kurnick 2020, n.p.) – sexual violence, misogyny, poverty, substance abuse, homophobia – Melchor's glancing details point us to the ravages of global capital by offering oblique references to the town's violent history. At several moments, Melchor steps back to recount the village's backstory, taking us to the late 1970s when a hurricane and landslide devastated the area, which was then slowly rebuilt with 'chozas y tendejones levantados sobre los huesos de los que quedaron enterrados bajo el cerro' [shacks and shanties raised on the bones of those who'd been crushed under the hillside] (Melchor 2017, p. 25). Oil deposits discovered north of town, we learn, radically altered the landscape of 'cañas, pastos y carrizos que tupían la tierra' [cane and pastures and reeds filling every inch of land] (ibid.), as the construction of a highway intended to serve megadevelopment or extractive projects carried the promise of wealth and a fast route to prosperity. Yet, these infrastructure projects only brought misery and destitution, leaving behind a streak of 'cantinas, posadas, congales y puteros' [cantinas, guesthouses, whorehouses and strip clubs] (ibid.) to service the drug traffickers and engineers bound for the oil fields nearby. Falling victim to neoliberal rapacity, economic crisis and the rise of the drug trade, the people of La Matosa, however, as Barbara Halla argues in her review, do not understand their poverty as the result of these very real sources of misery: 'instead they cast blame on the hurricane season that affects people's moods, the Witch summoning the devil in the women she assembles in her home, or the evil she conjures at the parties she holds every night at her house with local young men' (2020, n.p.). These aspects throw the novel into the terrain of the gothic-grotesque already explored by contemporary Latin American writers – such as the Argentinians Mariana Enriquez and Samanta Schweblin or the Ecuadoran Mónica Ojeda– to capture the precariousness of life

in the twenty-first century, as these occult forces cypher the anxieties over the social changes caused by the enclosure of communal lands in La Matosa and the surrounding region. Tapping into these different traditions (from the noir detective novel to the gothic), Melchor's novel, as Gorica Majstorovic posits, creates 'new contexts for the twenty-first century literature and culture based on the failures of the oil-fueled neoliberal economies' (2021, p. 19), using this ravaged space as a privileged location from which to uncover capital's menacing hold over life, resources and labour in the Mexican Gulf coast.

Looking at the 1970s through the wreckage of the recent period, Melchor allows us to see that much of what would later become violently palpable was already nascent: the neoliberalization of the countryside would set the stage for what Alejandro Velasco and Joshua Frens-String call 'the bloody embrace of drug wars and capital' (2016, n.p.). Yet, while her novel brings us to the full flowering of the Mexican crisis, her methods, as Will Noah observes in his review, 'arise from her nonfiction *crónicas,* vivid accounts of the effects of drug-war violence on the everyday lives of *Jarochos,* as Veracruz's inhabitants are known' (2020). Her first book, *Aquí no es Miami* (This is not Miami, 2013 [reedited in 2018]), collected various nonfictional pieces on violence in her home state, earning her a PEN club prize for Literary and Journalistic Excellence and a place in the revered tradition of the *crónica* genre, which, as Sánchez Prado observes 'combin[es] journalism, indirect narrative styles, and essayism, popularized by writers like Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska' (2020, n.p.). Foregrounding the exercise of terror that has besieged her native city, similarly to her novel, her *crónicas* make use of occultist symbols for the social *malaise* that engulfs it. In one, Melchor narrates the extraterrestrial fever that caught the country in the 1990s and her own sighting of UFOs hovering over the city's port when she was a child, which turn out to be planes carrying Colombian drugs into the region (2018, p. 21). In another, ('La casa del Estero' [The house by the Estuary]), which almost works as an allegory of

capitalist patriarchy, the incursion to an abandoned house that locals believed to be haunted – as told via a third party known by Melchor – leaves one woman possessed by a demonic spirt, who will claim the women's body and the house grounds as his own (p. 104). As Guillermo Espinosa Estrada observes in a review titled 'Un ovni como excusa de lo real' [An UFO as an alibi of reality], 'como si supier[a] que para tomar el mejor pulso de este país tuviéramos que examinar, antes que nada, sus márgenes, [Melchor] rodea y se detiene en lugares excéntricos' [as if knowing that to take a better pulse of the country we needed to examine, before anything, its margins, [Melchor] circles around and lingers on eccentric places] (2013). Her novel, for instance, was originally conceived as a nonfiction investigation into a real-life murder that took place in a destitute village near her hometown that appeared in the *nota roja* crime press ('red pages' for their bloody content) with a bewildering explanation: the victim was a known witch and the motive was attributed to witchcraft. As a journalist by trade, Melchor's first impulse was to investigate this spot and interview the suspect and villagers to pursue the project in the manner of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, taking Veracruz as her setting. However, due to the dangers that journalists face particularly in the rural parts of Veracruz– Mexico's deadliest state for the profession – she opted instead for a work of fiction lingering between crime fiction and horror. Yet, the obscure spaces that Melchor figures in her novel are also found in her early *crónicas*, seeing that, as Patricia Poblete Alday argues, the 'crónica narrativa que se escribe y publica hoy en América Latina […] revela aquellas aristas más oscuras de la realidad que nos esforzamos por mantener ocultas' [the narrative chronicle written and published in Latin America […] reveals the obscure edges of reality that we strive to keep hidden] (2019, p. 103). In her *crónicas*, Melchor uses the capaciousness of this hybrid genre to investigate the dark forces that have taken hold of the *trópico negro*.

The articulations of unsettlement that Melchor's texts convey, while unusual in their register, can be identified in a significant portion of contemporary *crónicas*. The spatial anxiety produced by a 'Mexican soil that swallows [its] victims' (Ortega 2019, n.p.), as an ever-expanding number of clandestine graves dot the territory, has more recently become the focus of nonfiction literatures, offering a glimpse into the vast and unaccountable net of violent power relations at work across the region.[3] In its treatment of space and setting, however, it is Óscar Martínez's collection *Los migrantes que no importan* (The migrants that don't matter, 2010) which provides a salient point of linkage to the obscure terrains that Melchor prefigures, as Martínez surveys the small Mexican towns and *ejidos* (communally owned land) along the Gulf states and southern border that for the past decades, as the anthropologist Rebecca Galemba has documented, have been transformed into 'hub[s] for migration, petty commerce, prostitution and the drug trade' (2018, p. 28). As a reporter from "Sala Negra", an investigative unit that covers transnational organized crime for Central America's digital news magazine *El Faro*, Martínez navigates the most intense points of conflict and friction along the migrant trail, coming to grips with the violent practices that have soared and transformed Mexico and the Northern Triangle.[4] The socio-economic configurations and the consequent expressions of power affecting these geographies are challenges that the works of Melchor and Martínez delve into in order to account for the felt experience of exploitation and unevenness that unfolds in the militarized and industrial corridors of the region.

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[3] Some relevant examples include: Lydia Carrión's *La Fosa del Agua: Desapariciones y feminicidios en el río de los Remedios* (2018), Javier Valdez's *Malayerba: La vida bajo el narco* (2016), Diego Enrique Osorno's *La guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica* (2013), Marcela Turati and Daniela Rea's *Entre las cenizas: historias de vida en tiempos de muerte* (2012).

[4] The Salvadoran-based online media outlet *El Faro* is considered one of the hallmarks of independent journalism in Latin America as its focus on in-depth or 'slow journalism' (Romero Rodríguez et al. 2021) in its coverage of violence in Central America has ran against the 'blatant and instrumental criminalization of gangs' by the state and media systems in the region (Charles 2020, p. 105). Using the methods of traditional journalism and literature, its Sala Negra section has produced a number of narrative chronicle collections, such as *Crónicas Negras. Desde una region que no cuenta* (2013), that grapple with subjects such as the region's security policy, extrajudicial killings by state agents, prison conditions, forced disappearances and forced displacements. See also: Rockwell, Rick. 2017. Evolving Media Structures in Central America. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 13 (1): pp. 57-73.

Recent scholarship on the contemporary Latin American *crónica* (Poblete Alday 2020; Miklos 2020; Aguirre 2016), a genre which surged in the convulsive 1970s to make sense of the new contours of the megalopolis, recognizes in many of the texts that take violence as their focus a perspectival shift that sees them move from their usual geographical domicile and register. For instance, while scholars like Gabriela Polit-Dueñas have underscored the contemporary *crónica* in its urban incarnation as the genre that has defined Latin American neoliberal expansion (2019, p. 13), Juan Carlos Aguirre proposes the provincial *crónica* as the form that captures the disruptions that derive from the complex, transnational structure moulded by the flows of goods and people under this global neoliberal agenda (2016, p. 11). As Aguirre posits, scholarship on the Mexican chronicle has overwhelmingly privileged the genre's depictions of the capital, leaving unexamined 'the highly visible efforts to narrate the violence that a binational anti-narcotics initiative has inflicted on Mexico's provinces' (2016, p. 10). The diverse territories administered out of Mexico City, as he outlines, have long been shaped by their economic marginality and the plundering of their resources for the sake of the Federation, making them a ground zero of the current national political crisis. For Aguirre, the Mexican *provincia* – a catchall term used to designate the country's vast interior – comes then to represent the 'lens through which a new, transnational reality must be understood' (ibid.). Since, according to Aguirre, recent *crónicas* explore the trafficking routes that mark these territories which have become 'the obverse of the formal licit market whose nodal points are in the great metropolises', these texts open the possibility of reframing the national crisis in terms that are 'emphatically inclusive of "provincial" space' (2016, p. 32).

Aguirre's analysis – focused on Sergio González Rodríguez's collection *El hombre sin cabeza* (*The Headless Man*, 2009) – however, leaves untouched the nexus between illicit and licit realms in the provincial landscapes these *crónicas* depict (set mostly in Michoacán, Tabasco, and

Veracruz). Most of these terrains have not only been altered by an illicit drug industry but also by their removal from ordinary normative arrangements due to their position as new frontiers of capital, now operating either as free trade or special economic zones (SEZ). As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson postulate, ports, harbours, corridors, special economic zones and other forms of logistical space operate as the new geographies of capital's global expansion, as sectioned-off locations in which foreign investors enjoy exceptions to law and other normative regulations (2019, p. 213). As such, these sites are often earmarked for environmental degradation, dispossession, exploitation, and the 'dominance of market logics over territorial rights' (Neilson 2014, p. 21). Functioning under special legal or regulatory frameworks, however, these licit operations often appear delinked from the state and paramilitary violence (for instance, the beheadings González Rodriguez explores) that is connected to the militarization of the drug trade. Yet, as Alessandro Peregalli suggests, the 'formation of a necropolitical governance around corridors, zones and infrastructural nodes' in Mexico, Colombia and Central America suggests the 'unhealthy collaboration between the state, paramilitaries, drug cartels and the local *caciques*' in the making of these spaces (2020, n.p.). Accordingly, logistical and extractive zones represent, to follow Mezzadra and Neilson, 'paradigmatic sites that render visible complex connections between patterns of dispossession and exploitation' (2016, p. 24). In contemporary *crónicas* then, these intense, yet incredibly opaque patterns appear coded in the provincial landscapes depicted, which are rendered as hostile, strange and encroached settings infused with latent violence.

Accounting for the violent and obscure restructuring of the provincial space, Melchor and Martínez's chronicle collections emerge then as exemplary of not only this newfound shift towards the province as locus of the political catastrophe but also the coding of these alienated landscapes as spaces saturated with intrigue and threat. As Poblete Alday identifies in her expansive survey of contemporary chronicles, 'Mexico aparece en estos textos como un espacio

ominoso, lleno de peligros y emboscadas tanto para los migrantes que cruzan de manera ilegal camino a Estados Unidos, como para el ciudadano de a pie, que vive expuesto a índices de violencia crecientes' [Mexico appears in these texts as an ominous space, full of dangers and ambushes for the migrants that cross it illegally on their way to the U.S., as well as for the ordinary citizen, who lives exposed to the growing indexes of violence] (2020, p. 141). For Poblete Alday, *crónica* writers invoke the signature traits of horror, gothic and fantastic fiction to represent the Mexican terrains as a 'secularized purgatory' as well as to deploy the classic archetype of the monster to represent a number of actors: narcos, coyotes, migrants, police and the military. These chronicles, Poblete Alday concludes, reveal to us the frailty of the borders between 'good and evil' in a context plagued with explicit and conspicuous violence. Attention to the 'recurrencia de la crónica narrativa actual a tematizar las manifestaciones del mal' [tendency in contemporary narrative chronicle to thematize the manifestations of evil] (2018, p. 250) that Poblete Alday calls for to understand the nightmarish visions of the present will be carried forward in this chapter, which takes the violent provincial landscape as a site that focalizes the operations of global power in its most excessive form. Yet, moving along and beyond the scope of horror, my focus lies rather on how 'espacios del mal' are depicted through a noir atmosphere, making use of 'noir's generic investments in investigations of legality and power' (Pitt-Scott 2020, p. 2) to query the legitimacy of the neoliberal, militaristic social order in the nooks and corners of the Mexican hinterlands.

Noir has usually taken the image of the city as *locus terribilis*, since, not unlike the crónica, the genre surged throughout the continent alongside the architecture of neoliberal global governance. The provinces, however, voraciously transformed by a capital-intensive infrastructure that accelerated the immiseration of its peasantry, constitute the perfect site to interrogate what is hidden behind the zones of enclosure and transnational corporate rule. As

Bryan D. Palmer observes, by 'stylistically juxtaposing the bizarre and fantastic with a relentless sequence of "realist" snapshots', noir creates an atmosphere of the ultra-normal periodically ruptured by the violent and the disturbing (1997, p. 60). In Palmer's view, noir's formalistic darkness – having its origins in the socio-economic malaise experienced in the US during the 1930s – has continued to allow the depictions of 'capitalism's unsavory undercurrents' (ibid.). Latin American *novela negra* adopts and transforms this tradition, moving from a conception of crime as a deviation or anomaly within a societal order that the classical detective genre upholds to the recognition that 'is not so much that the system is broken, but rather that the system itself in its ordinary functioning produces violence and injustice in the form of perpetual underdevelopment' (Dove 2012, p. 22). As such, the hostile terrains of noir are adopted as a salient vehicle to capture the contradictions of modernity in post-68 Mexico – for which the Massacre of Tlatelolco in Mexico City stands as its most visible symbol – and later, with the rapid neoliberalization of the economy, the violent experience of frontier capitalism in which female maquila laborers became the human debris of global trade.

Melchor's *Aquí no es Miami* – a title that already prefigures an asymmetry with respect to the US metropolis – however, moves away from the much-discussed capital and the northern borderlands, to follow crime trails in the dark, violent Gulf coast. As Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos recognize, the figure of the 'detective duro' that moves through Mexico City's criminal underbelly has been supplanted, both in fiction and in real life, by the figure of the journalist who, faced with the void left with the withdrawal of the state, has come to perform most of the police investigation (2010, p. 378). As turf wars, massacres, summary executions, mass disappearances, mutilated bodies on display and 'the excess of a heavily militarized government to the surfeit of violence' began to take hold of the newspaper headlines, furthermore, the *crónica* witnessed a boom that led to a region-wide dissemination of the genre, trying to bring the

structural context of the drug trade to light (Aguirre 2015, p. 60). The optics of noir, 'oppos[ing] light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes – and, by extension motivations and true character – in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown' (Place and Peterson 1996, p. 66) thus seem to parallel the *crónica*'s efforts to illuminate the obscurities around the mystifying tendencies of mainstream journalistic discourse on the war on drugs. However, most of the efforts remain still tethered to the northern borderlands, seldom accounting for the powerful forces organizing the despoiled geographies of Mexico's coastal and/or southern 'interior'. Given their strategic positioning in trade (functioning as logistical corridors or extractive zones), these terrains have been shaped through what Deborah Cowen calls an 'intensification of both capital circulation and organized crime […] in ways that might be difficult to recognize' (2014, p. 11). *Aqui no es Miami*'s referentiality to the obscure and the labyrinthine seems to partake in such deciphering, depicting these sites as punctuated by a specific sense of malaise and a suffocating atmosphere to encode and index the broader ramifications of the region's intensifying violence.

Similarly, in Jon Lee Anderson's words, Martínez prowls through back roads in a stubborn quest for truth, 'exhibit[ing] the instincts of a detective and the soul of a poet' (2016, n.p.). Delving deep into the region's 'tortured labyrinth', as Junot Diaz highlights (2016), Martínez's work has received widespread praise not only for documenting the abysmal violence besetting Mexico and the Isthmus – earning him the WOLA-Duke Human Rights Book Award – but particularly for having 'la coherencia orgánica, el desarrollo y el empuje narrativo de una novela' [the organic coherence, development, and narrative drive of a novel] (Goldman 2013, p. 12). As with much of the post-conflict Central American cultural production, Martínez's chronicles seem particularly informed by the novel of detection, which, diverging from the wartime nonfiction genre of *testimonio*, readily registered the pervasive sense of corruption, decay

and disillusionment once 'it became clear how little was achieved by long years of armed struggle' (Kokotovic 2006, p. 15). In many post-war texts, as Misha Kokotovic argues, there is an allusion or play with the conventions of the genre to capture the official conclusion of hostilities that didn't end violence but simply took more criminal forms. The restructuring of Central American economies, which exacerbated the region's dire economic and political straits, gave shape to a subset of works, focused chiefly on Managua, Guatemala City and San Salvador rather than the rural areas of wartime literature, that for Kokotovic can be defined as 'neoliberal noir'. For Kokotovic, this term can better account for texts that do not fit neatly within the generic boundaries of the detective or mystery novel or never fully reveal the details of the crimes around which the narrative revolves, yet make use of crime as a plot device to 'provide a vivid representation of the process of demodernization, of corruption, of injustice and new manifestation of violence [….] produced under neoliberal capitalism' (2006, p. 26).

The affective charge and paranoid spaces of noir in Martínez's work has already attracted critical attention – as I will discuss in the following section – particularly in relation to the ways in which these tropes have been used to expose the collapse of institutions and State corruption vis-à-vis the rise of narco-trafficking (see Chinchilla 2015; Jossa 2019; Miklos 2020). However, while the marshaling of the anxieties of the noir mode in Martinez's crónicas certainly relates to themes of corruption and impunity, attention to the provincial spatial context represented, I suggest, proves particularly fruitful to probe how his 'crónicas negras' register the patterns of violence and exploitation that, rather than an anomaly or product of the drug trade, are rooted in the imperatives of capital accumulation that rule upon the region. Centering on the open secretiveness that underlies the economic spaces of capitalism, as this chapter intends to explore, allows both Melchor and Martínez to gain purchase on the larger social tensions and constellations of power that remain obscured in the drug war discourse. Noir fiction's sustained

interest in the underbelly of society provides a way to engage with both *Aquí no es Miami* and *Los migrantes que no importan*'s forlorn and threatening landscapes, which, endowed with a strong feeling of alienation, give evidence of the all-pervading belligerent business that ravages the Mexican and Central American region.

'These trains are full of legends and their history is soaked with blood': Óscar Martínez's noir *crónicas*

Seldom featured in earlier Central American cultural production, the rising number of detective or crime narratives in the aftermath of the Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan civil wars emerged more pressingly with the transformation of its Northern triangle as 'la esquina más homicida de la Tierra' [the most homicidal corner of the Earth] (Martínez 2018, p. 49). As with neighboring Mexico and Colombia, where the work of writers such as Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Mario Mendoza gave way to the category of "neo" or "narco" noir,[5] Central America's full integration into the neoliberal regime of accumulation and the increased influx of local and transnational crime fuelled a more violent environment on the Isthmus, leaving its mark on the region's literatures. This transnational reality has been notably explored in recent years by the chronicles of *El Faro*, which, in Sophie Esch's words, has emerged as 'a lighthouse towering above the isthmus, shedding light on the region' (2020, p. 7). As the center of investigative crime reporting in Central America, the socially engaged literary journalism of its 'Sala Negra' has been characterized as an attempt to 'tackle the underworld' (Turati qtd. in Esther Maslin 2016, n.p.) and a quest to navigate the region's "'dark pit" […] in the hopes that, by recording the violent

[5] As Carmen Luna Sellés contends, the neo-noir can be seen as an attempt to represent urban postmodernity in the wake of political violence, the massive incursion of drug cartels and the sprawling growth of big cities. In narco-noir, however, the breakdown in 'civil authority' invariably provides the unsettling backdrop.

events that shape the region, they will be able to understand its harsh reality' (Martínez 2013, n.p.).

The wide-ranging geopolitical outlook that underpins these *crónicas* is therefore closely aligned with noir's recent interrogations of the 'transnationalization of crime and policing networks in the contemporary era', brought by the impossibility of locating violence 'within the bounded territory of discrete states; when, in other words, violence is not specifically located or locatable' (Pepper and Schmid 2016, p. 2). In such a context, as Pepper and Schmid argue, the challenge then becomes finding appropriate forms and registers to contextualize the ways in which the flows of global capitalism and the changing practices of states in turn produce these new configurations of violence in order to continue crime fiction's 'compromised search for justice in a global, not just state bound context' (p. 6). Sala Negra's quest to interrogate the muddled business of contemporary geopolitics in Mexico and Central America thus seem to account for this compromise, as its chronicles are firmly situated in cartographically specific locations while also pushing towards both an expansive vision of global capitalism and a critique of state power.

As one of the most recognized writers of *El Faro*, Óscar Martínez has authored several *crónica* collections that centre around the larger and more diffuse forms of violence that have surged throughout the Americas. In *Historia de violencia: vida y muerte en Centroamerica* [*A history of violence: life and death in Central America*], for instance, Martínez travels through 'Nicaraguan fishing towns, southern Mexican brothels where Central American women are trafficked, isolated Guatemalan jungle villages, and crime-ridden Salvadoran slums' (Martínez 2017) to trace the network of power relations that cut across the entire region. In his most recent work *El Niño de Hollywood: Una historia personal de la Mara Salvatrucha* [*A Hollywood kid: The violent life and violent death of an M-13 hitman,* 2019] – penned along with his anthropologist brother and fellow writer of *El*

Faro – Los Angeles and El Salvador are the settings of a search into the imperial manoeuvrings that laid the groundwork for the country's homicidal rates and forced displacement. The pronounced transnational landscape that these *crónicas* feature would thus seem to be absent from *Los migrantes que no importan* which, as Martínez himself states, takes as its mission to 'illuminat[e] the dark, forgotten and depraved corners of Mexico, far from any of the major cities' (2013, p. 274). These provincial sites, however, are located in the Eastern migrant route along the Gulf coast and in the southern and northern border zones. Thus, rather than representing a national-bound setting, they provide a gateway into the complex transnational structure of extraction and logistics that shape the region's current manifestations of violence.

Originally published in installments by *El Faro,* Martínez's chronicles in *Los migrantes que no importan* are organized in a geographical south-to-north pattern, each covering different dimensions of the 5,000-kilometer journey from southern Mexico to the US-Mexico border, for, as Martínez writes, 'cada estación tiene su dosis de podredumbre' [each station has its own dose of rottenness] (2010, p. 17). Written between 2007 and 2009, Martínez's chronicles focus mainly on the Gulf coast migrant route– also known as the 'route of death'– that runs along the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz and Tamaulipas and which at that point became a contentious hotspot for kidnapping, sex-trafficking and assaults on migrants. Already forewarning the profound changes in security environments that accelerated with Mexico's entry into the Mérida Initiative – a bilateral security agreement with the US to combat drug trafficking and transnational crime and, to secure Mexico's southern border – these sites encapsulate the longer trajectories of political, criminal and structural violence including neoliberal restructuring and the hemispheric war on drugs. This violence, however, remained relatively unchecked until 2010 with the gruesome discovery of 72 migrants brutally murdered in what became known as the Tamaulipas massacre. The title of Martínez's collection, as Alice Miklos rightfully points out,

suggests these migrants' invisibility in international media at the time his book was released (2020, p. 25). As Martínez himself has stated, the intention that drove the book's publication was to build a map 'de lo que consideramos los crímenes más masivos y brutales […] establecer una ruta de la barbarie y seguirla: punto por punto, recodo por recodo' [of what we considered to be the most brutal and massive crimes […] to establish a route of barbarism and then follow it: point by point, corner by corner] (2010, p. 8). In the vein of noir, the migrant route, from the 'jungle-shrouded Tenosique' to the 'muddy bank of the Rio Grande', is framed by Martínez as a low-grade environment at the city's edge and thus the crime scene to be inspected.

From the first pages, Martínez situates these crimes within an international theatre of displacements, expulsions and eradications and the escalation of organized violence. The collection opens with a *crónica* that tracks the conditions that brough the Alfaro brothers from a small Salvadoran city to a migrant shelter near the Guatemalan border, which shows a discernable pattern of immiseration: it traces their transformation from exploited agricultural labourers to slum dwellers and then, into the world's displaced. Echoing the processes of dispossession that have been fuelled by armed conflict, the depiction of the brothers' lives bears resemblance at times to descriptions of war zones: 'De repente, en su pequeño mundo en El Salvador empezaron a caer cadáveres. Cada vez más cerca' [Recently, close to the brothers' home in a small Salvadoran city, bodies started hitting the streets. The bodies fell closer and closer to the brothers' home] (Martínez 2010, p. 17 [2013, p. 1]).[6] From rural Chalchuapa, where they worked as farmhands – which, as one brother says, 'that sort of work, he was convinced led nowhere' – they left for the infernal slums on the Mexican border with Guatemala, 'una de las colonias más peligrosas de Tapachula, zona de fábricas y maquilas' [one of the most dangerous

[6] Throughout this section, I cite Martínez's book in the original language followed by the published translation into English. Where I have altered existing translations in which the meaning differs slightly, I include a footnote indicating the change.

barrios and site of many national and foreign-owned factories] (2010, p. 22 [2013, p. 10]). Their mother, however, left behind in El Salvador, was soon killed, pulling the brothers back in search of answers. But, in Martínez's words, '[l]a muerte no tiene una sola cara en un país como El Salvador. Se puede presentar en forma de abanico. Sus mensajeros son tantos que cuesta pensar en uno solo' [death isn't simple in El Salvador. It comes in a wide array of forms. Its messengers are so numerous that it is hard to think of a single one] (2010, p. 31).[7] As Martínez muses, no option was left for them but to join the ranks of a disposable surplus population: 'Sintieron la condena de su región, la fuerza con la que su país lanza los escupitajos hacia fuera […] Hicieron las maletas y emprendieron el viaje. Se unieron a la romería de los vomitados centroamericanos. Se metieron en el flujo de los que escapan. Unos de la pobreza. Otros de la muerte' [The brothers felt the purgatory of their country, they felt the force with which their country spit people out […] They packed their bags and started north, joining the pilgrimage of upchucked Central Americans. They dove into that stream of escapees. Those fleeing poverty, those fleeing death'] (2010, pp. 30-31 [2013, p. 19]).

This noir-driven search into the dynamics of expulsion in El Salvador is similarly applied to interrogate the systemic failures that manifest in the encroached landscape of the Mexican south, which is rendered by Martínez as a terrain of active hostility:

> El viaje por la sierra los llevaría a atravesar lo verde y espeso de la selva oaxaqueña, a transitar lo irregular. Los llevaría a internarse en un camino poco conocido por los migrantes […] con retenes militares […]. El viaje por el tren los obligaría a encaramarse como garrapatas en el lomo del gusano metálico y suguir así durante tres horas, hasta llegar a Medias Aguas Veracruz, base de los Zetas […] Sin embargo, el riesgo de la sierra

[7] I have altered this translation to retain the sense of the Spanish version.

> tampoco es leve. De los diez indocumentados centroamericanos, seis son asaltados por las mismas autoridades mexicanas. [A journey through the mountains would take them through the thick green Oaxaca jungle, well off the migrant train trails. But it's a route studded with checkpoints and migration authorities […] In contrast, the voyage by train would have Auner and his brothers clinging like ticks onto its roof struts for at least three hours en route to Medias Aguas, Veracruz, the home turf of Los Zetas […] But the risks of traveling through the mountains, so as to avoid Los Zetas, aren't inconsiderable. Of every ten migrants from Central America, six are apprehended and mugged by Mexican migration authorities.] (2010, p. 17) [2013, p. 42]).

Evident in settings such as the one described above is an order imposed by the state that 'is not so easily separable from the disorder against which it is apparently arrayed' (Shaw 2016, p. 69). Crystallizing the gang-like sway of the authority, Martínez spatially represents the precariously thin line separating criminality and law enforcement. This seems to follow suit with Alice Miklos' assessment – following Kokotivic's concept of neoliberal noir – that Martínez marshals the fearful affective charge of popular crime genres to 'uncove[r] those officials and police, who, through negligence or complicity with organized crime, permit the atmosphere of impunity regarding the mistreatment of migrants' (2020, p. 16). Yet, the complexity of the structures of organized violence in Mexico makes matters far from straightforward. For instance, as Guadalupe Correa has documented, Los Zetas are a very intricate criminal organization that functions more like a transnational corporation, and that has greatly benefitted 'the arms-producing companies; the international banking system (due to the billions of dollars that are laundered daily in the major banks of the world); the US border economy; the US border security/military-industrial complex: and several forms of corporate capital, particularly

international oil and gas companies' (2017, p. 11). In short, this new model of organized crime (transnational in nature) and new forms of militarization (of criminal syndicates and government security strategies) are essential rather than extraneous to legal businesses and corporate capital (Correa Cabrera 2017, p. 12). This context, hence, affects the tropes of crime fiction insofar as what is sought is no longer the revelation and expulsion of particular corrupt individuals but rather 'an understanding of the intricate machinations of whole trade systems and of the ambiguous relationship between capitalism and criminality' (Desnain 2016, p. 81). Despite Martínez's apparent focus on corruption, the 'map of barbarism' that he outlines offers us rather an entry into the obscure and ever-expanding world of economic, national and supra-national interests and to crimes far exceed the localized acts investigated. The concrete geographical locations serve as a prism through which to capture the deep implications of these logics which are inscribed in and produce specific material and social circumstances.

These larger socio-political tensions are thus primarily accounted for by Martínez through his attention to degenerated and derelict rural spaces, while an accompanying sinister atmosphere is articulated through the representation of the built environment. In *Los migrantes que no importan*, issues of crime, security policies, state power, and economic neoliberalisation are not, in line with neoliberal noir narratives, inspected around car parks, sleazy hotel rooms, dimly-lit highways or warehouses but instead on train tracks, migrant shelters, 'the pitch dark of the jungle' and abandoned cattle ranches. The 'territorio rural, transurbano, pueblerino y/o periférico frente una hegemonía de las tramas de lo urbano' [the rural territory, trans-urban, provincial and/or peripheral vis-à-vis the hegemony of urban plots] (Ceresa et. al 2016, p. 7) comes more forcefully to index the systemic violence and geographical unevenness amplified with the neoliberalization of the country. In consequence, this coexistence of unevenly developed regions, as Harry Pitt-Scott argues, 'provides sites of narrative friction and anxiety, a

mood of fear and suspicion' (2020, p.15). In the chronicle 'Aquí se viola, aquí se mata: mayo de 2009, estado de Chiapas' [Here they rape, here they kill: May 2009, Chiapas], for example, Martínez focuses on the danger of rape and assault in a shadowy network of abandoned ranches that connects Tapachula, Chiapas, the first city that migrants encounter in Mexico, and Arriaga where they wait to board the tops of freight trains. Martínez describes the Chiapan landscape, one of the states affected most deleteriously by Mexico's economic and security policies, noting the way its built environment has become a fertile ground for violence, which implicitly reveals this territory as both crime scene and victim. The *crónica* therefore underscores not only how the 'dimensions of these horrors diminish to points of geography. Here on this rock, they rape. There by that bush, they kill' (Martínez 2013, p. 127), but also a discarded countryside where the word 'basurero' [waste dump] is used to encapsulate the setting (p. 126), and where lands are described as 'still noticeably ravaged by Hurricane Stan which struck in 2005' (p. 124). If as Christopher Breu argues, the factory space on the outskirts is mobilized in neoliberal noir in order to encapsulate the transformations from 'the Fordist model of industrial labor to [a] neoliberal model, with a full-time, protected work force […] replaced by a part-time, casualized labor force made up primarily of women and immigrants' (2016, p. 44), the abandoned *ejidos* in Martínez's *crónicas*, which now serve to funnel immigrants into its rugged and deadly terrains, disturbingly signal a deeper systemic transformation. This shift, to follow Saskia Sassen, is more akin to 'a kind of economic version of ethnic cleansing where the elements considered troublesome are simply eliminated' (2014, p. 116), the rooting out of local economies and living working labour from which there is no surplus-value to 'suck'.

An acute consciousness of the predation of these rural sites thus permeates Martínez's subsequent *crónicas*, as the physical description of these spaces mediates the social death that plagues the *provincia*. In 'Los secuestros que no importan: noviembre de 2008' [The kidnappings

that don't matter: November 2008], Martínez confronts the collapsed landscape of the oil town of Coatzacoalcos, a key site in the area of mass kidnappings carried out by Los Zetas as well as privileged site of crude extraction, where the motions of global capital, statecraft and criminality are encapsulated in its violent and disruptive spatial arrangements:

> Esta es una localidad industrial, uno de esos poblados del interior que parecen medio fábricas y medio pueblos, pero jamás ciudades. Una autopista central, flanqueada por grandes bodegas industriales, se combian con las calles de tierra. Casi 300,000 mil habitantes, hacen su vida en este lugar cuyo meridiano es una callejuela donde las viviendas son de lámina y madera, donde apenas hay paso para vehiculos, pero en la que las vías del tren dibujan esa columna vertebral a la perfección […] Tras una noche de tiroteos, secuestros, muertos, camionetas blancas y correteadas, se han enterado de que llegaron a la peor parte […] Hay sitios donde se respira el miedo. Para un migrante, Coatzacoalcos es uno de esos lugares […] todos lo saben, nadie hace nada. Segurá pasando. [We're in an industrial zone, one of those places that seem half factory and half town, not quite what you would call a city. There's one main drag, a partly dirt road, that's flanked on both sides by industrial warehouses. There are almost 300,000 people living here, mostly in narrow rows of wood-and tarp shacks that run alongside the train tracks […] After a night of shootings, kidnappings, murder, white trucks and car chases, the migrants realize that they've arrived at what may be the worst leg of the journey. […] There are some places where the fear is so thick you breathe it. For a migrant, Coatzacoalcos is one of those places […] everybody knows, nobody acts, and the kidnappings continue.] (2010, p. 112 [2013 pp. 277-281])

The robberies, kidnappings and homicides that Martínez catalogues thus unfold against this stark background of unevenness, eroded social networks, and infrastructural degradation, but also against an open economy that functions without interruption whilst the conditions of people and communities continue to deteriorate. Martínez's account aims in part to decipher how the violence increasingly employed by armed groups enmeshed in the drug war can carry on with the knowledge of local governments, the migrants' countries of origin, the media, and the Mexican and US government. This incongruity, however, proves difficult for Martínez to follow given the secrecy, misinformation, and bureaucratic runaround that is designed to deflect attention: 'I try for the tenth time to contact Alfredo Osorio, the municipal president of [neighbouring] Tierra Blanca, but he doesn't answer my call' (2013, p. 285). Yet, the sense of foreboding that Martínez sutures onto the landscape effectively dispels the notion of the state as a protective entity.

As Martínez underscores, this is a city where multiple authorities look on as armed groups kidnap migrants in broad daylight; where money-wiring companies, based on the number of wires a single person receives 'must know who they're dealing with' (p. 282); and where police officers have even returned migrants to their Zeta-sponsored captors when they tried to file a report. The discrepancies that Martínez traces in this industrial landscape debunk the perception that such violence runs against the vested interests of state and corporate actors and instead make tangible the fact that no contradiction exists between the provision of legal and material guarantees to ensure the viability of capitalist accumulation 'in states that erode the rights of local people through austerity and violence' (Granovsky-Larsen and Paley 2019, p. 286). Particularly in resource-rich and logistically strategic areas, as Granovsky-Larsen and Paley argue, 'the dual processes of security and rule of law for capital on the one hand, and insecurity and injustice for people and communities on the other, are, in fact, attractive to investors […] the

blind eyed turned to illegal acts allow states to have unmatched influence over shaping the context for capital accumulation' (p. 289). While official discourse upholds the state's attempts to restrict these crimes – 'since 2006-2007 the number of complaints by migrants against government officials has decreased' (2013, p. 298), Martínez relays with suspicion – the appropriation and reworking of a noir atmosphere to map these fractured regional landscapes suggest rather the inclinations of the state to cover up these crimes.

A similar dynamic is made palpable during the chronicler's crossings through Arriaga, Chiapas, where he observes, a few steps away from a militarized checkpoint, 'un sitio apocalíptico. Seco, yermo […] un punto esperpéntico de asaltos y violaciones' [an apocalyptic place. Dry, wild in its dryness […] the place of rape and violence] (2010, p. 58). This sense of foreboding seems to evaporate when nothing occurs and the migrants manage to cross safely. Maybe the story here in Chiapas has changed course 'y los fiscales y los comandantes están logrando su objetivo' [and the prosecutors and police officers are successfully reaching their goal] (ibid.), Martínez wonders. In the following subsection, fittingly titled 'Nada es lo que parece' [Nothing is what is seems], however, the chronicler offers a counternarrative of hidden truths, tracing the mounting trail of crimes denounced by heads of migrant shelters, local priests and rape victims that the government seems unwilling to acknowledge. As one officer communicates "they're not that interested. They don't want to touch this stuff" (2013, p. 152). Devoid of any protection, this place of 'monte, lodo, silencio' [scrubland, mud, silence] (p. 144 [p.44]), is enabled only as a site of burial or concealment of crimes, and consequently, as Martínez reflects, 'I can't help but wonder when the next [body] will turn up' (ibid.). In some senses, the apocalyptic sense of place that the chronicler conveys evokes not only a noir setting– a secret, dark and threatening space– but also, with the allusion to state-sanctioned impunity, the starkly decaying order that earlier urban *crónicas* sought to mediate. But whereas, for example, the post-

1994 Mexico City appears for Carlos Monsiváis, as 'una ciudad con signo apocalíptico' [a post-apocalyptic city] (1995, p. 21), since the market, to paraphrase Nora Lustig, comes to replace regulation, private ownership to replace public ownership and competition to replace protection (1998, p. 1), Martínez identifies the devastation in the provincial spaces where the state, rather than having been replaced, continues to set pro-business conditions through violence and terror.

It is useful to remember then, when approaching Martínez's writing, that he follows a long line of writers who see the *crónica* as a means to examine the hidden margins that dominant narratives elide. Martínez's texts recuperate on many levels the chronicle's métier of running counter to official or authorized versions of events through 'una lectura basada en el subsuelo del país' [a reading based on the country's subsoil] (Sánchez Prado 2010, p. 122). Of course, the chronicle's traditional preoccupation with representing the marginal and denouncing the unsayable is no secret, as it is directly linked to 'the genre's close kinship with journalism, and those aspects of its form and language that distance it from conventional reporting' (Jörgensen 2011, p. 382). As it developed in the twenty-first century, chronicle writing took to task to counterweight an increasingly troubled journalistic field that, 'reduced to the *nota roja,* an extensive compilation of anecdotes about violence, […] evades attributions of causality and culpability' (Braham 2016, p. 120). Such reports, as Persephone Braham argues, make use of provocative headlines, extraordinary gruesome photographs and 'parrot the official story with little investigative critique' (p. 122). The crimes they depict, furthermore, are linked back to the fetishized image of the all-mighty Cartel, detached from and stronger than the State whose allure obfuscates a far darker, more complex reality. Faced with state-sanctioned accounts, the form and language of noir allows Martínez to take a distance from official and periodical reports, and to illuminate the way in which criminalization, that is 'the inscription of a crime into a single act

which can be attributed to a single individual' (Desdain 2016, p. 85), helps to hide the wider set of actors and interest groups which rely on such actions to entrench their power and profit.

A striking example of this can be observed in the *crónica* 'Nosotros somos Los Zetas' [We are the Zetas], where Martínez takes the state of Tabasco, another lucrative site in the Gulf coast corridor, as a vantage point from which to explore how Los Zetas have expanded their activities and zones of influence. As Martínez explains, after months of hearing their name and smelling the fear in the small towns of southern Mexico, he traveled to Tabasco – which marks the beginning of the eastern route they control – to understand 'quiénes son, cómo funcionan y sobre todo, cómo consiguen su principal activo para poder operar a sus anchas: el temor' [who they are, how they work, and, above all, how they acquire the main asset to have such wide-ranging control: fear] (2010, p. 127 [2013, p. 113).[8] In the book's opening *crónica*, Martínez has already offered readers a clue as to who they are: the organization, as he mentions there, was composed of Mexican army deserters belonging to elite forces – some of whom had trained in the US-led School of the Americas – and thus trained in the use of highly specialized military equipment as well as in counterinsurgency operations (p. 16) Accordingly, in 'Nosotros somos Los Zetas' [We are Los Zetas], beyond trying to decipher who they are, Martínez circles around questions of why and how they operate. In some ways, this seems to align with Tyler Shipley's assessment that 'what is analytically paramount in understanding the current cycle of capital expansion in this region is not necessarily understanding *which* actors carry out violence as much as *why* they do so' (Shipley 2019, p. 1036). Yet, as Shipley goes on to add, the needs of private economic actors are a critically important connection point between many of the seemingly disconnected outbursts of violence, as it is crucial to determine who benefits from this massive conflict. Hence, in order to negotiate some of the pitfalls of drug-related violence reporting,

[8] I have altered this translation slightly for accuracy.

insofar as the number of actors is vast and the relationship to the state not always clear, Martínez mobilizes the alienated settings and forensic language of noir to attune the reader to a more complex reality than the one that has sunk into the Mexican and US imaginations.

In the first instance, Martínez starts his description of Los Zetas' activities in a way now ubiquitous in crime reporting: the reference to its gruesome tactics. As he investigates the military-state operation that led to the rescue of fifty-two Central American migrants after they were kept captive in a hidden ranch for days, Martínez goes to this clandestine location describing in detail how the victims were subjected to militaristic forms of torture, captured and shot dead when they attempted to escape into the nearby mountains or raped as the Zetas entertained themselves while they waited for the ransom (2013, pp. 311-312). But as he examines the grounds from the outside – since the prosecutors won't let him get near the scene – he provides the following description: ``[l]a lluvia fue la que hizo que el rancho La Victoria terminara de parecer un montaje. Aquello era como si delincuente se disfrazara con un parche en el ojo, un enorme gabán negro y una pistola a la vista. El rancho era toda la escenografía del secuestro que podemos esperar que salga de nuestro imaginario' [the rain makes La Victoria ranch seem like a film set. It looks staged, the perfect backdrop for a kidnapping—as if a bad guy with an eye patch, an overcoat, and a large pistol was about to step through the door] (p. 307). Akin to a setting of noir, which would 'typically signal the presence of forces deliberately concealed from the reader' (Pitt-Scott 2020, p. 6), the description establishes a sense of uncertainty regarding what took place. Although the state's high kidnapping rates have led to a heavy presence of the military, state policeman and even the National Commission for Human Rights, along with the resultant mass of reporters who jostle for photos and sound bites, in Tabasco, he says, 'el temor […] eso se respira aquí, eso se percibe con ese sexto sentido tan real, tan en la piel, con el que uno sabe cuando está por ser asaltado en una esquina oscura' [you can almost taste the fear. It

hits you in your sixth sense: that feeling of walking round a dark corner and knowing you're about to get mugged] (p. 315). As he walks through Tenosique's main street, he finds out that, in a city of plenty of landmarks, what stands out is not the café where someone famous once ate, but the number of businesses whose owners or family members have been killed or kidnapped (p. 358). This dark mood of paranoia and suspense is further heightened as his investigations lead him to the abandoned Hotel California of Tenosique, 'una de las más descaradas expresiones de impunidad que he visto' [one of the most outrageous examples of impunity I've come across], where every authority knows the Zetas store arms and drugs and house kidnapped migrants, and which is located just down the street from Migration offices (p. 368). The impunity of this place is revelatory and helps to confirm the chronicler's suspicion: the raid at La Victoria ranch was not the result of an intelligence operation but due to 'una cuestión de azar' [dumb luck], as one source ratifies, since the military unit nearby was unable to warn Los Zetas about the operation on time. Thus, as he confronts these brutal realignments in power structures, in the following subsection 'Sin luz al final del túnel' [No light at the end of the tunnel], he manifests the 'sensación de impotencia' [sense of hopelessness] that invades him, and presents the reader with an image of future decay in those same paths 'donde pronto habrá otro ejecutado y muchos migrantes más serán secuestrados' [where soon there will be another murder, and where soon many more migrants will be kidnapped] (2010, p. 141).

A reader with a basic familiarity with the country's recent events would likely be aware of what this future brought. As Martínez himself references in the prologue to the third edition – published in Mexico in 2016 – what is happening now across the country (the homicides, mass graves and disappearances) was already rehearsed in those 'pequeños municipios, aldeas ejidos [….] donde el estado decidió dejar de estar y dejar que otros estén en su lugar' [small municipalities, villages and ejidos […] where the state decided to retreat and leave others in its

place] (p. 7). The same sentiment is expressed as he traverses the rural areas near Tapachula, Chiapas, where he writes: '[b]ones here aren't a metaphor for what's past, but for what's coming' (2013, p. 216). The affective distress Martínez conveys in some ways coincides with Chistopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker's reading of noir texts as organized by a perception and feeling (conscious as well as unconscious) of economic transformations, contradictions and forms of exploitation (2020). For these scholars, noir affectivities (rage, loss, sadness, anxiety) underscore the ideological contradiction between 'the commodified rhetoric' of the individual-as-entrepreneur and the material precarity and disposability of workers and populations under a neoliberal order (Breu and Hatmaker 2020).[9] In Martínez's *crónicas,* however, such a sense of hopelessness anticipates more saliently a mode of neoliberalism that no longer rests 'on the technocratic narratives of the economist class but in a naked war on resources and bodies' (Sanchez Prado 2016, p. 103). These underlying transformations are captured by Martínez as they began to be acutely felt, for the years that followed tragically witnessed this logic penetrate and subsume economic activity and social life as a whole. Thus, as soon as the bodies of migrants, poor, and working people started to be littered across the Mexican terrains – examples of which Martínez catalogues in the prologue – so did these despoiled landscapes became 'espacios de total libertad para el movimiento del capital transnacional' [spaces of total freedom for the movement of transnational capital], in which tax regimes, safety standards, industrial relations, environmental policies and labor come to be entirely regulated according to a market-driven logic (Ávila Romero 2019, p. 109). The multiplication of special economic zones in those same sites that the chronicler traverses – Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, and Tabasco, in particular – materialize the collapsing future that Martínez envisages, as it condenses the intensification of capital's control over, and destruction of, life that ultimately shapes the migrants' plight.

[9] The book was consulted on Google Preview and therefore page numbers are missing.

Martínez's incisive attention to the horrors the migrants encounter across these territories, which have been only aggravated in recent years, ultimately surfaces the least visible dimensions of this crime scene: the land grabs, military actions, and exploitation that surround it.

What Martínez's *crónicas* inevitably register is how the zoning and extractive dynamics that pervade the Mexican landscape begin to be meted out to the migrant bodies that traverse it. As Aihwa Ong argues, the carving out of new economic spaces gives corporations an indirect power over the political conditions of subjects in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits (2006, p. 78). The 'ejidos y montes donde la tolerancia de México a la barbarie se estiró' [*ejidos* and shrublands where Mexican tolerance to barbarism stretched out'] (Martínez 2016, p. 11) that the chronicler depicts, capture the making of exceptional locations where exploitation as well as disposability comes to be increasingly sanctioned. The perception of such commodifying logic is therefore expressed in Martínez's bleak vision of the current transmigrant expulsions as he perceives this as inexorably tied to an economy that sees migrants both as cheap labour as well as waste to be snuffed out. In Kanishka Chowdhury's view, for example, Martínez is relentless in his efforts to illustrate the complete disposability of migrants, as he embeds this tragedy in the 'macrolevel of global geopolitics' (2019, p. 192). As Chowdhury underscores, Martínez aptly points towards the imperialist role in the making of Central America's fractured reality, 'civil wars characterized by indescribable massacres perpetuated by elite battalions backed by U.S. money' (Martínez 2013, p. 272). Furthermore, in the aftermath of these conflicts, to follow Heather Gies, the broadly unifying solidarity agenda that was formed in demand for basic human rights and democracy was soon halted as coherence around positions supporting the region's political future proved more elusive (2020, p. 355). But while broad-based solidarity dimmed, 'economic interests and transnational corporations salivated over the newly pacified region and worked to impose a

development doctrine that ensured access to its resources' (p. 356). The wreckage produced by economic imperialism is thus addressed by Martínez, as he points to how the Isthmus population was soon thrust into a cycle of super-exploited labour:

> The miserable routine of waking up at five in the morning to travel two hours on a dangerous public transit system to get to a fast-food restaurant or a market or a warehouse in San Salvador, or in Tegucigalpa, or in Guatemala City, where they spend the whole day working away at undignified work (2013, p. 272).

For Chowdhury then, Martínez shows how the 'airlocks' of immigration' were adapted 'to suit the needs of the metropolitan capital' (2019, p. 192), as one of his texts describes photographs from the 1980s of migrants scaling the fence and being greeted by Border Patrol agents in Santa Claus outfits who hand gifts to children as they let them pass. Yet the horrors of the present signal how, as Martínez has diagnosed elsewhere, the subcontracted violence of criminal corporations can equally suit the particular needs and whims of U.S. corporate interests as 'uno de los grandes logros estadounidenses es que el sur se persiga a sí mismo' [one of the greatest U.S. successes is making the south hunt itself] (qtd. in Paredes 2020, n.p.). Thus, while Chowdhury – although acknowledging Martínez for not resorting to frequently evoked liberal solutions – reproaches the chronicler for insufficiently addressing how refugees' rights can be negotiated or how to instill a collective movement that seeks to transform this 'crisis' (2019, p. I96), his lack of engagement with a human rights frame should be read, in my view, more than a blind spot stems from a recognition that this cannot be realized from within the current patterns of power and capital established across the Isthmus. If these spaces have been encoded for economic freedom and entrepreneurial activities, and the people within these spaces are

managed in relation to their extraction value, a human rights discourse proves insufficient for Martínez, who indicts the utter inhospitableness of the capitalist world.

This is perhaps best illustrated in the *crónica* 'La Bestia' [The Beast] – the piece that gives name to the book's English translation – which centres directly on the migrants' experiences of riding the rails as they cross through Veracruz. These cargo trains, privatized in the aftermath of NAFTA and mostly owned by a subsidiary of one of the largest mining corporations in the country, are where the undocumented Central Americans ride, experiencing intense physical exertion and the brutal threat of bodily injury. In a significant moment, Martínez transmits his conversation with Jaime, a Honduran peasant who left his small Caribbean coastal village dreaming of healthy crops, shots of corn and beans that would one day surround his home, as a hurricane, 'una tormenta de esas que siempre caen en esta parte de Honduras' [one of those storms that relentlessly hit that part of Honduras] (p. 68) destroyed everything he had grown. And so, as he recounts, wanting to see the corn bloom around his house again, he rode atop of trains without stopping and sleeping until, unable to stay awake, he fell off the train and had his right leg cut off. As Martínez narrates, however, it is not just the lethal combination of sleep deprivation and the precarious infrastructure of the trains that poses a threat, but specifically the 'guardias privados de las compañías ferroviarias [que] impiden el paso a estaciones' [private security guards from the railway companies [that] won't let anybody board near the station] (p. 65) as goods are loaded, forcing migrants to jump onto the moving train where they will likely be maimed. His queries regarding these practices – why, if these companies know that the migrants are going to get on anyway, do they make them jump when the trains have already gained full speed? – as Martínez ragingly admits, have been ignored by the directors of the seven railway companies that operate La Bestia. A similar rage is expressed by the chronicler as he details how military raids are often conducted at night, making migrants run in stampede

'lanzándose sobre las vías donde las llantas de acero aún pueden rebanar [over the tracks where the steel wheels wait to slice through a body] (p. 73). Thus, as he talks to and watches the thirty farmers, bricklayers and labourers waiting to begin the treacherous journey, what Martínez conveys is not the disorder of corruption, illegality or excessive use of force but the rule of a global economy whose chief concern is that the movement of goods remains unaltered and a state whose main purpose is to guarantee that the conditions for capital accumulation are met.

The *crónica* thus obfuscates the facile associations between violence against migrants and the illicit practices of criminal groups, touching on the complexities of an order bolstered by a differential juridical-spatial regime that governs the Mexican provincial terrains. In consequence, even though Martínez stresses the efforts of Father Alejandro Solalinde – a Catholic priest turned human rights activist who has been at the forefront of demands that Mexican authorities better protect migrants – to ensure raids are no longer conducted at night, the chronicler acknowledges this only works as a palliative solution since, once outside the priest's territory of influence, nightly raids continue (p. 73). As these violent practices are exposed in the *crónicas*, the wider implications of these crimes are hence not alleviated but intensified. Therefore, as Dove argues in his analysis of noir forms in recent literature, in the demise of the revolutionary imaginary associated with the Latin American guerrilla movement, several narratives reflected grave doubts about 'literature's capacity to bring history in its totality into view' (2017, p. 34). Noir forms nevertheless emerged, as Dove posits, as a template to explore the more diffuse history of transformations under neoliberalism. Influenced still by a sociopolitical commitment, Martínez's *crónicas* make use of certain aspects of this template to attempt to make visible a deliberately opaque network of power that, in its pervasiveness, cannot be simply overturned using the institutionalized mechanisms provided by the system. If Martínez fails to provide satisfying accounts of communal action or future justice, he nonetheless offers an alternative

narrative to the depoliticized discourses that are premised on 'mottos such as "end corruption" (Emmelheinz 2019, p. 3) that continue to dominate Mexico's political imagination. This counterweight rests on Martínez's sustained focus on the seemingly exceptional spaces carved out in the fringes of the metropolitan centres and on the largely ignored subjectivities whose conditions contradict the notion that violence in the Americas today is an unintended outcome of drug trafficking and illegal activity. Pointing instead towards a much wider and much complex network of power that underlies warfare in Mexico and Central America, Martínez's *crónica*s offer an urgent account of global capitalism in all its horror and shows the genre's ability to put into question the fictive underpinnings that sustain it.

Fernanda Melchor's dark tropics

As the ground zero of social and material fragmentation and precariousness, the provincial Mexican landscape has been more recently depicted as an injured and injuring setting. Koral Carballo's photographic series *Mala Hora* [At the wrong time] – chosen as part of the *Exhumar. Endoscopias al paisaje* [Exhume: Endoscopies of Landscape] exhibition at the 18th Biennial of the Centro de la Imagen – for example, conveys the sense of menace that hovers weightily over Veracruz's urban landscape, which is figured as 'una escena de crimen e intromisión' [scene of crime and intrusion] (2018). Consisting of photographs taken between 22:45 pm to 4:00 am, the unofficial curfew most citizens abided by during the most intense years of militarization in the state, Carballo captures the vacant streets and spaces where night becomes perceived as 'una superficie peligrosa, un espacio clandestino donde ocurren los actos más violentos y terribles' (2018, p. 4) [a dangerous ground, a clandestine space where the most violent and terrifying acts take place]. The motivation for this project, as Carballo contends, is to explore these desolate public spaces in the hope of finding evidence of violence: '¿En dónde está el terror? ¿Dónde está

el control? ¿Qué es el miedo? ¿Qué es lo que sucede?' [Where do we locate the terror? Where is the control situated? What is fear? What is going on here?] (ibid.). The unremarkable sites now turned into sordid settings that Carballo documents – a junkyard filled with police cars, a desolate baseball field, an abandoned house with rent signs, a derelict housing block keeping lights on, a gated residential community and a SUV abandoned on the side of a highway – effectively register the traces of a violence that has taken root in a territory increasingly caught up in the ruinous dynamics of militarization. But located mostly in the port city of Poza Rica, an emblematic oil town that flourished during the "Mexican Miracle", the precarious and unsettling locations, which are inevitably linked to the social investments brought by petromodernity (e.g. company-provided housing and recreational amenities)[10]also index the harmful failings of oil-fueled development, showing the aftermath of a 'oil miracle that turned into an oil nightmare' (Meyer qtd. in Sheridan and McGuire 219, p. 18).

As Carroll observes in her study of the NAFTA-era, the implementation of NAFTA is inexorably 'foreshadowed by Mexico's petrolization' (2017, p. 10) as the first neoliberal economic reforms came to be as a consequence of the 1982 debt default. During Mexico's oil fever – "la petrolización" (1978-1981) – the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional's eagerness to find and exploit the region's oil wealth as rapidly as possible in an effort to reestablish legitimacy, had led to increased foreign investment and dramatic spending in the industry sector paid for, largely, through US bank loans. Once interest rates soared and oil prices

[10] In the Gulf of Mexico and southeast region where Pemex operates, public benefit spending during the oil boom concentrated mainly on infrastructure, road building and other facilities such as housing and sports arenas. In Carballo's photographs, the (now gated) suburban housing and abandoned baseball facilities effectively showcase what Mónica Salas Landa has called the 'crude residues' of Pemex's 'social achievements' (2016) See: Crude residues: The workings of failing oil infrastructure in Poza Rica, Veracruz, Mexico.

plummeted, Mexico's economy teetered on the brink of collapse, and by 1982, the country 'achieved a dubious milestone', becoming the first Latin American nation to declare a moratorium on payments (ibid.). As the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were wheeled in to provide Mexico with emergency loans, President Miguel de la Madrid executed the organizations' demands and 'privatized many of the smaller state-run industries, cut investment in infrastructure, reduced tariffs, refrained from taxing the elite, encouraged foreign investment [and] slashed government subsidies to the agrarian sector' (Wallace and Boullosa 2016, p. 45). The first round of shock treatment was particularly felt across the Mexican Gulf states, which were left hard-pressed by a deepening agricultural crisis and the decaying remnants of the oil bonanza.

Fernanda Melchor's collected *crónicas* in *Aquí no es Miami*, while written mostly between 2002 and 2011, start off from this point in time to prefigure the contours of the unfolding catastrophe. As Melchor herself has commented in interviews, as a person born in the year of the worst economic downturn, and thus, in a way, biographically inscribed by the oil crisis, her writing has been imprinted with 'una sensación de "devaluación perpetua", una sensación de haber nacido al principio del fin […] puras catástrofes en escalada' [a sense of "perpetual decline", a sense of having been born at the beginning of the end […] one catastrophe on top of the other] (qtd. in Ortuño 2020, p. 129). Drawing from this sense of rupture, her nonfictional collection establishes the now trademark themes that unite both her journalistic and fictional work: the socio-economic processes that underlie the violent landscape of the crisis-ridden state. Registering this long-lasting downturn, her *crónicas* –similarly to Carballo's photographs – zoom in on Veracruz as a scene of crime and imminent peril. However, whereas in Martínez's chronicles the violence that permeates these terrains is surveyed through a journalistic fact-finding endeavour and through the lens of an outsider looking in, Melchor's nonfictional pieces

chart these processes from the supernatural beliefs, hearsay and local mythologies of her own native region. Tapping into the home-grown feelings that circulate as a result of economic depredation, the geographical scope of Melchor's inquiry, while seemingly more contained than Martínez's, is mobilized to register the increasing alienation produced upon local ecologies as they are opened up to predatory forms of accumulation and transformed into fertile grounds for what David Harvey indicts as a 'feral', 'slash-and-burn' capitalism (2012, p. 56). In this sense, the deepening of a 'political economy of mass dispossessions, of predatory practices to the point of day-light robbery, particularly of the poor and the vulnerable' (ibid.) that Harvey diagnoses, is accounted for by Melchor's depiction of a space gradually estranged from its inhabitants, as they begin to experience the systemic menace of a capitalist ferality unleashed in the country's neglected edgelands. Most powerfully, perhaps, this process is condensed in Melchor's personal recollection of her own feelings of alienation as she harks back to her childhood years in Veracruz – overlapping with the early stages of the official neoliberal turn – in the book's opening *crónica.*

Depicting a society at the dawn of profound socio-political turmoil, 'El ovni, la playa y los muertos' [The UFO, the beach and the dead], situates the reader at a threshold that is both temporal (the violent present and the bygone days of childhood and peaceful enjoyment) and spatial (an estuary between the one-time fishing village of Boca del Río – Melchor's native town – and the neighbouring port of Veracruz). Although tinged with an air of melancholy, the topography of this territory as remembered by Melchor is far from an unspoiled paradise, as the description of the beach that surrounds her hometown frames a marginal landscape 'replet[o] de matorrales llenos de espinas en las que quedaban atrapadas las ramas podridas y botellas de plástico que el rio arrastraba' [full of thorns that trapped the rotten branches and plastic bottles

the river dragged down'] (2018, p. 15).[11] Yet, still resisting the accelerated neoliberal urbanization that will completely restructure the town and turn this beach into 'un hervidero de turistas' [a hotbed for tourists] (p. 24), the sentimental details conveyed (such as the hand-painted misspelt signs warning of the treacherous waters underneath the lurid drawing of a skull) stage Melchor's nostalgia for a provincial world that slowly begins to recede from her view.

Against this backdrop, Melchor narrates her startling encounter with mysterious aerial phenomena that her nine-year old self is convinced can only be a sign of extraterrestrial life. Melchor explains her deep belief in these alien objects as profoundly shaped by the penetration of American popular culture and the series of sensationalist tabloids and news programs that began to appear in the country, one of which dedicated a record time of eleven hours and ten minutes to discuss the supposed presence of aliens on Earth (2018, p. 17). The sense of doom that scholars see in the unprecedented prominence of such sensationalist coverage and narratives of disaster during the Mexican economic crisis (Cabañas Tovar 2009; Anderson 2016), which as Melchor mentions kept the country's eyes fixed on the sky –'southern peasants dying of typhoid and dengue fever? no one cared about that' (2013 p. 16) – is experienced as relief by her nine-year-old self as she sees in the alien presence a way out of a crisis that has assumed apocalyptic proportions – 'wars that drench poor pelicans with oil' (p. 19). This improbable prospect of rescue, which reflects not only the experience of an increasingly militarized global context but also a 'social change [that] has only become imaginable via the apocalyptic threat' (Anderson 2016, p. 103), is then inevitably shattered when she overhears a conversation between adults and learns that the lights she saw that summer do not belong to UFOs, but to cocaine-laden Colombian aircrafts landing into a clandestine airstrip overseen by the Mexican military.

[11] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

This revelatory moment encapsulates the overall narrative structure of Melchor's *crónicas*: supernatural encounters and oral folk tales are used as the narrative kernel from which to survey an elusive violence that starts to grate against the provincial world. As violence mystifies its own origins, Melchor's investigation proceeds from a refusal to dialogue with 'la Historia con mayúsculas' [History with a capital H] (Melchor 2018, p. 9), drawing instead from a communal memory that accounts for this brutal reality vis-à-vis the mythologies of organized violence that the media begins to construct. Therefore, while the opening *crónica* jumps off from the UFO sighting to the macro-history of drug-trafficking in the region, the journalistic exposition is equally used to signal the unstable grounds of these narratives.

Melchor goes on to recount one of the most notorious episodes of crime history of the state: the 1991 killing of several federal police agents in the rural village of Tlalixcoyan during a drug bust gone awry, which threw into relief the corruption of the military that opened fire to protect the cocaine shipment. The killing captured both national and international headlines which, coupled with the gruesome photographs of the bullet-ridden police officers, only served to ramp up the anti-narcotics discourse and 'reinforce the trend towards militarisation' (Maciel-Padilla 2012, p. 193). Yet, as Melchor reports using hearsay and unofficial chronology, sightings of irregular aircraft activity in the military base date back to the 1980s, as the inhabitants of the rural villages that surround the airstrip were well aware of the links between the aircrafts and the army and federal police (most of whom were at the service of regional landowning elites) that were stationed there. Hence, the armed officers that 'supuestamente' [supposedly], as Melchor mistrustfully signals, had arrived at this clandestine site to detain the Colombian traffickers, were already involved in land disputes and illegal contraband with the full knowledge of state

authorities–as was amply documented by local journalists.[12] However, the 1991 drug-related scandal along with others that quickly followed were suitably used to maintain the 'seriousness of the narcotics crime', leading President Ernesto Zedillo to declare, at Washington's behest, the need for 'measures never seen in the country to stop it' (qtd. in Andreas 2000, p. 68). What the locals witnessed, however, were the pro-business measures that led to the region's dramatic transformation through state-planned tourism development, which even had the locally assigned 'Playa del Muerto' [Dead Men's Beach] changed in favour of an 'apelativo más turístico y mucho menos tétrico' [more touristic and much less morbid name] (Melchor 2018, p. 23), laying waste to the habitual ways of doing and living that existed before. As Melchor nostalgically concludes '[t]odo era pura mentira' [it was all pure lies] and from that point on, she adds, 'ni siquiera Dios se salvaría de mi incredulidad' [not even God would escape my scepticism] (p. 24).

The dissolution of space that Melchor traces is therefore linked, more than to the hyperviolence of drug lords and bloody turf wars, to the historical curse of Latin America as a site shaped, as Eduardo Galeano has long diagnosed, 'siempre en beneficio del desarrollo de la metropoli extranjera de turno' [always for the benefit of the foreign metropolis of the moment] (1971, p. 16). The pressures that global capitalism began to exert within this territory, transforming 'familiar vistas into newly uncanny scenes' (Shaw 2016, p. 62), is therefore articulated by Melchor's *crónicas* through a literary idiom that has long concerned itself with an uncanny sense of geographic and temporal dislocation. Indeed, what Melchor encounters at the beach evinces, as Latin American *novela negra* had already detected, is a context in which the 'promise of modernity has been found empty' (Dove 2012, p. 22), resulting in disorientation and

[12] An investigative report of the relationship between drug feuds and disputes over land, contraband, and *caciquismo* in relation to this episode was published in 1993 under the title *Todos están dentro* [Everyone is in] by then deputy editor of the local *Notiver* newspaper, Miguel Angel López Velasco ('Milo Vela'). In 2011, he along with his wife and son were gunned down outside their home and his head was thrown into the streets bearing the message 'This is a present for journalists. More heads are going to roll'. While Melchor makes no explicit reference to the 1993 journalistic report, the killing of Milo Vela is referenced in a subsequent *crónica*.

a sense of crisis. Melchor therefore situates her inquiries on the margins of the modern provincial city, drawing from the atmosphere of crime, decay and instability of literary and journalistic crime genres, to depict the catastrophe unleashed by capitalist modernity. Since the suture of Mexican and US economies left almost all the riches ripped from the remnants of *la petrolización* and the provincial landscape undone in the fever of privatization, the inscription of newly spatial relations premised on plunder are aesthetically registered in her *crónicas* as a criminal plot that has become the rule rather than the exception. If, to follow Harvey, the neoliberalized world is a domain where 'feral politicians cheat on their expenses, feral bankers plunder the public purse for all its worth, CEOs, hedge fund operators and private equity geniuses loot the world of wealth' (2012, p. 157), Melchor's investigations centre on the vast scam of feral capitalism that has led to the region's violent collapse.

Yet, much like the titans of the mid-twentieth-century provincial novel (Juan Rulfo being the most prominent), which accounted for the de-ruralization and urban immiseration that was to define the Mexican Miracle years, Melchor indexes the pauperization that followed the demise of oil-fuelled dreams by zooming in on a provincial landscape similarly populated, as Kerstin Oloff observes in her study of Rulfo, 'by entrapped echoes of dispossessed and murdered farmers and the ghostly screams of raped, abused, and commodified women' (2016, p. 84). As with the other works that make her *trópico negro*'s triptych of books, figures of ghost and spirits are invoked in her *crónicas* to excavate the toxic roots that account for the increased brutality of life in the Mexican tropical provinces. Making use of the informal, collective register of unconfirmed gossip as well as the *nota roja* true-crime genre that has long accounted for these horrors, Melchor maps out the origins and ends of the current wave of violence. For example, in 'Reina, esclava o mujer' [Queen, slave or woman], which follows the gothic hauntings of the abandoned barracks of Veracruz's historic downtown, Melchor focuses on a past crime

committed on these now decaying premises: the alleged murder and dismemberment of two young children at the hands of their young mother, Evangelina Tejera, a woman who, just a few years before, had been crowned Queen of the Veracruz Carnival. The crime, which took place in 1989, was reported on in local papers and was much talked about, becoming fodder for urban legends and ghost tales. Functioning more like a ghost story than a murder mystery, if one agrees with Avery Gordon that 'stories concerning exclusion and invisibilities' (2008, p. 17) are ghost stories, the *crónica* thus harnesses spectral figures as esoteric evidence of the region's exploitative transformations.

In its early pages, Melchor situates the *crónica* in an spectral 'post-urban' environment – what Marta Sierra defines as a 'geography of darkness that engulfs the dreams of the modern city' (2017, p. 63) – since she describes the physical space of the city's centre that neighbours the region's main logistical hub as: 'una ruina llena de escombros, hogar de dipsómanos y felinos sarnosos, espectros que penan entre la basura y entre la maleza que espantan de vez en cuando las buenas conciencias del puerto' [a ruin filled with rubble, home to junkies and mangy cats, sorry-looking ghosts pawing through rubbish and weeds, disturbing the good consciences of the Port] (2018, p. 43). In the very architecture and landscape of this place, which is offered as a phantasmagoric scenery dotted with 'casonas abandonadas que se desmigajan sin prisa en las calles' [abandoned buildings that are slowly crumbling into the streets] (p. 44), Melchor reads the dents of inequality and dispossession that have come in the aftermath of deregulation and privatization processes, which only accelerated the expulsions and estrangement of people from their places of dwelling. The *crónica* thus moves to the run-down 'laberinto de apartamentos' [labyrinth of flats] in which a handful of elderly dwellers meagerly exist 'a la luz de las velas […] sin agua potable ni electricidad' [in candlelight, without drinking water or electricity], capturing the feeling of unsettledness that they experience as they are caught up in the unjust geographies

of urban regeneration. As one resident narrates, following a fire in the late seventies, in a push to beautify the buildings but still constricted by 'las antiguas leyes del inquilinato […] los dueños nos cortaron la luz y el agua y nos fueron corriendo a todos' [the old laws of tenancy […] the owners cut off the water and electricity and tried to drive us out] (p. 44). While he managed to resist for several years, however, it was ultimately not the precarious conditions foisted by the owners that drove him out. As he recounts, his eventual departure was due to an overwhelming sense of estrangement from this place, to 'una mala vibra' [a bad vibe] in the atmosphere, as screams and moans – presumably coming from the children allegedly mutilated by Evangelina Tejera – began to haunt residents at night. Attempting to trace the source of such fears, since as Anthony Vidler reminds us, the anxieties produced by the 'labyrinthine spaces of the modern city' are ultimately what gave birth to the novel of detection (1992, p. x), the *crónica* proceeds by offering an in-depth account of the social and economic relations that swirl around this site of ruin and malevolent hauntings.

As both former icon of Mexican tropicalism and petromodern development, Veracruz's devastating turn of character from blossoming tropical environment to 'tropicalist dystopia' (Bencomo 2016, p. 34) is epitomized in the *crónica* through the Carnival Queen's tale of rise and fall. If as Bencomo argues, in less than a century we have witnessed the birth and demise of the country's idyllic tropical heavens, as corruption, ecological devastation and urban violence now haunt the once postcard images of paradise (p. 25), the brutal fate of one of its key tropicalist 'commodities' is seen by Melchor as a mirror of such brutal descent. Not arbitrarily then, Melchor's chronology of the woman's life accounts for a period that goes from the 1982 economic crisis to the rise of 'el grupo delictivo de Los Zetas, recién separados del Cártel del Golfo' [the criminal group Los Zetas, recently separated from the Gulf Cartel], as the woman's life unravels and finds itself inescapably shaped by these ruinous transformations. For instance,

as Melchor pieces together, coming from the ranks of the Mexican middle-class, one born out of the highly volatile oil-financed economic boom, the 'crisis económica que se recrudesce al iniciar la decada de los ochenta' [economic crisis that exacerbates at the start of the eighties] (p. 50) set in train a fierce class realignment that pushed her family into financial ruin. Yet, in line with the neoliberal discourse of self-improvement that flourished in the period, the title of Carnival Queen 'una distinción que incluso a la fecha suele considerarse "la máxima aspiración" de cualquier muchacha de "buena familia" del puerto' [a distinction that even now is usually considered as the "maximum aspiration" of any girl from a "good family" in the port city] (p. 45) offers the girl a way out of the material impoverishment of her circumstances. The carnival celebration and its Queen, it should be noted, dating back to the post-revolutionary period, has long benefited the projection of Veracruz as an attractive tourist destination, advertising a manufactured image of 'charm and tropical hedonism' (Rinaudo 2014, p. 6) to reel in hotel and real estate investors and publicize its development to a global market. In the context of the economic downturn, '*la alegre disposión*' [the gracious disposition] of Evangelina '*para representar la alegría del pueblo jarocho*' [to represent the joyfulness of the *jarochos*] – as mentioned in the society pages from which the *crónica* draws from – signals rather her well-preparedness to meet the market demands, offering a distraction to 'la caída de los precios del petróleo, la pulverización de los salarios' [the falling crude oil prices, the decline in wages] and the reality of violence taking place in the streets (Melchor 2018, p. 51). Moreover, treated to the lascivious looks of the offspring of hotel and real state capitalists who prior to her coronation disregarded her (ibid.), the young Evangelina becomes their object of sexual pleasure, and is invited into their world of raucous drug-fuelled parties and debauched antics, which were often overlooked 'pues la policía estaba ahí para protegerlos' [as the police were there to protect them] (p. 50).

Yet, the sexual commodification of the girl by these 'hijos de papi' [posh boys] (ibid.), representative of the flourishing of finance capital and its hold over the city, kicks in instead a rumour-mill that shows the town's troubled response to this socially fraught reality. Rumoured to participate in orgies, blow coke and have affairs with drug-dealers, the ex-queen becomes the proper scapegoat at which Veracruz's residents can aim their ire. Falling out of favour with a 'sociedad que se pretende un enclave de sensualismo tropical pero que en el fondo es profundamente clasista y misógina' [society that sees itself as an enclave of tropical sensualism but that in reality is profoundly classist and misogynistic] (p. 60), Evangelina ends up discarded, living in the decaying buildings of the city centre, where she will be eventually be charged with the murder of her children in 1989. Although Evangelina's abject poverty, mental illness and documented history of abuse is surfaced as the reason for her children's death (claimed as a result of starvation), the news media didn't waste any time discursively pathologizing and vilifying the woman's alleged excesses (speculations around her homicidal motives include revenge for being abandoned by her lover, a drug-induced state and/or child abuse). For Melchor then, there seems to be no better way to capture the zeitgeist of the "lost decade" than in the disturbing contiguity between 'la asención de la joven al estatuto de reina, emblema viviente de la alegría, la lozanía y la fecundidad de un pueblo y su posterior envilecimiento como filicida, villana mítica, bruja de cuento de hadas' [the rise of the young woman to the stature of queen, living emblem of the joy, vitality and fecundity of a people and its later vilification as filicidal, mythical villain, fairy tale witch] (ibid.). In her body and in her story arc, Evangelina crystallizes not only the downward mobility experienced by many people (especially women) as part of the dramatic boom-and-bust cycle, but also a narrative in which the 'economic risk and damage capitalist themselves have created' are meted out onto individuals cast as 'guilty of poor management'

(Lazzarato 2013, p. 52). Thus, with her body 'convertido en un guiñarapo de ojos vacuos' [turned into a vacant-eyed wreck] and no longer serving as the city's symbol of fecundity but rather of its dark reverse, Evangelina is ultimately dehumanized and bestowed with fear-instilling qualities and built into a repository of the city's social ills. As the *crónica* nears its conclusion, Melchor, not surprisingly, summons the perennial myth of 'la Llorona' – the treacherous and selfish woman condemned to wander eternally for her sins – as a parallel to Evangelina's tragic fate: 'igual que sus hijos, la antigua reina de carnaval condenada por homicidio […] ha sido obligada a convertirse en un fantasma' [just like her children, the ex-carnival queen convicted for homicide […] has been forced to become a ghost] (Melchor 2018, p. 60).

It wouldn't be unwarranted then to see in the use of this spectral lexicon a certain alignment with the contemporary corpus *crónistico* in Mexico and Central America, where, 'el fantasma pasa a ser expresión mermada de una humanidad frágil, abandonada por Estados que se doblegan ante la soberanía de un sistema económico feroz' [the ghost appears as a frail expression of a population weakened and discarded by a state that has bent over to the rule of a voracious economic system] (Poblete Alday 2018, p. 222). As argued by Poblete Alday, while previously confined to the fantastic realm, in the intensification of phenomena such as extreme poverty, forced migration and drug trafficking, spectres have "wandered off" beyond the genre's limits 'para instalarse en lo real/referencial' [to find settlement in the real/referential] (ibid.) and signal the fractured reality produced by the economics of past decades. In this manner, while retaining the tone and texture of a true crime procedural, Melchor engages this spectral figure – which in many ways recalls the monstrous-feminine of gothic fiction – to capture, like the trope it echoes, the occult sources of horror that hide behind it. Far from limiting its social enquiry, this monstrous-feminine character, which in the Latin American gothic mode is deeply

embedded in the disavowed failures of national projects that have led to social violence and inequality (Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordíz 2020, p. 32), allows the *crónica* to transcend the localized critique and speak rather of the haunting legacies of disinvestment (precariousness, feminization of poverty, unemployment, a failing health care system) that global capitalism produces. Drawing from the gothic undercurrent of the region's literary tradition, where the monstruous has been summoned to express 'the deadly consequences of raw capitalist enterprise for the disadvantaged' (p. 34), the *crónica* sanctions 'un grado de implicación que resulta imposible dentro de la economía informativa de la *nota roja*' [a degree of engagement that would be made impossible within the informational economy of the *nota roja*] (Poblete Alday 2019, 138). Thus, eschewing the revelatory dénouement that characterizes this crime genre, which as Melchor herself concludes, usually presents 'los asuntos de su "literatura" como sucesos excepcionales, únicos e irrepetibles' [the matters of its "literature" as exceptional, unique and one-off phenomena] (p. 60), the chronicler plots these matters as the product of a more complex assemblage (the economic crisis, the gendered-based violence and the failures of the welfare system] (ibid.)) and draws attention to the social deformations experienced in the region during Mexico's 'Naftafication'.

Chronicle of a dispossession foretold

While in 'Reina, esclava y mujer', the invocation of the woman's phantasm translates for the readers the massive social costs of Mexico's neoliberal transition, in the *crónica* 'El Cinturón del Vicio' [The Corridor of Vice] the processes of exploitation and dispossession that mark the period are charted by following the travails of a depeasantized dock worker known as 'El Ojón' in the port's downtown historic district. Building a longer arc than the one presented in Evangelina's *crónica,* however, the dock worker is characterized by Melchor as the product of the

region's long durée of capitalist dispossession, since the *crónica* accounts for the 'nested, rather than linear and sequential, quality of the roughly post-1970s period' (Deckard and Shapiro 2016, p. 5):

> El Ojón nació a las orillas del Barrio El Huaco, uno de los asentamientos populares más antiguos del puerto de Veracruz. Habitado durante el periodo colonial por libertos de origen africano que levantaron sus viviendas en los márgenes del río Tenoya con los maderos provenientes de los naufragios, El Barrio (a secas) fue durante muchos siglos único hogar possible para las miles de personas que arribaban al puerto huyendo del hambre y miseria de las zonas rurales, para invariablemente pasar a engrosar la nómina del muelle, el comercio y el contrabando. [El Ojón was born in the banks of the Barrio El Huaco, one of the oldest popular settlements in Veracruz's port. Inhabited during the colonial period by freed slaves of African origin that erected their houses in the banks of the river Tenoya with the wood obtained from shipwrecks, the Barrio (full stop) was during many centuries the only settlement imaginable for the thousands of people that reached the port running away from the hunger and misery of rural areas to inevitably join the swelling ranks of the docks, commerce and contraband.] (p. 24)

Framing a "longer spiral" of plunder, which overlaps the temporalities of colonial exploitation with the expropriation of the country's peasantry as labour surplus in the wake of Mexico's agrarian industrialization (a period that coincides with El Ojón's birth), Melchor presents the port and the downtown barrios that surround its harbour as a labyrinthine object that begs the chronicler's exegesis. Furthermore, as the social engineering of urban regeneration programs seek now to transform this borough into a place 'lleno de terrazas y cafés "europeos"' [full of

promenades and "European" cafes] (p. 31), Melchor makes use of El Ojón's anecdotal evidence to weave a history of the multiple cycles of exploitation imprinted in these settlements.

To scan these traces, Melchor's inquiry focuses on the fractured cartography of downtown Veracruz of the 1970s, restricting its view to the now decaying string of cantinas (known locally as the 'cinturón del vicio' [corridor of vice]) that line its backstreets and which were once the main social stage for the port's working classes. This space, as Melchor charts via El Ojón's memories, contrary to 'los refinados clubes, que calles arriba sólo admitían (y admiten aún) a caballeretes que se las dan de penisulales' [the refined clubs, only a few blocks away, which only admitted (and still only admit) young gentlemen who claim peninsular ancestry], these cantinas were home to the seafarers, dock workers and fishers 'que buscaban un respiro de media mañana para sus respectivas ocupaciones' [who were looking for a mid-day respite from their respective occupations] (p. 26-27). Hence, even if El Ojón's recollections of the time already mark a space characterized by profound unevenness (and colonial legacies), preceding the whirlwind of deregulation and privatization that will utterly weaken the port's workforce, a certain nostalgia for the past is inevitably infused in them. Tellingly, Melchor narrates El Ojón's pride over his muscled body – 'hasta tensa los músculos de los brazos y luego los flexiona a los costados para mostrarme la fibra que aún le queda' [he even tenses his arm muscles and then he flexes them to show me the still remaining fiber in them] – that, even though resulting from the years of grueling labour as a cargo loader, is contrasted with his 60 kilo 'ñengo' [rachitic] body with which he arrived to work at the docks (p. 27). As part of this urbanized proletariat, furthermore, he gained access to consumer goods such as branded jeans and 'varias camisas españolas que a él le gustaba dejarse desabotonadas para que las mujeres del Cinturón del Vicio vieran los musculos de su pecho [many Spanish-made shirts that he liked to leave unbuttoned so that the women from the Corridor of Vice could see his chest muscles] (p. 28).

The conjuncture of the late 1970s is crucial for understanding El Ojón's standpoint. This was a moment when the PRI, flush with petrodollars, 'expanded spending and made rhetorical gestures towards the radical reforms carried out under Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s' (Wood 2021, n.p.). Petrodollars were a 'godsend to Mexican corporatism', ensuring the resources necessary to lubricate the patronage machine within party-affiliated unions, as it afforded its leaders with the ability to dispense rewards such as loans, scholarships and promotions to its rank-and-file members (Grayson 2004, p. 246). As Melchor describes then, in these cantinas, impoverished workers would often come seeking employment from union leaders who would grant them temporary jobs in exchange for political support: 'hombres gordos, cargados de cadenas de oro, que se pasaban el día entero bebiendo coñac mientras sus cuijes, muchachos fuertes y ganosos como El Ojón se rompían el lomo en los rústicos muelles del puerto' [fat men, covered in gold chains, who would drink cognac all day while their recruits, strong and tenacious men like El Ojón, would break their backs on the rustic port docks] (p. 27). Not surprisingly however, this arrangement was cut short as the crisis began to unravel, rendering cargo theft and contraband the most viable option for much of the port's workforce. Consequently, these same cantinas began to operate more as a critical hub for extralegal commercial chains (mostly petty theft of imported goods), the nerve center for cargo loaders whose lack of technical resources was compensated by their 'ingenio, el hambre y las ganas de chingar' [wit, hunger and desire to fuck them [the cargo companies] over] (p. 30).

As the moniker of this location (and title of the *crónica*) would suggest, this popular marginal space comes to be interpreted, from the perspective of the dominant social norm, as an indicator of the city's moral laxity and decay. Melchor's intricate descriptions of this place, from the air that seethes with 'la fragrancia de los negocios cladestinos' [fragrance of clandestine business] to the reference to this place as engulfed by penumbral shadows (p. 27) would similarly

mark this site as a *locus criminis*, an urban scenery that communicates 'a dystopian view of the modern city, in which chaos, alienation and discord prevail' (Braham 2004, p. xiii). The evocation of the Gulf metropolis burdened with criminality thus can be said to share a marked resemblance to the atmospheres of hard-boiled fiction – particularly in its port setting and its expression of an iconic urban darkness. And yet, Melchor's portrayal of this socio-political milieu, which draws from collective knowledge rather than from the language of officialdom, shows this murkiness not as a feature of the economically marginalized but as constitutive of the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy 'güeritos…gente dizque de bien que por acá salen en las páginas de sociales […], y por acá son unos malandros' [blonde-haired guys […]…supposedly virtuous people that appear in the social pages of newspapers and that here are nothing but crooks] (p. 30). As El Ojón charges, it was these green-eyed people with their 'hijos güeros' [fair-haired children] (a clear reference to the prevailing colonial hierarchies in Veracruz) that would profit most from the port's extralegal activities. Much like the feral capitalists Harvey indicts, who 'pontificat[e] unctuously about the loss of moral compass, the decline of civility and the sad deterioration of values and discipline' (2012, p. 157), Veracruzean elites will use this rhetoric to legitimate the dissolution of the dock workers' Union, which will further entrench their power and access to the port's assets. Thus, in 1991, during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari – who would promote a "new Mexico" of "democratic transition" – a *requisa* [requisition] of the port of Veracruz (which is only constitutionally sanctioned in case of international war, grave alternation of public order and threat to peace) was ordered citing 'corruption, theft, inefficiency and exploitation' (Hiskey 2003, p. 112). With the concession rights for the labour unions revoked, as El Ojón recalls:

> El Cinturón del Vicio se vino pa' abajo […] Chingo de gente perdió su chamba, su hueso en el sindicato, y de chupar Napoleón etiqueta azul todos los días se volvieron franeleros y acabaron viviendo en la calle o pidiendo limosna afuera de los bancos y el mundo entero se les vino abajo con la movida del pelón culero este. [The Corridor of Vice came tumbling down […] A fucking bunch of people lost their jobs, their fixed posts at the union and, from drinking blue label scotch, they ended up as car guards, living in the streets or panhandling outside of banks and their whole world came crumbling down with the stunt of that bald-headed fucker.] (p. 31)

El Ojón's description of the port's disastrous *despojo* – or at least disastrous for its working-classes – more than an overstatement, perfectly captures the dystopic proportions reached during the Salinas *sexenio*. From 1988 to 1994, 150 state-owned firms were sold off and the final remnants of developmentalism were syphoned off by an emerging class of conglomerate-owning elites, bringing along socio-economic disparities 'comparable only to the post-independent period' (Carroll 2016, p. 12). As for Veracruz's old traditional elites, according to Arroyo Fonseca and Rebolledo Flores, Mexico's official neoliberal turn and its upward redistribution of wealth secured them not only with multimillion dollar-contracts via an illicit system of cash payments but particularly with the licit benefits derived from large-scale infrastructure and mega-projects that would be brutally implemented in the region (p. 4435). These projects, of course, were promoted through discourses that emphasized 'technological and infrastructural development and economic growth as a way to help societies with […] poverty alleviation and pro-poor development' (Córdoba Azcárate 2020, p. 286). Fittingly, almost ventriloquizing the language of neoliberal governance, towards the end of the *crónica* Melchor voices the efforts of the government to transform Veracruz's port and reactivate its economy, mainly through a new

promenade that will scale up this area for tourist consumption, bringing jobs, safety and comfort for its inhabitants. Yet, as Melchor introduces El Ojón's final intervention, this space-clearing gesture is likened more to a neo-colonial land grab, leading the reader back to the uneven space with which this piece opens, and thus presented as part of the cyclical path of capitalist accumulation:

> Esos pinches españoles lo único que quieren es chingar al pueblo y que al centro se lo lleve la chingada. Quieren que el puerto se parezca a Miami o no sé qué pedo pero yo te digo que uno de estos días el pueblo se va a cansar. En aquel entonces también viviamos bien jodidos, pa' que te miento, pero al menos viviamos contentos y teniamos donde chingarlos nuestras chelas a toda madre y cotorrear sin que nadie nos hiciera menos por ser obreros. [The only thing those fucking Spaniards want is to fuck people over and that the old downtown turns to shit. They want the port to look like Miami or something like that, but I'm telling you, one day the people will grow tired of this. In those days yes, we lived like shit, I'm not going to lie, but at least we lived joyfully and we had a place to chug our beers and gabble away with no one making us feel less for being labourers.] (p. 31)

The prescient vision of Veracruz' near-future that El Ojón articulates, narrowing in on the 'spatial-fix'[13] to come, registers the ruinous conditions of the present as part of a long continuum

[13] The spatial fix refers to a process whereby the crisis tendencies of capitalism are managed, at least for some time, through spatial reorganization and geographical expansion (Harvey 1982), that is, incorporating more territory of the globe into the ambit of capital; transforming relations of production and ways of life on a broad scale; and erecting 'expanded and improved built environments' in order to 'sustain and enhance the system's ability to create wealth' (Schoenberger 2004, p. 429).

of predation that, although heralded by a new breed of conquistadors, will allow the dispossession of poor and working people from land and access to resources. Presenting then a flattened horizon in which historical pillage (represented by the Spaniards) and economic deregulations coexist to bestow transnational capitalism with new commodity frontiers (the untapped goldmine of tourism), the *crónica*'s final passage prefigures present and future dereliction as shaped by these old/new extractive logics. Only a few years later, at the time of the book's publication, El Ojón's portentous indictment would be seen in full force, as Veracruz's boardwalks were turned into a mass pit and the state's hydrocarbon sector finally opened to foreign investment —an "oil revolution" prominently dubbed "Saving Mexico".[14] Yet, signalling already the violence that would shortly consume it all and open the territory to a new kind of ruthless entrepreneurs – capsulized by the title of the collection's last piece 'Veracruz se escribe con Z' [Veracruz is written with Z] – Melchor's *crónica* draws attention to these criminal enterprises (in the original site of conquistador colonialism) as always-already inscribed in and necessary for capitalism's predatory trajectory.

It becomes clear then, to return to where I began, not only why this geographical location has been recalibrated as the epicenter of the nation's ills but particularly, why this terrain has been a privileged location to plot the deepening fault lines of global capitalism. As Charlotte Whittle argues in a recent review of Hector Aguilar Camín's 1985 *Morir en el Golfo* [To die in the Gulf] – a novel focused on the criminal failures of the oil-driven post-revolutionary state – the title of this noir thriller suggests that murder is already emblazoned into the Gulf landscape and

[14] In 2011, two trucks piled up with 35 dead bodies were dumped on a main road of the city's busy resort area, marking the beginning of an unprecedented wave of murders and disappearances in the state. Two years later, President Enrique Peña Nieto signed a controversial law that allowed to fully open Mexico's hydrocarbons industry to the participation of private transnational businesses. President Peña Nieto was soon featured in the cover of Time Magazine with the accompanying front-page headline "Saving Mexico", which praised his "revolutionary" reforms as changing "the narrative in his narco-stained nation".

bound for repetition (2016).[15] The scars left by Mexico's petrolization on these coastal landscapes and the enormity of the current crisis, she therefore contends, 'sho[w] noir to still be a fruitful mode for exploring an intricate maze of links between crime and power' (2016). The formal concerns that arose during a particular moment of Latin American literary history, mainly how to represent the chaos that violence was wreaking across the hemisphere beyond, to follow writer Horacio Castellanos Moya, 'the tyranny of breaking news that trivializes criminal violence' (qtd. in Luna Sellés 2020), are thus woven into Melchor and Martínez's crime *crónicas* to offer a sceptical view of the current crisis. There is in both *Aquí no es Miami* and *Los Migrantes que no importan* a conscious effort to expose the economic impulses as absent cause of the radical and catastrophic restructuring of these territories, which, at the time of writing, brutally unfolded under the deceptive 'war on drugs' misnomer. Zooming in on peri-urban environments where the processes of 'militarized accumulation or accumulation by repression' (Robinson 2018, p. 845) come to be more forcefully enacted, allows the reader to capture the layers of mystery shrouding the extensive exploitation of and within these spaces. Thus, against media's mise-en-scène of an inhuman and dehumanizing violence, the noir landscapes of Martínez and Melchor's *crónicas* productively register the criminal instincts of capitalism conveniently cloaked in the spectre of the Cartel that is often invoked as single culprit. While in this chapter I have focused on how provincial crime-*crónicas* foreground the undetected nexus of crime, capitalist exploitation, and ecological degradation in the ravaged landscapes of the Mexican Gulf Coast, the next chapter explores the ways in which recent documentaries experiment with the distinct

[15] Whittle refers here to the novel's English translation published in 2015 as *Death in Veracruz*. As Whittle highlights in her review, while in English the title seems to point to a single episode, *Morir en el Golfo* allows room for repetition: "to die in the Gulf," or "dying in the Gulf," just one way to die among many.

medium affordances of cinema to give shape to the imperceptible violence that accompanies the neoliberal projects of resource withdrawal and control.

Chapter two:

Documenting in wake of extraction: the aesthetics of slow and sudden violence in Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* and Tatiana Huezo's *Tempestad*

At the opening of Betzabé García's first full-length documentary *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (*Kings of Nowhere* 2015; hereafter *Los Reyes*), as the titles fade out and the humming sound of a motor increases, we see a young man steering a small skiff boat, making a slow course over silvery waters. A thick fog blankets the landscape and a maze of bare tree branches can be seen jutting out from the water, tinging the atmosphere with a quiet air of desolation. The camera stays on him for a few minutes, before abruptly shifting its focus beyond the man to a bell tower and the cross of a church rising out of the water's murkiness. Now over the prow and placed at river level, the camera appears to float over these ruins. Slowly, along with the landscape surfacing above the floodwater, a ruined and derelict town emerges in a panoramic shot that exhibits the large-scale destruction: vacant houses surrounded by water, buildings covered in mildew, structures about to collapse and muddy waterways that were once paths. Surveying the damage, García's camera unhurriedly wanders through the waterlogged roads and emptied-out dwellings as if taking stock of the losses; we perceive this once was a vibrant town. But suddenly, as the boat-mounted camera takes us through the town's main streets, pass the half-sunken houses and the tropical greenery that promises to overtake them, an impossible sight appears: a streetlamp that pokes through the water and somehow still lights up the town.

I linger on the details of these opening few minutes not only to stress and delineate the film's aesthetic strategies but also to suggest the focus and scope of this chapter. The opening section introduces some of the film's central concerns: socio-ecological rupture and its corollaries such as massive territorial displacement, infrastructural collapse, loss and protracted

degradation. My close reading of García's feature rests upon this phenomenon and its mise-en-scène, exploring the ways in which the film slowly captures the manufactured socio-ecological vulnerability of this rural geography. But while this devastation initially appears to be the collateral damage of a large-scale dam project, the socio-ecological ruin is shown later in the film to be also deeply entangled with the (para)militarised violence that has ruptured the Mexican countryside. As visions of warfare appear in an oblique and non-direct manner, this chapter is interested in how the film puts into relation the town's environmental rupture and the danger that is only showed lingering on its outskirts, an aesthetic choice that signals a significant departure from the spectacular displays of violence sustained in cinematic explorations of the Mexican drug war. I commence then by discussing the portrayal of the ecological collapse of this coastal town before examining the significance of the film's engagement with and eschewal of the usual conventions prevalent in the observational/*verité* approach of the Latin American "social documentary".[16] Unlike many examples of this genre, which traditionally favours realist representation, García opts for often surreal still shots to capture life in an environment haunted by rising waters and nocturnal terrors from unseen actors that evoke the extractive operations and paramilitary violence that have pressed upon these rural lands. Blended with a socially critical perspective of hydropower projects, the presence of tropes of the spectral tallies with what Warwick Research Collective (WReC) identify as a key characteristic of 'irrealism', a mode of signification that brings the socio-ecological ruptures and uneven realities produced by the

[16] In her substantial revision of the form, Julianne Burton defines the social documentary as a filmic form that, belying its origins in the New Latin American movement of the 1950s and 1960s –itself profoundly influenced by Italian neorealism– shares a concomitant desire to film "raw reality", and to serve as vehicle for social criticism. In the observational mode of social documentary, according to Burton, we usually find intimate detail and texture of lived experience; minimum interaction between observer and observed; a general predominance for synchronous sound and long takes; and an emphasis on moments of historical or personal crisis (1990, p. 4). Recent examples of observational social documentaries include Everardo González's *Cuates de Australia* [Drought] (2013), Martín Oestenhled's *La Multitud* [Crowd] (2015) or María Augusta Ramos's *Futuro Junho* [Future June[(2015).

penetration of capitalist modes and structures to the fore by defamiliarizing 'realism' via the fantastic, oneiric or supernatural (2015, p. 121). As I explore, the ghostly ambiance enhanced in the film functions then as an irrealist mode of registration that seeks to capture the traumatic yet imperceptible threats– mainly, neoliberal forms of paramilitarism and green extractivism– that have led to the town's altered ecosystem and almost terminal decay. The irrealist current in García's non-fictional register coupled with its slowed down trajectory, as I will further discuss in the chapter, gives *Los Reyes* the capacity to render apprehensible the violence that appears 'out of sight' and unfolds over time (Nixon 2010) in the country's extractive peripheries. In doing so, the documentary connects these not immediately visible harms to the scarring modes of capitalisation fuelled by the neoliberal extractive regime.

The socio-ecological devastation nourished by Mexico's (para)militarization is likewise discussed in this chapter by turning to Tatiana Huezo's road-documentary *Tempestad* (*Tempest*, 2016). *Tempestad*, like other recent Mexican documentaries (Everardo González *La libertad del diablo* (2017), to name one example) tackles the country's violence through the perspective of individuals indelibly scarred by an experience that usually included disappearance, torture and familial/communal displacement. What is remarkable about *Tempestad* is the degree to which this violence is engaged without rendering it explicitly onscreen, making the two voices of the protagonists echo over the storm-battered landscapes and desolated highways of Mexico. This suggested relationship between the bodily harm narrated by these two women and the hostile and abandoned terrains they navigate, as this chapter attempts to flesh out, points us to the structural forces and forms of power wreaking havoc on both bodies and environments. The film, as I will discuss, similarly to *Los Reyes*' departure from a strictly realist mode of documentation, presents a disjunction between the visuals and the testimonial voices to dialogue with the physical brutality that has often been address through graphic imagery and hyperrealist

modes of representation. Its dissociative structure calls instead for an examination of the gradual assaults that specific populations are made to endure, as the dislocations produced by the devastating use of terror that is used to sow fear leave lasting impacts in subjectivities and communities alike. Through the flexible metaphor of its titular tempest, slow pace and its road film style, the latter which has been characterized as exploring 'usually familiar land that has somehow become unfamiliar' (Corrigan 1991, p. 147), *Tempestad* carves out a space to reflect on the trail of impacts and deformations produced by the unfolding neoliberal catastrophe, tracking a territory now fraught by checkpoints taken by police and army. If *Los Reyes* places an emphasis on accelerated extraction and control of 'natural riches' and on issues of dwelling and forced eviction in the north-western geographies of Mexico, the besieged national geography in *Tempestad* turn us to the use of state and criminal warfare that operate as mechanisms to dominate populations, territories and ecosystems. As I conclude then, both documentaries engage the disruptive order of a 'neoliberal war' (Paley 2020, p. 145) that fractures communities, carries death and communicates terror, making recourse to long takes and defamiliarized modes of perception that attune viewers to the connection between state-mandated violence and the collapse of social environments in the peripheralized zones of global capital.

Territories of extraction and 'hydro-irrealist' aesthetics

Los reyes del pueblo que no existe takes place in San Marcos, one of the six rural villages flooded by the construction of the much-opposed gigantic Picachos dam in the coastal state of Sinaloa, a state that been often referenced as 'the birthplace and […] epicentre of the current drug war' (Valdez Cárdenas 2017, p. 5). The cataclysmic inundation in 2009 led to the forced displacement of more than 800 families who were resettled into temporary shack-like dwellings on the

opposite side of the reservoir, effectively cut off from the drowned communal lands.[17] The ongoing dam project, commissioned during Felipe Calderón's administration (2006-2012), captured and re-routed long stretches of the Presidios River to provide a thirty-year water supply to the drought-ridden Mazatlán city, a coastal resort site that has experienced an ever-rising level of real estate speculation. Pursued under the aegis of neoliberal developmentalist narratives, the hydraulic scheme was naturalized as a necessary means for the region's growth, development and progress since, as Calderón remarked in its inauguration, it would provide 'abastecimiento sustentable de agua a los habitants de Mazatlán […] y beneficiará a las familias agriculturas de la region sur de Sinaloa [sustainable water supply to Mazatlán's inhabitants […] and benefit family agriculture in the south of Sinaloa].

Yet, like other intensive technologies of extraction, as Deckard warns, hydraulic megaprojects are certainly not sustainable, producing ruptures and impacts on the entire ecology from which water is syphoned away, water that is rerouted to flow uphill 'towards capitalist agribusiness, state-favoured development projects and urban centres' (2019, p. 11). Mazatlán, it is thus important to note, while already famous as a destination for U.S. residential tourism, has witnessed a vast increase in federal and transnational capital geared towards aggressively developing the coastline, as the state's ejidal landholdings were previously out of the reach of the transnational tourist development economy (Gottdiener 2013, p. 21). These plans have been equally heralded as part of a new age of progress for the region, seeking to revitalize Mazatlán and Sinaloa's image by attracting tourists to all-inclusive, "sustainable" resorts (ibid.). By mobilizing these discourses, the communities sacrificed for the development of the region were not only subjected to a physical dislocation but also to what Nixon sees is the 'imaginative

[17] See Cañedo-Cázarez and Mendoza-Guerrero (2017) 'Desplazamiento forzado y empoderamiento femenino: el caso de la presa Picachos en el sur de Sinaloa, Mexico' *Ágora USB*, July-December 17 (2) 370-386.

expulsion' of populations from national memory that comes prior to assaults of the nation's environmental resources (p. 151). Cast as an inconvenience or disturbance to the implied trajectory of 'national ascent', these riparian and agrarian populations were 'dropped off official maps and plummeted into zones of invisibility' (2011, p. 153). In this manner, the people of San Marcos and the five other coastal villages experienced not only the celebratory developmental rhetoric that led to their submergence but also, with the creation of a "new" San Marcos, the rhetorical and visual evacuation of the place they used to inhabit, figured now as a place without community, without history, or use value. From the vantage point of those that continue to dwell in a submerged town that should no longer exist, Betzabé García's documentary explores the unseen, ill-fated peripheral spaces of capitalist extraction.

The film focuses on seemingly small moments of everyday life in the near empty other-worldly town of San Marcos. García's subtle camera work immerses itself in the spectral rural landscape now only inhabited by three remaining families, out of the more than three hundred that have lived in these lands for generations. Following the opening scene, the camera tracks the village's slow rustling to life in the bright morning light, against the aural backdrop of the mangrove jungle. In these early scenes –the only moment in which García and the crew members' voices are heard – the silent and still frames that capture the sheer size of the destruction of the hydraulic project are suddenly disrupted by a voice that appears off-screen. As the camera abruptly pans to the out-of-focus figure standing in the muddy road, the cameraman asks "¿Lo podemos grabar?" [Can we film you?]. Now in focus, the man suggestively responds by inviting the crew to film his still standing home instead: 'No pues el chiste es allá en la casa, pa' que se vea bonito. Pa' que salgan las gallinas y todo ahí' [But let's film by my house so I'll look all pretty. So you can film the chickens an all[18]]. From this introductory scene, the

[18] All English translations are quoted from the film's subtitles.

documentary seems to already prefigure and point towards an alternative framework, one that seems to reach for another way of perceiving and registering the afterlife of disaster. Not coincidentally, much of the praise that the film has garnered rests precisely on its formal conceits, foregrounding not only García's unobtrusive observation and verité style of filmmaking but also the surreal and 'García Marquesque' echoes she brings into the frames. Devoid of people, the visually entrancing shots of animals roaming freely through the dilapidated buildings, donkeys licking up the dough from the still-open *tortilleria* and a couple dancing *banda sinaloense* in the middle of the ruins of their abandoned dwelling, convey the sense of being present in a dreamscape. Moreover, in Carolyn Fornoff's reading, the documentary 'unexpectedly blends the speculative with documentary realism' (2018, p. 16) by charting a future in which humans continue to live in the aftermath of rising waters, manoeuvring about in small boats through the once dry pathways. Yet, as Adriana Pérez Limón observes, while 'the cinematography courts a ghostly, magical, silent landscape' (2018, p. 95), *Los reyes* also captures the violence and menace that engulfs the region.

Although García eschews on-screen text to let the context slowly emerge through the film's long takes, wide angles and still frames, a context-lending footnote reveals the violence that cuts through this location, which like the rising waters, brutally threatens to submerge it. Atilano Román Tirado, we are told, the forefront of the movement seeking justice for the hundreds of rural families displaced by the megaproject and denouncing the Sinaloa government's pro-dam efforts to circumvent communal land rights, was shot dead during a live radio broadcast a year prior to the documentary's release. This last explanation, as Michael Pattison's review suggests, gives retrospective gravity to earlier scenes, contextualizing the ruin and danger that always lingers in the outskirts of San Marcos, as unnamed figures that shoot and attack them enter and exit the townspeople's conversation without comment or explanation

(2015, p. 4). Responding to the documentary being received as a 'war-zone survival drama' (Hopewell 2015, p. 1), García ponders on the nature of contemporary violence: 'Uno piensa que un estado de guerra, es masacres continuas, pero no. Guerra es lo que estamos viviendo el país: se come, se va a la escuela, pero se tiene miedo y no se cuenta. Se oyen cosas pero no se dice nada' [One thinks that a state of war is made out of continuous massacres, but it isn't. War is what we are living in this country; you eat, you go to school, but you live in fear and you don't talk about it. You hear things, but you don't say a thing]. Even when an armoured vehicle is seen driving through the deserted town streets or the sounds of distant gunshots makes the townspeople anxiously look over their shoulders, their fear is scarcely voiced and only momentarily glimpsed through their anxious glances; 'fireworks, they are only fireworks' one comments with a nervous chuckle. Like the shape-shifting forces of flooding, the difficulty of tracking, visualizing or exposing the violence that rains down on the townspeople of San Marcos is thus approached in *Los reyes* by enhancing the sense of a suspended and surreal state of living that is hard to visualize through the realist impulse of nonfiction.

In Warwick Research Collective's ecocritical-oriented approaches to cultural production from the Americas, 'irrealism' is presented as a recurring feature in peripheral literary aesthetics: it surfaces to encode the traumatic and catastrophic transformations of environments and societies when a shift towards an accelerated mode of capital accumulation occurs (2015, p. 96). The literary device of 'irrealism', in Michael Niblett's view, for instance, can be read as mediating the disjuncture and rifts attendant upon the violent environment-making in the capitalist world-ecology (2015, p. 9). In using the term 'world-ecology', Niblett follows Moore's critique of how, since the long sixteenth century, capitalism has created 'external natures as objects to be mapped, quantified and regulated' (Moore 2015, p. 13) to fuel its accumulation regimes, which emphasizes the systemic character of the production of nature under capitalism. As Niblett argues, with the

'restructuring of ecological relations that took place with the transition to the neoliberal regime of accumulation' (2018, p. 82) 'irrealist' modalities appear in peripheral cultural discourses to express certain facets of the catastrophic turbulence brought about by the expansionary project of global capital which would otherwise defy representation. Borrowing the term from Michael Löwy, for whom "irrealism" designates modes of representation in which realism is either absent, distorted or disrupted in some way through the incorporation of elements of the fantastic, marvellous or dreamlike, Niblett suggests that irrealist forms such as surrealism and magic realism might be especially well suited to express 'the feelings of strangeness and rupture engendered by the rapid reorganizations of human and extra human natures' (2015, p. 269). The irruption of irrealist elements into a text, even if otherwise broadly realist, not only signals the 'disruption caused to local socio-ecologies' (Campbell and Niblett 2016, p. 10) whose ecological resources are leached away but also, through the juxtaposition of different narrative modalities, foregrounds the temporal dislocations and violent imposition of different modes of life by the forces of extractive capitalism.

The verité style conventions in *Los Reyes*, from the peaceful and natural soundscape that serves to score the daily activities of townspeople – an old woman rocking on the porch, a couple cleaning the local church, a woman deboning a chicken – to the slow pacing and editing, are at moments 'impurely' inflected with oneiric elements. Puncturing the realist overture, these brief moments could be said to respond to 'the 'lived experience of capitalism's bewildering […] destructive creation' (WReC 2015, p. 51). Across several press interviews, García herself has reflected on the need for such in-mixture, pointing to how she felt driven to highlight an atmosphere 'bordering on magical realism' (qtd. in Turner 2016, n.p.) As she asks, 'how can there still be a working tortilla shop in the middle of all this water?' (ibid.), an impression that followed her after the first visit to the apparent ghost town. In emphasising the disjointedness

of a not readily apparent reality, the decision to approach this setting from a different gaze is almost rendered as a prerequisite. Thus, as she revealingly concedes elsewhere, 'I had to abandon the script I had written' (qtd. in Cutler 2016, n.p.). From this first impulse, García allows the audience to be slowly beguiled by the strangeness of the situation and defers the use of the interview form as a means to gather information – which has now become the ubiquitous form of the post-conflict, human rights genre – featuring only a handful of unhurried interviews as the townspeople go about their daily lives. Instead, García homes in on the 'observational' mode of documentary that, following Bill Nichols' oft-referenced nomenclature, abjures commentary and illustrative images to 'ced[e] control over the events that occur in front of the camera' (1991, p. 38). This emphasis on concrete experience, which allows for the impression of the camera to disappear into the stillness of the frame, lends itself to what Navarro and Rodríguez see as a 'general suspicion of conventional formulas and traditional documentary rhetoric' (2014, p. 7) in Latin American nonfiction cinema of recent decades, a weariness that has come coupled with 'a desire to share with nonfictional subjects part of the authority normally attributed to the filmmaker' (Navarro 2014, p. 76). In this regard, García's decision to include the old man's invitation to film his house in the first scenes appears illustrative.

Following the man's cue, the resulting scene positions the viewer in front of his house, as the man, now joined by his wife, stands in the porch and proceeds to describe the life in the town, half-jokingly intimating how they don't miss the townspeople that have long since fled: 'se fueron porque quisieron, se fueron porque se iban a mejorar decían ellos…pero ahí pasan hasta dos, tres meses sin agua…aquí nosotros estamos en agua' [they left because they wanted to…they left because they would better themselves, so they say…but over there they spend up to two, three months without water…and over here we are in water]. With a chuckle, his wife joins in and adds, 'aquí estamos más a gusto…gracias a dios, aquí no hace falta el agua' [we are

more comfortable here… here we are not short of water, thank god]. The residents' account is subtly and unhurriedly registered by García, attentive to the complex ways in which they continue to dwell in a space legislated as a zone of displacement. Their testimony functions as a directive into other pathways to account for life in the waterlogged village of San Marcos. In following scenes, her camera joins a former town resident making a slow course through the canals, as he recounts the local stories harboured in each site he passes, explaining to the camera what was lost in the flood: 'Si le sigo moviendo el cassette, yo creo que aquí vamos a amanecer… pues hay un largo historial aquí…este ranchito es de los recuerdos, por eso cuando nos fuimos hasta lloramos. Híjole, cómo pudo ser que llegó este renegado y dijo "Pa fuera, chicos"?' [If I keep going down memory lane, we'll be here till sunrise…Well, there are tons of stories to tell about this place…This little town is so full of memories, we even cried when we left. Damn…how could this renegade come along and say "Out you go, guys"?]. Beyond the visible ruins that fill the backdrop of the frame, the man's account tracks the way in which the imposed 'official landscape' of the large-scale water infrastructure has likewise cast into shadow the affective, historically textured registers of the now fractured landscape, a land now written 'in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction- driven manner' (Nixon 2011, p. 17). As he continues to rove silently through the watery nocturnal locale his shadowy image stands-in for the ghostly habitat, a world fissured, distorted, made barely visible by the official landscape. García's camera holds the viewer's gaze on these shadows, lingering on the local perspectives that the waterpower has sought to drown.

Projects of death

Faced with the impending decimation of local ecologies in the wake of the mega-development schemes that continue to sprawl across the Americas–from 'the installation of hydrocarbon,

energy-mining, monoculture, agroindustry and biofuel project… to the assemblage of roads and infrastructures to locate, extract, and transport commodities' (Vallejo 2019, p. 11)– peasant, indigenous and afrodescendant communities have rightfully labelled these traumatic intrusions and enclosures as 'proyectos de muerte' (projects of death). Through this moniker, local communities cast into doubt the narratives of frictionless transformation that project global growth, trade and development where dispossession, exodus and extinction occur (Gutiérrez and Zapata 2013; Ontiveros et. al 2018). The exposure to 'extraction's waste zones, befouled elements, polluted water, mismanaged waste and colonized atmospheres' (Demos 2018, p. 15) converts rural and peripheral spaces into ravaged habitats where a 'slow death' threatens to unfold via a gradual wearing down and deterioration of a commons that 'however modestly or precariously, had proffered a diverse diet, a livelihood' (Nixon 2011, p. 152). Shrinking the viable lands and straining its resources, the human and nonhuman animal bodies of sacrificed locales are left with, in Nixon's words, a 'diet of dead rivers and poisoned fields' (p. 232), bearing the physical burden of transnational capital's insatiable hunger and thirst. Still, large-scale infrastructure and mega development projects such as dams, although 'forcibly drowning villages and fields, exhausting regional watersheds, and introducing hydrological hierarchies between those who can access water and energy—often metropolitan elites—and those who are deprived of their former resources—local indigenes' (Deckard 2016, p. 11), press up against fragile environments and life forms in an apparently 'bloodless, technocratic, [and] deviously neutral' (Nixon 2011, p. 163) manner that underscores the violence involved. Yet, as slow and quiet as the rising tide, the gradual and out of sight despair that tinges the atmosphere in San Marcos seeps into the arresting images of the disjointed everyday existence in this precarious watery location.

As the camera tilts in Miro's direction – whose name we only know through his aging mother, tethered to the town with her dementia-stricken husband – the viewer's gaze is routed to the oblique and incremental violence of the flood that impacts the community: 'Aquí está un pueblo deshabitado, abandonado ya. Escombros, eso es todo lo que tiene…año con año pues llega el agua y se llena, se va secando y se va a ir enterrando de tierra …es una pobrería, no hay trabajo, no hay empleo en estos pueblos' [What you have here is a deserted, abandoned town. Rubble, that is all there is…year after year, the water will rise, flooding everything, then it will slowly dry out and the town will be slowly buried in mud…It is a staggering poverty, no jobs, no opportunities in these towns]. The dramatic vision of a town buried beneath deep mud and detritus foreshadowed by Miro, which according to Perez Limón captures his 'sentiment of entombment' (2016, p. 102), is juxtaposed with shallow-focus shots of skeletal ruins overlooking the blurred landscape. These images, hauntingly underscore the hydrological project, to follow Deckard, as a 'death-scheme that violently removes the basis for future socio-ecological reproduction' (2019, p. 114). With the deadening of local economies and modes of subsistence ('aquí antes era todo lleno de ciruelas…ahora es sólo agua' [It was full of plums here, and now there is only water]), the affected communities, usually peripheral and marginal in relation to centres of economic and political power, are transformed from places of 'ecological complexity into hydrological zones and submergence zones that, in the violence of their euphemized effects, are second cousins to the so-called sacrifice zones of military strategy' (Nixon 2011, p. 162). The narrow proximity and continuity between submergence zones and the sacrificial logic that clusters around habitats and tracts of land destroyed, poisoned or otherwise rendered uninhabitable 'in return for some sort of benefit: military advantage [or] economic benefit' (Reinert 2018, p. 599) points to the destructive spatial violence and disposability fuelled by extractive regimes.

Gómez-Barris similarly underscores this occluded nexus in her analysis of large-scale dams as landmarks of 'dystopic developmentalism' (p. 2018, 6). Grounding her discussion in the long-term multimedia work of Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo *Be Damned* –which documents the effects of El Quimbo Hydroelectric Project construction on the local communities living alongside the Magdalena River over five centuries – Goméz-Barris frames the ravaged flooded landscapes as extractive zones where 'military, corporate and state collusion over the destruction of life' literally "damns" social ecologies for extinction (2018, p. 97). As Caycedo herself signals playing with the multiple meanings contained within the word "dam"– evoking the use of the Spanish word *represa* which encompasses both "to dam" and also "to repress" – there is a lethal confluence between the containment of the 'river as a transformed landscape and the containment of the inhabitants of the area for the sake of new flow of capital' (qtd. in Salamanca 2012, n.p.). The extractivist logic of hydroelectric damming, as she therefore argues, goes 'hand in hand with the militarization of the territory, the displacement of natives and the consequent fragmentation of ecosystems, communities and local economies' (Caycedo 2014, p. iv). Per Caycedo, the obscure networks between damming, violence and expulsion, linked to a longer arc of land dispossession in her native Colombia, foregrounds the protracted history of paramilitary terror across the Americas.

As an axis around which the vast programs of extraction revolve in Mexico, Colombia and Central America, the 'combination of terror and policy making' by 'drug war capitalism' has served as a multipronged mechanism for 'cracking open' lucrative territorial frontiers once unavailable to global capitalist interests (Paley 2014, p. 32). 'The war on drugs', Paley has prominently contended, 'is a long-term fix for capitalism's woes', as the increasing paramilitarization and its ability to displace, terrorize, and monopolize territories has provided vast benefits for some actors in transnational capital– particularly the energy, hydrocarbon and

mining sectors, as well as for the retail industries operating in free trade export zones. In this context, neoliberal and pro-business structural reforms that favour foreign direct investments and expropriation are deeply imbricated with explicit violence, pillage, and plunder, as forced displacement through the widespread use of terror-inflicting methods eliminates potential opposition to extractive projects. The 'synergistic interests among [extractive] companies, drug traffickers and instigators of state-sponsored wars to militarize Mexico' (Narchi 2015, p. 13) or in other words, the confluence between drug, war and capital, operates as a form of what Saskia Sassen labels the 'predatory formations' of contemporary capitalism–'assemblages of powerful actors, markets, technologies, and governments' (2017, p. 4)-which both facilitates transnational investment and expulsion of people from highly valued regions and allows neoliberal development to 'camouflage its predatory character' (p. 6). In its current shape, as the Zapatistas have long predicted, 'the capitalist hydra, the destructive beast, tries to hide behind other names in order to attack and defeat humanity [as] one of the names behind which it hides its projects of death is "megaproject"' (Subcomandante Moisés 2019, n.p.), a euphemism that stands for the destruction of the entirety of a territory. At the current historical juncture, 'the fascinating lure of [a] directly visible "subjective" violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent' (Zizek 2008, p. 1), which has framed the symbolic representation of the conflict, obscures the causalities of this complex web of 'subcontracted paramilitarism and counterinsurgency' (Emmelheinz 2019, pp. 4-5) that safeguards the projects of infrastructure and resource extraction of the private sector and transnational corporations.

The obscure inner-workings of drug war capitalism underline the importance of Nixon's injunction to shift our analysis from the instantaneous and immediately visible guises of violence to the 'threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene' (2011, p. 14).

Therefore, while the insidious presence of drug war violence in the flooded town in *Los Reyes* – which is only made evident through the ominous atmosphere created by its mise-en-scène (noises blasting afar which could be fireworks or gunshots)– is, for instance, cast by Audrey A. Harris as a 'subtle undercurrent' that reveals 'the political dilemma of a doubly-menaced people: flooded and faced by the constant threat of cartel violence' (2017, p. 56), what García carefully attends to instead is how the unseen and imperceptible terrorizing forces that hover over the town are not decoupled from the menacing force of the dam; rather, they stem from the same project of death— to harken back to the Zapatista metaphor– unleashed by the many-headed capitalist hydra. Before exploring the ways in which *Los Reyes* plots and gives 'figurative shape' to the imperceptible mechanisms of plunder and appropriation, I wish to place the documentary within a critical panorama that emphasizes the attritional or systemic violence in contemporary Mexican cinema of narcotrafficking.

A look towards slow violence

In his essay 'Toward a Cinema of Slow Violence', film scholar Llamas-Rodriguez argues that films about narcotrafficking are an exemplary case study for a theorization of the cinematic treatments of slow violence. Narcotrafficking, as he contends, 'lends itself to spectacular depictions of violence, aided in part by the heavily reported, US-sponsored "War on Drugs" and by the drug cartels' own attention grabbing antics' (2018, p. 28). Performing a reading of both the spectacular and unspectacular violence in Amat Escalante's 2013 film *Heli* – which accrued instant notoriety for its deadpan depiction of brutal and abject acts of torture – Llamas-Rodriguez argues for a shift in critical treatments of narcotrafficking 'to make visible the disastrous effects of narcotrafficking that remain overlooked or unacknowledged because they are not as readily captured as part of this phenomenon' (2018, p. 29). If, as he suggests, critical

engagements and academic scholarship on violence and narcotrafficking have focused on its most 'explicit, explosive representations', a 'cinema of slow violence' can serve as a framework from which to trace the 'large-scale effects that narcotrafficking wreaks upon the Americas' (ibid.). In this way, Llamas-Rodriguez eschews the most remarked upon scenes of the film (e.g. the infamous torture scene in which a character sets the genitals of a suspected cocaine thief ablaze) to underscore instead montages of soundscapes in which 'workplaces become figured as violent' (e.g. the loud noises of a NAFTA-enabled assembly factory in which the protagonist works). For the film scholar, this suggest how aurally and affectively or, through sequences that do not rely purely on the visual field, cinematic engagements with violence can gesture towards 'the pervasive, continuous nature of violence beyond its already well-known spectacular instances' (p. 29).

Relatedly, albeit with a different conceptual tool-kit, Andres Guzmán analyses the use of ambient sound and editing techniques in Natalia Almada's documentary *El Velador* (2011), which from the vantage point of the night-watchman and construction workers of a graveyard packed with the opulent mausoleums of the narco-elite, composes a film with 'drug violence as its central theme, yet refusing to show any scene of explicit violence' (2017). Rather, Guzmán argues, Almada shifts the attention to the systemic violence produced by 'narco-capitalism' (a nod to Paley's term) as it shows the seemingly innocuous activity of the booming cemetery industry in order to subtly disclose the pernicious drug trade violence that fuels formal and informal arms of the economy. While my analysis is closely aligned to the theoretical registers of these works, García's documentary, I argue, proves generative for venturing out of the now fixed cinematic spaces that account for the current Mexican situation, for its lens is tilted towards the frontlines of environmental disaster to obliquely point towards the pillage and terror recessed behind the harmless facades of capitalist developmentalism. If, from the perspective of today's capitalism

'the natural resources of much of Africa, Latin America and Central Asia are more important than the people on those lands as workers', as argued by Sassen (2014, p. 10), the deranged and threatened environment that the film foregrounds allows us to apprehends the imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but, as Nixon suggest, by 'imperceptible change whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes' (Nixon 2011, p. 11). Thus, going beyond an exclusive focus on the drug trade, *Los Reyes* proceeds through the suspension of immediate and palpable violence to account for the underlying projects that sustain the lethal model of capitalist development.

In spite of certain stylistic parallels (e.g. preference for the long-take and extended periods of prolonged stasis), García's departure from the recurrent thematic concerns that underpin these cinematic figurations of drug trade violence (focus on warehouse-labour routines and the attendant labouring bodies) also introduces an important split with the hyperrealism favoured by these films. While the films can be said to be, to varying degrees, invested in the tenets of the New Latin American Cinema variant of realism and its faith in what Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky calls 'the "that-has-been"-ness of the photographic image [and] in the evidentiary value of the *data* provided by appearances and testimony' (2017, p. 125), *Los Reyes* leads us away from the realist aesthetics as conventionally defined and understood. Rather than realism proper, *Los Reyes* gestures towards a critical irrealism that more readily registers the 'paisajes donde se vivencia y experimenta la sensación de vivir en un territorio, más que "ocupado"/"usurpado", absolutamente extrañado.' [landscapes where people experience the feeling of living in a territory, not just 'occupied'/'usurped', but absolutely stranged] (Machado Araoz 2014, 62). Instead of resorting to 'the evidentiary value of data' afforded by appearances and testimonial accounts, *Los Reyes* appeals to an atmosphere of oddity and menace to apprehend the imperceptible violence and terror brought by the penetration of brutal capitalist modes of

accumulation within these backlands. In one of the few scenes in which the characters audibly voice their fears, the cinematography assumes an almost nightmarish quality to chart the lurking threat that roves through the countryside.

The sequence begins with an arresting wide-shot of a storm-threatened night sky with streaks of lightning flashing over the darkened landscape. An ominous crash of thunder punctures the cacophonous nocturnal noises of the tropical forest as the camera jump cuts to the eerie sight of an empty road just as the electricity feeding the streetlight is abruptly extinguished, plunging the town into darkness. In the following shots, as Yoya and Jaime roam through pitch-black rooms with a flashlight as their only light source, silhouetted by its scattered light, the camera lingers on the darkness that engulfs their emptied-out dwelling. García resorts to a static long shot– which effectively showcases the characters' smallness and vulnerability – while the piercing rumble of thunder and cicadas dominates the soundscape, amplifying the atmosphere of isolation and dread that encircles their dwelling space. With the candles now lit, the camera closes in on the scarcely illuminated couple's faces, which are obscured by the shadows cast on the blackened room walls, almost as if foretelling something terrible that awaits crouched outside the frame. In a half-whisper, the couple opaquely signals the source of their unease:

> Jaime: Cuando dicen que vienen pa' acá pero uno no los ve. Yoya: Ellos pasan pero ellos pasan por donde andan. Uno no se da cuenta. Jaime: Vendrán en la noche o no sé pero uno no pos no se da cuenta uno. Yoya: Ay no. Ni digan de eso ahorita. Porque, como dice tú las paredes, oyen. Jaime: No pos a Ricardo lo hicieron pedacitos allí. Y allá fueron a tirarlo cerca de La Noria. Por eso te digo no no sabe uno dónde está la gente. De dónde sale. Yoya: Porque atacan de repente. De volada. En cinco minutos. Jaime: Y es donde

> pasa eso y pos toda la gente pos todos nos asustamos no nada más nosotros por decir. Todo el rancho pues. De ver esas cosas. Yoya: No, toda la gente se asustó porque él no se metía con nadie. Jaime: De ver esas cosas, no nomás nosotros. Todo el rancho, pues. De ver las cosas que pasan Yoya: Y hubo unos días que sí pasaba mucho miedo aquí. Jaime: Sí. Yoya: En los días que pasó todo eso. ¡Ay no! [Jaime: People say they come here, but we rarely see them. Yoya: They just stroll around, on their way. You just don't notice it. Jaime: Maybe they come at night. I don't know, we don't, we don't take notice. Yoya: Let's not talk about it. Like you say, the walls have ears. Jaime: They chopped up Ricardo into little pieces. Then they went and dumped him near "La Noria". That's what I'm saying. You never know where these people are. Yoya: They attack suddenly. Unexpectedly. In five minutes. Jaime: And that's how, when it happened, everyone, everyone was frightened. Not just us. No, everyone was scared, everyone. To see something like that. Yoya: He never caused any trouble for anyone. Jaime: When you see something like that. Not just us. The whole town, that is. To see the things that happen here. Yoya: There were days when I was really scared. When all that happened.]

While the visual arrangement and soundscape already foreshadow the spectre of violence that haunts the townspeople, the elliptical and oblique testimony similarly summons up the threatening and phantasmagoric qualities of the capitalistic forces that operate in the besieged rural environment, as the couple resorts to irrealist vocabulary and tonality to figure 'a particular order of reality relatively inaccessible to "realist" representation' (WReC 2015, p. 75). Fraught by bewilderment and anguish, the account of these spectral intrusions upon these near-coastal communities layers the proximity between these hidden macabre histories and the environmental insecurity that threatens the web of life – stressed by the aural backdrop of the

raising floodwater heard throughout the testimony – a linkage that is nonetheless presented as outside the visual field.

This formal interplay between visibility and invisibility is correspondingly underscored in a later scene, as we see Jaime, standing in a parched open field while feeding his horse, suddenly point to a nearby location and start recounting the grim sight he once witnessed: 'Hace varios días ahí mataron a un chaval y yo estaba ahí. Yo estaba ahí parado estaba dando agua a las vacas y paso el…no debe platicar uno porque un día salen pa allá las cosas' [Some days ago they killed a young man just there and I was right there…I was just standing there giving the cows water…and…But it's better not to talk about these things...you never know what could happen]. In this moment, García's camera remains at medium distance, prompting us to observe Jaime's shallow-focused natural surroundings, yet never venturing enough to reveal the site of which he speaks – which appears to be located around the edges of the frame – leaving it outside our field of vision. In its absence, however, the off-screen space takes on a centrifugal function, constantly pulling at the edge of the frame and reminding the viewer of what is left unseen.

This aesthetic path detaches the film from the straightforward methods of envisaging violence and disaster, which is most starkly underscored by the conspicuous absence of the Picachos Dam from the filmic register. In withholding it from view –and only explicitly acknowledging it in the final credits – the dam is dislodged from the celebratory and teleological narratives of progress and modernity and the spectacular visibility bestowed upon it. Instead, the film tracks the violent tides of ruination that followed in its wake, and figures it, to borrow Gómez-Barris's description of the overbuilt condos in the Chilean coastline, as a 'monstrosity looming over a delicate local ecology' (2019, p. 36). Hence, if as Nixon argues, 'the production of ghosted communities who haunt the visible nation has been essential for maintaining the dominant narratives of national development' (2011, p. 151), García's documentary operates in

an inverted scheme of visibility. Employing subtle visual and aural cues –sometimes evoking the 'low keening rumble of a horror movie' (Harris 2017, p. 56) – the film's language gestures instead towards the insidious workings of late capitalism (displacement, executions, creation of ghost towns) that act as a haunting force in the zones of extraction and resource control. Thus, if we follow David McNally's argument that the elusive power of capital that grows and multiplies remains 'unseen and un-comprehended', the estrangement-effects used in the film to materialize capitalism's life-threatening capacities can be said to work towards charting out the horrifying dislocations that, as he contends, are 'at the heart of a commodified existence' (2011, p. 7).

The spectral surrealism attributed to García's feature therefore carries a disruptively political charge as it promotes a kind of realism that mirrors the strange and bewildering world of capitalist modernity better to expose it, operating to make 'the everyday appear as it truly is: bizarre, shocking, monstrous' (McNally 2011, p. 7). But while in *Los reyes*, the juxtaposition of the everyday and the spectral or *absurdo* is engaged to bring dam building into the domain of violence, as I will explore in the following section, the film's irrealist qualities do not merely testify to the rifts caused by the capitalist machinery of dispossession and extraction. García's full investment in shifting our way of perceiving also constitutes an attempt to foreground the small scale of experience and communal webs of life that, however precarious and temporary, flow against the imposed schemes of extractivist capital.

Submerged below dam waters

In a significant moment in the film, viewers are stirred through the brownish waters via Miro's small boat, silently heading to dry land. Where the vegetation thickens and the sound of the mangrove mountains heightens, the boat's movement slowly ceases. Turning toward the verdant landscape, the still boat-bound camera tracks Miro as he jumps into the muddy water carrying a

sack over his shoulder. A wide-scale shot frames Miro as he moves deep into the green mass of rainforest, making a whistling sound that blends with the amplified hum of birds and cicadas. The camera abruptly cuts to show a white cow surrounded by dense green foliage. Miro lays out the hay and the tortillas he brought for her, gently caressing her as he explains to the camera how the cow was left stranded on this tract of land by the rising waters: 'Se quedó aislada aquí…cada vez que vengo le traigo algo… le gustan mucho las tortillas' [She was stranded here…every time I come I bring her something…she just loves tortillas]. Key to the filmic register in *Los reyes*, the sequence poignantly underscores and mirrors the story of abandonment, insulation and decay that characterises the catastrophic projects of modernity across the peripheral sites of resource extraction. However, as the camera requires us to focus our attention on the quotidian and intimate interactions between humans and similarly vulnerable animals living within the mangrove forest, we are able to perceive anew the overlooked networks of living relations that run parallel to the alienating conditions that extractive capitalism produces.

One of the direct consequences of this sustained focus on the more-than-human living in *Los reyes* (indicated by lengthy shots of both built and natural environments devoid of human presence) is an elongated and attuned awareness to the intricate unfolding of the natural world, a slowed down form of perception where 'the 'frenetic timescape of extraction is not the sole temporality' (Gómez-Barris 2018, p. 17). Like the already-hailed 'cinema of slowness' that has proliferated across the hemisphere, *Los reyes*, grounded on the stillness of diegetic action and stationary camera work, similarly presents slowness as a 'sensory perceptual prism' that brings into view the quotidian rhythms and folds of everyday life assaulted by the 'accelerated tempo of capitalism' (de Luca and Barredas 2016, p. 3). This model of perception, while not necessarily attuned to the slow violence that ruptures the precarious spaces the 'cinema of slowness' attends to, opens up the potential to short-circuit the capitalized sensorium of extractivism, a totalizing

visuality that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, has been undergirded by 'neoliberalism's terror of a profit-less wilderness' (2012, n.p.), seeing territories, populations, plant, and animal life as raw resources primed for extraction. Thus, while state and extractivist corporations operate on the purely materialist cost-benefit logic on which the practice of expropriation is based, *Los reyes*' lingering investments into the affective and communal toll of the river's blockage and subsequent submergence not only attunes the viewer to the violent atmosphere but also enables us to sense the layered land-based rhythms of life in these terrains.

Like in the above-mentioned sequence, the complex relationship between animals, people and environments that forms the basis of the film's visual address registers, to use Gómez Barris's terminology, a 'submerged viewpoint' within the murky waters that gives primacy to the 'less perceivable worlds, life forms, and the organization of relations within them' (2018, p. xv). Furthermore, the prolonged view of the marooned cow and the caretaking practices Miro performs to keep her alive, more than an allegory of the town's slow decimation, enacts what Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese have called 'practices of radical care', that is, the 'vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, p. 2). If the act of extraction, in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's words, 'removes all of the relationships that give wherever is extracted meaning' (qtd. in Klein 2013, n.p.), the intricate collaborations within and across species that García visualizes point towards the land-based relations that resist the commodity logic of extractivism. Yet, as Gómez-Barris contends, 'to be able to see beyond the capitalist divide, renewed perception does not simply represent a structure of visibility'; rather, it needs to foreground 'an enlivened sense of the relationships that inhabit […] the microspaces of interaction and encounter' (2018, p. 2) that exist alongside the developmental paradigm. Thus, by orienting our senses toward the sonic landscape and the spatial surroundings, the film's aural cues not only capture the menace emanating from the

surrounding foothills but also register the 'audacity to produce, apply, and effect care despite dark histories and futures' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, p. 3), practices that are based on the felt interdependence between the townspeople as well as with other forms of life.

A trenchant example of this is manifested mid-way through the film, as Miro's aging mother expresses how she copes with living in this perilous and desolate locale. Although the threat of being attacked in the middle of the night keeps her awake, she tenderly intimates how she and her son have devised a form of communicating – a whistling sound – as a way to combat the isolation, anxiety and fear and to care for each other. Although Perez Limón reads these 'ordinary affects' as performed within the family unit (2018, p. 101), the film, I argue, also charts radical care practices that extend beyond these confines, signalled by the intimate encounters between humans and animals registered in almost every frame and the everyday activities that townspeople continuously perform to preserve communal lands and their local food production. For instance, we see two of the townspeople (Paula and Pani) maintaining the *tortillería*, cranking out fresh tortillas daily for the surrounding hinterlands –despite having once been ambushed and shot while driving their truck– as well as their continuous efforts to restore the now-ruined town's square. These repeating frames visualise the forms of communal rebuilding and collaborative resistance devised in the face of ongoing dispossession. If as Deckard suggests, the infrastructures of water resource management and hydropower that rupture peripheral ecologies are made visible by courting an 'hydroirrealist' aesthetic – tropes of draining and desiccation; propensity towards repetition and circularity; narration marked by the spectral of absurd (2019, p. 113) – in *Los reyes*, this optic also proves useful to visualize the precarious infrastructures crafted to sustain communal forms of living in the face of these *proyectos de muerte.*

As Gladys Tzul Tzul argues, the process of rebuilding communal life vis-à-vis the continual forms of dispossession, aggression, and capture fundamentally requires the

'reconstruction of landbased communal systems' as well as of collective memory (2018, p. 404). Since when a common good is stripped from a community, in Tzul Tzul's view, the social relations created through the management of the good extracted also become undone, forms of communal work that manifest in 'microscopic' ways through rebuilding pathways, tending to plots of land and sources of water, and the organization of communal celebrations help to re-establish the order of communal life (2018, p. 406). In a similar vein, reading the notion of the infrastructural through the prism of Indigenous thought, Anne Spice suggests that the category of "critical infrastructure" mobilised by governments 'to transform oil and gas infrastructures from industry projects into crucial matters of national interest' (2018, p. 41) has been contested by communities resisting extractive constructions to point instead to the collectively constructed systems that build and sustain communal life. Appropriating the term 'critical infrastructures', as she further argues, land defenders not only 'expos[e] the lie that these projects are creative/productive' but also index infrastructures as interconnected systems of relations that 'require caretaking' and 'create the grounds' for a commonly-administered life (2018, p. 41). Tzul Tzul's gloss on community building and Spice's alternative approach to infrastructure thus capture something useful about these forms of communal care and recovery that García's camera attentively registers. Through repetitive framing, these small daily acts performed by the townspeople acquire a critical and heightened importance that, as one critic has evocatively suggested, plays almost like the '*Myth of Sisyphus* filtered through Gabriel García Márquez' (Spector 2016, p. 9). While most of these forms of tending for the land might be characterized by an strict adherence to realism that has become the trademark of slow films, I will turn to the oft-noted 'absurd' and 'magical realist' musical montages within the film that prove generative for seeing beyond the violent ruptures of social ways of life. By way of closing this section, I will attempt to read these irrealist moments as a way to index not just the breaks and rifts engendered

by the death projects of late capital but also how communities respond to the plans to absorb and drown the proliferation of life.

Rebuilding in the wake

Immediately after the stranded cow sequence, the camera cuts to a wide shot of the half-sunken houses, framed by bare shapes of trees and the intermittent sound of the lapping water. A percussive sound begins to slowly engulf the ambient soundscape. As the soundscape beings to change to softly register this distant sound of the percussion, the image jump cuts to a medium-distance frame of a tree trunk that sits in the middle of the ruins of the former *plaza* covered by forest vegetation. With percussion sounds now dominating the aural environment, the frame cuts to an open shot of the now distant *plaza* that reveals the source of the peculiar sound: a young boy appears walking amongst the ruins playing what appears to be a makeshift drum. This same motif repeats itself at different instances throughout the film. We see a second boy sitting in the ruins of a rundown brick wall as he plays the tuba surrounded by water and overgrown foliage; in another moment a boy appears on the upstairs window of a flooded building playing an instrument made out of scrap materials. These 'ethereal' moments, as one critic notes, add to the 'stroke of magic realism' and other-worldliness that tinges the film (Turner 2016, n.p.). Whilst, following Deckard's reading of García Marquez's 'hydroirrealist' tropes, 'hauntological qualities' appear in his fiction to 'gesture to absolute exhaustion' and a 'hydrological rupture in the social metabolism of nature that promulgates an irreversible collapse of the entire ecology' (2019, 155), the spectral qualities courted in these surreal sequences appear to figure instead what Anna Tsing calls, 'the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present' (Tsing 2017, p. 1). As Tsing argues, 'forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others' (p. 6). Yet, as she continues, 'ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our

forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces' (ibid). The haunting quality of this troupe of children's solitary wanderings amidst the ruins disrupting the oppressive silence with traditional village brass-band music (*tambora/banda sinaloense*) resurrects memories of the local ways of life submerged with the arrival of the dam and pushes against the amnesiac removal of what was once there. This is further reinforced by the film's end credits as an old recording of a town's celebration shows the now displaced children, women and men – some of whom, as the end credits denounce, have been murdered– joyfully dancing to the sound of *tambora.*

In the face of looming degradations, the boys' apparitions not only manifest as living traces, memories of the lost and disappeared, but also as forms of communal meaning that still reside within the zones of displacement and paramilitary terror. As the extreme climate of insecurity and growing threat of submergence is strongly manifested in the film's final sequences, as a storm tears through the already water-logged settlement, García directs the attention to the sounds of the makeshift instruments played by the troupe of boys, drowning out the portentous sound of torrential downpours and gathering thunder. While the sequence moves between static shots of decaying buildings as they fill up with diluvial water, the last frame reveals the now complete junk-band playing in the middle of the derelict *plaza*. As we see them standing within the imperilled wooden structures erected by Paula and Pani and the verdant foliage that has grown out of the ruins, the sequence charts a visual trajectory from depletion and ecological disaster to the deep-seated communal life forms that resist neoliberal erasure. In the following sequences – which echo the film's introductory frames– Paula and Pani are framed tending to the *plaza* in the storm's wake, clearing out the debris and laying out bricks to secure the wooden structure, which underpins the Sisyphean nature of their rebuilding task. Miro, again framed roving through the flooded mangrove, narrates the overwhelming anxiety over the devastating

fate of the town exacerbated by the severe weather conditions: 'Todo se me juntó y aquí estoy amarrado' [I got hit in every direction. I'm trapped here]. Yet, in the midst of chaos, he descends from his boat and immerses himself within the vegetal environment, as his whistles (similar to the ones he uses to communicate with his mother) reverberate through the verdant mountains, calling the cow and other stranded animals left in the storm's aftermath.

However, while these future-oriented endeavours performed by townspeople signals the primacy the film gives to the sources of collective resistance and creativity in the face of loss or slow violence, García's concluding vision does not preclude her from showing the ongoing infrastructural collapse of the town, nor does it disavow the inevitable calamities to come. Towards the end of the film, the camera pulls the focus to the wooden planks protecting the rebuilding site, silhouetted against the gathering clouds and flashing thunder looming over the horizon. Torrential rain begins to fall and the previously featured sites now appear almost covered by the rising tides. As night closes in, García's camera tracks the damage wrecked upon the land and the bare eroded buildings. No longer hearing the young boys' music, viewers are instead alerted to the warning and heightened echoes of water slowly pouring through the remaining houses. As Kyo Maclear notes in relation to weather emergencies and their attendant cultural responses, we need to be wary of visions of environmental resistance that align themselves to the 'global disaster policies that tout the art of resilience and promote risk adaptation as solution for frontline impoverished communities' (2018, p. 620). If any figuration of survival and 'care in the wake' as well as any future imagining needs to reckon with the afterlives and residues of the longstanding histories of structural violence and neglect, García's attention to the harm and exclusions that socio-ecological eroding acts have produced in this site effectively mobilize these complexities.

In the film's last scene, to offer one last example, two of the families sit on Jaime and Yoya's porch now surrounded by the darkened landscape, teasingly suggesting one of the advantages of the storm that hit the town in the abovementioned sequence: 'Así que en la mañana podrás ver un sol bien bonito y en la noche una luna bien bonita. Eso no lo compra el dinero' [You'll be able to see a lovely sunrise and a lovely moon. Money can't buy that]. 'No', Yoya responds, 'when will it ever? Only nature can give you that', framing nature away from the instrumentalised logic that undergirds capitalist extractivism. As they continue to discuss the upsides of their situation and their plans to clean the plaza the next morning, Jaime teasingly proposes that they should proclaim themselves 'los reyes de San Marcos' [the kings of San Marcos]–fleshing out the meaning behind the film's title. While this scene could be easily read through a tone of triumphalism against the apocalyptic and expulsive forces of extraction, this moment is soon upended by the sound of gunshots coming from the adjacent mountains. Although the townspeople follow up their conversation and continue to reminisce about the past before a second round of shots is heard, García's camera pans to capture the fear in their faces as they look into the darkness. Opening the shot to frame the isolated dwelling perilously standing against the treacherous night, the lingering image preludes the film's closing titles, which call attention to the brutal consequences of confronting the interests of the state-corporate alliances that seek to uproot them. And yet, by continuing to rest its focus on the still-standing houses and the community that organizes to reclaim these lands, the ending – much like the opening sequence – also upends the apocalyptic forecasts oriented almost entirely toward death and decay. As Rebecca Solnit rightfully observes, although spaces carved out for navigating disaster are by their very nature 'unsustainable and evanescent', they are 'utopia itself for many people though it is only a brief moment during terrible times' (2016, p. 17). Thus, rather than conclude with images of total cataclysm, the film closes in on the emergent attempts of people

to reclaim the space, which despite constant assault, they organize to reconstitute. By locating forms of communal life in the townspeople's everyday activities or in the reverberation of the instruments played by the children in the middle of the ruins, *Los Reyes* undoes the visual and auditory primacy given to the destructive visions that solely imagine an extractive-oriented future.

Traversing the Neoliberal Catastrophe

Much like the opening of *Los Reyes*, Tatiana Huezo's *Tempestad* (*Tempest*, 2016) introduces viewers to the harrowing conditions wrought by late neoliberalism through a distinct slowed down register. The film opens with a black screen, as the chilling echoes of metal bars and creaking hinges gradually start to disrupt the densely textured buzz of nocturnal insects and dog barks that saturate the soundscape. Disconcerting at first, this aural registry leads the viewer to slowly establish a sense of location as a disembodied, trembling female voice reveals the source of the rumbling noises: 'Todas las mujeres estaban dormidas. Era de madrugada porque la cárcel estaba ya en silencio. De pronto, escuché un grito que decía mi nombre. Tuve miedo porque no era normal que me hablaran en ese horario. Pensé que venían por mí para llevarme al pozo del castigo' [All the women were asleep. It was during the early hours since the prison was already silent. Suddenly, I heard my name being shouted out. I was afraid because it wasn't usual to be summoned at that time. I thought they were coming to take me to the punishment well].[19] In this instance, the sharp sound of chains and sliding doors overrides the soundscape and the film's title appears over the black screen.

Yet, as the title fades, the blank screen still remains, mirroring the narrator's confusion

[19] All English translations are quoted from the film's subtitles.

as she awaits her fate in the darkened cell. As she continues to recount her ordeal, she recalls a voice that summoned her and ordered her to go to the cell door window. While she describes looking through it and seeing a long empty corridor, the obscure interior of a rundown and derelict building emerges on the screen. A sequence of arresting medium-shots that capture the mildewed walls and crumbling windows – which offer the obstructed view of waving trees and grey skies – evoke the entrapped and deteriorating condition of the narrating subject as she is informed that due to lack of evidence, she will be released. The camera opens up to an expansive shot that pictures the ghostly ruins of a dilapidated construction site set against the glowering skies. As the morose testimony continues, a haunting sequence of visuals depict lifeless images of war-torn Matamoros, disclosing the location through a fixed shot of a gritty and desolate avenue that features a sign that reads 'Playa Bagdad' and 'Puente Internacional'. Figured as a ghost-town, Huezo suffuses the images of bordered-up and rundown buildings with a grey hue that foregrounds its harrowing state, echoing the narrator's recollection of the context in which she was released:

> Sabíamos que había un toque de queda en Matamoros durante la noche, la ciudad estaba como en guerra, y había enfrentamientos todos los días entre Los Zetas y el Cártel del Golfo y la policía igual. El abogado que me recogió tenía miedo de que nos levantaran en el camino. Hacía cinco días que acaban de encontrar a 72 migrantes en una fosa en San Fernando. [We knew there was a curfew in Matamoros at night, it was almost as if the city was at war, and every day there'd be clashes between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel and the police and all. The lawyer who came to collect me was afraid that we might be kidnapped on the way. Just five days before, they'd found 72 migrants in a mass grave in San Fernando.]

As the narrator recalls the unsettling discovery, the camera lingers on mouldy walls with bullet holes sprayed across them in a way that mirrors the decaying and tortured bodies of the Central American migrants unearthed from the clandestine graves. Touching upon the large-scale effects that narcotrafficking wreaks upon the country, the film traffics in images of ruined and desolate sub-urban spaces not only to depict the hostile climate of terror and fear but also the displacement that comes with it. In a way, the cumulative toll of distress and exhaustion made palpable through the worn, paint-chipped facades parallels *Los Reyes*'s survey of the submerged landscapes of San Marcos through which we can read, trace and capture the relationship between forced displacement and the expansion of extractive capital. Yet, as Patrick Ridge contends, although the opening testimony in *Tempestad* contextualizes the danger and violence of the prison and surrounding areas, 'Huezo's use of tonal montage during this bleak exposition—shots that exhibit dimly lit interiors, gray-skied exteriors, dilapidation, urban decay—expresses Miriam's damaged psychological state while also revealing the continued failures of the Mexican State' (2020, p. 72). Thus, departing from the observational/verité filmmaking techniques courted in *Los Reyes*, the experimental register in *Tempestad* functions to reveal the simultaneous precariousness of the Gulf landscape and the physically and psychologically burdened bodies drawn into tumult by the violent tides of ruination. Continuing to think through the multivalent violences of the neoliberal socio-ecological trajectory, this second section attends to the ways in which Huezo's documentary registers the cumulative and deleterious implications of the legacies of violence and dehumanization that the 'drug war' drags in its wake.

Tatiana Huezo's second feature-length film documents a days-long bus ride through the Gulf of Mexico, tracing Miriam's trip back home after her sudden release from a privately-run prison in the far north of the country. A reflection on a country battered by the storms of

NAFTA and the bloodbaths of the drug war, *Tempestad* traverses the blustery and overcast landscapes of Matamoros, Tampico and Veracruz fuelled by Miriam's memories of unjust imprisonment**.** Narrating over those images, Miriam's disembodied, phantasmal voice-over, 'the one of someone coming back from the dead' (Ramos Ruiz 2016, n.p.), speaks of her gruesome encounters within the cartel-controlled prison and the pain that still wounds her. Yet, rather than re-enactments**,** these long-takes and 'lyrical' images of the tropical roads appear instead to replicate the emotions conveyed by the subjects' voices, a technique already present in Huezo's debut feature film *El lugar más pequeño* (*The Tiniest Place*, 2011). This first film announced the Mexican-Salvadoran director as one of the most important and necessary voices in Latin American cinema, thanks to her unique and sensitive look at the aftermath of the brutal civil war (1979-1992) that afflicted the jungle-shrouded mountains of her parents' native El Salvador. The intensely poetic visual language of the film – weaving together recollections of horrifying ordeals of rape, mutilation, and torture with visuals of a deep forest that 'looms in mute witness to the testimonies we overhear' (Dávila 2011, n.p.) **–** gave birth to a trilogy (the second film being her 2015 short *Ausensias*), for which *Tempestad* serves almost as a capstone, in which she continues to revisit the topics central to her work: absence, disappearance and the war-ravaged landscapes of Central America and Mexico. Likewise, as Ridge observes, her films seek out the 'testimonies of the historically marginalized – women, migrants, left-wing dissidents, the poor, the Indigenous – as a way to challenge the "official" accounts supported by right-wing dictatorships (El Salvador) or the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Mexico)' (2020, p. 69).

Using the same formal approach as in her prior films (long takes, disjointed asynchronous sound), the violence Huezo discloses in *Tempestad* appears less as a novelty and more as the continuation of a much longer history. Moving from the catastrophic trajectory of violence from the Salvadoran jungle and into the coastal terrains of Mexico, Huezo's latest

documentary seems part of an ongoing attempt to understand the deep logics behind the violence that has engulfed much of Latin America. As Huezo observes:

> cuando empezó a suceder todo esto en México, había imágenes que me remitían absolutamente a la guerra de El Salvador. La gente decapitada, o sea, los escuadrones de la muerte de El Salvador cortaban cabezas y las clavaban en palos y las ponían en la entrada de los pueblos para aterrar a la gente, y eran mecanismos para sembrar el miedo. Y en México, nos han sembrado el miedo de una forma muy parecida [when all of this started to happen in Mexico, there were images that reminded me completely of the war in El Salvador. The people beheaded, that is, the death squads in El Salvador that cut off heads, put them on sticks and left them at the entrances of towns to terrorize people, those were mechanisms to sow fear. And in Mexico, fear has been instilled in us in a very similar way.] (qtd. in Cuéllar 2016, n.p.)

Bound together by this narrative tie, Huezo's body of work, much like García's visual project, concerns itself with the occluded relationships that imperceptibly shape the ravaged environment of the conflict-ridden region. Just as García, who makes use of atmospheric visuals and the punishing weather to bear witness to the violence wrought by the legal, rhetorical, economic, and political contortions of extractive capitalism, the weather-beaten roads of Mexico's varying landscapes in *Tempestad* index the catastrophic rupture of local eco-systems in the territorial strongholds of drug war capitalism. However, whereas *Los Reyes* makes use of a magical realist or irrealist aesthetic to mediate the brutal dislocations engendered by the neoliberal drive to appropriate nature, a subtler yet similar approach is taken in *Tempestad* to allegorise the upheaval and turbulence of the "Drug war" period. Although *Tempestad*'s long-

takes and observational footage follows in the protocols of the verité documentary's gritty realism, the film's strategies of composition give way to more abstract experiments in form.

The disconnection between the voice and the visual sequences – a departure from the voice of *testimonio* adopted by the human-rights-themed documentary – for example, has led critics to describe *Tempestad* as a 'lyrical and often dreamlike socio-political study', 'un retrato poético' and, an 'artful and lyrical…strangely entrancing film' (Taylor 2018; *La Tempestad* 2017; Jaworowski 2017). As Meredith Taylor observes, the visually arresting footage of a 'rain-soaked bus journey through lush landscapes of the massive country bears little relation to Miriam's voiceover which deals [with] her harrowing time in the confines of a baking hot male-dominated prison' (2018, n.p.). However, while Taylor sees in this delinking a 'structural flaw', the absence of testimonial footage – which inhibits audiences from seeing Miriam's own body up until the last shot – serves rather as the central conceit of *Tempestad*. As Manuel Betancourt poignantly argues, by marrying the testimonies to the 'natural rhythms' of Mexico's landscape, 'Huezo stresses the way certain stories are weighted by their seeming inevitability as well as by the shroud of secrecy that so often buries them. Or worse, makes them feel a permanent fixture of Mexico' (Betancourt 2020, p. 64). Yet, while Betancourt aligns Huezo's 'oneiric storytelling' and aesthetic strategies to the reflexive turn in recent nonfiction documentaries from Latin America (2020, p. 61), Julia González de Canales Carcereny positions her work within the contemporary 'counter-cinematographic practice' of poetic cinema (2019).

As Gónzalez de Canales Carcereny proposes, given that the category of 'poetic' appears as a slippery term – usually taking many forms and educing multiple meanings– poetic cinema should be conceived through the 'conjunto de elementos formales intra-filmicos, posibilitadores de la dimensión sensorio-trascendental perceptible por el spectador' [set of formal intra-filmic elements that enable the sensory-transcendental dimension that the viewer perceives] (2019, p.

275). Between the main compositional features of a poetic film, she argues, one usually finds 'auditive/verbal elements (voice, music, prosody) and visual (metric, rhythm), which create figurative and affective associations that take the body or the landscape as support material' (ibid.). Moreover, although like slow cinema the 'cine poético' shares a concern with a restrained unfolding of the plot, the former often eschews the 'aesthetic of fragmentation based on montage' to preserve 'the continuum of reality' (de Luca 2016). Taking an opposite approach, contemporary poetic films, as González de Canales Carcereny contends:

> lleva[n] la representación de la cotidianidad a sus límites, rompe[n] con la lógica líneal de la narración, pone[n] en el centro el trabajo de composición formal del filme y busca[n] generar el extranamiento del publico espectador en su ejercicio de visualización activa. [take the representation of the quotidian to its limits, break with the linear logic of the narrative, put at its centre the formal composition of the film and seek to produce an estrangement in the viewer with an exercise of active visualization.] (González de Canales Carcereny 2019, p. 285).

Seen through this lens, the formal strategies mobilised in *Tempestad* appear in some ways analogous to the estrangement-effects used in *Los Reyes*, deftly departing from the straightforward narrative strategies associated with cinematic realism. In espousing the aural testimony of the prison's torturous environment to the 'natural rhythms' of the Gulf landscape, with its torrential rain and high winds but also with its permanent state of siege, *Tempestad* likewise registers what McNally calls the 'horrifying aspects of a strange and bewildering world that represents itself as normal, natural, unchangeable' (2011, p. 8). While *Tempestad*'s compositional features do not fit neatly into the irrealist modality that *Los Reyes* advances –lacking in surreal,

ghostly or magical realist elements – the absence of a testimonial body functions likewise to suspend what WReC diagnose as 'the assumed facticity of conventional realist accounts' (2015, p. 77). Thus, making of absence a central conceit, the film offers a timely intervention in a burgeoning if fragmented canon of Mexican films dealing with the armed conflict and its sensational visibility.

Equally proceeding from the suspension of immediate and palpable violence, *Tempestad*'s journey from north to south, from Matamoros to Tulum, is, as one critic suggests, 'la catografía de una herida' [the cartography of a wound] (*La Tempestad* 2017). Placing the lens in the ruptured landscape that passes through the steamed windows, the film resonates with Nixon's orientation towards critical imaginations that bring into view 'a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence' (2011, p. 15). To render the effects of the protracted aggression and life under militarized conditions, the deviation from the traditional conventions of observational documentary modes, already a feature in Huezo's previous films, is even more prevalent in *Tempestad*. In addition to Huezo's choice of leaving the interviews with her subjects off-screen, Ridge also highlights her decision to recreate Miriam's return journey first-hand, 'traveling the same route by bus and stopping at low-budget hotels' (2020, p. 70). As Ridge contends, this demonstrates the director's 'more participatory role' even when the final cut omits any authorial presence (ibid.). Most notably, as Abel Muñoz Hénonin observes in his review, by listening and making us listen, clearly and for a long time, to the testimonies of women caught by the violence of an organised crime that seems ampler that drug cartels, the unnarratable dimension of such violence is exposed by Huezo through the 'reticence between the testimony and the landscape' (2018, n.p.). Instead of a visible testimonial subject, Huezo chooses to juxtapose her indirect recounting with a 'series of tracking shots, static images of anonymous subjects, and visuals that often establish symbolic connections to the narration' (Ridge 2020, p. 70). While critics have

interpreted this omission as a means of protecting the subject's identity, in her director's statement, Huezo explains it as 'the most crucial formal decision' in the construction of the film (2016). By having Miriam's voice not related to a single face but to many faces along the way, as she points out, she sought to create the sense that any of them might be the protagonist of the stories told in *Tempestad*. This approach not only signals a shift in the observational and participatory register of her films, but also stages a departure from what Irmgard Emmellheinz identifies as narconarrative's 'privatization of political and economic problems that are, in truth, collective' (2019, p. 5). While most cinematic takes on the so-called drug war disseminate personal stories of individuals undergoing singularized problems, *Tempestad* harnesses instead the power of personal testimony to build a composite portrait of a whole exploited underclass.

In this way, the formal choice Huezo describes taps into a broader concern over the dichotomy between spectacular violence and the unobserved dynamics that Nixon diagnoses through his slow violence concept. In an interview with Huezo during *Tempestad*'s debut in the festival circuit, Huezo tellingly diagnoses the political implications of her documentary: 'now that I see the film from a distance, I realize there is an invisible war in Mexico; nobody recognizes it as such but we're like orphans from justice, from institutions, from authorities' (qtd. in de la Fuente 2015, n.p). Her unusual documentary approach, she says, stems from her desire to 'find new ways to tell a story through two different conversations, one oral, the other visual' (ibid.). Formally and politically consistent with her first feature, the shots of urban and rural decay in *Tempestad*, while not indexically linked to the asynchronous recordings, offer an often oblique and unexpected relation to the testimonies' harsh close-up of the horror of Mexico's violence and impunity. Yet, if we follow Huezo's observation, more than mirroring one another, the oral testimony and the 'loose' visuals of the overcast landscape function to tell two distinct but interlinked stories: the dramatic, event-centred violent acts inflicted upon Miriam's body, and

the uneventful, barely visible effects of violence that, in Nixon's words, appear 'out of sync […] with our narrative and media expectations' (2011, p. 9). In making Miriam's harrowing account play over free-associative footage that highlights the long, languid views of Mexican rain-swept landscapes, city streets and shipyards, or, in other words, placing the spectacular portrayal of violence in the aural realm only, the film creates an opening for making salient what Llamas-Rodriguez calls 'the pervasive, continuous nature of violence beyond its already well-known spectacular instances within narcotrafficking' (2019, p. 29). Given the propensity for violent spectacle to distract from far-reaching forms of violence, the interplay between sound and image in *Tempestad* impedes the consumption of the film's extremely tense and violent instances without a critical reflection on the multiple, slow, intersectional forces that wreak havoc upon the marginalized bodies that the film depicts and upon the sites and landscapes that are often read as mere scenic background.

From its onset then, the vividly poetic mode of the film functions to establish a nexus between Miriam's disembodied voice and the impressionistic shots that stress 'bareness, turbulence and corrosion without lapsing into heavy-handed symbolism' (Catalado 2017, n.p.). Following the opening sequences, the camera takes us out from the deserted streets of Matamoros and into a busy bus station. As we hear Miriam explain the difficulties of recognizing her own reflection upon her release, a medium shot of a woman appears on-screen, with her gaze momentarily resting softly upon us. While it first appears to be an unveiling of the narrator's identity, the following images capture the forlorn faces and silhouettes of women that wait at the station, conjuring instead the collective experience of vulnerability that connects them to Miriam's testimony. This vulnerability is further heightened by the conspicuous presence of military and police forces that crowd later frames, as well as warning signs against firearms posted across the station, which foreshadow the threat of violence that lingers on the background.

Adopting a poetic, meditative approach, rather than a more expository cinematographic form, the film thus, to use Nichols's description of this documentary template, puts more emphasis on feelings and atmosphere than on displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion (2001, p. 103). In this manner, following Ida Day's analysis of recent Latin American documentaries, the slower, lingering representation of images and voices that characterize the poetic mode seem particularly suited to account for 'the sense of gradualness and slow unfolding of catastrophic events' (2019, p. 177). As Nixon contends, 'to engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend–to arrest or even mitigate–often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses' (Nixon 2011, p. 14). Thus, following this assertion, the use of montage in *Tempestad* appears to function to refocus the viewer's gaze towards the barely undetectable and seemingly unimportant details of the surroundings.

The country addressed by Huezo's camera is, as critics suggest, a hardly identifiable Mexico. As David D'Arcy notes in his Berlin film festival review, this is not the 'majestic Mexico of tourist brochures but one of grimy bus stations and lorries jamming roads' (2016). Rather than 'swaggering narcos […] mask-clad police heroes or stalwart morally compromised autodefensas', one critic aptly observes, Huezo approaches the subject with 'such an absence of glamour, and an overt sense of fatigue' (Cataldo 2016, n.p.). While the focus on Mexico's darkened skies, mute faces of passengers and pedestrians and congested highways steer the film away from the extravagance of other narco-themed features, such sights align the film with the overall interest in the observational that characterizes contemporary Latin American renderings of the road film. As Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez argue, the upsurge of the Latin American road movie genre over the last decades has seen the mix of the conventions of the road movie with neorealist and documentary techniques 'to bear witness to important issues

such as the dismal effects of neoliberalism, the persistence of class divisions and widespread poverty' (2016, p. 17).

In their view, while the landscapes depicted no longer allow for readings that open up the space for a national revolution– as it happened in the Third Cinema movement of the 1960s– nor hint toward utopian reconfigurations of the national space, contemporary road movies 're-signify landscapes with competing valences across the political spectrum, thus compelling viewers not to overlook them as mere background' (2016, p. 18). Therefore, according to Jens Andermann , some of the most interesting examples of contemporary Latin American cinema revisit the cinematic and political archive of the rural landscape in order to 'reveal the impulsive, violent underpinnings of history' (2012, p. 63). What one can argue then is that Huezo's film not only illustrates what WReC call the 'bifurcated or ruptured sensorium of the space-time' of the world's peripheries (2015, p. 14) through its sonic-visual disjunction. But taking the viewer on a 2000-kilometre journey through the Gulf coast of Mexico, Huezo also redeploys the typical elements of the road movie genre to stage a regional landscape that contrasts with the neoliberal discourse of progress and modernization, reaching for the allegorical to unveil the fatal repercussions of the neoliberal catastrophe.

The (militarized) road genre

As the cross-country trip sets out from the border-city of Matamoros– which according to Betancourt metaphorically sets off Miriam's 'journey inward and backward in time' (2020, p. 64)– the iconic fixtures of the road film genre (the typical modernity of the highways, trucks, open roads and expanding horizons, road motels, gas stations, diners) appear fraught by the conspicuous presence of military roadblocks and a heavily armed police force. Instead of presenting the road as a realm of freedom, escape and diversion, a lengthy sequence early in the

film, and thus early in the journey, makes use of point-of-view shots that offer the passengers' perspectives of armed state and federal authorities inspecting and questioning travellers at security checkpoints. Furthermore, given the film's initial setting, the roads Huezo captures appear besieged almost entirely by the global trade practices of the Mexican borderlands. Thus, while subsequent shots capture the interior of a truck-stop diner – also a ubiquitous fixture of the road movie – the camera drifts away from the hustle and bustle of the local eatery to show the evocative image of a paradisiac beach painted on the diner's chipped walls, as a row of cargo trucks heading to the border is seen in the background. While the image works also as an allusion to Miriam's torturous return home to the Caribbean coastline, the nostalgic sight also conveys the emptiness behind the modernization project of neoliberalism and the urban and rural ruination it has left behind.

The life-defining trip across Mexico, as one critic suggest, is a 'well-worn story-telling device, best known from Alfonso [C]uaron's coming of age comedy *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), an adolescent joy ride from the capital to the Pacific Coast (D'Arcy 2016, n.p.). Released at the turn of the twenty-first century, this canonical Mexican road film, as María Saldaña-Portillo observes, presents the viewer with a cinematic representation of the changing nature of the Mexican landscape 'in the context of a neoliberalism historically represented by NAFTA' (2005, p. 751). As the film follows the youthful escapades of the upper and middle-class protagonists, this main narrative trajectory is intercut with interstitial scenes in which a voice-over conveys information about 'something happening outside the car on the road, to random people or to the actual landscape' (Saldaña-Portillo 2005, p. 752). In this manner, Saldaña-Portillo contends, these scenes de-centre the story of a 'technocratic elite's vision of Mexico's entry into "democratic capitalism"' in order to show another knowledge of neoliberalism (2005, p. 751). However, as Sánchez Prado remarks, while the 'turmoil of neoliberal reforms and the dreams of

a democratic transition found a fitting representation in Cuarón's road film', the inequality of violence described through the use of a voice-over narrator –a peasant struck by a vehicle at a juncture of the highway, the disappearance of the idyllic beach under the impact of international tourism – is not connected to the critique of neoliberal capitalism as such (Sánchez Prado 2019, p. 105). Sánchez Prado's reading also echoes Deborah Shaw's assessment of the apparent denunciation that the film seeks to articulate as 'a broad, unfocused critique of the greater evils of globalization', keeping the precise nature of the key issues presented uncertain and maintaining the 'white privileged gaze' of the city dwellers (2011, p. 181). In Huezo's turn to the genre, however, the minor and marginal stories that, according to Shaw are often used to serve the protagonists or to give a 'snapshot of the Mexico that is outside the car window' (2011, p. 130), are brought to the fore, placing the focus directly upon the brutal effects of the neoliberal era and on the subjects that are made to bear the brunt. After a decade in which Mexico 'has further progressed into a neoliberal nightmare of increasing social violence and economic inequality', as Sánchez Pardo argues elsewhere (2016, p. 54), Huezo's views of a storm-swept Mexico offer a keen contrast to the travel-friendly and brochure view of the country often presented in road films by allowing the viewer to fully navigate the uneven and violent environments of the still unfolding late neoliberal period.

A problem of 'the 'thinkability" of this form of neoliberalism, according to Sanchez Prado, 'derives from the fact that the brutality of its material conditions and the urgency in the visibilization of its violences postpones the full consideration of the social totality' (2016, p. 103). The extreme force of drug war capitalism and its corollaries seems to demand narrative forms that register the brutal co-occurrences of the period still unfolding. Using the distinct medium affordances of cinema, Huezo's work appears in many ways demonstrative of this injunction. *Tempestad*'s use of the road genre helps to elucidate what Piedras observes as the innovative ways

in which the new nonfiction cinema of the twenty-first century returns to earlier problems of the documentary tradition in Latin America (2016, p. 222). Thus, instead of the general state of disarray brought forward by the political persecution and repression of dictatorship, Huezo's documentary particularly captures how these earlier terrors are now differently enacted in a context where neoliberal capitalism and the drug trade appear as the new forces of destruction. For instance, as Ridge observes in his reading of the film, the ominous shots of state authorities throughout the journey, which might initially exhibit 'the government's efforts to ensure public safety with the intentions of combatting violence and organized crime' (2020, p. 72), take on a sombre look when paired with Miriam's descriptions of her detention. Yet, as her testimony is narrated over an arresting sequence that features images of the bus moving through interminable rows of trucks hauling the goods from border maquiladoras and the ominous oil refining and petrochemical complexes that litter the north bank of the Pánuco river, these symbolic visuals also foreshadow the links between state authorities, extractive economies and the 'illegal' underground practices that make them function.

As we learn from Miriam's testimony, while she was working in passport control at the Cancun International Airport, her boss instructed her to travel to Mexico City for work reasons. Soon after landing, however, she was detained by federal authorities and sent to the offices of the Agencia Federal de Investigación (AFI) – a government agency in charge of investigating federal crimes – accused of organized crime and human trafficking. Whereas the government reports that a criminal ring has been rounded up, her public defender informs her that she has been arbitrarily imprisoned: 'I know that your case has come from the top, this is a political situation where they have to show they're getting results in their handling of people trafficking, which does exist. Here, we call you payers, people who pay for other people's crimes. We know you didn't do anything but, well, somebody's got to pay.' Leaving out any form of expository

footage, Huezo pairs Miriam's testimony with visuals that capture the precarious market of sleazy hotels and bars that line the port city of Tampico, which in one instance, feature the 'tilted view of a woman dressed in a short skirt with high heels [p]resumably soliciting sex' (Ridge 2020, p. 73). Thus, in full consideration of the 'complex totality of pressures that is neoliberal capitalism' (Deckard and Shapiro 2016, p. 16), the sequence implicates a broader set of actors in the causal chains of the illicit global trade.

Resuming the road movie stylistic device, Huezo opens the following sequence with observational footage of women waiting at the Tampico bus station. The camera then jump-cuts to a disorienting view that originates from within a moving bus, blurrily capturing the passing landscape as the narrator recalls her transfer to the private-run prison in the U.S.- Mexican border, handcuffed and blindfolded. The point of view is, on this occasion, of the subject in movement, capturing the entrapment and turmoil she experienced. As she recalls her arrival at the prison and moving through its narrow corridors, an unstable frame of the darkened skies above and shadows cast by a passing bridge further emphasizes her disoriented state. However, while describing her entrance to the wide-open court of the prison in which she encountered twenty-five men armed with machetes and assault rifles, the camera opens up to a wide-shot of the path ahead, which features a military convoy patrolling the tropical and overcast roads. In a voiceover, we hear Miriam repeat the men's address to the new prisoners: 'Este es territorio del Cártel, están en una prisión que tiene autogobierno y aquí mandamos nosotros' [This is the territory of the Cartel, you're in a self-governing prison, and we're in charge here]. Through these dizzying editing techniques, Huezo disassembles the discourse around the country's violence, which often casts *narcos* as sole protagonist, and draws visual lines between the State military power and the criminal groups that terrorize the region. Now in the hands of the Gulf cartel, Miriam reveals she was forced to pay five thousand dollars a month to avoid further torture and

to give the names and contact information of her relatives to collect the fee. While she did not comply with the latter demand, she discovered the organization already had information about each member of her family, including her young son, which led her to realize the extent of police involvement.

As Miriam begins to narrate her initial torture and confinement, the journey becomes beset with heavy rainfall. Details of the extreme and brutal conditions of her captivity are layered over tracking shots of fog, trickling water and sheets of rain on passengers' windows which show gusting winds ripping through the grasslands. In a particularly distressing shot, Huezo unsettles the subjective gaze by making the camera tightly frame the upper body of a female passenger, constructing in this way a 'fetishizing male gaze' (Ridge 2020, p. 74) that arguably indicates the sexual violence experienced during her confinement. Jolting the spectator, this particularly unsettling point of view appeals to cinematic figurations that are not strictly representational, compelling the viewer to pay attention to what is unnarrated. Puncturing the natural soundscape, Huezo also suffuses the sequence with the amplified sounds of wind and raindrops as well as with a plaintive string score which produces a dramatic tension that 'helps to elicit the spectator's emotional response to this terror' (Ridge 2020, p. 54). In lieu of historical accuracy and verifiability, typical of expository documentaries, the burden of the testimony is visually and figuratively registered in the exhausted faces of passengers and in the storm-beaten palm trees lined across the rural road, emphasizing intervulnerability. In this way, pluvial time serves here to capture the brutality of the period, a catastrophe that is absorbed into the texture of the everyday. Moving past spectacles of suffering, the sequences make us sense and bear witness to the multivalent violences of the 'drug war' period, using the battered landscape and the tempestuous journey as a way to frame a country and a citizenry grappling with the brutal and deranged effects of the late neoliberal condition.

While the extreme climate rendered on-screen does suggest the narrator's emotional instability – setting up the distressing tone of Miriam's psychological and physical assaults – the landscapes battered by the turbulent weather also play as a harsh allegorical reflection of an ecology produced in the current phase of capitalism, that is, as Sayak Valencia diagnoses, 'un paisaje económico, sociopolítico…afectado y re-escrito por el narcotráfico y la necropolítica' [an economic, socio-political landscape… both affected and rewritten by drug trafficking and necropolitics] (2012, p. 83). Even though ruinous imagery appears associated with the actions and movements of the character, the visions of the landscape in *Tempestad* are not just point-of-view shots or external illustrations of emotional states experienced by the protagonist, but also reflective of Mexico's conflict-zone environments. Yet, whereas *Los Reyes* placed a much stronger emphasis on accelerated extraction and control of 'natural riches' and on the state-sanction terror necessary to crack open the north-western geographies, the conflict zones in *Tempestad* turn us to the devastating use of terror through kidnapping, human trafficking, human smuggling and extortion which function in themselves as 'a 'new' extractive industry of death' (Gibler 2016, p. 136).

As John Gibler suggests, while kidnapping and extortion previously functioned as small parts of the capitalist economy, these tools of fear and terror 'have been updated, integrated, and expanded upon for neoliberal times' (2016, p. 136). In Gibler's view, while drug war capitalism prepares new territories for mining and drilling, 'it also opens new territories for capitalist intervention by turning human life and death into a commodity for extraction' (2016, 138). This critical position seems to echo Valencia's concept of 'gore capitalism', which takes on the idea of 'gore' from the cinematographic genre to signal the 'explicit and unjustified bloodshed' required by Third World countries to wholly adhere to the logics of contemporary capitalism,

which encourages and demands hyper-consumption (2018, p. 12).[20] Through this concept, Valencia clearly attends to how capitalism produces bodies as surplus in its most extreme form, including kidnapping, the human organ exchange, torture, and assassination, within and outside the new drug economies. Seen through this lens, rather than a peripheral, accidental side-effect of cartels and corrupt politics, such hyper-specialized 'economy of bloodshed' emerges as a 'vast engineering project […] whose essential processes are as precisely calculable as the tensile strength requirements of a dam or a bridge' (Watts cit. in Valencia 2018, p. 96). Thus, rather than the end-result of sprawling webs of corruption, the violence Huezo conveys, similar to the project of death featured in *Los Reyes*, signals a lethal, structural, and constitutive feature of the Mexican capitalist modernity.

The brutal transformation in social relations and subjectivities wrought by these extractive operations is most starkly addressed in the latter half of *Tempestad*. Arresting images of 'workers, landscapes, exhausted men and women defeated by dreams, by the minimum wage, by impunity, injustice, violence' (de Pedro Amatria 2020, p. 19) abound in this equally tempestuous section. While nothing in these sequences seems sensational enough to arrest our attention, everywhere one looks, there are residues of the harm that the economic, political, and social transformations of the last two decades have taken on the most disenfranchised communities. As Valencia has argued elsewhere, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 'marked the 'kick-off toward a vertiginous' and 'uneven trip toward the unknown', a sinuous road that led to Mexico's descent into 'Capitalismo Gore' (2014, p. 131). The steeper path into Mexico's nightmarish reality is therefore illustrated in the film by

[20] Both Gibler and Valencia signal the indebtedness of their theorization to Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. Focused on the experience of Tijuana, Valencia extends Mbembe's concept to foreground the brutal context of Mexico's northern border in which maquila workers, migrants and those caught within the transit of drug wars very much live in the shadow of the state's necropolitical and sovereign power.

the vertiginous entrance into the ravaged and precarious environments of Veracruz, which offer a poignant counterpart to the scenes of abjection witnessed by the narrator within the prison.

At first, images of sunlight seeping into the bus windows as it pulls into the city bus station offer a stark contrast with the darker hues captured during storms, which are consistent with Miriam's testimony of getting out of solitary confinement – "El Pozo" – and seeing the sun for the first time in days. Likewise, shots that exhibit the partly illuminated interior of a rundown hotel and women cleaning and preparing the accommodation are evocatively interconnected with Miriam's descriptions of the hospitality and care showed by her fellow inmates. However, this moment of respite is soon upended as Huezo quickly transitions to shots of dilapidated dark rooms and corridors, which foreshadow the reality of Miriam's new environment. Recalling her entry into the men's section to discuss her extortion payments, the protagonist narrates her literal entrance into hell as she describes seeing a mural of the *Santa Muerte* and a sign painted in the three-story building that read: 'Vosotros que entraís aquí, abandonad toda esperanza' [Abandon hope all ye who enter here]. The inscription, also written on the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*, in Ridge's view, emphasizes Miriam's 'precarious situation', while the panting of the folk saint serves 'as a fateful warning to those that fail to cover their prison dues' (Ridge 2020, p. 75).

More poignantly however, the presence of these symbols within the prison system signals what Sayak has called 'the triumphal inauguration of the *other economy*, the economy of organized crime', a sort of 'B-side' of neoliberal capitalism 'organized according to the demands of the capitalist structure and the market' (2018, p. 97). Fittingly, Miriam's descriptions of the 'debt collectors' (well-dressed and hair perfectly coiffed) makes these seem more reminiscent of the managerial class than of the ubiquitous visions of swaggering, flamboyant drug lords. To pay her dues, these men inform her, she will have to work as a prison cleaner until her initial fee is cleared. As Miriam describes her insertion into the hierarchical power structure of the prison,

Huezo pairs her testimony with shots filmed in the city's port (which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is an important hub for drug trafficking on the Gulf coast) moving the camera through its shipyards, fish factories and the bustling Mercado Unidad Veracruzana. Accompanied by images of shoppers, fishermen, fishmongers, and shipyard workers, among others, the voiceover explains how the prison functioned as a self-governing settlement with its own stores, markets, and brothels, and without policemen, uniforms or bar cells. A long section watching workers gutting fish and shelling shrimp in a fish factory ominously coincides with Miriam's description of the dystopic logistics of the prison, which underpins the sacrifice of disposable bodies as an essential commodity of organized criminal violence: 'once you make the initial $5000 payment, they ask for a weekly fee of $500, which is the fee they charge to protect you from themselves, to ensure they keep you alive for that week, until next week arrives'. Yet, even though Miriam's testimony captures the extreme conversion of bodies into raw material, the precarious assembly lines on which the camera lingers signal how, as one critic observes, 'under a regime of unending violence, […] violence becomes folded into the fabric of everyday existence' (Ramos 2019, n.p.), which confers a disturbingly ordinary feeling to the events narrated.

While the use of montage in the abovementioned sequence fully fleshes out Huezo's unconventional documentary aesthetic and her critical orientation towards a fractured social reality, the most remarked upon experiment with montage appears at the midway mark of the film. As one review poignantly suggest, 'just when we think we've got purchase on the cadences of Huezo's style, the register changes and we are in a windy field in a Big Top circus tent where bendy children are practicing trapeze moves' (Kiang 2016, n.p.). Disrupting the film's narrative structure, Huezo intercuts Miriam's account with a different voice that speaks of motherhood and nomadic life in an isolated community of circus people living in the margins of the road. Before any stable sense of character, place or trajectory solidifies, Huezo marks the transition

from the road movie segment with an enthralling shot of a woman walking in the middle of the dreary landscape as lightning strikes in the grey and ashy blue horizon.

Much closer to the observational style and slower tempo of Huezo's first feature, the following shots attentively track circus members –mostly women and children– as they set up the big top and prepare for a day of work. While in this segment, contrary to the initial testimony, we almost immediately see the woman to whom this second voice belongs to –Adela, whose name we will only learn in the film's end credits– and speech from circus members engaging with one another is overheard, the woman's testimony appears similarly unhinged from the images shown on-screen. This insistence on disembodied voices denaturalizes the segment's otherwise perfectly 'naturalistic' feel, pushing the spectator out of the familiar territories of observational cinema. However, although no immediate link between the two testimonies is made clear, the refusal to synchronize sound and image in both segments signals a kinship between the two experiences we are made to hear. Furthermore, the continuity edit between the segments – particularly through the use of sights and sounds of the storm – provides a coherence not initially given by the narrative, making the wind-swept rural surroundings quietly suggest the precarious circumstances that link them both.

Economies of death: disappearance and incarceration

Though the shift towards this second voice and the alternation between segments has earned the film many plaudits– warranting descriptions of *Tempestad* as a docu-fiction diptych– some critics have framed this abrupt turn as 'jarring' (Kasman 2016, n.p.), 'problematically structured' and lacking a 'unifying vision' (van Hoeij 2016, n.p.). In his review on *The Hollywood Reporter*, Boyd van Hoeij criticizes the stylistic differences between the two storylines as well as Huezo's decision to not immediately reveal the reason for Adela's inclusion in the documentary which,

as he claims, makes it difficult to piece these stories together (ibid.). However, while the overall effect is constant disruption of registers as the film progresses, given that the film shuttles from a naturalistic observational documentary mode through which we glimpse the day-to-day life of the circus performer to the highly composed images of the long bus voyage through stormy and highly policed landscapes, these fragmented plot lines seem aptly suited to capture the experience of trauma and spatial displacement of the conflict-ridden region. With such layering, Huezo invests in the poetic potential of cinema in order to mediate the experience of torture, loss and displacement–the most severe and direct corollaries to the War on Drugs– using a disjointed and non-linear narrative to present the women's testimonies. Yet, while it takes some time to adjust to the disjointed structure, some continuities do begin to emerge as Huezo's camera patiently follows the circus rehearsals, women carefully guiding the young acrobats through a series of routines and tending to each other, building a thematic thread of community, motherhood and care which offers a tenuous but significant link to Miriam's tale.

Immediately after presenting Adela's voice for the first time, Huezo moves to Miriam's account of her friendship with Juanita, a fellow inmate who 'adopted her' and took care of her during her imprisonment. Set against a tranquil coastal backdrop, these joyful memories of her friendship not only include inside jokes and daily dances with Juanita to the sound of Rigo Tovar's ballad 'Lamento de Amor' but also the sharing of more intimate details such as the narrator having one of her limbs amputated when she was a child. As the focus shifts back to Adela, Huezo's observational camera also captures the affective relationships and the sense of long-lasting community that exist between the circus women. In a highly emotional scene, which appears to shatter the formal rigour of Huezo's style, the film records the synchronous dialogue of the group of women as they sit in circle and wait for the director's cue. While at first they start to joke with each other about being interviewed, which results in uncontrollable and

hysterical gales of laughter, suddenly, as Adela starts to tear up, the laughter turns into a crying jag as she is embraced and supported by her companions. Expressing the importance of having them around to cope with life and the solace she finds in these moments, Adela makes laughter resume. Although this scene returns to the theme of solidarity, also explored through Miriam's relationship with Juanita, it nevertheless prompts again the viewer to question the source of Adela's grief and its relation to Miriam's tale. However, no sooner has Huezo offered this brief moment of respite than the filmmaker lets her camera slowly zero in on the face of a child fearfully reacting to the portentous thunder and the tent flaps smacking against the poles. Each of these warnings, which clearly forebode the coming storm, function as a harsh indication of Adela's trauma but also suggest a sinister connective thread to the roving torment of the ex-prisoner.

Finally, accompanied by images that exhibit the circus women fortifying the tent against the gusting winds and the heavy rain pouring through their dwelling, the connection coalesces in the film. With a crack in her voice, we hear Adela reveal the reason for her despair: ten years ago, her 20-year-old daughter Mónica was disappeared after leaving her home in Ecatepec –one of the country's largest and poorest municipalities with the highest rates of kidnapping, murder and feminicide. As Adela narrates receiving a gruesome text message from her daughter's captors, which explains they will send back her dismembered body if the family doesn't pay the ransom, Huezo exhibits scenes of masked police men manning a checkpoint through a series of slightly low-angle and medium shots, which bestows them with a sinister air. The pairing of these highly policed landscapes and the extortion narrated by Adela appear exemplary of what Gibler suggests is a 'new impossibility of reading codes of violence: are they "narcos" or police or soldiers? Is there any difference between those categories anymore?' (2016, p. 16). Thus, silhouetted against the darkened and thundering skies, the disquieting shots of police officers

wearing full masks and long black rain cloaks further estranges their appearance (making them look almost as grim reapers) figure as violent what would otherwise appear to be a quotidian sight. In this way, Huezo's cinematography foreshadows the fact that, as Gilber posits, 'police and armed forces in Mexico have essentially merged with organized crime' (2016, p. 137), which is made particularly salient by Adela's aggrieved narration of her dealings with the Mexican authorities and the complete uprooting of her family life that came as a result.

The catastrophic impact of Adela's belated revelation is figured in the film through shots of the storm falling upon the circus motorhomes and close-ups that show its destructive scale. While this climatological event functions to tie up the nightmarish tales of the two women, it also works as an eerie reminder of the disorienting, horrifying upturn of the everyday in the war-ravaged regions of the country, where, as historian Alexander Aviña notes, lives oscillate between a 'Foucauldian biopolitical arrangement in which organized crime seeks the control of entire populations and a type of "gore capitalism" […] based on the commodification and accumulation of death' (2018, p. 406). Therefore, while the aural testimonies present us with the individual stories of those most impacted by drug-related violence, the camera's encounters with a country blighted by collapsing infrastructures and the menacingly militarised police force function to index how political instability, violence and war are integral to capitalist profit-making. Through the use of blustery landscapes in the subsequent sequence, which captures the wind-beaten palm trees and reeds of grass blowing in the wind, Huezo forcefully registers the progressive destruction of the country's socio-ecological fabric. Correspondingly, in order to narrate the growing degradation of the prison's conditions, Huezo fuses Miriam's voiceover with the dystopic highways and landscapes of the Mexican periphery, illustrating what Valencia sees as 'the semiotics of economic, social, symbolic, and existential violence [that] is legible even

within the architecture that offers itself to the gaze' (2014, p. 131).

In what Huezo herself has named as the film's climax, the filmmaker frames a fierce storm tearing through the precarious and near-empty rural landscape of Veracruz, depicting the state of impoverishment and catastrophe that afflicts it. In rhythm with the exhaustion that besets this space, Miriam's memories appear haunted with accounts of bodies that bear the pressures of structural and overt violence. This exhausted landscape is then not just a spatial figure for Miriam's inner desolation and shock but is intimately tied to the brutalised worlds of capitalist hyper-exploitation for which she testifies. 'There is one image that's really etched on my mind', Miriam shares in the voiceover, reckoning with the intertwined material and mental effects produced by incarceration: 'I saw Juanita running all around the courtyard in no particular direction like a madwoman. When she ran, it was as if she couldn't recognize where she was. She crashed against the walls. Like a hunted animal that's reached the end of the field'. Rendering the imperceptible aspects of drug-related violence visible, Miriam's description of the horrifying conditions of corporeal attrition within the carceral space foregrounds the prison as a contemporary site of abjection as well as a novel space of extraction.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has prominently explored, the contemporary prison-industrial-complex treats bodies as territories primed for extraction, as the criminalization of certain populations functions a form of political as well as economic suppression aimed at managing the 'surplus': 'workers at the extreme edges, or completely outside, of restructured labor markets, stranded in urban and rural communities' (2009, p. 71). U.S. carceral geographies, she contends, constitute places produced through 'organized abandonment' and premature death for capitalist exploitation, stealing time by extracting people from their communities, their families, and their lives, which are seen part of an equally exploitable nature (Gilmore 2017, p. 221). However, following Gilmore, what Paley observes taking place in Mexico is a different yet intrinsically

related dynamic to this 'prison fix', in which, as she succinctly puts it, where jobs vanish, terror follows (2020, n.p.). In this regard, she claims, instead of a sprawling revenue-hungry prison complex to manage the youth, low-waged workers and those pushed into illegal or informal economies by forced circumstances, what can be observed across the Mexican and Central American territories is a drug-war industrial complex in which massacres and enforced disappearance function as exemplary tools for social control (ibid.). This brutal yet crucial feature proves to be the connective tissue that threads together the tortured, trafficked, disappeared and displaced bodies that the film brings to the surface, spotlighting one area where the war on drugs has undeniably succeeded: 'perfecting an economy of death at the nexus between states, militaries, paramilitaries, and capital' (Velasco and Frens-String 2016, p. 105). Marking Miriam's further descent into this underworld, the second story of the film's apex makes these connections even more apparent, displaying how this brutal nexus is amply registered in the ruinous geographies that the film traverses.

Held together by tracking shots of the bus passing through a PEMEX gas station and a security checkpoint guarded by soldiers, the sequence foregrounds Miriam's encounter – following instructions that led her to a dark passageway – with Martin, a young immigrant detainee, with his hands tied and a frightened look on his face. In Ridge's interpretation, given that these visuals forebode the young boy's brutal fate at the hands of the cartel's prison heads, the coupling of Miriam's testimony with the sight of the oil company, which still serves a 'national symbol' as well as an 'achievement often mythicized by the PRI', functions 'as a symbolic reminder of the government's sinister dealings with the Gulf cartel' (2020, p. 76). However, while I agree with Ridge's assessment, the setting of the sequence – the hydrocarbon-rich Gulf territories – would suggest rather a more complex arrangement, given that, as Correa Cabrera has documented, one of the soundest successes of the decade-long conflict has been

the growing transnational corporate control over land resources, signalled by the recent opening of offshore oil and gas drilling in the Gulf Coast to foreign investors and by the ever-increasing militarization of this region (2017, p. 12). Surrounded here by military convoys, the petrol station – an iconic fixture in the imaginary of the road-genre – seems to implicitly double as a symbol of the intimate links between the state and transnational capital in the making of the unjustified bloodletting that batters these sites, which have been converted into key strategic locations for drug and human trafficking.

Fittingly, in lieu of the off-screen brutality narrated, Huezo makes the viewer linger on shots of precarious labourers bearing the wind's full force and on rural landscapes ruptured by violent gusts of wind (causing even the camera to tremble), fully capturing a cracked open territory hit by the ravages of neoliberalism. Against the shots of the now empty countryside – which mirrors the massive displacement of the region and nation at large – Miriam narrates the traumatic aftershock of the violence to which she has born witness: 'When I opened my eyes, Martín was dead. There was blood coming out of his ears and mouth […] Then, in the darkness, I was able to make out bodies piled up in there. Everything became muffled, I felt as if something had broken in me, something good. Such fear, that's what it's about'. Drowning her voice, the howling sounds of the storm become increasingly loud and startling and eventually take over the entire soundscape, materializing the demobilizing and overarching force of the terror inflicted upon her. As Huezo herself has stated in interviews, 'los mecanismos para sembrar miedo son casi como técnicas de relojería, como técnicas muy precisas, con el mismo objetivo: que es el de paralizarte, el de desmovilizar a la gente. El de silenciar' [the mechanisms to sow fear operate almost like clockwork, with very precise techniques, with the very same objective: which is to paralyze, to demobilize people. To silence]. Such impairment, which is allegorized here by the trembling camera and the near total blockage of speech, thus indexes what Valencia has

diagnosed as 'the social aphasia that surrounds the spectacular and quotidian violence that flood[s] Mexico' (2019, n.p.). As Paley contends, furthermore, the frenzy of disappearances, the criminalization of victims, the unknown perpetrators, and the 'drumbeat of the drug war' have served to create confusion regarding the political nature of neoliberal disappearance and death (2020, n.p.). Yet, as she continues, 'if one looks carefully', their 'widespread practice […] over the last thirteen years nonetheless tell a political story' (Paley 2020, n.p.). Thus, even though Huezo's documentary remains unmoored from any direct articulation of a political message, it is precisely its withdrawal of the 'recognizably cinematic, immediately sensational event' (Nixon 2011, p. 13) that allows us to look carefully at the 'political nature' of the current tempest: an intensifying neoliberal economic and ecological onslaught and, to follow Paley, the 'expanded counterinsurgency' at work that underwrites it (2016, p. 143)

And yet, the film's denouement does not centre on grassroots terror, fear, and familial/communal displacement, but rather another kind of political frame, which urges us to think 'outside of, *under*, beside state solutions to what the political could be' (Gómez-Barris 2018). Towards the end of the film and marking the end of the long journey, *Tempestad* makes us dwell on the mounting struggles of Adela to find her loved one and on the daily labours performed by both women to heal the personal and collective ruptures. In Adela's final segment, Huezo pushes forward visual associations and juxtapositions of the circus night performance to stage both Adela's vulnerability and fortitude. At first, visuals of the fog-covered and desolate surroundings of the circus accompany Adela's narration of the extreme hardships she and her family have faced: 'We've spent many years now looking for my daughter. It's been a very tough struggle, very painful. It's been 10 years. The authorities have extorted money from us, they've lied to us'. The close-ups of an altar dedicated to Mónica on the motorhome's dashboard, which makes us glimpse at the trickling raindrops on the windshield, emphasize this damage. In the

following scene, an over-the-head shoulder take shows the ringmaster putting on her makeup in front of a mirror, 'symbolic of the family's hiding following death threats from the local police' (Ridge 2020, p. 82). However, as the camera holds onto Adela's reflection while she continues to put on her thick clown makeup, her voice-over declares that she will no longer hide in fear, no matter what the consequences, imbuing this quotidian ritual with a vital potency. According to Alex de Boer, the association of Adela's courageous voice with her transformative reflection, makes the latter appear as a 'paradoxical filter we must see through', enticing us 'to look past the white powder, even past Adela's skin…[into] another Mexico hiding in there' (2016). Considered alongside the sequence that follows, that of the circus tent lighting up against the dark surroundings, this metaphoric reading of this scene as a point of entry into another less-visible ground proves generative for thinking of the images of solidarity, hope and survival on which the film closes.

In what several critics describe as one of the most remarkable final shots in recent memory (Kiang 2016; Rodríguez 2020), underwater images are made to frame the physical and traumatic reverberations of Miriam's imprisonment. Miriam's return home–signalled by the abrupt transition from low-lit shots of the bus interior to a panoramic view of the Caribbean Sea and its accompanying blue skies– did not offer the respite it promised to bring: 'When I eventually faced the fact of being alone in my home with my son, I began to shut myself in. I thought that if I left my house, they'd arrest me again or they'd kidnap me. I couldn't be in places where there were a lot of people anymore. Somebody else had to take Leo to school because I was no longer able to. That thing that happens to me, the trembling, which has been happening since Martin was killed, it's a trembling that I can't control, my whole face falls apart. Sometimes I even catch myself talking to him. Martin is still here, with me'. Stressing further the disjointedness Miriam feels, Huezo juxtaposes close-ups of the beach idyll with the heightened

sounds of wind heard in the film's climactic sequence, which signals the death and pain that accompanied Miriam's sudden freedom. Soon, however, the camera dips beneath the water surface, capturing the barrenness of a sinkhole's floor. As the camera slowly tracks the depths of a *cenote* – the underground river systems that mark the Yucatán peninsula and often tied to Mayan cosmology – images of lifeless limbs of sunken trees remind the spectator of the ghosts that continue to haunt her. From this submerged visuality the camera tips the film into a much less naturalistic realm to index the way the narrator experiences home as a haunted and defamiliarized reality. But as the viewer is faced with this wasted-like scenario, the final voice-over conveys her ongoing struggles to combat the trauma and her yearnings for her son to live without it: 'For many months I slept with Leo in my arms. He got used to sleeping like that, the two of us, feeling afraid. But there was a point when I realized what I was doing to my son. I realized that I couldn't let the damage spread to him'. As Miriam shares her realization, an upward angle slowly captures the silhouette of an amputee subject floating at the mouth of the cenote, providing the first and only glimpse of Huezo's protagonist. In using this submerged perspective, this symbolic image of resurgence – which ultimately establishes futurity – offers a corrective to the 'traps of the obvious, the sordid and the poverty-stricken' (de Pedro Amatria 2016, p. 19) that nourishes fictional and non-fictional approaches to the country's conflict. Pushing forward the possibilities of poetic cinema, Huezo captures an alternative viewpoint to the everyday horrors documented *ad nauseam* by mainstream media, human rights commissions and the 'stylized hyperrealism of the fiction-film boom' (MacLaird 2013, p. 477), drawing to the surface submerged stories of injustice and life in war's wake.

The weighted implications that *Tempestad*'s stunning closing shot carries, however, can only be seen in relation to Adela's concluding sequence. The intensity infusing this final scene stems as much from its poetic expressiveness as it does from its interdependence with the other

mother's story, their individual tales interweaved as the 'the front and back of the same experience' (Rodriguez 2020, p. 41). Dazzling and entrancing in equal measure, the closing sequence of Adela's segment signals a refusal of the generic images and clichéd depictions of drugs, violence and corruption. Accompanying Adela's final voiceover, which communicates her determination for locating her missing child– 'At this stage in life, I'm not afraid. I'd rather go out and keep searching'– Huezo avoids any temptation for explanation and opts instead for an almost dreamlike evocation of the buoyant world of the circus community. The women we have seen working tirelessly, teaching acrobatics, crying and laughing with Adela appear now fully adorned with their towering, colourful headdresses, waiting to appear on stage. At this juncture, we see medium-shots of Adela in her ringmaster costume looking at the acrobats with pride and ready to perform, infusing the images with an imposing quality that does not fit neatly with the conventional depictions of what Emmelheinz has called 'the victim of state indolence' that narconarratives prefigure (2019, p. 5). Furthermore, as the sequence links shots of Adela with that of her companions, these images do not only invoke her fierce persistence but also point to the solidarity, care and support between these women as a crucial sustaining force. In this sequence, we therefore find a keen cypher of the constellation of women that continue to 'survive, and even dare to thrive in environments that challenge their very existence' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, p. 3).

As Paley contends, within a climate of fear that has taken root in the precarious territories of the country, the ongoing searches by mothers and family members of the disappeared to find their missing relatives represent perhaps the most significant examples of grassroots resistance against the 'neoliberal war' (Paley 2020, p. 145). In Paley's view, through the concrete work of searching for the disappeared, these women-led collectives are demanding justice, bringing memory to life, and insisting that these crimes cannot be repeated. But, even more pressingly,

given that land searches for the disappeared are deeply grounded in community practices and work towards rebuilding the ruptured social fabric, 'these groups help us imagine a way out of the ongoing crisis of violence in Mexico, and ensure that we do not forget the terrible violations people have experienced, often at the hands of the state' (2020). While Huezo shies away from the specifics and includes no hard data about these current struggles, Adela's final words anchor and give voice to this critical effort: 'I would like to tell her that I am waiting for her […] And wherever she might be, I want her to know that we won't stop until she comes back to us'. Thus, indexing a broader off-screen reality, *Tempestad*'s poetic mode allows us to bear witness to the daily struggles and acts of practice that run parallel to 'the machine of death and destruction that the Mexican State has become' (EZLN). In a subtle rendering of these communities of struggle – for which the warmly-lit and flag-adorned tent hovering in darkness almost acts as a stand-in – these closing sequences end up with a quiet yet powerful paean to lives lived against the sustained presence of death.

Through the road film format, *Tempestad* figuratively departs from 'la figura de la víctima como locus de la enunciación testimonial' [the figure of the victim as locus of testimonial enunciation] (Cabral 2012, p. 2) to tilt the lens towards the precarious sites and landscapes that testify for both the latent threat and the brutality of the decade-long conflict. As the 'phantoms and terrors' of former cultural traditions have 'mutated into something more diffuse' (Wimmer 2009, p. 580), the atmospheric motifs in *Tempestad* (rain, wind, fog) function to suggests something which permeates each and every shot: a violence we do not always see but that is always there. If, as Paley articulates, 'lo que estamos experimentando en México es una forma de contrainsurgencia ampliada […] que ya no necesita combatientes, ni se limita a atacar grupos con practicas insurgentes' [what we are witnessing in Mexico is a form of expanded counterinsurgency […] that no longer needs combatants, nor is it limited to attack groups with

insurgent practices] (2019, p. 16), the hazardous atmosphere Huezo captures seems to attests for this diffuseness.

Yet, as these stormy conditions we see and hear appear affixed to symbolic sites of the state and of transnational capital (highways, checkpoints, oil-fields, logistics industries, fish processing plants), Huezo approximates this atmosphere as the consequence of different but not mutually exclusive forces: an environment where incarceration, death and disappearance terrifyingly coexist with a functional model of capitalist development. Through visual associations, these apparently separate realities – that is, one illicit (condensed in Miriam and Adela's aural testimonies) and one legal (depicted through the atmospheric visuals) – are ultimately interlocked in *Tempestad* to prefigure violence 'no como la presentan los medios, es decir, como dispersa, esporádica y anómala' [not as presented by media, that is, disperse, sporadic and anomalous] (Segato 2014, 48). Rather, what these juxtapositions insinuate, is a violence nurtured by 'the interconnections between the state and the paramilitary; the prison and enforced disappearance; or, between paramilitary led-dispossession and the legal economy' (Paley 2020, p. 14). Huezo's formal style and experimentation thus breaks down the stable signifiers through which violence becomes figured in order to engineer a critical and spectatorial disposition toward the politico-economic structures that make violence possible.

This last statement can similarly be applied to García's project. While Huezo's turn towards the landscape operates through a tension between materiality and metaphor – sometimes acting as a substitute for the absent body of the protagonist and other times to invoke a rarefied space – both Huezo and García's documentary filmmaking rehearses what Llamas Rodriguez calls 'the question how to "environmentalize violence"', that is, a concern over how best to grapple with physically dispersed aftermaths, how to render violence that is inapprehensible to the senses and how to trace implications that exceed the principles of

causation (2018, p. 27). Both filmmakers approach the contemporary landscape as a scenery of exhaustion, taking recourse of slow and defamiliarized perception that attunes the viewer to the political, social and ecological shocks and aftershocks of the conflict. While much visibility has been given to the framing of spectacularized displays of violence, these filmmakers take the documentary to new places that are not related to the visible and the immediate but to long processes that need to be persistently observed to be fully understood. The next chapter, extends this last claim further by considering the work of two authors that make use of the documentary poetic form to look into the lasting legacies of capitalist expansionism and prior cycles of accumulation that endure and give shape to the present Mexican neoliberal border regimes.

Chapter three:

Neoliberal frontiers and border regimes in Balam Rodrigo's *Libro Centroamericano de los Muertos* and Sara Uribe's *Antígona González*

A year into the signing of the much-hailed 2016 Colombia Peace Accords, an event that soon enough began to reveal its alignment to the government's extractivist priorities (Grajales 2016), Teo Ballvé, a journalist and former editor of the NACLA Report on the Americas, published an essay entitled 'Frontiers: Remembering the forgotten lands' that traces the long, violent and ongoing production of the Colombian rural countryside as frontier of extraction. The concept of frontier, as Ballvé explains, refers to a socio-spatial formation fashioned for the unrestricted exploitation and extraction of resources and labour upon which capitalist expansion necessarily depends (Ballvé 2017, p. 171). Frontier-production is achieved through processes of representation that, in Colombia, hinged upon racist discourses of civilization and barbarism that worked to depict these lands as archaic and unproductively developed. As Ballvé underscores then, rather than a space simply found at the edges of the nation, frontiers are geographical projects of peripheralization by which rural and other racialized ecologies are violently transformed into wild resources available for global capital (p. 172) Hence, as Ballvé propounds the need to attend to Colombia's frontier zones as a way to reveal the forces of exploitation and appropriation that continue to smooth the way for the erasure of lands and populations, it is perhaps not surprising that he summons the iconic fictional village of Macondo as an apt allegory of the brutal forces of frontier-making in Colombia.

As anyone who has read Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude [1967]) knows, Macondo starts off as a sleepy hamlet whose peaceful life is utterly transformed by the arrival of the North American Banana company. With a cyclonic

force, the company transforms the local staple into a lucrative export cash crop and turns the village into a bustling enclave complete with railways, irrigation networks and electricity. Yet, the apparent flux of material prosperity hides the traumatic production of this crop, which has left a ravaged environment and the transformation of Macondo's peasantry into cheap exploited labour. But once labour unrest begins to brew, the state colludes with the American company to make the workers disappear. In what is perhaps the most memorable episode of the novel, striking plantation workers are ruthlessly massacred by state police, after which a company executive unleashes a torrential downpour that erases all evidence of the slaughter. The town is immediately placed under martial law to ensure both the company's and the state's version of events is the only one disseminated. The years-long deluge tears down every infrastructure that was once erected, leaving villagers 'slopping through muddy streets in a stupor of oblivion' (Ballvé 2017, p. 169) until a final windstorm brings Macondo's catastrophic demise. Depicted in the novel's onset as a natural idyll, the brutal transformation of the Colombian rural landscape and livelihoods into available resources for the industries of the world is thus for Ballvé the perfect précis for a region torn asunder by decades of war and violent accumulation, for as he states, the real magic at work in Colombia's countryside has never been some supernatural force but 'the cold, hard forces of capitalism' (ibid).Yet, rather than a localised phenomenon (that is, a Colombian one), what Ballvé evidences through figures that range from *narco* state-owners to technocratic planners is how the struggle for resources has always been depended on the creation of zones of exclusion that, like Macondo, evoke literal or metaphorical frontiers: zones 'to make live and let die; but above all, make money' (p. 179). To turn our critical attention to the world's frontiers, or what Ballvé calls the 'Macondo's of our world', particularly in face of the current attempts to efface these violent histories, can thus help to reveal the centrality of these

supposedly peripheral spaces for the creation and maintenance of the unjust violence on which our current system has been erected.

Mobilizing Ballvé's conceptualization of frontier logics as a space-making manoeuvres by which the 'cold, hard forces of capitalism' and state violence as proxy organize bodies and environments for the purposes of extraction, this chapter is interested in how these spatialized dynamics are equally felt, experienced and mediated in representations of the Mexican geographical borderlands. Bringing to centrality the peripheralization of communities traumatically integrated into economic formations based on extraction is certainly part of an ampler critical and artistic inquiry into the structural and accumulative violence that shapes the outer boundaries of the Americas. As part of this undertaking, in the last ten years, as María Ospina has pointed out in her analysis of contemporary Colombian cinema, a growing field of critical and artistic production has increasingly turned to the violent peripheral spaces that have often been represented as premodern, empty and uninhabited, 'lands rich in exploitable resources that await proper incorporation into the nation' (Ospina 2017, p. 249). Within this trend, as Sebastián Saldaña-Gutierrez has recently highlighted, cultural practitioners seek to 'vindicate' stories that have been elided by main discourses about violence, making visible the systematic exploitation that have affected these ecosystems and the marginalized communities that inhabit them (2020, p. 35). In the Argentinian cultural scene, for example, Gisella Heffes's study of contemporary rural narratives has stressed a shift in the representation of the pampean landscape that has played alongside the implementation of neoliberal policies, since the *pampa*, traditionally figured as 'untamed', appears in twenty-first century texts as a space increasingly intervened by the global economy and the unregulated state (2020, p. 86). In her 2017 article, Ospina has also identified a similar attention to peripheral areas and 'the frontiers of the nation' in artistic explorations of Colombia's recent history, a turn driven by historical dynamics such as

the intensification of the armed conflict, the militarization of many rural areas and the territorial changes produced by the expansion of extractive economies (2017, p. 248). For Ospina, the focus on the rarely featured rural regions of Colombia, serves as a focal point for unraveling the complex sociopolitical and economic issues that constitute the root causes of the violent conflict and for exploring the impact on those lives who have endured its brunt.

The concerns that motivate many of the works analyzed by Ospina, which are a focus on regions that have been the epicenter of armed conflict and capitalist extractive economies, as well as a preoccupation with the mainstream codification of these spaces as backdrops of war or unpopulated terrains in need of management (p. 250), play also a critical function in the recent cultural discourse around Mexico's borderlands. Fiction and nonfiction films like *Cuates de Austrialia* (2011), by Everardo González; *A morir a los desiertos* (2017), by Marta Ferrer; *Laberinto Yo'eme* (2019) by Sergi Pedro Ross; *Sin señas particulares* (2020), by Fernanda Valadez; and novels such as *Por el lado salvaje* (2011), by Nadia Villafuerte; *Las tierras arrasadas* (2013) by Emiliano Monge, *La fila india* (2013), by Antonio Ortuño; *Basura* (2018) by Sylvia Aguilar Zeleny, have similarly shifted the view to the peripheralized border spaces where the neoliberal regime of accumulation and the war around illicit drug trade has turned these territories into sites of violent spoliation. The parallels with the dynamics that Ospina describes, are of course not coincidental, and are undoubtedly linked to what observers and policy makers have (problematically) dubbed the "Colombianisation" of Mexico, a perceived shared volatile mix of extreme corruption, violence and "mayhem" that is rather, as Camilo Pérez-Bustillo observes, a mutual experience of the expansionist destructive model that has capitalized from the realignments of drug trade (2016). Yet, that these conditions are more palpable in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, relates also to the fact that these territories have long been entangled in the terrors of capitalist

frontierization and have functioned, in Gómez-Barris's words, as the 'archetypal space of colonial and militarized violence in the hemisphere' (2019, p. 159).

As the historian Greg Grandin accounts, in the late nineteenth-century, the United States turned from its westward expansion to developing economic enterprises abroad. The southwest borderlands (northern, for Mexico) stood for the U.S. as a wide-open threshold from which to move forward toward 'an ever more bountiful future' (2017, n.p.). To allow for this enclosure, Indigenous peoples that inhabited these lands were caught up once again in the tropes of savagery and barbarism and soon, militias were deployed to cleanse them from the lands, thereby opening northern Mexico for US and Mexican businessmen to capitalize on the region's mineral wealth. As the border moved, Grandin posits, the history of the border became 'one of nearly unimaginable terror and grief, land theft, ethnic cleansing, forced marches, concentrated resettlement, torture, war and rape' (ibid.). Harsha Walia echoes Grandin's account and advocates to look at the contemporary US-Mexico border, which now expands in the name of 'security' with the Mexican government and its (para)militarized forces as proxy, as animated by similar logics and ambitions (2021). As Walia warns, since the border has been foundationally organized through, and hence is inseparable from, an economy of dispossession rooted in colonization and racial subordination that turned both land and people into property, its contemporary form, cannot be read as mere 'politics of movement per se' (p. 24). According to Walia, more than a racist weapon to exclude migrants, the contemporary U.S.- Mexico border must be understood as a key stratagem for the maintenance, with militarized enforcement, of a system of subjugation that, as it engineers these border areas as sites of brutality and death, works to create a pool of hyper-exploitable cheapened and disposable labour (ibid.). Hence, despite historical differences to the specific rural contexts of the cultural outputs analysed by Ospina, given that many of the abovementioned cultural texts engage both the rural and urban areas of

the Mexican borderlands, these works similarly respond to the interrelation of warfare, state policing, and the expansion of global capital that has turned the peripheralized zones in the Americas into brutal outposts of exploitation and violence.

Moreover, the projection of peripheral sites as dangerous spaces that need to be intervened and surveilled is a concern similarly shared by these texts. As Carroll explains in her study of NAFTA-era border art, in the 1960s the vast *fronterizo* regions were still coded as 'barbaric, empty, seditious, and illicit in a DF[Mexico City]-centered imaginary, matched only by the United States' representation of the free spirit and barbarism of the Wild West' (p. 211). This imaginary help move forward the establishment of urban development and beautification 'proto-neoliberal' agendas that formalized the PRI's high modernizing ambitions for the redevelopment of Mexico. The intention of these projects, which included shopping and museums complexes, was to create an image of continuity between Mexico and the US or what Carroll calls an 'hybridized economic-aesthetic intervention', that would legitimatize a system of industrial-border crossing whereby raw materials could be imported into Mexico duty-free, assembled or manufactured with inexpensive Mexican labor, and exported back to the U.S. (ibid.). From the 1970s onwards, as market-state master narratives remapped these lands and communities for transnational consumption, the projected image of the Mexican-US corridor was revamped from a rugged and untamed terrain into a space of 'unfettered (entrepreneurial) freedom' and hybrid cosmopolitanism (p. 212).

The revisions exacted on the Mexican constitution in the name of these agendas secured Mexico's reputation as a leader of offshore processing free trade zones and fostered a conducive climate for 'the unparalleled post-1994 *maquilaization* of Mexico's northern border'(ibid.). In the years following NAFTA, the revamped image of border cities like Tijuana, as Diana Palaversich notes, began to spread across the international press, among them Time Magazine, who in 2001

dedicated a special number to the city called 'Welcome to Amexica', depicting Tijuana as a crucible of the cultural hybridization of this 'brave new world *globalizado*' (2012, p. 100). But as NAFTA began to exacerbate rural dispossession and the number of undocumented Mexican male entrants to the U.S. rose precipitously, as the anthropologist Gilberto Rosas notes, popular and news media began to recalibrate the image of borderlands as outlaw topographies packed with 'undocumented migrants turned terrorists or parochial peasants turned vengeful, violent, armed narcogangsters' (2012, p. 9). From late 1990s, as the Mexican-U.S. corridor began to be elided with all things *narco,* the blurring of antinarcotic efforts with anti-immigration activities transformed the international boundary into a 'new neoliberal frontier' (Rosas 2012, p. 53), since the image of the savage of the nineteenth-century frontier 'was resurrected to legitimize a new low-intensity warfare' (ibid.). Hence, as Mexico inaugurated the US-funded regime of security warfare (explicitly modelled after the U.S. aid package Plan Colombia), the northern border featured throughout much war reportage as one of the most prominent 'ungoverned' spaces on the continent.

As this security discourse propelled the re-inscription of the country's borders as unruly, negative territorialities in need of policing and military intervention, more recent works have move away from the emphasis on the urban margins of the main border cities towards *espacios fronterizos* where structural conditions such as the displacement of local dwellers, the weakening of local economies by megaprojects and extractive industries, the precarization of labour, and gender and sexual violence, threaten the survival of border communities. Whereas prior border narratives such as Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz's *Tijuana City Blues* (1999), Luis Humberto Crosthwhite's *Estrella de la Calle Sexta* (2000), Federico Campbell's *Transpeninsular* (2000), thematized social anxieties related to drug consumption, corruption, institutional collapse, and urban criminality (Palaversich 2012, p. 101), contemporary visual and written accounts of the

border also index the terror, displacement, enforced disappearances and socio-ecological havoc that wrecks both rural and peri-urban environments.[21] Furthermore, since, as Tod Miller diagnoses in *Empire of Borders,* U.S. policies of border externalization have made Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and the 'spaces near the train tracks' a "new" US-Mexico frontier (2019, p. 40) some of these narratives have likewise turned to this formerly relegated spatiality. Julie A. Ward, for example, in a recent analysis on the representations of the 'other' Southern border (centred on the work of Nadia Villafuerte), reads border literature's contemporary turn southwards against the context of increased immigration enforcement and police abuse in the rural and urban areas of southern Mexico to advance the ways in which this engagement might foster 'more humane proposals for safer borders' (2019). Yet, the characteristics that I have outlined before, add a deeper layer of complexity to these narratives since, while heavily invested in a localized context of violence, they also leave ample room to read the violent political disorder at the country's borders less as a marker of poor state provision and more as an integral part of global accumulation dynamics.

In this chapter, I therefore turn to two literary works published over the last decade and written about (and from) the country's northern and southern borderlands that allow me to examine how contemporary texts might bring to the fore the violence that lies beneath the projects of securitization upon these lands: Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* (Surplus 2012; Les Figues Press 2016) and Balam Rodrigo's *Libro Centroamericano de los Muertos* (2018). Both of these texts attend to contemporary migrations taking place at the intersection of border securitization, trade integration policies, (para) militarization, and also engage border topographies rarely

[21] For instance, the 2019 documentary *Laberinto Yo'eme* directed by Sergi Pedro Ross focuses on the struggles for survival of the Yaqui tribe that lives in the Sonoran Desert, which situates the high consumption of crystal meth in these communities against a context of the neoliberal water-grabs of the Yaqui River and the (para) militarization of the Northern border states.

featured in contemporary Mexican letters: *Antígona González* sets the story of its protagonist in the Tamaulipas-Texas border region, while *Libro Centroamericano de los Muertos* opens from the transboundary waters of the Suchiate River shared by both the state of Chiapas and the department of San Marcos in Guatemala.[22] In both of these borderscapes, the technologies enlisted to execute border management and maintain the logics of exclusion came swiftly after anti-narcotic operations designated these sites as criminally-strategic areas for human smuggling and drug-trafficking, which brought about a heightened military presence that disrupted previous patters of cross-border mobility and exchange (Correa-Cabrera 2013; Galemba 2017). These geographies therefore make legible the process that anthropologist Rebecca Galemba calls 'securitized neoliberalism', that is, the espousing of neoliberal economic policies and logics with hemispheric security agendas, which, rather than providing a sense of safety, have led to an exacerbation of insecurity and furthered the criminalization of marginalized populations (2018, p. 17). As Elana Zilberg has similarly argued, the simultaneous advance of neoliberal reforms and security policies have resulted in the production of 'neoliberal securityscapes', novel spatial arrangements where the anxieties over insecurities produced by neoliberalism (crime, marginality and migration) are mobilized to authorize the introduction, under the color of law, of increasingly repressive state responses, as well as of violent extralegal reactions from communities and other actors (2011, p. 10). The production of Tamaulipas/Texas and Chiapas/San Marcos areas as securitized neoliberal environments has therefore been profoundly perceptible in the sudden fortification of these zones through border patrols, containment infrastructures and the weaponization of nature, but also particularly observable in its extreme corporeal costs: a high rate of disappearances, drownings and migrant killings.

[22] While this geography has been scantly represented in literature, there are few relevant examples such as Guillermo Lavín short-story 'Llegar a la orilla' (1994), which takes place in the city of Reynosa and Martin Solares's *Los Minutos Negros* (2006), which is set in the capital city of Tampico during the turbulent 1970s.

Uribe and Rodrigo's works respond specifically to these spatial formations and its brutal outcomes. Written at the height of Mexico's militarized security strategy, Uribe's *Antígona González* is a book-length play in verse in response to the discovery of two clandestine mass graves of mostly Central American migrants in 2010 and 2011 in the proximities of San Fernando, a rural village that sits along a strip of desert known as the 'Frontera Chica' (Small Border) –the northeastern stretch of the Tamaulipas border with Texas. In her long poem, Uribe documents these violent "incidets" through its splicing together of sources produced as by-products of these massacres (legal documents, crime obituaries, interviews with families, activists blogs) as well as other textual artefacts that respond to other geopolitical realities (dictatorships in the Southern Cone, the Colombian armed conflict, the Iraq war). These sources are combined with the story of Antígona González, whose fictional interventions are interspersed with these assembled components. The character tells the story of her young brother Tadeo, a casualized worker kidnapped on a bus on his way to the border either by militarized border forces or by drug traffickers (no one knows), and of the search for him—until he is found in the mass graves of San Fernando. In its assemblage of such materials, as I will explore, the poem deftly suggest the relationship between the borderlands' socio-economic decline, border enforcement, extra-judicial violence, and capitalist warfare, hinting at the nexus between the slaying of working-class bodies, and the dynamics of the neoliberal border regime that have turned this space into both a site of dereliction and a key area from which to preserve multinational capitalist accumulation and access to a extractible (and thus disposable) labour force.

Standing at the other edge of the territory, in a moment when the conditions of disposability wrought by border securitization have both intensified and become naturalized, Rodrigo's text *Libro Centroamericano de los Muertos* published six years later, enacts a critique similar to Uribe, revisiting both the same landscape she had sought out years earlier and reckoning with

a new one, as the Southern watery border with Guatemala began to appear similarly haunted by both the corpses and the surveillance of the national police turned frontier patrols. Using a similar technique to Uribe, Rodrigo intercuts transcriptions from testimony by Central American migrants, photographs of migration in the 1980s in the wake of Guatemala's genocidal scorched-earth campaigns, contemporary journalistic reports and notes that expand upon and cite sources for the supporting historical material that appears throughout the collection. The geographical spread of the poems, however, is far wider than that of *Antígona González* and the effects of the militarized policies of the years in between have also expanded the migrants' corporeal vulnerability to even starker forms, as Rodrigo spends more time dissecting the violent deaths suffered by them than does Uribe. Some of the poems are narrated by migrants from beyond the grave, in brutal detail: 'me mató a patadas/ […] tiró mi cuerpo al río, al pútrido Coatán/ donde antes lanzó también al niño [he kicked me to death/ […] he threw my body into the river, into the putrid Coatán/ where he threw the child before] (p. 32). It is then through these figures that point towards the wasting of the body and the wasting of environments, that the work speaks for the militarized reconfiguration of the Chiapas/Guatemala landscape as a site where structural forces and forms of power subject bodies and place to degradation and violence.

The fragmented and corroded borderland geographies that the poetic texts inscribe, is then crucial to note, also vividly capture these geographies' uniquely fraught relationship with the country's twenty-first-century modernity in its extractivist mode. As an extractive zone within an industrialized national interior, Northeastern Tamaulipas is, as Chad Broughton already prefigured in his analysis of the region's inequalities at the turn of the millennium, a space where:

> fábricas ultramodernas, limpias y eficientes están localizadas en el mismo panorama donde encuentra barrios llenos de misera, con viviendas ingeniosamente construidas de bloques de cemento, madera de embalaje desechadas por las fábricas y láminas de metal corrugado. [ultra-modern, clean and efficient factories are located within the same panorama where you find quarters filled with misery, with dwellings ingeniously built with blocks of cement, wood from the packing discarded from the factories, and sheets of corrugated steel.] (qtd. in Correa-Cabrera 2015, p. 340.).

Hence, while the maquiladoras, fields of sorghum and oil wells locate this region at the heart of the national economy, the rural communities and expansive slums that surround these industries, inhabited by both local farmers and a rural, dispossessed, and internally displaced labour force, have also played into the conceptions of this area as a sacrifice zone. As Uribe herself has addressed in a recent essay on the growing violence in her home-state, the plans to expand the oil and gas fracking boom that has lured scores of drillers to Southern Texas into the equally fertile region across the Mexican border where shale gas sits underground – the Burgos Basin– have also authorized the making of Tamaulipas into a fertile ground for land-grabs and lethal violence (2020, n.p.). Theorizing on her own approach to this violence, the poet recognizes her own incapacity to apprehend such totality since doing so requires to accept 'que la muerte, que los cuerpos, que la produccción y acumulación de cuerpos muertos es el modelo ecónomico de este siglo' [that death, that the bodies, that the production and accumulation of dead bodies is the economic model of this century] (2020, n.p.). Yet, the processes documented in Uribe's book-length poem as well as in Rodrigo's collection, which include the ravaging of these landscapes and the expendability of those living and crossing through the arid shrublands of

Tamaulipas or through the putrid rivers of Chiapas, effectively capture the layered deposits of social brutalities within these uneven border geographies.

Approaching *Antígona Gónzalez* in juxtaposition with *Libro Centroamericano* offers then important insights into how contemporary border literature grapples with the frontier-making and neoliberal securitization dynamics that intersect in the parched worlds of the Mexican northern deserts and which have expanded into the towns and rivers of the southern border states. As Tod Miller has examined 'the frontier zone now expands hundreds of miles to the north from the Guatemalan border as far as Oaxaca and Veracruz […] zig-zag[ing] through Zapatista territories and places of rich natural resources, ranging from hydroelectric dams to petroleum deposits' (2019, p. 152). It is in this context that the two texts' depictions of worlds saturated by death and disappearance take on their full meaning, for they showcase the concerns arising from a bolstered and expanded strategy of borders that will enable the colonization and full spread of capitalism over the borderlands' natural and human environments, leaving only destruction behind. Studied in tandem, the two texts' attempts to keep in view the social relations that organise these 'forgotten' frontier environments, as I will explore, offers a productive way to map the wasting of life that occurs here less as a chaotic event and more as part of capital's condition of possibility.

(In)securing communities at the Northern border

As already signalled from its title, *Antígona González* is a piece that interweaves the brutal conditions of violence that hover weightily over everyday life in the North-eastern Mexican borderlands with the Sophoclean myth of the Theban heroin, a use of the classical material that carries a long tradition in the Americas. In Moira Fradinger's extensive studies of Latin American stagings of the Greek tragedy, these constant returns are read as pointing towards the continental

obstinate remembrance of, and political concern with, unburied corpses, symbolized in the ancient myth by the body of Polynices, who Antigone seeks to bury against the edict of Creon, the sovereign of Thebes (2013, p. 63). Both the tragedy and the character of Antigone have been reimagined by almost every country in the region and has served as a valuable frame to capture the historical processes that have led to the disintegration of the social fabric in Latin America, especially in the context of the state and elite-orchestrated terror in the long 1970s, when young militants where clandestinely murdered and disappeared. It is not surprising then that Uribe takes recourse of the Greek tragedy for staging the testimonies of the real-life catastrophe taking place on the highly militarized and surveilled northern Mexican border. However, as Fradinger has underscored elsewhere, twenty-first-century Antígonas are not responses to authoritarian regimes but rather to new forms of violence that are wrought as capitalism 'advances toward a paradigm of expulsion (not only exclusion), creating disposable bodies throughout the globe' (2014, p. 763). This new historical pattern of rewritings delineated by Fradinger can thus be observed not only in Uribe's emplacement of Antigone and Polynices in what Naomi Klein argues are now 'capitalism's gaping wounds' (2020), but also in the piece's auto-reflexive awareness of this change.

One of the most significant features of Uribe's book-length poem is undoubtedly its extensive citational practice. In addition to Antigone, Uribe appropriates lines from Latin American adaptations of the play, academic texts about its reception, testimonies from family members of the missing and murdered published on local newspapers, crime obituaries of bodies found in north/central Mexico, posts from the collective-blog project *Menos Días aquí*, a civilian-led count of the country's violent deaths, the online journal of Colombian activist Diana Gómez, who blogs as 'Antígona Gómez', and the poem 'Death' by Harold Pinter, which condemns U.S. intervention in Iraq. At several moments, the text interrupts itself to explain the trajectory of the

Latin American Antigone, referring to adaptations penned over the last century. For instance, in the early pages, the speaker begins by tracing the figure of the disappeared to the tragedy's first twenty-century rewriting, Leopoldo Marechal's play *Antígona Vélez* (1951), which, set in the context of Argentina's necolonial conquest, captured the 'extermination of the first Argentine disappeared'——Indigenous peoples from the country's southern frontier (Fradinger 2014, p. 230). In the following lines, Uribe proceeds to reference Griselda Gambaro's resurrection of Antígona in the wake of the seven-year grip of its "Dirty War", which as the poet notes, marks the radical shift of Polynices into a victim of state terror where his figure, 'distorted and altered', will become 'identified with the marginalized and disappeared' (Uribe 2016, p. 23). With this collage of Antigones, Uribe situates her own character in the long tradition of the myth as well as in the long arc of repressive violence in Latin America. However, in the next line, the speaker auto-reflexively acknowledges her need to change the internal dynamics of the American corpus of Antigones and declares: 'distorted and altered, Polynices is Tadeo' (ibid). This turn thus makes us aware of Uribe's engagement with a new political reality, as her changing of the character constitutes a chilling cypher of a new and extended form of disappearance taking place along the border.

Arguably, this formal alteration obeys particularly to what many scholars have observed are significant transformations in the continental patterns of disappearance that have emerged over the last decades. For example, as Gabriel Gatti and David Casado Neira have recently argued, while past sites of disappearances often involved clandestine spaces built by the state to capture political dissidents, the new spatialities of disappearance seem to be more connected with phenomena such as the repression of indigenous populations, feminicides or migrants on transit between South and North: deserts in Mexico, dumps in Colombia or labour camps in Central America(2020, p. 502). Hence, just as the Sophoclean play had to be re-scaled upon

arrival to the Americas to accommodate the continent's manifold Antígonas and Polynices, the Sophoclean Thebes has to be rescaled from the enclosed settings of Cold War to the deserts of Tamaulipas where death appears almost as a natural fixture:

> Una mujer intenta narrar la desaparición de su hermano menor. Este caso no salió en las noticias. No acaparó la atención de ninguna audiencia. Se trata sólo de otro hombre que salió de su casa rumbo a la frontera y no se le volvió a ver. Otro hombre que compró un boleto y abordó un autobús.' (p. 20) [A woman attempts to tell the story of the disappearance of her younger brother. This case wasn't on the news. It never merited a hearing. It's just another man who left his house and headed to the border never to be seen again. Another man who bought a ticket and boarded a bus.] (p. 21)

Uribe's emphasis on the specific vulnerability of male working bodies, perfectly aligns with the patters of disappearance in Mexico, in which young males make up for the bulk of the country's missing and the likelihood of its occurrence appears geographically determined, as the majority of disappearances registered occur in proximity to the northern border (Meltis and Merino 2017, n.p.). These patterns of disappearance are clear manifestation of the aftershocks of NAFTA, which as Jason de León perfectly sums up in the *The Land of Open Graves*, left the country 'drowning in a *pinche montón* [fucking bunch] of subsidized *gringo* corn that crashed their economy' sending *campesinos* to experience 'the strong pull of the US economy and the simultaneous blunt force trauma of its immigration enforcement practices' (2015, p. 16). By positioning Polynices' disappearance in relation to the border, Uribe dislodges the perception of this corporeal destruction as an arbitrary occurrence and links it rather to the violence and inequalities intrinsic

to border militarization which, by criminalizing the movement of labour, has sanctioned and anointed the precarious conditions and disposability to which these bodies are subjected.

The book's emplacement, hence, as John Pluecker adds in his translator's note, gives 'a startling specificity' to Uribe's Antígona. 'We are in a state along the Gulf coast in Mexico and bordering the Río Bravo/Río Grande in South Texas,' Pluecker notes, 'a time of brutal violence that extends the very definition of the word "war" […] A specific moment and a specific horror' (2016, p. 191). These conditions thus give shape to the landscape of Uribe's prose poem, for they define the present dynamics of violence that are at the heart of the border regime. This site-specific and historical conjuncture is offered by Uribe through descriptions of an abysmal border scenario, 'un extraño lugar entre la vida y la muerte' [a strange space within life and death], 'el pueblo de los muertos' [the town of the dead] (p. which are used to translate an environment awash by an specific type of violence. However, in other lines, Uribe also complicates the understanding of this context as an insular manifestation and highlights this strange condition rather as a cruel symptom of a global capitalist regime of accumulation:

> *Por aquí también a usted la matan si entierra a sus muertos.*
>
> *Los caminos llenos de muertos dan más miedo ¿no?*
>
> : *Llenos de muertos.*
>
> : *Los caminos.*
>
> *[Around here, they'll kill you too, if you bury your dead.*
>
> *Roads full of dead people are scarier, aren't they?*
>
> : *Full of dead people.*
>
> : *Roads.]*
>
> (pp. 74-75)

These lines seem to aptly capture the desert geopolitical landscape that, filled with human remains, telegraphs terror and preempts any process of justice and recovery. The rhetorical question in the second line, points precisely to the interlocutor's full cognizance of this terror tactic which cautions Antígona's character of the risks of her search. Yet, as flagged by the italics and the book's end notes, these lines correspond to fragments of another text, Carlos Satizábal's 2005 Colombian play that, responding to the context of the Colombian armed conflict, narrates the efforts to bury the hundreds of thousands of unburied corpses that the conflict has left especially in war-torn rural areas. According to Fradinger, Satizábal's play differs markedly from previous regional *Antigones* as the myriad of agents that are involved in the conflict blur 'any dichotomic frames with which other armed conflicts in the region have been seen' (2015, p. 559). In Satizábal's rewritten tragedy, Fradinger argues, the root cause of the conflict appears at times as an excuse to exterminate indigenous peasants in order to expropriate their lands in the most gruesome way and sell it off to multinational companies. As the Colombian Antígona aptly summarizes: 'the rich will get richer with this slaughter' (ibid.). Within this context, therefore, as Fradinger notes, the centrality of the classic opposition between Antigone and Creon – the latter which usually stands in for the authoritarian state– is formally displaced, since Antígona responds now to the 'turns and travels of global capitalism (p. 561).

Uribe's use of this fragment seems to function as way to mirror a similar dynamic in the Tamaulipecan borderlands, as seen in one section where the townspeople, acting almost as a Greek chorus, warn Antígona of these maneuvers: 'Son de los mismos./ Nos van a matar a todos, Antígona./ Son de los mismos./ Aquí no hay ley./ Son de los mismos./ Aquí no hay país./ Son de los mismos.' [They're one and the same. /They're going to kill all of us, Antígona./ They're one and the same./ There's no law here./ They're one and the same. There's no country

here./ They're one and the same.] (pp. 26-27). The conditions delineated here, manifests then in one of the most distinctive changes in Uribe's Antígona: the authoritarian figure has been replaced by a largely absentee State —an aspect that has been recognized in existing criticism of the work (Williams 2017; Cantarello 2020). However, rather than a symptom of a 'debilitated Mexican state' (Williams 2017, p. 4), Uribe's prose poem uses this absence, much like Santizábal's play, where the figure of Creon appears 'almost as a ghost' (Fradinger 2015, p. 566), to index the ways in which, to say it with Ballvé, it is by means of 'the long, ghostly shadow cast by its absence' (2020, p. 26) that the state makes possible the reproduction, in remarkably perverse ways, of the rationality of the capitalist economic order.

As Ballvé argues, while neglect and lawlessness might seem like unquestionable evidence of a state's "failure", it constitutes rather a typical and key feature of zones slated for state-backed investments, which, as he warns, becomes even more stark if this frontier space is a site of drug-trafficking (ibid.) The differential presence of the state across these zones, the anthropologist Margarita Serje has similarly argued, has been conducive for the production of a focal image of frontiers as 'ruled by the law of the wild', a macabre quality that, constantly nurtured and legitimized, has succeeded in hiding the essential function of these spaces in the geography of the capitalist world system (2007, p. 30). What is veiled is precisely the fact that, the existence of zones 'ruled by chaos', in other words, spaces in need of control and "*mano dura"*, according to Serje, provide both the condition of possibility and the moral justification for all sorts of intrusive interventions and abuses, as it no longer matters if they're licit or illicit . More than being excluded or forgotten places where the State and its urban order have been absent, these areas, to follow the scholar, have been maintained by groups 'who incarnate the state […] who have access to "being" the state and decide to speak in its name' in order to foster the conditions for accumulation and rule (2007, p. 39). That Uribe rescales Creon from a tyrannical regime to a

menacing atmosphere, 'Creonte, este silencio amordazándolo todo' [Creon, this silence stifling everything] (2016 p. 104-105), appears then as a forceful manifestation of these extractivist frontier tactics.

These incarnations of the state by other actors– which can be either the paramilitarized drug cartels, militarized border agents, transnational corporations and its private militias – is more clearly staged in a later paragraph of the collection where Uribe offers a description of Antígona's (although referred here simply as 'a woman's') experience in the district attorney's office where she goes to report her brother's disappearance. In the last lines of the paragraph, which describe the woman's exiting from the offices and being approached by a man who pulls her by the arm, the man's menacing whispers are introduced in an italicised text: '*Vale más que dejen de chingar. Ustedes síganle y se los va a llevar la chingada*' [*You all better stop fucking around. Keep doing this and you'll fucking end up dead*] (p. 32-33). These last words, as Uribe registers in the endnotes, are taken from a newspaper article, in which a woman from the border town of San Fernando narrates the massive disappearance of men (among them her husband) that has left entire *ejidos* depopulated as well the threats that have come when they have tried to denounce it. No man above 14 years is now left, the woman condemns in the article, 'desde niño, cuidando la tierra y cultivando sorgo ¿ahora qué? [….] 'los de la última letra [Los Zetas] se fueron adueñando de ejidos completos, ahora San Fernando se va quedar desierto con tanta gente desaparecida' [since he was a child he took care of the land and grew sorghum, now what? […] those from the last letter [the Zetas] seized entire *ejidos*, San Fernando is going to be left deserted with so many people disappeared] (Martínez 2011, n.p.). Rather than reproduce a focal image of ungovernability or irrationality, Uribe's depiction of Creon (the figure of the law and state) as stifling silence and the presence of actors that ensure silence is upheld implies instead how the rule of law and paramilitary violence (here taking form in the Zetas) work in San Fernando as

mutually reinforcing vehicles for the disappearance of populations and the protection of corporativist (agribusiness) interests. However, rather than communicate this understanding from an authorial 'I', Uribe attempts to reconstruct the voices of the people of San Fernando as a kind of Greek chorus, that is, 'a collective body which mobilizes communal memory' (Goldhill 2007, p. 53), in order to warn readers of this brutal affiliation — 'they're one and the same'.

This pluralization of the agents of violence likewise complicates Antigone's contestatory demand to recover the dead bodies that, like the insurgent Polynices, were singled out for the terrorizing violence of the sovereign authority —a figure that served as particularly apt framing device for the Americas' 'tenuous post-dictatorial period' (Laufenberg 2018, p. 174). Patrick Dove, for example, discussing Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona Furiosa,* suggests the relevance of the trope in the wake of societal disaster and historical trauma, for it evoked the radical political demands of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo for the military junta to return those *desaparecidos* in the dictatorship's war against 'the armed left represented here by Polynices' (2013, p. 48). However, 'el cuerpo de Polínices pudriéndose a las puertas de Tebas y los cuerpos de los migrantes' [Polynices' body rotting at the gates of Thebes and the corpses of the migrants] (2016, pp. 108-109) that Uribe depicts, which makes him seem rather akin to collateral damage given that Polynices is not a political dissident but a young worker surviving buying used car parts at the border, would point to the neutralization of the figure's denunciatory role. This is perhaps best symbolized in the speaker's pronouncement of her own erasure, 'Yo también estoy desapareciendo Tadeo' [I am also disappearing, Tadeo] (p. 164), as she confronts a brutality, that, now deployed against broad segments of the population, seems to be indecipherable. And yet, this radical transformation, not coincidentally, can be similarly read in Gambaro's own play *La Persistencia* [Persistence] (2008), which restages the Antígona motif in a post-crisis Argentina that appears now as 'a barren landscape with an uneven, moonlike surface, traversed by

characters dressed in rags who seem forsaken by their abstract habitat' (Werth 2010, p. 59). Rather than having been neutralized, then, these twenty-first century Antígonas signal an attempt to attune us to what William Davies names as the new punitive phase of neoliberalism, where 'in contrast to the offensive against socialism, the "enemies" targeted now are largely disempowered and internal to the neoliberal system itself' (2016, p. 132).

Davies's observation that 'enemies' are now those 'crippled by poverty, debt and collapsing social-safety nets' (ibid) suggests the difficulties of rendering intelligible the mayhem that unfolds in the now barren landscapes of the Americas. The poetic I posits these concerns in relation to the Mexican northern border, which illustrates what Davies sees as the 'apparent senseless violence' that characterizes this phase: ¿Se le hace normal que un autobús desaparezca y los pasajeros muertos aparezcan en fosas?*'* [Does it seem normal to you for a bus to disappear and for the dead passengers to appear in mass graves*?*] (pp. 130-131). This seeming shift to unreason suggests Uribe's concern with how best to account for this violence that likewise complicates Antígona's function. But this questioning, rather than to uphold a government operating outside the norms of judgment, functions, in my view, as another way of reclaiming the dead. As Paley posits, the disappearance of people without apparent political motive has continued to be accounted for through 'Cold War logics that depend on ideological characterization of victims (politically active individuals, journalists, dissidents)' (2020, p. 2). But the roles and political identities of victims and perpetrators 'can no longer be viewed in terms of political allegiances or political activism' (p. 14). These notions, in other words, can often hinder our ability to understand the disappearance and massacre of thousands of people, in a relatively short time, as a central element for the regulation of a mobile workforce and for the appropriation of territories seen as extractible.

Uribe's ruminations of newspaper clippings found in the *nota roja* (compiled in the collective blog *Menos Días Aquí*), which interrupt the narration throughout, seems to point to attempts to wrestle with this neoliberal punitive phase. In these sections, the geographical data of these crime reports is offered– *'Monterrey, Nuevo León'* (p. 84)*, 'Reynosa, Tamaulipas'* (p. 90)*, 'Ciudad Altamirano, Guerrero',* (p. 44) – and the clippings chosen encompass young male bodies whose deaths authorities have routinely confined to what Paley would later call the 'victims-were-involved-in-drug-trade bias' (2013, n.p.), that has allowed the Mexican state to naturalize and justify them: '*Tres hombres muertos y amordazados fueron encontrados en una tumba del panteón municipal Zacatequitas'* [*Three men were found dead with their mouths gagged in a tomb at the Zacatequitas municipal cemetery*] (pp. 45-46); '*El cuerpo de un hombre entre 25 y 30 años fue encontrado a orillas del libramiento que conduce al puente Reynosa-Mission*' [*The body of a man between the ages of 25 and 30 was found on the shoulder of the bypass road that leads to the Reynosa-Mission bridge*] (pp. 84, 85); '*tres jovenes ejecutados justo a las faldas de un cerro*' [*three youths were found executed at the base of a mountain*] (pp. 90-91). Rather than point to randomness or senselessness, Uribe assembles these fragments to delineate a particular blueprint of violence, linking the brutality in the militarized margins of the nation-state with other Mexican geographies, thereby evincing a plurality of sites where the racialized and class-differentiated logic of such violence is forcefully displayed. This blueprint flawlessly corroborates recently compiled statistics that point to the high level of violent incidences concentrated in the border state of Tamaulipas and the coastal state of Guerrero and which muddle the association of these deaths to turf wars between competing cartels, serving rather to unpack how these killings have been favorable for the expropriation of people from resource-rich areas and for capitalist structures of labour subjugation (Meltis and Merino 2017; Paley 2020). Uribe's tracing of these deaths exhibits then a refusal of the rhetoric of securitization that sustains the neoliberal logic of accumulation, a rebuff that is more explicitly enacted in the

speaker's command to '*Contar inocentes y culpables* […] Contarlos a todos' [*Count both innocent and guilty* […] Count them all] (p. 6), which redirects Antigona's political defiance toward the capitalist system that produces this abjection.

Uribe's Antigone is then not just a meditation on the violence of a neoliberal regime that sustains global capitalist accumulation through border politics or the militarized enforcement of narcotic prohibition, but also an interrogation of how, under such a profit-oriented system that produces disposable bodies across racial and class lines, can these unburied corpses be reclaimed. This central question links back to the uncertainties posited by Uribe at the opening of her book: *¿Quién es Antígona dentro de esta escena y qué vamos a hacer con sus palabras? ¿Quién es Antígona González y qué vamos a hacer con todas las demás Antígonas?* [*Who is Antigone in this scene, and what are we going to do with her words? Who is Antígona González and what are what are going to do with all the other Antígonas*?] (p. 6). If within an securitized neoliberal 'escena' that naturalizes some losses as symbolically meaningless, racialized and poor/working-class bodies can now be systematically buried, the question that Uribe posits is also about what kind of strategies and tactics of oppositional action can be imagined to represent the innumerable bodies that accumulate in border geographies, rural communities and urban enclaves that, to say it with Ballvé, are seen as 'areas beyond the pale of nation' (2020, p. 40). At the heart of Uribe's assemblage of fragments thus lies an attempt to render legible these bodies beyond the neoliberal logic of criminalization and marginalization that has differently exposed them to death and unproper burial within a scenario where manyfold Antígonas are equally endangered when they perform '[l]a absurda, la extenuante, la impostergable labor de desenterrar un cuerpo para volver a enterrarlo' [[t]he absurd, the exhausting, the urgent labor of unburying a body to bury it anew] (2016, pp. 124-125). Hence, instead of humanist or citizen-centered appeals to grant these bodies' the rights of citizenship or human dignity – as the deed of Antigone has sometimes been said to perform – Uribe's extensive

use of fragments of the disappeared relative's voices, particularly in the last section the book, does away with pleas to recognize these bodies within the legal/illegal or non-guilty/criminal hierarchical orderings that the neoliberal border regime itself erected.

Towards the end of *Antígona González*, Antigona's dictum to 'contarlos a todos' appears all the more apparent. This last sequence of the book is emplaced in the town of San Fernando, after news of the mass grave discovery: '*Me dijeron que habían encontrado unos cadáveres, que era una probabilidad. Me dijeron que los iban a traer aquí*' [*They told me they'd found a few corpses, that there was a chance. They told me that they were going to bring them here*] (pp. 100-101). Before this section begins, it is important to mention, Uribe makes one last reference to the history of Latin American Antigonas and the strategies they have adopted, taking note of a never published Antigone that was specifically commissioned as a monologue in which one actress could embody every role (p. 92). This approach bears a telling closeness to what Fradinger sees as the strategy embraced by twenty-century Latin American rewritings, where the imagined collectivity of the Antigones is no longer just allegorized but presented onstage, as they either 'form part of a chorus, or they are multiple or exchangeable with other women' (2014, p. 765). The function of this strategy, according to Fradinger's analysis of its deployment in Colombian plays, is to articulate 'a multiplied retelling of catastrophe' given that one Antigone proves insufficient to capture the splintering of forces that has caught thousands of rural inhabitants in a cross-fire that intends to pave the way for 'capitalist mega-investments in plantations of African palm, banana, and coca' (2015, p. 559). Along similar lines, the emplacement of Antigona in the rural town of San Fernando in the concluding section of Uribe's poem, a town the speaker describes as a site '*con calles vacías* […] *sacudidas en sus cimientos por el paso de los carros de asalto*/ los ejércitos/las murallas' [with empty streets […] shaken in its foundations by the passage of tanks/ armies/ ramparts]

(pp. 114-115), that is, a space where violence has taken many forms, makes imperative to deliver a many-voiced account of this devastation.

Such polyphony stands as the correlative of the distinct reality of U.S.-Mexico border towns, where the scapegoating of racialized people as a threatening avalanche 'spilling' onto the border has translated into a landscape turned into both a 'waiting room' for thousands expecting to cross, as well as, per de León's description, 'a killing field' that has filled the walls of nonprofits that dot the border town's streets with 'photocopied posters put up by family members of missing migrants' (2015, p. 6). The many other bereft searchers who have massed outside the medical examiner's office in San Fernando in *Antígona González*'s final section are thus brought into the poem through the juxtaposition of their testimonies with the lines of Antígona, who, collectivelly asking for 'los cuerpos de los nuestros' [the bodies of our people], elide the exclusionary categories of social difference that legitimized the militarization of the border in the first place. In this concluding sequence, Uribe recuperates statements of the families of the missing that appeared in newspapers articles and places them as a collective answer to a series of questions whose bureaucratic language evokes a speaker, presumably a state officer, interrogating a person during the process of recovery and identification of a corpse.

Crucially, this series of questions are taken from Harold Pinter's poem *Death*, recited at the conclusion of his 2005 Nobel Prize lecture as an indictment of the U.S. imperialist violence and long-term criminal activity throughout Latin America all the way to George Bush's 'freedom-loving' Iraq war, suggesting the broad geopolitical implications of the frontier violence experienced at the Mexican northern border (2005, n.p.). The questions in Pinter's poem, 'Where was the body found?/ Who was the dead body?/Was the body dead when it was abandoned?/ How well did you know the dead body?/ How did you know the dead body was dead?' (ibid.), are used by Uribe to mimic the lumbering interrogations of the institutionalized sites of the state.

Fragments that speak of the relative's memories of the disappeared are placed by Uribe as answers to each of these questions: '*Le gustaba mucho bailar polka, redova y hasta huapango. Era muy alegre. Siempre fue buen padre.'* [*He liked to dance polkas, redovas and even huapangos. He was a really happy person. He was always a good father*] (pp. 140-141); '*En la fotografía usa sombrero vaquero y está de pie, sonriendo entre el sorgo que durante décadas cultivo…Sólo iba a trabajar y desapareció'* [*In the photo he's wearing a cowboy hat and he's standing up, smiling in the sorghum he farmed for decades… He just went to work and disappeared.*] (pp. 154-155). These answers, however, while initially seeming to offer emphatic personal-interest narratives to humanize these subjects as hard-working-not-criminals or adhere to appeals for an 'orderly, secure, and well-managed border' (Office of the White House Press Secretary 2021) – as the new US government proposes to do with the cooperation of Mexican authorities – progressively stop to respond to this line of questioning and the misfit between question and answer starts to become more blatant. This disarticulation suggests a recognition of the incapacity of the state to counteract the violence at the border and to enact care for the dead body, not because the state is withered, but because the criminalization of populations and the naturalization of their deaths is the neoliberal state's in-built role, as it allows for the voraciousness of capital to continue its 'merciless expropriation of land and exploitation of labor' (Walia 2021, p. 302). Hence, if criminalization is necessary to, in Ballvé's formulation, make live and let die but first of all make a profit from these marginalized sites, the misfit also hinges on the refusal to distinguish the victims of this violence as undeserving or deserving of extermination and/or disappearance, enacting instead a single and collective declaration repeated over and over that becomes the only answer*:* '¿Le cerró ambos ojos? *Somos muchos.*/¿Enterró el cuerpo? *Somos muchos.*/ ¿Lo dejó abandonado? *Somos muchos.*' [Did you close both its eyes? *We are many*. Did you bury the body? *We are many.* / Did you leave it abandoned? *We are many.*] (pp. 158-162).

Antígona González closes then with this first person plural, the choral voice that has long been a tool of protest and poetry, exhibiting the dissentious forms enacted to mourn and recover the dead bodies disposed of by neoliberal border regimes, 'para no olvidar que los cuerpos sin nombre son nuestros cuerpos perdidos' [so as to not forget that all the bodies without names are our lost bodies] (pp. 6-7). As the majority of these bodies found on the mass graves correspond to the undocumented populations caught in the fractures of the U.S-Mexico border regime, this resistance against their oblivion offered by the poem through the relatives voices is also a rejection to the exclusionary bordered world capitalism depends upon to further the depopulation and appropriation of territories ripe for extraction.

A Short Account of the (Neoliberal) Destruction of Central America

Even when Rodrigo takes as point of departure the same phenomenon addressed by Uribe, the violence that *Antígona González* exposes and condemns had, if anything, only become amplified by the time the Southern border and the migrant caravans crossing through it were catapulted into the hemispheric imaginary. The caravans, 'a novel mobility form employed by migrating peoples, largely of Central American origin, for purposes of wading through the unsafety of the Mesoamerican migratory corridor' drew major attention to junctures at river-borders that focused on these unprecedented form of mobility, which in turn, 'domesticated' places like the Suchiate River and its bordering function as more of 'a means', a 'transit point of peoples journey's but not significant in and of itself' (Cuéllar 2020, p. 3). In the cartography of U.S hemispheric security, as Galemba explains, the Mexico's southern border, previously deemed less important economically than the one up north, has increasingly began to take on the of function of the place 'where the genesis of problems occur', leading U.S Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security to declare the Guatemala border with Chiapas as the new 'southern border'

in the fight to curtail the northward flow of undocumented migrants, drugs and other illicit flows (2018, p. 12). Recent media and policy outcries directed to the Mexico-Guatemala border reflect an intensification of the situation but often misconstrue it as something new. However, the shift of U.S. border enforcement and the anxieties about unruly borders to Mexico's southern border has been underway since the 1990s and early 2000s.

Although highly visible in recent media images, the Mexico-Guatemala border has been depicted exclusively as the unruly backdrop of migrants' northward trek, rarely asking observers to pause on the transnational political, economic, and environmental logics that are central to the making of contemporary migrancy. As Galemba points out, however, while a sign demarcating the southern border was only erected in 2007 in response to President Felipe Calderón's promise to take a hard-line approach to border security and drug violence, the neoliberal economic policies that decimated agricultural livelihoods had already fostered a politics of criminalization in this neglected region (2018, p. 3). While communities on both sides of the border already shared a 'peripheral relationship to their nation-states', the smuggling of commodities that intensified in the 1990s due to economic crisis and the collapse of traditional livelihood options, began to made these borderlands synonyms with illegality and represented as a 'threat to the territorial state', which served to justify the attempts to "'manage" them and enhance security (p. 36). Moreover, while Mexico has periodically viewed the southern border as a potential threat to its national identity and sovereignty, the arrival of indigenous refugees fleeing to Mexico during the height of the Guatemalan civil war marked the emergence of a heightened border security as the state feared the conflict could spill into Chiapas and exacerbate mounting land tensions (p. 10). To curtail this, Galemba argues, the Mexican government adopted the view of the Guatemalan military that the indigenous peoples were members of the

guerrilla insurgency and placed them in a precarious status that guaranteed their exploitation as local fieldhands (2018, p. 39)

The transformation of the Mexico-Guatemala border into a security arena therefore, emerges particularly to secure no opposition from the rural poor in the face of neoliberal integration and to smooth the way for agribusiness' cheap labour demands. Additionally, as Cuéllar sustains in his analysis on the use of 'waterbodies' for bordering purposes, the sealing of the border helped to inscribe the sense of Mexico as 'belonging to North America through neoliberal economic integration and as separate from the ungoverned territories of neighboring Central America', disrupting the forms of 'transboundary community-making' that have sustained life in both sides of the Suchiate (2021, p. 13). Since this separation weakened safety nets and the pillars of life-making, processes of extraction and dispossession were given easy access to produce new wards for the neoliberal state, leaving an environment razed by 'resource wars, soil death, land grabbing for tropical deforestation and water scarcity' (ibid.). As Galemba suggests then, whilst local rumors that the heightened militarization that began in 2006 concealed interests such as the bulldozing of the municipality of Frontera Comalapa to construct a megadam or the U.S desire to purchase Chiapas for its oil wealth were in fact not true, these manifested how residents grasped the climate of dispossession that was underway, as the number of mining concessions would multiply exponentially in subsequent years (2018, p. 13). However, the routine vilification of the Suchiate's informal economies in news media, as well as the depictions of the river as devoid of life and sociality, worked successfully to obscure the messy socioecological entanglements and economic interests that have long taken place in these sites.

These knotted relationships between trade integration, securitization initiatives, migratory movements and the violent displacement in the southernmost part of the country have been crucial thematic strands of Rodrigo's critical and poetic work. Rodrigo was born and raised

in the Soconusco region, a coastal territory located in the southwest corner of the state of Chiapas and straddling the border with Guatemala, a geographical site that constantly appears in his work to grapple with the historical violence that has given shape to these borderlands as well as the rural marginalized communities that have been most impacted by it. His prior collection *Marabunta* (2017)*,* for instance, which Rodrigo himself identifies as a prelude to *Libro Centroamericano* (qtd. in Iris 2018), is a poignant account of the communities living on both sides of the Suchiate River, which evinces the social and kinship relations that span the border, as well as the violence, economic deprivation and criminalization that has long marked them. Rodrigo's collection is thus punctuated by childhood memories of his multiple crossings through the Suchiate to sell produce with his street vendor father, framing the daily lives of these communities in the context of decline in corn farming and the broader socioeconomic and political upheaval of the 1990s to excavate the shared historical injuries that have shaped life on both sides of the river.

Appearing in 2018, at the height of the so-called border 'humanitarian crisis', *Libro Centroamericano* continues to dwell on the Río Suchiate to reflect upon the present socio-political and ecological junctures at Mesoamerican border-rivers as these waterbodies began to be turned into 'el cementerio más grande de Centroamérica' [the largest cemetery of Central America] (Rodrigo 2018, p. 30). Awarded Mexico's Aguascalientes Premio Bellas Artes de Poesía, Rodrigo's latest collection focuses on the most egregious forms of violence committed on both sides of the Mexico-Guatemala border – killings, displacement, (para) military takeover of towns – dramatizing a theatre which, even in light of the local and international attention granted to this spatiality, remains mostly absent in the canon of Mexican literature. Rodrigo's origins in this border region are thus crucial to his work, as he draws from his childhood memories and family photographs that speak to the daily life in the torrid Soconusco and the

patterns of migration that have long striated these lands. Early on, for example, a photograph dated 1985 and which shows a group of men and children posing for the camera in front of a house, is accompanied by the personal recollections of the author who attempts to describe one by one the people in the photograph, as most of them comprise Central American migrants who used to find refuge at his father's home in the rural border town of Villa de Comaltitlán :

> Abajo y en cunclillas, casi en medio, a los pies del difuso manojo de caras, dos guatemaltecos: las letras de sus nombres son pájaros de olvido. Llegaron después que Nicolás, Carlos y Orlando, pero marcharon juntos, excpeto el último, que subió al tren un mes después: mi padre le regaló un viejo sombrero y un morral, y antes de partir al norte lo adiestró para emular a un campesino costeño. Libro todas las casetas migratorias, coyotes y polleros. Luego de varios meses, sorteando miles de kilometros de odio, nos escribió una carta desde Canadá […]. [At the bottom and kneeled down, almost in the middle, at the feet of that blurred bundle of faces, two Guatemalans: the letters of their names are birds of oblivion. They arrived after Nicolás, Carlos and Orlando, but they departed together, except for the last one, who boarded the train a month after: my father gifted him an old hat and a sack, and trained him to make himself pass for a coastal peasant before he headed north. He avoided all migratory checkpoints, *coyotes* and *polleros*. After several months, navigating thousands of kilometers filled with hate, he wrote us back from Canada […].] (p. 46)

As Juan Pablo Ruiz Nuñez observes in his review of Rodrigo's collection, the insertion of these personal testimonies shows the author's engagement with 'un discurso poético que linda con la crónica y autobiografía' [a poetic discourse that borders with the chronicle and the

autobiography] which proves effective to narrate life at Southern border and the deep relations with those who have crossed these lands to run away from civil wars and impoverished circumstances in their countries (2018). These childhood memories, paired with the photographical register of a 'pueblo' where, as Rodrigo says, 'ninguno de nosotros vive ya, todos migramos' [none of us live anymore, we have all migrated] (Rodrigo 2018, p. 46), gives an autobiographical sensibility to the collection and serves to excavate the forces that have made both Chiapas and Central America, once tied together, into a ruined environment that makes remaining impossible. Rodrigo's collection marries then the first-person address with political urgency, as he harnesses those memories to tackle the material histories of the environs that comprise the migratory path and which are nestled within the now common and spectacular images of the mass of bodies moving through this geography. Furthermore, as a remnant of a turbulent era in Central America, the photograph he introduces to readers, which shores up the not so visible underpinnings of this border geography, I argue, shows also Rodrigo's attempts to use documentary evidence to ground the text in a wider political historical reality.

The incorporation of documentary materials in poems has been prominently discussed under rubric of 'documentary poetry', which, as the poet Mark Nowak argues in the essay 'Notes towards an Anti-capitalist poetics', it is not so much a movement but a modality within poetry that includes found and collected sources such as corporate records, news bulletins, victim statements, or statistical data so as to document and chronicle the conditions suffered by the economically and socially disenfranchised (2007, p. 683). This turn towards the documentary record, having no signature spokesperson nor contested origins, as Nowak recognizes, can be seen in a number of practitioners where, chief among them, lies the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, whose documentary *exteriorista* poetics offered a model to inscribe materials formerly foreign to the realm of poetry (ibid.). In Cardenal's own words, 'statistical data, editorials from

a newspaper, historical chronicles, documents, jokes, anecdotes all fit the poem' as these make it possible to look at people and events in light of an 'objective' and 'concrete' socio-political historical reality (qtd. in Caso 2016, p. 241). In some ways similar, as Cardenal is one of Rodrigo's acknowledged influences, *Libro Centroamericano* makes use of these documentary sources to weave together a dense web of historical atrocities in order to situate the present border expansion in the *long durée* of capitalist modernity. [23] Testimonies of migrants that traverse the Mexican territory fleeing from ruinous economic and socio-ecological conditions in Mexico and the Isthmus are thus juxtaposed with fragments of sixteenth-century chronicles – which Cardenal also made use of – forcing readers to see striking similarities to the region's dismal recent history. In particular, Rodrigo makes use of extracts from Friar Bartolomé de las Casas' 1552 treatise *Brevisima Relación de la destrucción de las Indias* [A Short account of the destruction of the Indies], which, also penned from Chiapas, testified to the 'savage greed and manifest sinfulness' he witnessed in the New World, offering countless examples of the enslavement and brutalization of Indigenous peoples in the Spaniards' 'relentless search for gold' (1999, p. 35). Whilst las Casas critique, as Alberto Moreiras argues, was still at the service of empire, the 'primitive accumulation' of the *encomienda* system (lands grants that sanctioned Spaniards' access to land and the de facto slavement of Indigenous peoples found there) is 'shown by him to be an insane and indeed criminal machine' (2008, p. 19). Hence, to follow Enrique Dussel's assessment, las Casas' *relación* can be seen as capitalist modernity's 'first head-on critique' (2014, p. 27).

In Rodrigo's deployment of de las Casas' text, a usage that is saliently signaled from the book's subheading – 'Brevísima relación de la destrucción de los migrantes centroamericanos'

[23] In several interviews, Rodrigo has acknowledged the influence of Central American *poesía comprometida* and particularly the work of Ernesto Cardenal (who is directly referenced in one of the poems of *Libro Centroamericano*).

[Short account of the destruction of Central American migrants] – relevant fragments are lifted out as epigraphs for each section of the book and nouns are altered in a palimpsest-like layering that sees words like '*migras*' [migration agents], '*narcos*' or '*el Estado mexicano*' [the Mexican state] (Rodrigo 2018 p. 26) written where once read 'virreyes' [Viceroys] or 'encomenderos' [grantees of the encomienda system] (las Casas 1999, p. 15). These 'actualizaciones' [updates], as Rodrigo himself calls them in the author's note, explicitly lay bare the historical contiguities of primitive accumulation, placing the neoliberal border apparatus as its most recent engine. Exhibiting the continuation and proliferation of colonial accretion practices, *Libro Centroamericano* aptly captures the present forms and agents of 'accumulation by dispossession', to use Harvey's notorious term (2003), that are used to extend the zones of capital appropriation. The juxtaposition of this historical treatise and the material fragments of the discourses surrounding the 'border crisis' (news bulletins, statistical data, federal development plans and ethnographic documents) in *Libro Centroamericano* thus work to suture together prior regimes of land and labour appropriation with the present border securitization policies and violence.

In an early poem, for instance, an extract from an article that ran in a local newspaper, possibly rehashing the language from the regional migration office's press release, appears encircled by quotations: "'La indígena Guatemalteca María 'N', de 19 años, murió en el río Bravo, del lado mexicano, y perdió la lucha por alcanzar un major futuro […]".' ["The 19-year old, Indigenous Guatemalan María 'N' died in the Rio Bravo, on the Mexican side, and lost the fight to reach a better future […]"] (2018, p. 38). Making use of the passive and neutral language that characterize accounts of border deaths, the newspaper clipping makes no reference to the circumstances of her death nor to the historical structures that generate displacement. In keeping with documentary poets' tendency to include concrete data, Rodrigo offers the geographical coordinates of the precise site where these remains were reported from: '27º 54' 14.4" N 99º 53'

44. 9" W — (SABINAS, COAHUILA)'. However, given the impossibility to access witness testimonies or victim depositions that could complicate the neutral depiction of border deaths, Rodrigo juxtaposes documentary sources with dramatic monologues that, as one critic notes, echo Edgars Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) and its epitaphs of the eponymous town's dead population as well as the living dead rural protagonists of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) (Martínez 2018). Indeed, in interviews, Rodrigo has referenced these as sources of inspiration, particularly for their critical depiction of the rural environments where the many-dead contemplate an existence marked by the violence of modernity (qtd. in Salgado 2018). Juxtaposed with the news clipping cited above, the testimony of the dead 'María 'N" is therefore introduced to reveal the lethal significance of the neutral or euphemistic expression 'losing the battle' used in the journalistic report: 'México soltó sobre mí todos sus perros de presa, su virgen de las amputaciones, su violación masiva y patriarcal […] y nosotras exhaustas, hincadas ante el aullido métalico de *La Bestia*, trepanados nuestros cráneos por machetes […].' [Mexico unleashed on me all of its hunting dogs/its lady of amputations/its mass and patriarchal rape […]; and we, all exhausted, kneeled before the metallic howls of *The Beast*, our skulls trepanned by the machetes […].'] (p. 39). Through this post-mortem epitaph, Rodrigo frames the ways in which contemporary practices of border enforcement twist and reprise colonial trajectories of plunder, which, drawing from Las Casas writings, are alluded through references to terror tactics that operated in tandem with the expropriation of Indigenous peoples' lands, such as the gruesome 'dogging' of Indigenous peoples and rape.[24]

[24] As depicted in the famous 'Manuscrito del aperramiento' [Manuscript of dogging] in which a chained dog, controlled by a Spaniard, brutally kills a bound, indigenous priest, this practice was used to instill dread and obedience in Nahua populations. See Sierra Silva, Pablo Miguel. 2018. *Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The dramatic monologues of the border's many-dead, thus, similar to *Libro Centroamericano*'s acknowledged textual references, are marshalled to capture the violence required to create the conditions for capital accumulation's necessary expansion. Yet, more than taking *Pedro Páramo*'s purgatorial village simply as source of inspiration, fragments of the novel are also lifted almost verbatim and updated in ways similar to Las Casas's text. In the opening poem of the collection, '14º 40' 35.5" N 92º 08' 50.4" W — (SUCHIATE, CHIAPAS)', the renowned first line of Rulfo's novel ('Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivió mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo.' [I came to Comala because I had been told that my father lived here, a man named Pedro Páramo] (2002, p. 7) appears only slightly modified to capture the abyss the speaker is forced to navigate: 'Vine a este lugar porque me dijeron que acá murió mi padre en su camino hacia Estados Unidos [I came to this place because I had been told that my father died here on the road to the United States] (2018, p. 28). The pulling of fragments from Rulfo's novel is therefore profoundly telling, as, to follow Juliana Martínez reading of his literary work, it is ultimately him who models the spectral as a mode of storytelling that works to complicate the historiographic discourse of modernity in Latin America (2020, p. 31). *Pedro Páramo*, as Martínez's notes, is the story of Juan Preciado who sets out across the barren plains of Comala, a town inhabited by ghost and spectral whispers, to locate his father and demand repayment for years of abandonment, but, even more crucially, a tale of the disastrous effects of the plunder and physical violence of the Revolutionary period as well as of the results of Mexico's uneven process of modernization (p. ibid.). As Oloff likewise observes in her discussion of Rulfo's gothic aesthetics, Comala's living dead are therefore invoked by him as 'the human "waste"' left by a process of production that relied on devaluing and degrading land and labour, consciously making visible the waves of primitive accumulation in the Mexican countryside (2016, p. 95).

Tapping into this ghostly lineage, Rodrigo's poem frames the dead speaker that arrived from the 'bosques de azules hojas de la nación Quiché' [forests of blue leaves belonging to the Quiché nation] (2018, p. 28) to the banks of the Suchiate River, as the wasting body of a *long durée* of primitive accumulation that spans Mexico and Central America:

> Abandoné el olor a cuerpos quemados de mi aldea,
> la peste militar con sus ladridos de 'tierra arrasada"
> mordiendo hueso y calcañar con metrallas y napalm,
> su huracán de violaciones y navajas
> que aniquilaban hombres de maís con perros amaestrados
> por un gobierno que alumbra el camino de sus genocidas
> con antorchas de sangre y leyes de mierda.
> Hui del penetrante olor a odio y podredumbre;
> caminé descalzo hasta el otro lado del inframundo
> para curarme los huesos y el hambre.
> Nunca llegué.
> Dos machetazos me dieron en el cuerpo […].
> [I abandoned the smell of burned bodies in my town,
> the military pestilence, the growls of "scorched earth",
> gnawing bones and crushing with machine guns and napalm,
> their hurricane of rape and knives
> that annihilate the people of corn with trained dogs
> on behalf of a government that lights the path of genocide
> with bloody torches and shitty laws.

I fled from the penetrating smell of hate and rot;

I walked barefoot to the other side of the Underworld

to cure my bones and my hunger.

I never arrived.

Two blows of the machete hit me in the chest […]] (2018, p. 28). [25]

The imagery of the razed landscape explicitly references the 1980s' "scorched earth" campaigns perpetrated against the Maya Ixil population from the Chuchumatanes mountains of Quiché by U.S-backed Guatemalan military officers (functioning as the post-colonial 'trained dogs') under the presidency of Efraín Rios Montt. The all-out war on the Indigenous Mayan peasantry culminated in what is known as the Río Negro massacres, which, taking place on the banks of the Chixoy river, allowed to secure the building of the World Bank-funded Chixoy hydroelectric dam, 'to expand the frontier into the Guatemalan Highlands and to eradicate collective Maya-Quiché resistance' (Gómez-Barris 2019, p. 152). As the speaker goes on to recount, his killing on the Suchiate River, which is described as the 'fosa común donde se pudre el cadaver del mundo' [common grave in which rots the corpse of the world] (p. 30), Rodrigo ties together Guatemala's genocidal expansion of the hydropower frontier to the present river-turned–transnational graveyard, signaling both the sustained trajectory and the accelerated violence of prior dynamics of frontier-making and corporate-state tactics of population management. Hence, in depicting the riverbank as filled with 'souls of migrants', the speaker once again invokes Comala, which, described in Rulfo's novel as the 'mera boca del infierno' [mouth of

[25] I am using Cheyla Samuelson's English translation of the poem available at: https://works.bepress.com/cheyla_samuelson/18/. Accessed 5 April 2021.

hell] (p. 67), translates in the neoliberal present as the 'abierto culo del infierno' [the open asshole of hell] (Rodrigo 2018, p. 30).

This updating, that is, the substitution of 'mouth' by 'asshole', seems therefore as an apt way to speak of the late neoliberal process of accumulation that, surging in a moment where the consumption of available cheap resources and frontier expansion has hit its limits, works now, to follow Jennifer Wenzel, by keeping lifeworlds alive just long enough before they are discarded as 'excreta, byproduct, remnant […] as lands and lives laid waste' (2019, p. 141). Therefore, while Rodrigo places the colonial tactics of accumulation described in the Las Casas text and the mid-twenty century practices of dispossession indexed by Rulfo as the structural base of the neoliberal historical juncture, the environment-wasting in the contemporary phase of accumulation taking place at the border underscores also how, operating in the interest of short-term profits, these practices give way to deadlier formations. Other similar substitutions are therefore mobilized by Rodrigo in other parts of the text to make this changes plainly traceable. For instance, in the last section of the text, which corresponds to the 'Reino de Mejico', the reader can find an annotated version of terms taken from the dictionary of Guatemalan localisms, where the entry for *Kaibil*, while first appearing unabridged as 'soldado de elite para matar guerrilleros; militar que arrasa con poblaciónes indefensas' [elite soldier to kill guerrilleros; member of the military that razes defenseless populations] (p. 108) has its definition revised and enlarged in further pages:

> *Ex/Kaibil*: excelente milico de élite que participa, en general, en labores de barbarie, eliminando enemigos de otros cárteles, asesinando opositores políticos, y en particular comentiendo actos de genocidio contra la población indefensa del país, principalmente contra los migrantes centroamericanos […].

> [*Ex/Kaibil*: excellent elite member of the army that participates, in general, in barbaric operations, annihilating enemies of other cartels, killing political activists, and in particular, committing acts of genocide against the defenseless population of the country, mainly Central American migrants […].] (p. 120)

Rodrigo's texts thus draws upon this extrapoetic material, recontextualizing and expanding definitions to make them into cyphers of the accrual of violence in Mexico and Central America where prior actors of state violence are enlisted to perform novel functions. Furthermore, with this revision, Rodrigo also lengthens the periodization of colonialism for, as Jean Franco notes in *Cruel Modernity*, the term *Kaibil* was ultimately an appropriation of the name of an 'Indian chief' that fought against the conqueror Pedro de Alvarado, 'taking on the courage of the indigenous peoples while committing the atrocities attributed to the conqueror' (2013, p. 6). Hence, bringing visibility to the contemporary genocidal logic at the very of core of the securitized apparatus at the Mexico-Guatemala border, Rodrigo also appends this dictionary entry with a new adjacent definition: *Migra*: agente del Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) que trabaja en forma proactiva, cooperativa y participativa cumpliendo [….] excelentes funciones de genocidio multitasking en servicio del gobierno de México' [*Migra*: agent of the National Institute of Migration (INM) that works proactively, cooperatively and participates fulfilling […] excellent functions of multitasking genocide at the service of the Mexican government]. For Rodrigo, border enforcement and the criminalization of migration bookends the history of atrocities at the service of resource extraction as it offers a textbook example of the state-military-corporate complex. These inextricable historical entanglements are thus layered by Rodrigo to posit border securitization as the contemporary medium for capitalism to open new frontiers to colonize, converting bodies and lands into waste.

In both Rodrigo and Uribe's works, the material incorporation of historical textual artefacts emerges then as a response to the efforts to portray the spectacle of militarized violence along the U.S/Mexico and the Chiapas/Guatemala borders as an issue of crime, marginality and migration. Their documentary-based poetic works, I have argued, seek to textually disempower this truth claim and to excavate instead the present and longer histories of violent accumulation that underpin the formation of 'neoliberal securityscapes' in both Southern and Northern borderlands. In *Antígona González*, Uribe's mixes lyrical poetry centered on the searches for missing bodies at the northern border with documentary materials, personal testimonies of families of the disappeared, and other source texts that deal with Latin American cold-war anti-insurgency tactics. By yoking together these materials, Uribe's work offers a way to see the slaying of working-class bodies as the latest tactic through which capitalism preserves access to a extractible (and thus disposable) labour force. This complex juxtaposition of documents is similarly carried forward in Rodrigo's work, which, as I discussed, deftly borrows from Bartolomé de las Casas historical treatise and its denunciation of the atrocities of colonial extraction to place the migrant deaths at the border in the *long durée* of capitalist modernity. In this way, both writers intervene in and challenge the dominant neoliberal and global capitalist discourse on border regimes, underscoring the latter as an imperial frontier project that seeks to organize environments and bodies for the purpose of extraction. In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I turn to two writers whose works speaks to the state and corporate logics that map territories and people as extractible commodities evoked in Uribe and Rodrigo, but that, by looking into the persistence of the colonialist dystopia and the struggles for life within extractive Indigenous territories, also provide new ways to perceive beyond these predatory mappings.

Chapter Four:

The geographies of extractive capitalism and the nature of low-intensity warfare in the work of Irma Pineda and Hubert Matiúwàa

In the years that followed the implementation of NAFTA, the debt, the wage stagnation, the dismantlement of welfare, the decimation of labour and downward mobility rapidly wreaking havoc across the country came to be felt as a world-destroying end of times. As number of scholars have recently engaged, literary representations of apocalypse in NAFTA-era writing, often served as vehicles through which to negotiate these impacts. In Tomás Regalado-López's view, for instance, several authors embraced the apocalyptic optic as part of a turn in Mexican literature, which, zeroing in on Mexico City, portrayed the capital as a 'dystopian space, destroyed, uninhabitable and quickly approaching a final cataclysm' (2019, p. 67). Mexican writers, he claims, imagined a future megalopolis that suffered a magnified version of the mid-nineties, featuring issues like neoliberal policies, population growth, environmental destruction and public insecurity (ibid). Reacting against the failures in the official discourse of Mexican modernity and the capitalist expansion that accompanied NAFTA, writers like Jorge Volpi, Ignacio Padilla or Carmen Boullosa, to name just a few, depicted an urban landscape on the verge of destruction using the apocalyptic mode as a narrative discourse to elaborate on 'the omens of a threatening and sinister future' (Muñoz 2003, p. 77). According to Muñoz, the fear of a poisoned environment and the transfer of public space into private hands displayed via the apocalyptic was a direct response to the events that rendered 1994 'one most of the most horrible years in Mexico's recent history' (ibid.). The official entrance to neoliberalism, the devaluation of the local currency, the political crisis during Salinas de Gortari's last year of presidency that was felt throughout that year, the scholar holds, was translated by these authors by prefiguring

an image of a city made 'sick, miserable and disgusting' and anticipating an imminent socio-ecological and economic demise (p. 78). As one could further argue, however, this terminal vision of the country's future, suggests above all the apocalyptic logic by which neoliberalism, in the words of Deckard, has 'concertedly worked to repress those imaginative possibilities in their cultural and political expressions, to eradicate the very prospect of alternative cognitions and social organizations, and to reorganize lifeworlds for the economic and political benefits of elites' (2017, p. 84). Apocalypticism emerged then as the ultimate expression of a future claimed by neoliberalism and its dispossessing logic, as the imaginative capacity to think of a post-historical world beyond capital appeared not only strained but foreclosed.

Yet, in the mountains of Southeastern Mexico, the news of NAFTA and its 'death sentence' was perceived instead as part of an apocalyptic trajectory that had already begun five hundred years ago with the colonial encounter. As signaled in the widely circulated Declarations of the Lacandon Jungle published in 1994, signed by the general command of the Zapatistas (EZLN), made up of mostly Mayan Tzetzal and Tojolabal peasants, the land grabs and rupture of Indigenous lifeworlds can be traced back to the encroachment of Spanish militias in the sixteenth century expanding all the way to the 'dictadura de más de 70 años encabezada por una camarilla de traidores' [70 year dictatorship led by a clique of traitors] (p. 33). From the First Declaration, the EZLN articulates the past colonial and genocidal/ecocidal apocalypses that precede present threats, as the depleting effects of exhaustion, malnutrition and disease as well as the risk of total erasure have hovered over their bodies and the lands they inhabit since the dawn of the colonial enterprise (1994, ibid.). As Ayuujk scholar Yásnaya Aguilar has addressed in a similar fashion, the voraciousness of the colonial project and the regime of value constructed around the promises of extraction 'must have been lived as an apocalypse', for the production of commodity enclaves and racialized sites of disposability established to fuel accumulation bred

a radical and catastrophic change that is everywhere apparent today (2020, n.p.). Gómez-Barris, theorizing on what she calls 'the colonial Anthropocene' and building upon the work of Indigenous writers and their claim that apocalypse has long come to bring genocide, loss of land and ecosystems, has argued for an engagement with the slow and accelerating violence that has already produced dystopias across colonized environments (2019, n.p.). According to Gómez-Barris, while the lexicon of the Anthropocene, Holecene or Chthulucene has importantly turned attention towards the crisis of future life in the planet and the damage inflicted upon it, these terms continue to elide how this crisis 'was first organized by colonialism, its extractive project, and its desire to rapaciously rule over and decimate the territories and peoples it constituted through difference' (2019, n.p.). The intensification of extraction that continues to destroy local geographies, exacting differential pain upon the bodies and territories of Indigenous peoples, she suggests, should thus make clear to us that apocalypse for some is not the future horizon, but the historical experience of capitalism's destructive drive.

In this chapter, I consider how Indigenous artists foreground the persistence of colonial dystopia in the current stage of neoliberalism, documenting both the emerging socio-ecological threats to Indigenous livability as well as the long aftermath of previous waves of devastation. Specifically, I turn to the work of Binnizá and Mè'phàà writers who engage the scars and deformations within geographies still 'saturated in coloniality' (Gómez-Barris 2017, p. 11) in the indigenous Southwestern Mexican highlands, where the forty-year neoliberal privatization and deregulation processes as well as the global intensification of new forms of extractivism have disrupted the ecological rhythms necessary to sustain life.[26] Importantly, while these works engage the effects of the neoliberal developmentalist offensive and the governance structures

[26] While the terms Zapoteco and Tlapaneco are more commonly used to refer to the Binnizá and Mè'phàà communities, I make use of the latter as these are the ethnonyms used by both Pineda and Matiúwàa to self-identify.

that undergird it (such as NAFTA), they turn particularly to the starker forms of violence produced in the context of the long counterinsurgency warfare, often euphemistically called low intensity-warfare, that was been waged against Indigenous existence across the hemisphere. The first work I examine is Irma Pineda's bilingual long-poem *Guie' ni zinebe-La Flor que se llevó* (2013). In this work, Pineda traces the deep and multilayered histories of colonization, sexual and extractive violence that have long taken place within the Binnizá territories of the Oaxacan Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as well as the programs of counterinsurgency backlash and war-making that currently fuel neoliberal dispossession. In what we might think of, to follow Gómez-Barris, as an 'extractive view', the way of seeing that 'facilitates the reorganization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation' (2017, p. 5), Pineda's poem reckons with how this gaze is now wielded by state and multinational corporations to expand their control over nature. In her book, Pineda elucidates the centrality of this viewpoint for the construction of Indigenous peoples and their living systems as a hinderance to capitalist expansion, a vision mobilized to justify neoliberalism's "low intensity" warfare. This modality of war, as depicted by Pineda, is closer to what Diana M. Nelson calls the 'lower intensities of the ongoing, regenerative, everyday cultures of militarism' (2019, p. 122), whereby warfare is less of a temporal experience with beginning and end that expresses itself purely through moments of horrible brutality, but one that unfolds equally through the tactical wearing out of the life processes and the systems of meaning of a population in the space of the ordinary.

The second works I examine are two poetry collections published by Mè'phàà writer Hubert Matiúwàa, which similarly thematize the long-drawn-out enshrinement of terror by the

state-military-corporate nexus upon the region known as La Montaña in the state of Guerrero.[27] The rugged landscapes of La Montaña have long been the theatre of a material and representational conflict, as dominant racializing discourses have mapped these territories as sites of backwardness, violence and cultural deficiency (Mora 2017). In his bilingual collections *Xtambaá-Piel de Tierra* [Earthen Skin] (2016) and *Tsína rí nàyaxà'-Cicatriz que te mira* [The Scar that Looks at You] (2018), Matiúwàa surveys the long-term damage and violent reorganization of life produced by almost forty years of neoliberal development policies that, in conjunction with today's security policies, are experienced as a profound crisis of the social reproduction capacity of Mè'phàà peoples. In particular, Matiúwàa's poetry centres around the ruptured Indigenous knowledge systems and foodways that have sustained for centuries the communities of La Montaña, as NAFTA reforms left opium as one of the few cash crops that could still earn highland peasants any money at all. These conditions, according to Miller, made this region into a place where 'abysmal poverty meets profitable drug trafficking and where trafficking meets militarization', resulting in a consistent pattern of violence and abuse (2009, n.p.). The socio-ecological alteration produced by drug-fuelled agribusiness, however, is explored by Matiúwàa away from present securitization narratives, situating it rather as part of a continuum of violence that stretches back to the colonial extractive endeavour and its instruments of dispossession. In this way, in both collections, Matiúwàa shows how, whether through violence inflicted against their bodies, the extraction of their workforce or through the destruction and commodification of ecosystems, extractive capitalism has long worked to gradually erode the basic ecological conditions of social reproduction and bring about the end of established worlds.

[27] Matiúwàa (born Martínez Calleja) has published both collections under different pseudonyms. His 2016 collection was published under the last name Malina, which refers to the demonym for the people of Malinaltepec, his place of birth. His 2018 collection was published under his current pseudonym, Matiúwàa, which, meaning 'gente de calabaza' [people of the squash], is a nod to the origin myth of the Mè'phàà peoples.

But while both Pineda and Matiúwàa's engagement with the interrelating timelines of neoliberal warfare and the previously established dynamics of colonial occupation drives home the point that the current catastrophe is nothing new for Binnizá or Mè'phàà communities, the writers' staging of the long genealogies of revolt and struggle within these territories also works to push beyond neoliberal apocalypticism. These writers, hailing from sites whose geographic location and natural resources have historically made them into important territories to control, explore the acts of resistant refusal mobilized by Indigenous peoples to defend both their territories and livelihoods as well as the knowledge systems and relationships to land that work against the financialized view of nature foisted by extractive regimes. Pineda, for instance, is also a prominent activist, campaigning with both Binnizá and Ikoot communities against the wind energy 'rush' currently experienced in the Isthmus, which, though promoted as a 'green' or 'clean' solution to mitigate climate change, has intensified existing trajectories of land grabbing as well as the 'slow industrial genocide' of Indigenous peoples (Dunlap 2018, p. 550). This struggle to defend land, however, rather than exceptional or new, has been fed instead by past moments of Binnizá insurgence and resistance, such as the revolts against the privatization of communal lands in the 1970s. These mobilizations were met with brutal extra-judicial violence and ended with the kidnapping and murder of a dozen land defenders and militants from the Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students from the Isthmus (COCEI), including the activist Víctor "Yodo", Pineda's father.[28] Thus, while Pineda's poetry acknowledges the low and high intensities of war that operate to promote ongoing modes of accumulation, her work also invokes Indigenous resistance efforts as well as imagery that speaks to the Binnizá worldview to

[28] See Dunlap, Alexander. 2018. The 'solution' is now the 'problem:' wind energy, colonization and the 'genocide-ecocide nexus' in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22 (4): pp. 550-573.

foreground the relationships of reciprocity with the land that continue to exist in spite of the forces of extraction and dispossession. By putting forward and evoking Binnizá and Mèphàà' epistemologies that foreground alternative economies based on communal and collectivist practices, these literary works, I argue, appear as natural accomplices to and product of the militant Indigenous movements currently at play, as they work to belie the apocalyptic-inflected logic of neoliberalism and its efforts to repress the possibilities of even imagining a future beyond the capitalist present. If low intensity warfare has been central for both capital's recovery and neoliberalism's slow decimation of other possible worlds, Pineda and Matiúwàa's poetry also indexes what Nelson calls the 'low-intensity struggles' that have been built upon 'decades of struggle and stubborn endurance' across the Americas (2019, p. 199), struggles for socio-ecological renewal that, one can claim, have also worked to imaginatively erode the paralyzing paradigms of no future.

Militarization and the territory- body: the work of Irma Pineda

Irma Pineda is one the most prolific and well-known Indigenous contemporary writers. Her work, published in both Diidxazá (Isthmus Zapotec) and Spanish is part of a longstanding Binnizá literary tradition, which is often referenced as one of the most expansive of all the indigenous languages of Mexico (Montemayor 2005, p. 2). Particularly during the 1970s, and linked to the agrarian struggles of the COCEI, literature produced in the Isthmus attracted national attention as Binnizá writers began to reinforce the connection between political activism and poetry within their verses, defending Binnizá communal practices through the depiction of 'the beauty of the natural world and the sanctity of everyday life' (Sullivan 2012, p. 43). Pineda's first publications, however, coincide rather with the resurgence and so-called boom of Indigenous literatures, which at the turn of the twenty-first century saw an outpouring of texts

produced by Indigenous authors and poets. Some scholars trace this resurgence back to the early 1990s, when various institutions were created inside and outside bureaucratic structures, allowing the establishment of standardized alphabets for traditionally oral languages and promoting literacy as a tool for cultural preservation (Montemayor 2001, p. 29). In 1994, for example, the National Council for Culture and the Arts established the Nezahualcóyotl Award for Literature in Indigenous Languages and a scholarship fund for Indigenous authors, while the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) launched a publication series titled *Letras indígenas contemporáneas* (Burdette 2019, p. 42). The production and circulation of bilingual texts in the Mexican literary landscape became even more prominent in the wake of the approval of the Ley General de los Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas (General Law of Indigenous People's Linguistic Rights) in 2003, which guaranteed the safeguarding and promotion of the diversity and linguistic rights of Indigenous peoples.

That the state's endorsement of multiculturalism and the flood of programs and funding began to take hold as the Zapatista insurgency was making claims to land and denouncing the violence of capitalist extraction, led some scholars to ponder on what they see is the crucial paradox that defines the struggle for indigenous autonomy in the neoliberal era; that is, in the words of Charles Hale and Rosa Millamán, the way 'cultural rights' operate 'both as battle cry of opposition to neoliberal regimes and as a leading idiom through which these same regimes domesticate and govern their opponents' (2006, p. 294). As these authors argue, one of the results of this phenomenon, drawing from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's notion, is what they call the *indio permitido,* a socio-political category, that, evoking past narratives of the 'docile' indigenous labourer, refers to the provisions and novel spaces granted to 'authorized' or 'domesticated' Indians for their relative silence and inaction on issues of race or rights to land (p. 285). Such an administered form of multiculturalism, they highlight, can lend itself to the

neutralization of the radical propositions of Indigenous movements and help the state mask itself as a beacon of inclusiveness and multiculturalism while it does nothing to change the increasingly violent enclosure of communal lands (ibid). To confront this, Hale and Millamán thus advocate a greater focus on more radical and contentious forms of resistance that challenge the 'indio permitido' and the cultural rights idiom. Yet, while the cultural project of neoliberalism has unquestionably introduced challenges to the struggles against the logic of late capitalism, as Hannah Burdette contends, to read the more public position of Indigenous writers as merely performing a conciliatory role sidelines Indigenous literature's deep connection to the histories of militancy (2018, p. 81). Moreover, according to Burdette, Indigenous writers strategically alternate between the authorized and the insurrectionary as a means of negotiating the complex terrain of public discourse and make use of poetic language to 'resemanticize' popular understandings of insurgency within dominant imaginaries (p. 113). As Abigail Pérez Aguilera likewise adds, many of these contemporary artistic forms echo and support the aims and goals of political documents such as the Zapatistas' Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, adhering to its commitment to rebellion in the face of military, political, ideological and economic onslaughts (2017, p. 204). These art forms thus support the survival and continuance of Indigenous communities and lifeways, foregrounding not just the capitalist system's impacts on labour relations and fragile food systems or its intersecting racial and gender oppressions but also the Indigenous conceptualization of nature that posit other realities and uphold communal forms of living.

Pineda's collection *Guie' ni zinebe-La flor que se llevó* is thus exemplary of those art forms that take to the social and environmental justice efforts advocated by Indigenous resistance. Since her prior collection *Xilase qui rié di' sicasi rié nisa guiigu'-La nostalgia no se marcha como el agua de los ríos* [Nostalgia Doesn't Flow Away Like River Water] published in 2008, Pineda has

explored Indigenous communities' struggles for subsistence as their ability to earn a living growing corn was thwarted by neoliberal trade practices, resulting in rampant migration as day laborers to the agro-industrial fields of Mexico's northern states or as semipermanent undocumented workers in the U.S. Such disruptive changes are evoked in the collection through two fictional voices: the person of Pineda's hometown who has migrated north and the person's partner, who has stayed behind. The physical separation of Indigenous peoples from land and consequently, from the relationships that are embedded in place, thus reflects Pineda's preoccupation with the painful threats to survival (of subsistence practices, of community, of language and knowledge) that were wrought upon by NAFTA. The five years in between these publications, however, only intensified the already fraught circumstances within Indigenous territories, as the militarization (and paramilitarization) spearheaded through the multimillion anti-narcotics aid-packages threatened once more Indigenous existence. *Guie' ni zinebe*, as Pineda has stated, was written as a response to the brutal rape and homicide of an elderly Nahua woman by a group of soldiers stationed in the Zongolica highlands of Veracruz (a region that borders the Isthmus), whose death was officially ruled the result of 'chronic gastritis'.[29] The presence of the military in the zone was part of the Operation 'Veracruz Seguro' [Safe Veracruz], which, officially introduced to deter crime, ramped up the surveillance and harassment that Nahua communities had experienced since the early 2000s. During those years, poverty alleviation programs were introduced to police and contain expressions of social discontent as well as the mobilizations from the Coordinadora Regional de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Sierra de Zongolica (CROIZ). As one member of the CROIZ stated following the murder, the increased organization of communities for the defense of their political autonomy and natural resources

[29] See Trujillo Baez, Norma. 2020. 'Felipe Calderón y Fidel Herrera ocultaron la violación de Ernestina Ascencio: Perito.' *Pie de Página*. https://piedepagina.mx/felipe-calderon-y-fidel-herrera-ocultaron-la-violacion-a-ernestina-ascencio-perito/. Accessed 2 September 2020.

(wood and coffee) underpins the numerous assaults and military presence in the region. These movements, he states, particularly in the face of the expansion of the Zapatistas' 'Otra Campaña', 'prendieron desde hace años la alarma de quienes detentan el poder en esas montañas' [turned on the alarms of those that wield power over those mountains] (qtd. in *Proceso* 2007).

In *Guie' ni zinebe*, Pineda situates the targeting of Indigenous communities and particularly of women's bodies as a terror strategy that not only drags into the present the temporalities of counterinsurgency, but also the variety of colonial tactics deployed to dispossess Indigenous peoples and to curtail the horizons of resistance mobilized in defense of territory and life. Through the depiction of the slow wearing out of Indigenous, symbolized for instance through the image of 'voces de trueno' [voices of thunder] turned into 'pequeñas chispas que agonizan cada noche' [small sparks that agonize each night], Pineda articulates the somatic effects of militarization that work to incapacitate forms of contestation to the advancement of capital. There is therefore a sense of loss that pervades in Pineda's opening stanzas, as the containment of radical Indigenous voices has entailed the land-reduction that made Indigenous survivability impossible. The conditions of scarcity and duress that left Indigenous peoples to 'agonize each night', denote then the mass debilitation of bodies under conditions of military occupation that, as J. Kehualani Kauanui argues, have been 'designed to slowly erode, break up, and destroy a specific population' to allow for the corporate and state privatization of Indigenous landholdings (2018, n.p.). The perpetual confrontations with the army in the form of daily harassment at military checkpoints, overflights by helicopter gunships, and soldiers on patrol in villages as well as the incarceration of Indigenous leaders with charges of terrorism, riot or sedition are therefore deployed to keep Indigenous peoples in a continuous state of debilitation. In what we might think of, to follow Frantz Fanon, as a 'state of combat breathing', a total mobilization of an occupied population's life energies merely in order to continue to live, breathe and survive the

exercise of state violence (qtd. in Pugliese and Perera 2011, p. 1), the somatic asphyxiation produced through militarized surveillance in the Isthmus appears as its ready equivalent. Pineda's long poem thus traces how government's actions rather than geared toward combating poverty, are instead directed toward incapacitating manoeuvres that seek to advance the neoliberal 'evisceration' of the earth:[30]

La paz fue siempre nuestra hermana hasta que la maldad sacudió el vientre de la tierra porque deseaba más No le bastó nuestra presencia silenciosa en un rincón No estuvo satisfecho con nuestro callado dolor	[Peace was always our sister until evil eviscerated earth's womb with its greed Our cowering in the corner wasn't enough our silent pain did not satisfy
Mil demonios agazapados levantaron su pesado cuerpo para borrar la memoria y escribir después que nosotros nunca existimos sobre la tierra (Pineda 2013, p. 31)	The thousand sly devils dug up her body to erase our history and then decree we never lived on this earth] (Call 2018, p. 135)

Pineda draws attention to the dystopic landscape and nightmarish reality wrought by the predatory raiding of nature, 'el vientre de la tierra' [earth's womb], as well as to the land and the associated forms of life that capital seeks to stamp out through the violence of dispossession and enclosure. Through the reference to a ruptured 'peace' in the first line, Pineda contrasts two distinct periods of time in the life of Binnizá communities. These are unspecified in the poem, but the photographs that are interspersed in the book and which show the militarization of the Southern Mexican countryside that were captured by photojournalist Frida Hartz during the late

[30] Unless otherwise stated, all English translations are cited from Wendy Call's translations of Pineda's collection published in *ADI Magazine* (2020) and *Chicago Review* (2018).

1980s, would suggest that they refer to a pre- and post-NAFTA period. Read in such way, the reference to 'sly devils' that materialized to dug up the earth's body would denote the full force of state control in the not-yet regulated extractible territories during the pivotal era of neoliberal structural transformation.

As Dunlap has documented, ejido topsoil and communal land had been a source of conflict between different tiers of Mexican government, private companies, land owners and social movements in the *Istmo*, as efforts to assert control over and further integrate social property into the national economy had been foreclosed by its legal status as social property, long serving as a barrier towards public and private development projects (2017, p. 393). It was, however, precisely in the 1990s that privatization and deregulation undid most protections for Indigenous territories, including eliminating Article 27 from the Constitution that had famously shielded the ejido communal system since the 1910 revolution, affecting most deleteriously the state of Oaxaca, where 38% of land was so administered (ibid.). As such dismantling and counter-revolutionary legislation led to a widespread dispossession across the country and the Oaxacan Isthmus, the scene that Pineda describes indexes the catastrophic threat to the futurity of Indigenous peoples wrought by neoliberalism and its project of erasure and extraction. Yet, while Pineda's depiction of Indigenous displacement via counterinsurgency tactics captures the neoliberal efforts to make social property legible, Pineda's reference to a prior space profoundly transformed by the colonial imprint, also suggest the multiple apocalyptic outcomes that have been produced through different periods of capital accumulation:

El silencio fue cortado cuando nueve palmas escaló el demonio para tocar la piel del mundo	[Silence was broken when the devil climbed up from below to touch the world's skin
Subió con su verde manto y nadie pudo ver sus ojos de serpiente con la maldad dilatando sus pupilas	He rose up in its green cloak So no one could see his snake eyes How evil dilatated its pupils

Vino el demonio con su ropa de hierba
disfrazado como un hijo de la tierra
apretó el cuello de la noche
que lanzó un grito de ramas quebradas
y ahuyento la paz en los nidos de los zanates
(Pineda 2013, p. 35)

The devil came in his leafy clothes
Disguised as a child of the earth
Wrung night's neck
and she yelped like a branch snapped
and peace fled from the grackle's nest]
(Call 2018, p. 135)

As we see in the reference to Mexican state security forces and their 'green cloaks', Pineda captures an ecology ruptured by the heavy militarization of the countryside in the turn towards the neoliberal regime of accumulation. However, rather than present this as an isolated moment of devastation, the allusion to the demonic forces that disrupt the *zanate*'s [Mexican grackle] ecology, an species original to the Americas and ubiquitous of the Zapotec Isthmus, suggest also the destruction and death force of a prior civilizational project. As Michael Taussig has contended in his classic anthropological study examining the surging of the figure of the devil with the onset of mines and plantations in the Americas, rather than superstition, the figure appears as a mythic expression to convey what it is perceived as an evil and destructive way of ordering economic life (1980, p. 17). Therefore, as the poem establishes the Isthmus region as a frontier war zone occupied by devils in 'leafy clothes', the initial reference to a quietness ruptured by devils that climbed 'nueve palmas' [nine handspans] –a Diidxazá term which refers to the depths of hell (Valdivieso 2008, p. 12)– further extends the notion of an apocalypse that has already taken place prior to present-day conflict.

The evocation of the colonial and extractive encounter that haunts the landscape sutures together the temporalities of the colonial catastrophe and the militarization of the modern period, revealing the constant re-enactment of the scene of discovery that 'representationally evacuated native peoples in order to produce an innocent account of […] settlement' (Gómez-Barris 2017, p.84). In describing the stunting force of territorial expansion –the erasure of

history stated in previous lines– the poem also attests to how Indigenous removal operates through the inscription of their territories as *terra nullius*. From this viewpoint, extensive resource-rich regions are cast as territories without inhabitants, imaginatively emptying out territories of Indigenous peoples to facilitate acquisition. With their presence written-off, as Pineda signals, their histories and existence have been effaced from the nation's memory, often relegated to an ancient past, making their territories appear as empty plots of land waiting to be taken. Furthermore, since the colonial fiction of *terra nullius* continues to structure capitalist dynamics of expansion, Pineda elevates the project of disappearance of Indigenous peoples as a central and ongoing feature of neoliberal extractive governmentality.

The inherently eliminatory logic of capital accumulation has occasionally taken less blatant forms in order to occlude its true nature. State agencies, for example, as Dunlap argues, have used conservation and development programs as a kind of counterinsurgency in areas of rural poverty to win the 'hearts' and 'minds' of locals, which also attempts to erode communal structures and communally held land in order to 'confine it within the grid of industrial development and thereby mitigate revolutionary violence' (2017, p. 638). These schemes of rural pacification that seek to undermine insurgent groups, however, work alongside more perverse measures that are usually more effectual to cater for capitalist insatiable nature: making criminals out of those it has despoiled. From subversive capture and the counterinsurgency campaigns in the long 1970s through the current war against 'organized crime', the criminalization of Indigenous mobilization has served the neoliberal state to tailor environments for civil and security sectors to manage rural populations. In this context, the 'heavy bodies' that operate to erase history invoked in Pineda's previous stanzas, functions also as a metaphor of the 'counter-terrorist' infrastructure that is mobilized to regularize and invade communal lands. Military machinery such as the tank, as Gómez-Barris observes, always litters 'the spaces of intimidation,

state terror, and cleared memory' as it operates as the 'prototypical weapon of violent amnesia' (Gómez-Barris 2018), for it functions to erase the vibrant ecologies and the ways of living, being and doing tied to them in order to transform Indigenous land and life into commodities. Juxtaposed with the poem, there is then a black and white image that dates back to the period of land tenure change, which shows a military convoy crossing through a mountainous and rugged terrain as soldiers armed with assault rifles descend upon the fields and crawl through the ground to camouflage with the dense forest. However, while the photograph taken by Hartz shows the emergent neoliberal order in a bellicose fashion, it is the poem which demands readers to experience the firsthand accounts of what came in the wake of this neoliberal dystopia:

vinieron ellos	[they came
con sus brazos de metal y fuego	metal and flame in their arms
incendiaron la noche	they set fire to the night
despertaron a la tierra con sus gritos de fieras	they woke up the earth with their savage cries
y los gemidos de animal herido	and the wounded-animal howls
que escapaban	that fled
de la nariz y garganta de mis hermanos	from my brothers' and sisters' noses and throats
(2013, p. 41)	(Call 2018, p. 39)

In this account, Pineda renders visible the full force of state and corporate land invasions and reveals the maiming tactics that are essential to the accumulation imperatives of neoliberalism. The 'wounded-animal howls' that come out of the maimed Indigenous bodies points to the 'infliction of incapacity' that underpins territorial acquisition, which turns the Indigenous body that is seen as an obstruction into 'the site of injury' (Gómez-Barris 2018). As Indigenous corporealities are one of the only impediments for global land-grabbing, anti-terrorism and anti-drug legislation have authorized what Jasbir Puar has prominently called 'the right to maim', which is invested in creating injury and maintaining populations debilitated 'yet alive, in order to control them' (2018, p. 10). Although this logic appears as complimentary to the 'the right to

kill' of neoliberal governmentality, as Puar advances, to stunt, to maim and to debilitate are not byproducts of, but one of its very raisons d'etre (p. 4). The references to 'Metal y fuego' in the poem, therefore, not only metaphorize the technologies of warfare used to maim bodies but also the violent technologies of extraction used for the digging and drilling of 'el vientre de la tierra', given that, to follow Gavin Bridge, 'the hole represents an essential feature of the extractive landscape […] a dark, inhuman hell of tunnels to strip away the organs of nature' (Bridge 2015, n.p.). The targeted debilitation and the maiming of Indigenous bodies is thus also inflected upon their environments, which in turn forecloses what Puar calls 'the life support systems that might allow populations to heal from this harm' (2018, 143). In the poem, the speaker's address to a soldier/state that 'todo tira y todo rompe' [breaks and throws everything], works then to illustrate how it is not just the immediate corporeal assaults of military campaigns that pushes towards the diminishment of Binnizá populations but it is the ecological devasting neoliberal model violently put in place in the Isthmian forest what fosters their elimination:

Llegaste con los extraños a pisar la hierba que sólo conoce mis pies cubriste los ojos del sol que sólo mis huellas ha mirado […] Crees que bastará la faz del mundo Para escapar de tu odio Crees que no habrá selva capaz de guardar vida Porque tú le has robado los colores para pintar tu traje (2013, p. 45)	You came with strangers to pound the grass that only knows our feet you blinded the sun that had only gazed on my footprints […] You think the world is too weak to escape your hate you think the jungle too small to shelter us because you stole her colors to dye your clothes (Call 2020, n.p.)

By describing a de-resourced environment, Pineda captures what Achille Mbembe has likewise identified as a war-making tactic; a 'war on life support' which as he argues, makes of the supporting infrastructures of ordinary life both the target and weapon of intervention (2003, p. 31). However, contrary to the interpretation of life supporting infrastructures given by both Puar (2017, p. 133) and Mbembe (2003, p. 27), which is used mainly to refer to the built environment

– bridges, railroads, schools, hospitals, heating plants, communication networks – Pineda points rather to the destruction of nature as a reduction of life possibilities. As Pineda shows here, the extractive gaze of the state works to destroy and dimmish the aliveness of targeted socio-ecologies, and in particular, what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard describes as 'the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge' that inform and structure Indigenous lifeways (2014, p. 31). Pineda's poetic speaker illustrates these land-connected practices as she signals a Binnizá worldview that sees the *selva* as a sentient being, a vision of the world that, as Claire E. Sullivan observes, is captured in their creation story 'which tells them they were born out of a root of a *pochote* tree' (2016, p. 201) and which registers an interdependency with nature that threatens to be ruptured. Given that militarization flattens the vibrant worlds of relationality within the rainforest, Pineda renders the outcomes of both punctual and protracted warfare upon geographies where coloniality has left yet continues to leave its inscriptions.

As the main cataclysmic event that has plundered the planet's resources, as Gómez-Barris's signals, colonial dispossession has been the dominant background structure shaping the so-called peripheries of the late-capitalist enterprise (2017, p. 4). Reducing life to capitalist conversion, the totalizing viewpoint of extractive capitalism severs and obscures the complex and porous interactivity between human and nonhuman nature. Yet, working against the universalizing idiom and viewpoint of colonial capitalism, Pineda's above-mentioned poem lingers on the hidden worlds that exist alongside extractive capitalism, refuting the renewed logic of *terra nulllius* imposed by the violent processes of accumulation currently unfolding across the Americas. By bringing to the foreground what Gómez-Barris calls 'the coordinated systems often illegible to those with state and financial power that assume simplicity where complexity actually dwells' (2017, p. 16), Pineda contests the totalizing reach of capitalism that supposes

'no place on earth' and no 'jungle' escapes its death grip. Therefore, in the following stanzas, speaking directly to the soldier, Pineda accounts for the relationships of reciprocity and intimacy with the *selva,* which she describes as both 'home', 'mother' and 'child', as well as the ecological knowledge systems that are capable to perceive 'cada parte de su piel' [every inch of her skin] with just sensing the scent of the forest. The relationship described extends the recognition of an interdependent link between the rainforest and those who inhabit it which goes beyond the logic of commodification that capitalism has sought to foster.

Pineda's rendering of the closeness between her and the rainforest is therefore linked to an understanding of land as 'a relationship based on the obligations Indigenous peoples have to other people and the other-than-human relations that constitute the land itself' (Coulthard 2014, p. 57). As a system of reciprocal relations and obligations, this 'grounded normativity', as Coulthard names it, foregrounds a non-dominating and nonexploitative orientation to land. Thus, the constitutive alliance between land and bodies that Pineda conveys is one that the soldiers fail to recognize, as they have been captured in the perverse plotlines written by colonialism. As Pineda reveals in further lines, which allude to a 'mirada tierna de ayer' [tender gaze of yesteryear] seen in the soldiers' eyes, these men are part of the complex and pernicious mechanism of state terror in the Mexican countryside, whereby Indigenous men have been implicated as accomplices to the violence and brutality against their own communities. As Pineda painstakingly illustrates, referencing the soldiers' obedience to 'aquella voz que te ha enseñado a ganar el pan de cada día' [that voice that has taught you how to win your daily bread], extractive capitalism expands its reach by coopting communities into becoming instruments of their own dispossession. However, while cooptation strategies usually entail foreign aid provided to collaborating local elites to stabilize and manage areas of interest, Pineda importantly points rather to the lethal turning of Indigenous peoples into collaborators of state terror.

Recent research into the composition, training and functioning of the Mexican armed forces such as Daniela Rea's and Pablo Ferri's journalistic work *La Tropa* [The Troop] (2019), has underscored how the majority of soldiers that have joined their ranks in the last decades and who constitute the lowest rungs of a paradigmatically vertical structure have come from the rural areas of the southern states of Guerrero, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Chiapas, places where 'siete de cada diez personas nacen, viven y morirán pobres" [seven out of ten people are born, live and die in poverty] (Rea and Ferri 2017, p. 108). Furthermore, these are the states most affected by neoliberal policies, leaving a deep pool of rural unemployed to use as the muscle to armour NAFTA. Although not much has been said about this formation, experiences of the low-intensity conflict in Guatemala can point us to comparable dynamics. As Mayan Jakaltek scholar Victor Montejo has observed, poor young Indigenous men were coerced and then brutally indoctrinated to serve as foot soldiers in the country's 1982 Indigenous genocide. Enlisted for '$35-a-month […] a bed, a board, the privileges of the army uniform' and the promise to become 'real mean', Mayan youths were 'indoctrinated with the basic racist attitudes of ladinos [mestizos] toward Indians even when that racism was directed against themselves and their families' (Montejo 1999, p. 62-63). Their violent training ultimately ensured that 'brainwashed and desensitized', they could be drove into 'carrying out a violent war against their own people' (p. 63). Dunlap's research into extractive operations in the Isthmus has likewise underscored how energy companies co-opt the 'very own *compañeros*' of Binnizá and Ikoot fisherman and farmers that mobilize against 'green' energy projects, 'sucking them with money and arming them' to turn them against those who have proven a threat to transnational wind energy companies (2017, p. 644).

This complex panorama, illustrates how dispossession, to follow Simpson, is not only about the removal of physical beings from their environments; it also entails the removal of

'bodies and minds from the place-based grounded normativities' that guide communal relations (2017, p. 43). As state structures colonize and incorporate the people and natural resources into the projects of dominant actors, the relationships that grow out of the land are tactically severed, coercing people to identify with corporate and government-sanctioned values rather than with their own communities and land-based practices:

¿no ves que el demonio acecha?
¿oyes como suenan sus pies de hierro en la hojarasca?
No son tortillas las que sostiene en sus manos
tampoco trae la voz de los abuelos
Tiene sed padre
y quiere beber tu sangre
(2013, p. 49)

Can't you see the demon lurking?
do you hear the sound of his iron feet
on the fallen leaves?
it is not tortillas that his hands are holding
nor is he bringing the voices of the ancestors
he is thirsty father
and it is your blood he wants to drink
(Call 2020, n.p.)

In the stanza, the colonization of Indigenous minds to alienate them from their communities and from the land is portrayed both in the soldier's close affinity to a bloodthirsty colonizer and in his disavowal of expressions of customary knowledge, given that the cultivation of maize and the connection to ancestors underpin Indigenous relationships to land. By highlighting this colonized subjectivity, Pineda symbolically convokes the mechanisms of social pacification that are necessary to perform the task of extraction, functioning to allure and covert the subjectivities of people to 'ingest the values of invading societies' (Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020, p. 29). The now militarized, technologically enhanced, uniformed body of the solider prefigures the social engineering of a colonized docile subjectivity, who has acquired the state's full recognition by adopting what Ramón Grosfoguel calls the 'genocide/epistemicide of the "I exterminate, therefore I am"' that underprops extractive capitalism (2013, p. 73). Pineda's lyrical first-person address to the soldier thus elucidates and questions these violent forms of recognition and accommodation that operate to shape Indigenous peoples' identities towards 'white[-mestizo]

power, state capital and male dominance' (Coulthard 2015, p. 188). Speaking directly to the soldier, Pineda questions rather the perversion and inhumanity bestowed upon him 'después de calzar esas botas rígidas […] esas botas que mi cuerpo ha conocido desde el suelo […] esas botas que hoy dirigen tus pasos y te llevan a la boca del abismo [after fitting those rigid boots […] those boots my body has known from the ground […] those boots that now guide your steps and take you into the abyss] (2014, p. 17). As Pineda seems to decry, the control and displacement of Indigenous communities operates both through coercive measures and through the capture of Indigenous peoples to partake in the same schemes of exploitation and domination.

The reproduction of patriarchal violence and of the capitalist gaze that sees nature as extractible which has already been suggested in the abovementioned lines is likewise one of the central preoccupations in Pineda's work. The intricate connection between the colonial project, resource extraction, and sexualized violence that is implied by the allusion of the state-sponsored violence that has been already inscribed in the speakers' body is thus further deepened in subsequent verses that dwell on the assaults upon feminized bodies in the current stage of resource extraction. From the perspective of the coloniality of power, the entangled categories of body, territory and sovereignty have been prominently analysed by Rita Segato, who has signaled how female corporealities, their reproductive organs and their sexuality have been continuously turned into conquerable territories or *terra nullius*; regions to be plunder, destroyed and violated (2010, p. 82). The torture inflicted on women by the army, paramilitary organizations and security forces working for transnational corporations in the Americas, according to Segato, more than having a repressive function, act by making the body an ostentatious display of domination and territorial sovereignty. As she contends: 'the sexuality poured over it expresses the taming act, the taking possession of, when inseminating the

woman's body territory' (Segato 2010, p. 83). The female or feminized body signified as territory to be annexed is consequently 'an etymology as archaic as its transformations are recent' (p. 83). Pineda's descriptions of rape as a violent uprooting, the 'stolen flower' referenced in the book's title, thus, rather than a reassertion of female/nature equivalence captures how extractivism becomes inscribed on the *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory). This notion, derived from Indigenous and Latin American feminisms, posits that the corporeal (human) body and geospatial territory are acted upon and subjugated by the same heteropatriarchal capitalist regimes of power. The analogies between the earthly features of the body that Pineda draws, for instance, the weakened 'branches' and dried 'soil', thus end up transcending the metaphor and illustrate the interlinks between the violence against land and the forms of violence – psychic, physical, sexual and land-based – enacted upon the bodies of Indigenous women. As Segato ultimately underscores, 'let us not forget' that '*rapiña* the Spanish word for pillage, and *rapinagem*, the Portuguese word for voracious looting, share a root with *rape'* (p. 87).

Pineda's portrayal of this *rapiña* thereby illuminates the way in which neoliberal regimes have continuously re-enacted colonial sexual violence to shape the territories on which communitarian fabrics still exist, rupturing the relationships that root, localize, and sediment affects and everyday life. Speaking of a women's womb ripped opened 'de norte a sur con una línea certera [from north to south with a clear-cut line]', Pineda denotes as well the moment of conquest, the historical move that sutured the female body to land and to untamed nature. The line signals the colonial paradigm of the land lying open and vulnerable to rape and conquest, drawing attention to the manner in which these forms of violence nurture and perpetuate each other. The intrinsic connection between the looting of the earth and the rape of women's bodies, beyond its metaphorical content, highlights how 'the patriarchal mind that seeks to control the sexuality of women and Indigenous peoples also controls nature' (Smith 2003, p. 80). Thus,

when Pineda writes 'el vientre de mi hermana/ miraste como la fruta redonda […]/ la abriste para arrancar su semilla [you looked at my sister's womb like a rounded fruit […]you opened it to rip out her seed]' she writes of an extractive, patriarchal and hierarchical organizing vision that marks the Indigenous female body and by extension, the land and nonhuman nature, as opened for exploitation and extraction. References to the impossibility to 'moisten the soil' and 'revive' what was uprooted also foregrounds imagery linked to fertility, which is here used to connote both feminized violence and the foreclosure of 'futurity'; the material and symbolic deprivation of social reproduction. This link however is not accidental, given that sexual violence enables the dislocation of a community from its land-base, but also because the genocidal logic of the State marks the female body as target for its ability to physically 'reproduce' Indigeneity.

In mapping loss through her territory-body and grieving her inability to make her 'flower' revive, the poetic voice renders the threat to survival in the areas of militarization and extractive capitalism. It is her integral relation to land and place that makes her a threat to the futurity of the capitalist state that as she denounces, to borrow what Simpson calls the rendition of her body as targeted extractible nature, plans to build pipelines across her body, clear-cut her forests, contaminate her lakes with toxic chemicals and make her body a site of continual sexualized violence (2017, p. 183). Thus, as the poetic voice poignantly intimates: 'mujer tierra soy/tierra abierta/tierra rasgada/tierra violentada/tierra que duele por sus hermanas/tierra que no quiere ser arada por el duelo/tierra que no quiere engendrar dolor/tierra que quiere llorar/tierra que quiere sangrar' [I am woman earth/opened earth/ripped earth/wounded earth/earth that pains for her sisters/earth that doesn't want to be ploughed by sorrow/earth that doesn't want to engender pain/earth that wants to cry/earth that wants to bleed] (2013, p. 67). While the first lines hinge upon her female body as the bearer of ancestral pain, the last lines manifest her desire to resist the 'never-ending cycle of victimhood' in which Indigenous peoples have been placed

(Simpson 2017, p. 80). The danger of perpetually placing Indigenous women in the context of victimhood and powerlessness, as argued by Simpson, is that 'Indigenous grief can be managed, exploited, and used by the state to placate Indigenous resistance' (p. 238). Manifesting an unwillingness to 'be ploughed by sorrow', the first-person voice engages then in an radical rejection as she demurs to amplify and cycle the pain of shame and violence. Furthermore, the lines 'I am woman earth [..] that doesn't want to engender pain' suggest an assertion of bodily and land-based sovereignty and with this, what Simspon calls, an act of 'generative refusal' to the inevitability of colonial capitalism's supremacy, which, she argues, can open the possibility of imagining other futures (Simpson 2017, p. 9). Through this affirmation, Pineda begins to re-route the colonial extractive imaginary that sought to foreclose Indigenous and nonhuman futurity to map other temporal imaginaries that continue that survive and mobilize within this preyed upon landscape.

As Gómez-Barris contends, complex representations that illuminate the suffering that has been disproportionate in the spaces of clear-cutting and those sites where slow and immediate violence has increasingly reduced 'territories and forest to commodities and Indigeneity as remainder' (2020, p. 80) are crucial to understand the genocidal-ecocidal rationale that drives the militarized resource rush of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, as she continues, the ecologies of the forest cannot be delinked from the long arc of forest peoples' struggles, as these are societies that possess deep collective histories and have lived through the disruptions of historic and ongoing practices of colonialism and capitalist extraction (ibid). Rendering then a future beyond catastrophe, Pineda describes her territory-body rather than as a site of injury as 'el surco en la piel de los campos, herida abierta para depositar vida' [the furrow in the field's skin, wound open to nurture life]. Furthermore, in other lines, which offer an image of community life and evoke the cultivation of the land, Pineda conveys the intimate relations

among humans and non-human elements that occur in these daily acts. Given that these acts require a 'direct material engagement with the cyclical unfolding of the natural world' (Gómez-Barris 2016, p. 99), such moments articulate a relational knowledge that continues to organize life and proliferate it despite the open wound. Confronted with continuous attempts to 'break the networks of intelligent relationships housed on Indigenous bodies in order to prevent the replication of Indigenous freedom' (Simpson 2017, p. 127), the embodiment contoured by Pineda subverts the language of abjection by upholding the survival and renewal of Indigenous life systems despite the neoliberal onslaught. Animating the body as a land still enlivened, subsequent lines describe her body not as 'ceniza después de la noche que incendiaste la hierba y quemaste la casas' [ash after you set fire to the grass and burned down houses] but as 'humo que aroma' [scented smoke] (Pineda 2013, p. 71). Through this self-affirming embodiment, Pineda symbolically disrupts neoliberal apocalypticism by foregrounding not only Indigenous peoples' survival but their resurgence. As further lines stress how this arson, a clear allusion to the scorched-earth tactics of neoliberal counterinsurgency, 'no alcanzó el gran árbol de nuestra memoria' [didn't reach our immerse tree of memory], Pineda foregrounds the knowledge systems and liberatory politics of Indigenous peoples that continue to keep people attached to the land. In weighting on the aftershock of 'the night'– used here connote 'that long night of 500 years' that the Zapatistas decried – Pineda gives an afterword to catastrophe and dystopia, depicting how these ties to land also mean a deep tie to an unseen history of resistance.

In the context of 'slow genocide' and extractivist replacement, as Pineda seems to write, the roots, barks, needles of the 'immense tree of memory' act as an anchor to the world of Ancestors and to the erased histories of struggle. In this manner, cultural memory becomes not solely 'a repository of wounds, traumas, and victimization of authoritarianism but also an activator of forms of expressive resistance to colonization' (Gómez-Barris 2014, p. 94). As such,

Pineda moves out from the deadening impasse of capitalism's apocalyptic phase to the enlivened spaces where the grip of capital is resisted, refused and forestalled: 'Esta es la guerra nos dijiste/y disparaste al aire/ para que todos los pájaros se marcharan/ Esta es la guerra nos dijimos y empuñamos nuestra palabra' [This is war/you told us/and you fired straight into the air/so all the birds would go away/This is war/we said /and we wielded our word] (2013, p. 75). In the first lines, Pineda indexes the military actions that from the colonial endeavour to the low-intensity warfare operations have now become generalized and reached unprecedented levels under the War on Drugs, that have been aimed at the social extinction of Indigenous peoples for land-grabbing purposes. Yet, what she poignantly outlines in the last lines is how Indigenous bodies continue to refuse and mobilize to challenge this obliteration. As Pineda suggest, it is by rooting themselves in their '*palabra*', that is, the Indigenous knowledge systems accumulated over centuries, by which the material conditions of resistance can be unleashed. Language, Pineda seems to argue, is a way to collectively engage with land and place-based knowledges and practices, echoing the Zapatistas' poetic call to use the *palabra* to light 'un pequeñito fuego en la montaña' ['a small fire in the mountain']. Upholding this manifesto, Pineda showcases how Indigenous struggles to defend land are embedded within Indigenous land-connected practices and associated forms of knowledge that fundamentally challenge the commodification of nonhuman life fronted by neoliberal development as well as extractive capitalism's fantasy of Indigenous disappearance:

La guerra nos declaraste
creíste que éramos polvo esparcido
animal sin fuerzas
pequeña luz del alba
Ahora sabes que somos muchos
compañeros de las piedras y los montes
conocemos el lenguaje de los ríos
hablamos de la arena junto al mar

You declared war against us
you thought we were scattered dust
weak animal
little light of dawn
Now you know we are many
companions of stones and fields
we know the language of rivers
we speak to the sand that lives by the sea

Ahora sabes que no estamos solos
miles de ojos nos observan desde la selva
y nos ven danzar junto a la muerte
(2013, p. 77)

Now you know we are not alone
a thousand eyes watch us from the jungle
and they see us dancing alongside death
(Call 2020, n.p.)

By putting forth a counter-script to the apocalyptic paradigm of neoliberalism, Pineda maps the complexity and political vitality of communities where the threat of extinction has loomed large but where entangled interactions with nonhuman nature and the knowledges that have cultivated biodiversity for centuries persist. Knowing the 'language of rivers', sensing the words of the sea and living alongside stones and fields, signifies a cumulative, dynamic, adaptive and ancestral knowledge that, as Pineda hints, grounds Indigenous sense of place and propels and strengthens the struggle against removal and commodification. It is this grounded normativity which threatens state and corporate power, who mobilize efforts to subjugate and erase Indigenous peoples from the lands, as their bodies engage in on-the-land practices that challenge the neoliberal present. In invoking the 'thousand eyes looking from the jungle', Pineda's work not only summons the insurrectionary movement that emerged from the depths of the Lacandon rainforest, but also unearths a territory in which Ancestors dwell, 'where spiritual beings exist, and where the spirits of living plants, animals, and humans interact' (Simpson 2017, p. 155). By doing so, Pineda asserts an unmapped terrain that cannot be reduced to extinction, as it is channelled through the embodied practices of struggle that continue to contour pathways for resistance and resurgence. The act of 'dancing alongside death' therefore, more than a metaphor for living under the perpetual threat of disappearance, testifies to the long struggles and the five hundred years of practice of anti-colonial resistance. As such, Pineda not only presents the vision of a radical resurgent present but also imagines ways out of domination that are always-already informed by the knowledge and intelligence of 'many Indigenous visionaries who took the pen

to write and many of those whose work is not collected in the archive' (Goeman 2008, p. 32). Turning to these unseen unwritten histories of resistance, Pineda suggest a creative power to build new pathways that is already held by the spoken word and in the stories that have reached back and forward across time. Therefore, while Pineda prefigures in the final lines the future assaults that will come through 'veneno' [poison] and 'fuego' [fire] to destroy their bodies, alluding to both the toxic pollution and warfare driven by extraction, she also speaks of an already-anticipated future in which Indigenous presence is upheld and where 'entre las piedras la memoria permanecerá' [memory will persist within the stones] (2013, p. 87). This intimation of another futurity suspends the damage-based viewpoint that, in William Lempert's view, has temporally entrapped Indigenous peoples in 'savaged pasts and suffering presents' (2018, p. 209). Depicting how the apocalyptic informs the past and present of Binnizá peoples yet does not foreclose future possibilities, Pineda engages in a epistemic shift that points towards desire as a way to account for and forward Indigenous survivance and sovereignty, for, as Eve Tuck argues, 'desire based-frameworks' document not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope (2009, p. 49).

Although Pineda's book length poem begins by mediating an apocalyptic and ruinous landscape, these depictions work both against dystopianisms or ahistorical idealisms that portray Indigenous communities as either a lost cause or occurring in some distant pre-national past, rooting hopeful futures within a present that still feels the enduring legacies of colonial brutality. Moreover, in upholding the importance of orality and past histories, Pineda locates the revival of generations of knowledge built through struggle as an important process for visioning, imagining and propelling resurgence. The practices of remembering and weaponizing language are therefore surfaced as strategies for continuance and political power, as they serve to animate the 'seeds of resurgence that the Ancestors so carefully saved and planted' (Simpson 2017, p.

20). Thorough her own poetic acts, Pineda embodies these practices, as she calls forth not a decisive conclusion but ever-growing possibilities.

In using language to resituate Indigenous knowledge, Pineda's work gives privilege to the epistemology and intellectual thought of Binnizá peoples regarding land which complicate the State's mapping of the Isthmus as a zone of criminality and social backwardness by which it can ensure the continuance of the neoliberal accumulation regime. While Indigenous resistance has been often narrated either a lost cause or in some distant pre-national past, Pineda positions long-standing forms of radical struggle within the neoliberal present but also in an unpredictable path that lies ahead. If Indigenous vanishing is essential for the endurance of extractive industries and state-aligned mega-projects, showed more recently in the massacres against Isthmian communities now struggling against the 'renewing destruction' of wind energy development (Dunlap 2019, p. 2), Pineda brings forward alternative understandings of the land as way to confront present-day forms of Indigenous genocide and elimination. In rendering the Isthmus highlands as a rebellious, mobile, shifting geography, Pineda challenges the notions of a controllable, reduced and unsalvageable wasteland, foreshadowing Indigenous epistemes and communal memory as paramount to the construction of other possible worlds beyond extraction.

'Our rage sprouts from the earth': low-intensity warfare and insurgent landscapes in La Montaña.

'There are numerous communities whose notions of use value and exchange value were changed by the global market's expansion into every corner of the planet', Matiúwàa writes in one of his

essays published in the newspaper *La Jornada*.[31] In the text, entitled the 'The Global Market in the Guerrero Mountains', Matiúwàa rails against the world-altering neoliberal polices that, arriving in this mostly rural region geographically marked by the Sierra Madre del Sur highland, upended the 'philosophies and ways of life embedded in the local economies of diverse peoples' (2018, n.p.). What is particularly significant about Matiúwàa's account is how while such displacement of 'community-based economic relations' in Mè'phàà territories is first traced back to the 1980s and 1990s, this periodization is later revised when he acknowledges that elders already felt these changes all the way back in the 1960s, as living beings 'who possess a consciousness just like we do' were suddenly transformed into "merchandise", "things", or "objects" (ibid.). The importance of this prior date, particularly when speaking of the Guerrero mountains, relates to the fact that it was precisely during the 'long 1960s' when state police forces, the Mexican military, and cacique paramilitaries, manned a gruesome civilian-targeted low intensity warfare against rural poor *guerrerenses*. These tactics emerged as a response to the peasant mobilizations that were organizing to contest the PRI model of development that was based upon a massive transfer of resources 'from the poor to the rich and from the country to the city', a urban and industrial utopia envisioned by the ruling party that depended upon the coercive disciplining of industrial workers and the countryside (Aviña 2016, p. 12). For such efforts, the Guerrero countryside, especially in the region of La Montaña, experienced the most violent and coercive facets of PRI rule, with massacres and everyday forms of terror raging throughout the turbulent decade (ibid.).

As the brutally violent military occupation prevented the full actualizing of the anti-capitalist and alternative visions of these peasant guerrillas in La Montaña, Matiúwàa's essay, like

[31] While the essay was originally published in *La Jornada*'s monthly supplement, here I am referencing the English version of the essay published in *Asymptote* journal.

Pineda's work, captures precursor scenes to the apocalyptic extremes reached under contemporary neoliberalism. The low-intensity strategies against Indigenous and peasant resistance allowed soon after to begin, in a slow and piecemeal fashion, the integration of rural and Indigenous areas into new patterns of accumulation and neoliberal deregulation, leading to the subsumption of their local knowledges to the 'economics of the global market' (Matiúwaa 2018, n.p.) As Matiúwàa accounts, the rivers of Guerrero were increasingly transformed into sewage waters by progress' promises of 'better drainage', chemicals were introduced by the demands of accelerated production making lands 'gradually gone sterile' and assistance programs worked more to court votes and to erode the 'self-sustaining, communal work' than to bring an end to poverty (ibid.). 'Neither health, nor education, nor a respectable living arrived with globalization', Matiúwàa condemns, exposing instead the onset of an entire economy that transformed everything and anything into objects to be plundered (ibid.). The loss of knowledge, foodways and autonomy that Matiúwàa underscores in his essay, which he describes as something akin to a 'long, slow death', takes heed of the fact that the arrival of neoliberalism was brought through the eroding effects of counterinsurgency against Indigenous existence. But as he also contends, the righteous indignation and ongoing revolutionary ardour that continues in these lands has found ways to resist and propel 'alternative practices to capital's depredations' (ibid.) as the strangled imaginary that an incipient neoliberalism tried to impose continues to threaten the land, water and sustainable lifeways now under different guises.

Through both his essays and poetry collections, Matiúwàa continually revisits the multifaceted forms of violence that take hold of the region of La Montaña, where military hardware remains aimed at the most vulnerable. The incessant and surging presence of soldiers in the region, which is now one of Mexico's many drug-war hotspots and one of the principal poppy growing regions in the country, has made it one of the many political landscapes that, as

Todd Miller already observed more than ten years ago, 'from to time to time, brings the war into sharp and sudden focus' (2009, n.p.). The work of Matiúwáa, like that of Pineda, reflects the low-intensity operations that are mobilized now through a counter-narcotic rhetoric as well as through the precarization/criminalization of rural and working classes. Furthering this critique, moreover, his work reflects what Mixe activist Bety Cariño observed has been a remaking of the lands in the southern countryside as 'scenes of ruin and disaster, victims of indiscriminate commercial opening, genetically modified crops, the ambitions of the multinationals, which consequently has caused the forced migration of millions of our brothers and sisters who […] have had to leave in order to remain' (2010, p. 34). Thus, while Matiúwàa's poems prominently hone in on the militarization of Mè'phàà territories, they also take the reader into the sites of leisure in Guerrero's resort-city of Acapulco where 'no pagan bien' [pay is low] as well as across the U.S border where Indigenous peoples have left the 'tierra seca' [eroded land] and 'se arrancan la lengua a punta de chingadazos para mirar la Montaña desde el norte' [rip out their tongues to watch the Mountain from the north] (2019). In this manner, while Pineda's collection concerned itself with the occupied rainforest, Matiúwàa's volumes encompass other predatory formations that similarly entail the erasure, cancellation, and the destruction of other possible worlds.

Matiúwàa's writings thus place the militarized zones of La Montaña as well as the sites of monoculture and mega-development as 'deathscapes' that have assumed the level of normal and natural through invisible forms of structural violence. As Tendayi Sithole argues in his critique of Mbembe's concept of 'death-worlds'– defined as new and unique forms of social existence characterized by terror (2003)– the concept of 'deathscapes' can better account for the hidden exclusionary spaces of ruin 'emanating from the colonial encounter to the present era of subjection' that situate those whose humanity is put into question in a perpetual state of social isolation, material and existential neglect (2020, p. 226) 'Deathscapes', as conceptualized by

Sithole, captures the forms of zoning that precede and exceed the sites of absolute terror famously mapped by Mbembe, for they name not only war-zones but 'the very existential location where life is prone to death as a result of structural violence' (p. 227). While both visible sites of terror and sites of hidden violence are inseparable in Matiúwàa's work, his poetry lingers on those landscapes where the violence directed towards the racialized population occurs, as in Nixon's words, 'beneath the radar of newsworthiness' (2011, p. 64).

As Ángel and Ortiz write in their review of *Tsína rí nàyaxà/Cicatriz que te mira* (2018), for instance, Matiúwàa's collection focuses on 'los campesinos de la sierra de Guerrero, comunidades desde siempre marginadas y empobrecidas las políticas estatales' [the peasants of Guerrero's mountains, communities marginalized and impoverished by State policies since the beginning of times] (2018, n.p.). Matiúwàa's poems focus on the development-inflicted destitutions and ecological scarcity produced by the encroachment of Indigenous landholdings, testifying to the marking of Mè'phàà geographies as recognizably uninhabitable and impoverished and, accordingly, reserved as a newly available geography for exploration and economic gain. As I mentioned in the opening remarks, the poet's work explores the unmaking of traditional agricultural practices in the Guerrero highland to make way for a new cash crop: 'bajo las sombras/ dejaron el maíz pájaro/ para coronar al que alumbraría su noche/y en las básculas pesaron el miedo/que enraizó sus pies para no irse al norte' [under the shadows/they left the bird's maize/to crown the one which would lighten their night/and in the scales they weighted their fear/that tied their feet to prevent them from leaving for the North] (2018, p. 39). In these lines, Matiúwàa indexes the conditions that the slashes in farm subsidies and government support over the last 40 plus years of neoliberal onslaught have left in La Montaña, which made it impossible to survive from the cultivation of maize. As Miller observes, while in this mostly Indigenous region (around 80% of the population) migration has become the most

common response to this situation, poppy for opium production has turned into the only form of subsistence for Indigenous people (2009, n.p.). Per Miller's description, they constitute the 'lowest and least dangerous link' in the drug trafficking trade, 'most making a pittance of 12 to 42 dollars a month' to produce enough flowers to be eventually distilled into a half a kilogram of opium and use the money to buy corn or squash to supplement meagre incomes (ibid.). In Matiúwàa's poem, such disruption of the subsistence strategies that Mè'phàà peoples had developed over millennia is mirrored in the personification of their 'azadones' [hoes], as they are so used to 'quedarse sin apoyo del gobierno' [used to being left without government support] that they 'masticaban las piedras hasta caerseles los dientes' [chew the stones until the teeth would fall] (2018, p. 39). As poverty loomed large, this new inherently commercial mode of agricultural production spread rapidly through La Montaña, pushing Me'phàa peoples into 'the multi-billion dollar, transnational and inherently extractive industry of modern heroin trade' (Farfán-Méndez 2021, n.p.). As Matiúwaa illuminates in his poems, Mè'phàà peasants, who knew 'cómo surcar la tierra para sembrar las palabras: hambre, necesidad y pobreza' [how to plough the land to sow the words: hunger, need and poverty] (p. 39), were made to work for subsistence wages in poppy plantations, taken far from their towns and exposed to violent abuse.

What Matiúwàa's depiction of the ruptured socio-ecologies of La Montaña lays bare is the persistence of an extractive optic by which Indigenous bodies and land are crafted and recrafted into a commodity-like status: 'an open sign that can be arranged and rearranged for infinite kinds of use' (Lethabo-King 2019, p. 1125). The reference to the rusty hoes, the sterile ground and the Indigenous hungry bodies are not only used in the poem to symbolize underdevelopment but their equivalence points to how their bodies are seen as tools to carve out new spaces for capital. If, as Mbembe argues, the inaugural acts of conquest involved the production of the colonized as belonging to 'the *universe of immediate things*-useful things when

needed, things that can be molded and are mortal, futile and superfluous things, if need be' (2001, p. 187) the poems signal how this logic continues to be summoned in the current stage of global accumulation. In these initial stanzas, the poetic 'I' therefore describes numerous times the commodifiable features of his body– 'nos quieren porque nuestros pies son sigilosos' [they want us because our feet are stealthy]– which make him and his peoples things of value for the extractive and illegal economies that intersect in La Montaña, which, to say with Mbembe, is 'an usefulness that makes them objects, tools' (2001, p. 187). The production of the Indigenous body as raw material and instruments for the drug economy is fleshed out further in following poems, as the poetic voice signals how his corporeality has become enmeshed with the penknives used to extract the raw gummy ingredient of heroin from the poppy flowers: 'han llegado de lejos a vivir en nuestras manos/ a algún espiritú le pertenecían o a un aire malo/ llegaron con hambre de nuestros brazos tiernos' [they have come from afar to dwell in our hands, they used to belong to some evil spirit, and came here, with an appetite for our tender arms] (Matiúwàa 2018, 45).

The abovementioned lines illustrate a phenomenon that Nathaniel Morris has documented in relation to the social and economic changes in Indigenous communities that came with the making of poppies into a profitable cash-crop and key commodity for the Mexican-U.S drug trade. As he argues, since Indigenous peoples have been made to inhabit the accumulative effects of corrosive transnational forces, youngsters in particular have transformed into 'the masters of the opium harvest', which has not only obstructed their ability to cultivate maize but has also fuelled social problems related to excessive drinking such as alcohol-induced illnesses as well as 'drunken, often lethal violence between heavily-armed young men' (2020). Such context is further explored in the poem 'Adà-El niño' [the Kid], where Matiúwàa depicts 'zopilotes' [black vultures] lurking around and feeding on carrion looking for these 'brazos

tiernos', illustrating the integration of the young men as fleshy surplus or cannon fodder, the feet and muscle that will feed the cycle of accumulation: le colgaron un cuerno de chivo/tres rosarios de ojo de venado/y se dispuso a cazar hombres/y a sentar muerte en su mesa/Desde entonces dicen que los de La Montaña/somos buenos para eso/y no dejan de venir para llevarse niños/y sembrarle muerte en las manos [they hung an AK-47 and three amulets around him/and he set out to hunt down men/and place death on his table/Since then, they say that people from La Montaña/are good for that/and they won't stop coming to take the children/and sow death on their hands] (p. 59).

Emphasizing the predation of these agrarian spaces, Matiúwàa makes use of the well-worn figure of the vulture to depict the threatening feats of late capitalism's economics. As William Calvo-Quirós reminds us, figures of blood-sucking and predatorial creatures were particularly prominent during the 1990s, which were invoked to turn into flesh the monstrous atrocities and exceptional violence experienced by rural communities as the forced proletarianization of the countryside and the overflow of US-subsidized corn that came with NAFTA were draining their lives away (2014, p. 213). As Matiúwàa describes in an interview, however, the figure of the zopilote, once an embodiment of periods of drought and economic scarcity in Mè'phàà oral tales, has changed and adapted to reflect new pains and anxieties, especially in the wake of phenomena such as forced migration and narco-fuelled land-grabbing that afflict the region (cit. in Aguilar 2018). Embedded with this complex system of meanings, Matiúwàa's *zopilote* enacts the flesh-hungry predator that mirrors the violent struggles lived in La Montaña. In Matiúwàa's repurposing of this figure, *zopilotes* are displayed lurking from the *mojoneras*– blocks of cement that mark territorial limits– a high ground that offers territorial oversight, facilitating the survey of land in search for flesh. Sightings of this ravenous animal, as depicted in the poem, normally take place in the reduced plots of *ejido* land, which although long

transformed by the process of capitalist expansion via agrarian reforms and neoliberal privatization, remain still sought-after spaces from which to extract, in Marx's famous words, 'the living blood of labour' (p. 367).

Yet, unlike the vampire-like blood-sucking creatures that act as uncanny signifiers of transnational corporations, international banks, and global markets, *zopilotes,* as Mè'phàà oral tales go, are not statesman or foreign developers but rather local men taking to this predatorial form. Anchored in the oral narratives of the region, the reference to *zopilotes* in Matiúwàa's work materializes the heterogenous knowledge formations coded and transmitted through Indigenous myths, making use of community vernacular knowledge not as simple recovery but to expand these *saberes* in order to interpret the present moment. In this manner, as he pulls these figures from the oral archive and gives them a new modus operandi, the *zopilotes*, with their capitalist greed and AK-47s, hinge at the already familiar history of complicity between co-opted local farmers and the military and transnational forces in the hunting of men from La Montaña.

As a handful of anthropologists and historians have documented, in addition to the systematic military abuses and attacks on dissidents that took place in the mountains of Guerrero during the 1960s and 1970s, 'as local rumors suggest, counterinsurgency tactics included the introduction of poppy cultivation in the region […] justifying the continued presence of the armed forces in the daily life of the inhabitants and creating conditions aimed at detonating processes of social fragmentation' (Mora 2017, p. 72). Because of these societal ruptures, Alba Estrada similarly contends, 'it is well known that many of the paramilitary bodies that participated in the siege against guerrillas came from the mountain peasant communities enlisted by the army, which had the task of keeping an eye of the populations and fight any sign of resistance' (2015, p. 40). In exchange for this, she further suggests, 'they were granted a license to carry arms and grow illicit crops in the vast and abrupt mountain area of Guerrero' (ibid.).

While these interred histories of militancy and paramilitarism have been widely underacknowledged and oftentimes explicitly denied by official discourse and historiography, they have been retained and transmitted through oral testimonies. Thus, in alluding to the doings and desires of the *zopilotes,* Matiúwàa puts forward an alternative form of historiography, one which, rooted in a submerged and constrained orality, functions to invoke the long-denounced alliances forged in the highlands well before the intense military operations that have turned the region into sudden war zones. Although references found in Matiúwàa's earlier poems advance these historical conditions, it is in the interplay between the poetic language and an accompanying illustration– which has been made using the established genre of the linoleum block print– that these connotations are developed.

In the illustration, Mazatec artist Filogonio Velasco Naxín stages a landscape that eerily resembles the cataclysmic environment of the post-Revolutionary period, an era that witnessed the collapse of the pledged agrarian programs, the perdurance of the practices of oppression and dire conditions that characterized the hacienda system, and the protracted political authority of criollo hacendados, ranchers and caciques. Nodding to the exploited peasantry and the predatory and extractive hacienda economy, the illustration shows the hands of a peasant interred in the fields working under the vigilant gaze of two *zopilotes* that look like archetypal cacique-hired guns. The illustration itself makes use of a long tradition of political printmaking that surged during the 1910 Revolution to express the social and political concerns of the period, documenting in particular the plights of the rural oppressed (McDonald 2016). Yet, as the peasant hands are showed to be extracting the sap from an opium poppy bulb, Naxín's *grabado* connects past and contemporary scenarios to illustrate the irresolution and repetition that characterize *guerrerense* history, as the *zopilotes* who oversee the plantation come to personify a new mode of extractive accumulation, whereby human and extra-human natures become subject to ever-more aggressive

forms of plunder. Moreover, the *grabado,* not produced by an inhabitant of La Montaña but rather by a Mazatec from the neighboring region of Oaxaca, appears both to countersign the suppressed truths and veiled histories that Matiúwàa registers, as well as to signal the shared conditions of subjugation and genocide – for the word written on a coffin that can be seen in the poppy fields stands for 'children' in Naxín's Mazatec language– experienced in the communities of both artists.

The interplay between Matiúwàa's poems and Naxin's *grabado* therefore places the former's work not as an individual endeavour, but one that intersects with other voices and is informed by formerly hidden historical transcripts that have been consigned to oblivion. Sorting through the memories of Indigenous experience, the collective work of excavation challenges the smooth and coherent narratives of the neoliberal security agenda, which has likewise invested in rupturing the reciprocal relations forged between and within Indigenous communities. Moreover, as a means of burying the histories of state terror and the deep-seated praxis of rebellion encoded in oral accounts, the subjugated bodies that have engaged in insurrectionary processes have been violently disappeared and concealed. Tapping into these submerged histories, Matiúwàa's poetics engage what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui refers to as the 'memoria larga' [long memory] of oppression and resistance, which refers to 'una memoria de las luchas anticoloniales […] que impide perder de vista que la ocupación no ha cesado' [a memory of the anti-colonial struggles […] that impedes to lose sight of the fact that the occupation has not ended] (2003, pp. 7-8). In this manner, Matiúwàa's work invokes both the long genealogy of insurgency in the remote mountains of Guerrero as well as the corporate-state alliances that, within the present neoliberal regime of accumulation, have reproduced and

renewed the sanguinary tactics of previous counterinsurgency forces. As Matiúwàa illustrates in the poem 'Xtámbaa-Piel de tierra' [Earthen Skin]: [32]

Los que huelen la carne
se llevan nuestros sueños
en autobuses que no tienen vuelta
en su sigiloso acecho se visten de lluvia
y cuentan los dedos
por los que estamos en la Montaña
los de la mano oculta
los de la tierra roja
los que vivimos en la casa de Lucio
(2016, p. 79)

They are out for blood
to carry off our dreams
in buses with no return. watchful,
stealthy, dressed in rain,
And counting us on their fingers
counting as we hide in the Mountains,
we of the hidden hand,
we of the red earth,
we who dwell in the House of Lucio
(Worley 2019, n.p.)

Making explicit reference to the contemporary conditions that inform his critique of the increased (para) militarization in La Montaña, the poem is dedicated to Mauricio Ortega Valerio, one of the forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher Training School forcibly disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero, who was also a member of the Mè'phàa communities from the Malinaltepec highlands– Matiúwàa's place of birth. In this poem, which gives title to his first collection, Matiúwàa depicts the pain experienced by Mè'phàà communities by the loss of one of its members, revealing how the constant violence and terror now waged on behalf of transnational capital, serve as a means of suppressing entire communities and weakening processes of social reproduction. Thus, rather than situate the disappearance of the students of Ayotzinapa as an exceptional event (as has often been done), Matiúwàa's work connects this massacre to the deeper, long-running paramilitarization of the army/government that began in the 1960s and 1970s via the development of death squads and other clandestine bodies that shape state functioning today.

[32] I am using Paul Worley's English translation of the poem published in *Asymptote Journal*.

The reference to the 'House of Lucio' explicitly alludes to the site where the campesino guerrilla leader Lucio Cabañas, as he himself once pointed out, was 'born politically': the *Escuela Normal Rural* of Ayotzinapa. Founded in 1926 on the grounds of a vacant hacienda, this teacher training school was established as an experiment in socialist education in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (Padilla 2021, p.7). Made up of students from the poorest and most marginalized rural communities, a large part of the philosophy underlying the pedagogy of these *Escuelas Normales* was designed to respond to the specific experiences of the *ejidos* and to promote emancipatory practices of self-governance and collective labour (Zagato 2018, p. 70). While these rural colleges where founded for the purposes of state consolidation, the popular longings driving the Revolution inevitably permeated these institutions, making land reform, education for the poor, and community leadership the guiding principles of the teachers they trained (Padilla 2021, p. 5). Since by the mid-1940s, the post-Revolutionary governing body had already abandoned the promises of agrarian reform, the training and pedagogical work of *normalistas* in impoverished areas allowed Cabañas and other rural school teachers to mobilize a large base of popular support for guerrilla insurgency. For this reason, counter-insurgent forces were not only invested in capturing Cabañas and his *Partido de los Pobres* (Party of the Poor). As Aviña argues, it was the clandestine burial of Cabaña's maimed corpse which disclosed the main objective of paramilitary warfare: to kill the guerrillas and 'secretly bury the bodies to ensure the death of their subversive ideals' (2016, p. 2).

Advancing this view, Matiúwàa's poem, while relaying the hunting and killing of Mauricio, dwells also on the capture of the *normalistas*' radical 'dreams', which alludes to the quelling of ideals and visions sustained by past popular insurrections. The disappearance of Indigenous teachers and peasant leaders of the highlands, as Matiúwàa advances, is not indiscriminate, but aimed at disarticulating the memories, radical discourses and strategic lessons

of indigenous insurgency that these community leaders carry and recreate. The insurgent practices mobilized by *normalistas,* grounded in ecologically sustainable land and communal forms of governance, have long been met by a covered State-corporate terror, as these ideals stand at odds with the landed classes and transnational elites that have greatly benefited from the unrestricted extraction of capital from these territories. Cacique-hired gunslingers, like those displayed in Naxín's grabado, have thus served as local-regional nodes of these forces, proving key for subduing insurrection not only by their ready willingness to terrorize the Indigenous population but also by allowing these assaults to be framed as inter-communal conflicts. Furthermore, as Aviña argues, by removing Indigenous and peasant guerrillas from a protracted history of social injustice and violence, repressive measures became recast, with the help of a largely compliant national media, as wars against rampant criminality, effectively burying the reasons that mobilized revolutionary rage and violence (2014, p. 11). Yet, it is precisely by resurrecting Cabañas's figure that Matiúwàa not only gives layered meaning to the lingering legacy of counterinsurgency that fuels the engine of capital accumulation in La Montaña, but also foregrounds the epistemes and alternative forms of relating to nature that, while making them a target of violence, have continue to nourish political horizons in the face of the ongoing pillage and plunder.

In 'Xtámbaa', Matiúwàa emphasizes the shockwaves to the affective and communal structures of Mè'phàa peoples with the disappearance of the *normalista*, reflecting a community left in a state of grief. Yet, portraying the interdependence between human and extra-human life that exists in La Montaña, Matiúwàa foregrounds how the disappearance of one of its inhabitants 'levantó el polvo y el asombró de los árboles […] y las cicadas' [kicked up dust, shocking the trees […] and the cicadas] (p. 83). Addressing Mauricio in the second-voice, the Mè'phàa poet utilises an elegiac mode to somberly contemplate what was loss with his death: '¿Dónde amarraré

este dolor que enciende la esperanza?/ ¿Quién traerá la cabeza del pueblo?/ […] ¿En qué tierra he de encontrar tus pasos,/ ahora, que tu cuerpo se acobija en el miedo y crece la espiga de nuestra rabia?' [Where shall I hang this pain that burns hope?/Who shall lead our community?/[…] In what world shall I have to follow your footsteps now that your body is wrapped in fear/ now that our rage sprouts from the earth? (p. 81). The elegy, moving affectedly between lamentation, fear and outrage, captures perfectly the severe and premeditated consequences of the counter-insurgent tactic of disappearance, which is aimed at suppressing hope and eradicating the efforts to make room for other forms of organizing life. However, the evocation of a pain shared by the speaker, as well by other human and extra-human communities captures a different ontological vision that does not map onto the rigid hierarchies that are central to the sustenance of extractive capitalism. And thus, while the 'you' that the poetic speaker talks to first appears only as Mauricio, for it is him, 'the town's son', to whom the speaker demands to get up and see how 'crece el fuego de nuestra tierra en tu memoria' [the fire of our land burns in your memory], in the final verse, however, the 'you' the speaker addresses is rather a living being that now dwells within the trees: 'vives árbol/arbol flor de corazón/[…] árbol de Iguala' [you are alive in the tree/tree that flowers hearts/ […] tree of Iguala/] (p. 91). With this porous 'you', which blurs the individual with the earth and the forest, Matiúwàa presents Mauricio as part of the interconnected web of relations between the human and nonhuman communities that live in La Montaña, who experience the killing of one of its inhabitants as a shared loss.

Yet, the primary way in which Matiúwàa brings forward this reciprocal system of relations and responsibilities, is more forcefully apparent in stanza VII, where the 'you' is addressed by the speaker as 'Xtámbaa', to whom he poignantly declares, 'estoy contigo en el mundo' [I am with you in this world] (p. 85). A footnote to the Mè'phàà language poem alerts

the reader to the fact that *Xtámbaa ,* according to Mè'phàà though, refers to an animal companion born alongside each member of the community both of whom are mutually entrusted with protecting each other as they go through life (p. 95). The literal translation of *xtámbaa* is '*piel de tierra*' [earthen skin], as the root of the word '*xta*' makes reference to the skin, 'cuya función dentro de la filosofía Mè'phàà es la de cuidar aquello que cubre' [whose function within Mè'phàa philosophy is to protect everything it covers] (ibid.). In that sense, the concept of 'earthen skin', materializes the epistemologies of the Mè'phàà peoples which comprise a way of being in the world that understands the responsibilities with the earth and other living beings, which whom the same ontological condition is shared (ibid.). This mode of relating to nature, of which Mè'phàà peoples see themselves as part of, underlies the grief of the community, for the death of Ortega Valerio is seen as a rupture of the tight-knit kinship system and networks of care that protect life in La Montaña. Hence, Matiúwàa's poem figures both Mè'phàà peoples and the earth mourning together and are shown to be equally affected by the assaults that have been meted against him: '¿Qué no saben que todo lo que te hagan me lo hacen a mí?' [Everything they do to you, don't they know, they do to me?] (p. 81).

But while Matiúwàa's 'Xtámbaa' is deeply elegiac in its depiction of communal loss, the reference to a 'espiga de rabia' [the stalk of rage] that sprouts from the earth in response to the harms done to Mèphàà bodies, speak not only of the web of relationality between a sentient environment and the humans that inhabit it, but also foreground the political rage that, derived from this interconnectedness, continues to build up in the Mountains. If for Indigenous scholar Jarrett Martineau, political rage acts as a way to affirm life by refusing the colonial-capitalists' 'desire for calm' and their 'acerbic pleas to return to the way they have always been' (2014, n.p.), Matiúwàa's figure of the growing rage fostered by the land heralds righteous rage as a way to sprout the basis for resurgence in the face of the multi-layered capitalist killing machine of bodies

and worlds. But beyond representing this rage, Matiúwàa's work also seems to cultivate a disposition to perceive the worlds where the lands, trees and communities call upon us to feel it. As Irma Pineda herself poignantly writes in her review of *Xtámbaa* 'faced with the pain of Hubert's stories, so close to my own […] at end of our reading we should have not one stalk but entire fields sown in a rage that might flower so as to change things for this wounded and ransacked country. It can't be any other way'(2016, n.p.). Matiúwàa's work then, as Pineda seems to suggest, demands readers to feel 'a boiling in the blood beneath their skin' (ibid.) as he translates those worlds of relationality that are threatened by extractive capital as well as the hidden genocidal histories that continue to power it.

Writing is therefore envisioned by Matiúwàa as political and ethical imperative that can call upon and make us listen to the actively silenced and unseen of the nation, and to acknowledge the violence to which they have been subjected over time. This is perhaps best illustrated in *Xtámbaa*'s epilogue entitled 'Los Mè'phàa' [The Me'phàa], which, as the only section written entirely in Spanish, is unequivocally directed at mestizo readers. In it, he explains how language has worked to congeal racial hierarchies and justify the violence unleashed against them and their territories. As he recounts, his peoples have been historically referred in Mexico as 'Tlalpanecos', a term of Náhuatl origin whose roots of the word *neco*, meaning 'el que está pintado' [those who are painted] has evolved into pejorative and racially charged appellatives such as: 'los de la cara sucia' [those who have dirty faces] (2018). However, in the wake of the eruptions of Mè'phàà militancy across La Montaña during the 1990s in defense of land and culture, these communities explicitly refused the term 'tlalpaneco' in favour of '*Xàbò Mè'phàà*: personas que se definen dentro de un territorio en donde se habla la lengua Mè'phàa' [*Xàbo Mè'phàa*: people that define as part of a territory where the Mè'phàà language is spoken] (ibid.)

This self-given ethnonym works to assert their belonging to the Guerrero Mountains, the last place in Mexico where the language continues to be spoken.

Accordingly, the reference to the skin invoked through the title, as Matíuwáa himself explains, also functions as a metaphor of the reciprocal relations between land and language: the land that Me'phàà peoples risk their lives to shelter and the Mè'phàà language and knowledge that the land sustains. Since both the Mè'phàà language and the territories of La Montaña have been both coercively marginalized and slowly eroded, the act of writing involves then an ethical charge to protect the life and voicings that the Mountains hold (p. 95). As Matíuwàa contends in an essay entitled 'Porqué escribir poesía en idioma Mè'phàà' [Why write poetry in the Mè'phàà language]:

> En nuestro tiempo, la importancia de la palabra que cuenta se torna fundamental […] contar la palabra de los ríos contaminados por los agroquímicos, el de la tierra arrasada por las minerias a cielo abierto, el del tigrillo curtido para adornar las mesas […] La carne que habla debe crear comunidad ante las políticas violentas que alteran su vida' [In these times, the importance of the word that voices proves fundamental […] to tell the voice of rivers polluted by agrochemicals, of the earth ravaged by open-sky mines, of the tiger skinned to adorn tables […] The flesh that speaks must foster community in the face of the life-altering politics of violence] (2017, n.p.).

Beyond the commodified and extractive view of nature, the ethical dimensions chart here underscore a way to perceive the river, the lands and animals as living beings to whom Mè'phàà peoples owe responsibility. The role of the Mè'phàà writer, 'the flesh that speaks', is then to uphold this reciprocal co-existence through the Mè'phàà language, whose structure and

composition is designed to articulate other worldviews, values and conceptualizations which, running against dominant understandings of nature, can mobilize the protection of lands from the environmental destruction that has been facilitated by state governments and instituted through large multinational corporations. In Matiúwàa's work, we see then how age-old techniques have been used to stifle these systems of obligation and framings that threaten such nexus as well as the bodies that mobilize to defend against it; 'la cicatriz de nuestro padre' [the scar of our father] and the 'desolla[do] venadito que quería ser maestro' [flayed deer who was to be a teacher] are referenced in 'Xtámbaa' to index the corporeal legacies of the counterinsurgency practices that have sought to cut off the lifeblood that nurtures these worldviews. The recognition of how and why Mè'phàà systems and lands are being threatened, that is, how colonial infrastructures and low-intensity warfare continue to operate in these territories to suppress violent contestation against enclosure, control and extraction, is certainty crucial for Matiúwàa, as his poetry collections and essays reckon with the efforts to erase these histories and criminalize resistance. However, while Matiúwàa specifically locates the ethos and technologies responsible for the current catastrophe and traces the past, present and future trajectory that capitalist development has created, the conclusion of the essay hinges at the urgency to refuse the prevailing order of things to which writing can contribute by fostering other forms of relationality.

To conclude, I therefore offer one last example, which in my view captures the ethical and imaginative endevour proposed by Matiúwàa. In a poem entitled 'La noche que no duerma' [On the night I don't sleep][33], Matiúwàa envisions a way out of the oft-stated inevitability of the planet's dystopic future by summoning the Mè'phàà world of dreamscapes and writing these visions in the future tense. The poem begins by figuring a nightmarish scenario where the

[33] I am using Claire Sullivan's translation of the poem published in *Latin American Literature Today*.

speaker perceives the operative logic of extractive capitalism and its militarized developmentalist offensive upon territory and rural life. Representing the destructive trajectory of capitalism upon La Montaña, the speaker sees 'al diablo pasar levantando las ánimas' [watch the devil rousing souls], in which the figure of the devil, similar to the one invoked by Pineda, captures the logic of extractive exchange-value that continues to desecrate ancestral sites (2016, p. 17). Accordingly, the speakers witnesses 'las botas de los hombres verdes, sus risas mentándonos la madre, pisando las flores, encañonando al correcaminos' [the boots of green men, laughing at us son of bitches, trampling flowers, aiming death at the roadrunner] (p. 14), as militarization propels the metabolism of capitalist growth. Invoking the neoliberal takeover of their lands as a continuous nightmare that stretches over centuries, Matiúwàa meditates the current dystopic landscape taking place within Mè'phàà territories where the search for the 'the last oil, the last forests, the last water' (Gómez-Barris 2020, n.p) continues to threaten the survival of the Mountain and its peoples.

Yet, as the poem draws to a close, the speaker turns towards a future that is no mere obliteration and beyond the capitalist nightmare, foregrounds a parallel world where he sees the ancestors that gave him 'la voz del pensamiento' [the voice of knowledge] and where he hears 'la lumbre acariciar a la leña que pintará el comal que sostrendrá la casa' [the blaze caressing the firewood that will paint the *comal* that will nourish the home]. This vision of a future, prefigures the Mè'phàà language and food sovereignty that sustains the Mè'phàà's corn diet (symbolized here by the *comal*) and 'la casa', La Montaña, foregrounding a rejection of the neoliberal developmentalist logic and the capitalist socio-ecological systems that puts the earth and lifeways at risk. Moreover, as the poem represents how these practices continue to be maintained through anti-extractive activism, by bodies that 'will hold the rifle and head straight for the *milpa* [corn fields]' (p. 15), Matiúwàa posits a counter-vision to the paralyzing apocalypticism promoted by

a global system that brutally converts the life within these geographies into multinational capital. As the writer has warned in a recent essay, the fields of La Montaña and the neighboring Costa Chica have attracted the attention of the mining sector in recent years, owing to the 42 ore deposits found within that area, for which the federal government has already granted 38 fifty-year concessions to allow various companies to undertake exploratory and extractive mining activities (Matiúwàa 2020). If they take our land, the writer speculates in this piece, the displacement, the arrival of organized crime groups, and the prohibition of ceremonies and agriculture that serve as bases of knowledge and identity 'will take us from the possibility of being Mè'phàà' (ibid.). But as he uses the Mè'phàà language to prefigure a horizon where vernacular foodways and communal forms of cultivation –the ancestral *milpa* system– nourish Indigenous futurity and the struggles for environmental renewal, the epistemologies upheld in Matiúwàa's work operate as a baseline against the deterministic and unrelenting march of extractive accumulation and lets us look instead into the rebellious futures yet to come.

Both Pineda and Matiúwàa's poetry collections illustrate how Indigenous-authored works draw from Binnizá and Mè'phàà epistemologies to engage the present socio-ecological struggles against state-sanctioned corporate resource extraction in the Mexican Southern highlands. In *La Flor que se llevó,* I have argued, Pineda reckons with the 'extractive view' that has long been wielded to transform life within Indigenous territories into extractible matter and borrows images from the Binnizá oral tradition to situate the project of disappearance of Indigenous peoples as a central and ongoing feature of neoliberal extractive governmentality. Yet, conjuring imagery that speaks to the Binnizá worldview and the reciprocal relations the Binnizá peoples hold with the *selva*, her work also invokes Indigenous resistance efforts and human and nonhuman caregiving relations that have worked to undo the dominant modes of viewing nature and the hierarchies of value through which extractive capitalism secures its

seemingly boundless expansion. Anchoring his work in the oral narratives of the Mè'phàà region, as I have explored, Matiúwàa's poetry and essays in turn give shape to other extractive predatory formations that similarly entail the erasure and the destruction of other possible worlds. Stories of ravenous figures from Mè'phàà oral tales, once used to mediate the nightmarish conditions wrought by the hacienda system, are saliently repurposed in Matiúwàa's work to reveal the continuities between these past modes of exploitation and the present harms linked to opium poppy production. However, while his writings invoke the terrorizing environments of present extractivism, they also point to the knowledges encoded and transmitted through Indigenous orality that suggests other forms of existing and relating to nonhuman natures that have worked to sustain that current calls for decapitalization and demilitarization. Situating my analysis in regions that remain still 'saturated in coloniality' (Gómez-Barris 2017 p. 11), I have explored how these texts provide not only incisive insights into the many forms in which capitalism's genocidal/ecocidal destructive trajectory continues to squeeze territories in its ongoing quest to accumulate wealth, but also into the other ways of thinking and doing that operate outside the terms and logics of the extractivist purview.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the ways in which the socio-ecological changes, annihilations and overall spoils of extractive capitalism are given expression in contemporary Mexican culture. My main aim here has been to read the formal and aesthetic features pertaining to the cultural texts produced in the region over the past decade in relation to the violent reorganizations of environments wrecked by the extraction-determined drug war variety of neoliberalism, probing the extent to which these texts mediate the militarized production of extractive environments and the violent conditions of existence that govern life within them. This implicates a close reading of the material conditions that structure the provincial crime *crónicas* of Óscar Martínez and Fernanda Melchor – particularly the failures and crude residues of la *petrolización* and the spoilation of agricultural terrains in the Mexican Gulf Coast– and the use of noir settings and devices reconfigured to reveal the nexus between energy-driven interests and the territorial predations of the post-NAFTA era. The second chapter sought to discuss how Betzabé García and Tatiana Huezo's documentaries mediate the resource-depleted existence foisted by death projects in a number of neoliberal locales (sacrificial zones and privatized carceral spaces) via aesthetic devices that emphasize estrangement and defamiliarization to register what falls out of the camera's field of vision; here, visual/aural disjunction, irrealist aesthetics, and slowed downed registers bespeak the horrifying, bewildering, lethal yet not immediately visible mechanisms of terror through which ecosystems and bodies in neoliberal Mexico are made into the dead matter of extraction. An analysis of Sara Uribe and Balam Rodrigo's poetic texts struck an extended path, examining how their experimentation with documentary practices that yoke together testimonial transcripts of migrant death with historical records of colonial ransacking and guerilla

warfare open our view to the deep extractive substrates of present border buildups. The final chapter looked at the dystopian effects of large-scale plantations and narco-fueled dispossession in Irma Pineda and Hubert Matiúwàa's writings, to consider what they reveal about the continued and cumulative militarized assaults upon Indigenous lands and bodies and the neoliberal resource scrambles that foreclose Indigenous population's claims on the future. Ultimately, extractive capitalism and the dents it leaves on peripheralized environments function as the connecting trope that links the thematic concerns and the aesthetic qualities of these works, which capture the intimate yet concealed relation extraction holds to the violent military logistics of the late neoliberal period.

The focus upon recent cultural texts that take the full-scale socio-ecological transformation on hinterlands, provincial towns, ejidos, and other(ed) border geographies under late neoliberalism assisted in my reading of both the visceral and slow violence that besets these texts as intrinsically bound up with extractivist activity. Extractivism has predominantly taken place in peripheralized out–of-the-way places, which allow everyday forms of state violence and warfare techniques employed to reorganize land and labour practices in such a way as to send vast reservoirs of food, energy, and raw materials into the global economy to be presented as exceptional, unavoidable or even necessary via neoliberal discourses of security and development. By taking the extractive peripheral spaces being mapped in different genres of cultural representation as the basis for my comparative analysis, I have showed how contemporary texts are willing to probe these normalizing and invisibilizing discourses and to give instead shape to the hidden violence of ecosystem disruption, local displacement, land grabbing and social immiseration associated with the militarization of resource withdrawal. This is particularly visible in the first and second chapter, where the stark existential transformations related to petro-extraction and mega-development in the rural and urban/built and natural

environments of the Mexican Gulf Coast and the Pacific Shoreline are given expression by both *crónistas* and documentary filmmakers through aesthetic and formal experimentation that undermine the hegemonic modes of mapping these war-ridden spaces. The analysis of texts in chapter one, for example, attempted to map new directions in the crime-*crónica*, and especially its turn towards the southern provinces, which, functioning predominantly as special economic zones or logistical corridors, appear in these texts as spaces ruptured by the concentrated unevenness, traumatic dispossession and exploitation enabled by neoliberal structural adjustment programs. Framing this perspectival shift at work in recent *crónicas* in correlation to the extractive thrusts of NAFTA allowed me to raise important questions regarding how *crónica* authors' destabilizing of generic tropes and settings within crime non-fictional writing reveal the brutal management of nature and labour in capitalism's extractive peripheries, and in doing so, complicate the singularized depictions of criminal violence usually afforded by the genre.

The articulation of capitalism's systemic undercurrents in the crime-*crónica* chimes with my analysis of the documentary strategies deployed in chapter two, which seeks to contribute to discussions about how techniques of visual occlusion and obfuscation, plot ambiguity as well as an elongated duration in cinematic treatments of violence might foster a critical spectatorial disposition towards the slow and systemic violence that saturates the landscapes of armed conflict and extraction. Here, I argued that recent social documentaries that engage irrealist and or/experimental modes of representation push back against the hyper-realism and sensationalism favored by the cinema of narcotraffic to capture the imperceptible violence and manufactured socio-ecological vulnerability linked to the neoliberal practices of water and labour enclosure in areas of heavy militarization. The pairing of these documentaries also proved particularly fruitful to foreground the knots of connectivity between the creation of sacrifice zones and of carceral spaces in the current period, as both filmmakers frame the similar

predatory methods through which neoliberalism works to seize human and nonhuman bodies into different kinds of enclosures.

While the first two chapters engaged cultural text that limn the radical eco-social transformation of rural and urban geographies through the violent establishment of new territorialities for extraction and asset-stripping (special economic zones, logistical corridors, sacrifice zones and carceral spaces), the last two chapters offer a longer view of the pillage and terror that have long sustained capitalism's militarized march to 'appropriate the unpaid work/energy of humans and the rest of nature' (Moore 2015, p. 29). In my reading of Balam Rodrigo and Sara Uribe's documentary poetry collections, militarized borders appear as the latest manifestation of the extractive regimes of imperial capitalism, a *long durée* that is revealed through the poems' material incorporation and layering of historical textual artefacts that testify to these harms. This historical density is likewise offered in the protest poetry and writings of Hubert Matiúwàa and Irma Pineda, as they both bring forward the oral traditions through which Indigenous peoples have given meaning to the experience of 'apocalypse' in colonial sites of extraction and repurpose them to register the threats to Indigenous survival posed by militarized extractive grabs upon agrarian and *ejido* territories in neoliberal times. Yet beyond this apocalyptic horizon, Matiúwàa and Pineda also give expression to the intimate intertwining of human and non-human natures within extractive sites and pay homage to the militant practices of anti-extractive organizing that imagine a future beyond the logic of extractivist valuation.

This thesis has argued for a more sustained analysis of the violent and militarized peripheralized extractive spaces currently being mapped in contemporary Mexican cultural texts, showing how writers and filmmakers saliently engage with ecological rupture, degradation and environmental injustices vis-à-vis the stronghold of drug-related violence in the country's cultural imagination. In taking the multiform violence of extractivism as a category of cultural

analysis this thesis purports then to offer a new lens from which to study the cultural production of Mexican late neoliberalism away from the overemphasis of cultural criticism on the representation of spectacularized drug-war violence and on narratives of state failure. This new lens, as I hope to have showed, can also more readily attune us to cultural registrations of the systemic violence and unevenness produced by megaprojects and the infrastructures of resource extraction in peripheralized areas that often occupy a marginal place in Mexican cultural production. By turning more attentively to the peripheralized geographies and subjects determined by the violence of extractivism under neoliberal capital, cultural responses to the present crisis in Mexico not only offer a way to look at this plunder and exploit as integral to the world-systemic circuits of capital accumulation but also to bring into view the oft-obscured efforts to destabilize the cultural imaginaries that fuel the neoliberal extractive regime.

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