



LITERATURES, CULTURES, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Visualizing Loss in Latin America

Biopolitics, Waste,
and the Urban Environment

Gisela Heffes
Translated by Grady C. Wray

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Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment

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Department of English
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Los Angeles, CA, USA

Gisela Heffes
Rice University
Houston, TX, USA

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Gisela Heffes
Rice University
Houston, TX, USA

Translated by
Grady C. Wray
University of Oklahoma
Norman, OK, USA

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*To Ken,
To Sarah and Nathaniel
To my mother*

Visualizing loss means making sense of absence. But what does it mean to make sense of presence when the world as we know it starts to vanish before our eyes? In the past years, I've been witnessing a huge deal of losses, from cherished species and precious forests to loved ones. I dedicate this book to those people who have marked me in different ways, and while they are no longer here, they reverberate in these pages because of their very existence. Because of their passing from this world. Because they are still, somehow, here, not completely extinct: my father, David Viñas, Josefina Ludmer, Carol and John Merriman, Adriana Astutti, Sergio Chejfec, and Sylvia Molloy.

PREFACE

*There is an ever-growing wasteland around the ranches,
greater every year, that frightens and saddens.*

—Rafael Barrett, “Tree Haters” (1907)

Trans. by Patricia González

When the book *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación* [Politics of Destruction / Poetics of Preservation] was published in 2013, the field of Latin American ecocriticism was in an embryonic stage. Over the past 10 years, Latin American environmental studies have undergone incredible growth which encompasses new areas of intellectual inquiry such as the vegetal turn and plant thinking, animal studies, queer ecology, new materialisms, waste and garbology, toxicity, and Amerindian epistemologies, among others. The translation of this book into English affords me new opportunities to discuss the recently published work of scholars and writers around the globe. I have also taken this as an opportunity to further refine my argument, and to expand and update the bibliography. In this spirit, I also decided to change the title of the book to *Visualizing Loss in Latin America: Biopolitics, Waste, and the Urban Environment*. Why would I make such a move? The book argues that the countless imageries of waste accumulation, a byproduct of our consumption patterns, social aspirations, and cultural values, serve as a reverse metaphor of the ongoing depletion of the environment. As modern extractive fossil fuel-based economies continue to surge, and as the extractive imperial frontier accordingly advances, it has become clear that capitalism has turned into a device that devours nature as a “natural resource” through a digestive operation of

continuous transformation or “commodification of the non-human nature” (Foster and Burkett, 2016). The mechanics of this “social metabolism” inevitably results in the expulsion of refuse, a now amorphous matter that we (scholars, writers, artists) have tentatively categorized as “waste,” although it consists of much more: ruins, decays, vestiges, scraps.

How can we visualize loss? Can we see, imagine, project, and account for what is no longer there? What’s left of a vanishing world, and how is environmental depletion imbricated in the complexities of human and non-human entanglements? While documentary filmmakers, journalists, photographers, and scientists have embarked upon the grim task of registering what has vanished, melted, burned, and been wiped off the Earth, I contend that another way of visualizing loss and what is being forever extinguished is by mapping the production of residues, in other words, the remnants of what Capitalism renders unusable and discardable. The question I would like to pursue in the pages of this book is the following: Are depictions of the enormous heaps of waste that pile up either at the bottom of the oceans or along the fringes of cities a useful way to making sense of loss? What role do the aesthetic objects that apprehend the complex human and non-human interdependencies—what is preserved and what is discarded—play, and which type of dialogue do they facilitate not only with the Earth but also with our current anthropogenic time? Poetry, narrative, and art are all aesthetic forms that capture unrelenting entanglements and interdependencies beyond their preliminary intentions: *we live in the Anthropocene and we also live the Anthropocene*, in the sense that we experience it, which means that it traverses our writings, our thinking, our performances, and, more broadly, our lives, our feelings, our thinking, and our bodies. In other words, *there is no outside of the Anthropocene*.

What do the images of these sites of depletion and what do the portraits of those spaces of disposal and spillage amount to? One could argue that, to some extent, one is the condition of possibility for the other. As we attempt, sometimes unsuccessfully, to grasp and visualize loss, the materiality of what has been extinguished reemerges in a different shape, form, and color to be later disposed of. Where there used to be a mountain or a forest covered with trees, now there is, perhaps somewhere else, a mountain or a terrain covered with plastic, rags, and cardboard. By “externalizing nature” (Miller 2021) through extractive practices and the massive expansion and flow of capital, we encounter not only environmental destruction and degradation but, more importantly, emptiness and

disappearance. How do we grasp through visual means the temporal, spatial, and material challenges brought about by a process that renders both humans and non-humans into commodities? How do we grasp the scale, the speed, and the irreversibility of a “damaged planet,” as Anna Tsing et al. (2017) have defined it? Or, following Lesley Stern (2017), is it a “garden” or a “grave”? Is it a home or a dump?

Bringing this query to my home, how can we envision among a heap of discarded objects awaiting removal on the front yard of a house in Houston (Texas) that flooded during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 a tree from Canada (in the legs of a couch), oil extracted and spilled in Ecuador (through the contours of an old polymer doll), Borneo’s monocrop palm trees instead of that region’s vanished magnificent forests (in an empty Nutella jar), and traces of child labor and exploitation (in the stains of Costa Rican coffee on an old blanket)? What *Visualizing Loss* seeks to demonstrate is that an aesthetic of waste constitutes both an irrefutable and inexorable testimony to this loss.



The front yard of a flooded house in Houston (Texas) after Hurricane Harvey, 2017. Photo taken by the author.

Gisela Heffes

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I wrote this book in 2012–2013, in Spanish, under the title *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación. Apuntes para una lectura (eco) crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina*. I was then raising two little kids and had a husband who was commuting back and forth to and from Houston. Because this book was required for my tenure evaluation, it was written under lots of pressure and stress. I also wrote this book when the field of environmental humanities in Latin America was almost non-existent. In the midst of all these difficulties, who trusted me? Who trusted this book? This book was welcomed right away by my former editor, Adriana Astutti, from the Rosario-based publishing house Beatriz Viterbo. She did everything in her power to have the book ready in time for the tenure review. Once the book was out, I presented it in Buenos Aires through an invitation from Claudia Torres and Luz Horne at the Universidad de San Andrés. They, along with Florencia Garramuño, welcomed the book—and me—again. I feel enormous gratitude for that very cherished moment. It was intimate and yet insightful, enlightening. My beloved advisor, and by then also very good friend, Josefina Ludmer, read it and endorsed it with her usual affection and intellectual rigor accompanied by an inescapable sense of humor. My dear and generous colleague Beatriz González-Stephan wrote a beautiful appraisal for the back cover. The year after I was invited by José Antonio Mazzotti to coordinate a special issue on “Ecocrítica” for the *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*. I am indebted to him as well as to all the contributors who agreed to participate in this project. In 2015, the book received the First Honorable Mention from a jury consisting of Francine Masiello,

Mabel Moraña, and Marcy Schwartz. The mention arrived at the same time that my father departed, and it always felt like a little gift from him, from who knows where. At the same time, the book embarked on a journey that had unexpected surprises. I am thankful to all those who have, in many ways, directly or indirectly, contributed to the unfolding journey of this work which now has been translated into English. Because the book came out exactly 10 years ago, it is more than a translation. It is an expanded and revised version, which also explains my decision to change the title. Since its publication, I have presented the ideas laid out in this book in different venues, and I have also published sections either in the form of scholarly articles or book chapters on multiple platforms. I am thankful to those who invited me to be part of their research initiatives as well as to those who motivated me to contribute with pieces geared toward a more general audience (Cristian Alarcón for *Revista Anfibia*; Rose Mary Salum for *Literal*; and Héctor Hoyos and June Carolyn Erlick for *ReVista, The Harvard Review of Latin America*, to name a few). I am especially appreciative of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston for granting me permission to reproduce the two images of Antonio Berni's wondrous works. I am deeply indebted to my incredible co-editor for the Palgrave series on Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment, Ursula Heise, for her warm encouragement to personally contribute to our series. Allie Troyanos, Palgrave's Senior Publishing Editor, is to be commended and thanked for her endless patience. Grady C. Wray is an incredible translator, but even more, an extraordinary friend. Several colleagues read and re-read the manuscript, contributing to its improvement in so many substantial, generous, and remarkable ways. I am especially indebted to Ken Loiselle and Isis Sadek for their invaluable and insightful suggestions. Without them, this book would have been significantly different. When I published the book in 2013, my children were three and five years old. Since then, I have seen them grow to become two beautiful human beings whose curiosity expands like tiny particles spread by the wind. Perhaps those piles of particles will also one day contribute to the ongoing queries on what it means to visualize loss. Despite their latency, they are always there, awaiting to be seen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gisela Heffes is a writer and Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture at Rice University, Texas. She is the editor of the annotated anthology *Judíos/Argentinos/Escritores* (1999), and two monographs: *Las ciudades imaginarias en la literatura latinoamericana* (2008) and *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación. Apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en América latina* (2013). She has edited the collections of essays *Poéticas de los (dis)locamientos* (2012) and *Utopías urbanas. Geopolítica del deseo en América latina* (2013). She was the guest editor for the special issue of *Revista de Critica Literaria Latinoamericana* on “Ecocrítica” (2014). More recently, she co-edited *The Latin American Ecocultural Reader* (2020), *Pushing Past the Human in Latin American Cinema* (2021), *Un gabinete para el futuro* (2022), and *Turbar la quietud* (2023). As a fiction writer, she has published the novels *Ischia* (2000), *Praga* (2001), and *Ischia, Praga & Bruselas* (2005); the collection of short stories *Glossa urbana* (2012); a collection of poetic chronicles, *Aldea Lounge* (2014); the novella *Sophie La Belle and the Miniature Cities*; the novel *Cocodrilos en la noche* (2020); the bilingual collection of poems *El cero móvil de su boca / The Mobile Zero of Its Mouth* (2020; forthcoming in Swedish in 2023); and *Aquí no hubo ni una estrella* (2023). The English translation of her first novel *Ischia* was recently published with Deep Vellum Publishing (2023), and her novel *Cocodrilos en la noche* just came out in a new edition with Grupo Planeta of Colombia (2023). Gisela Heffes serves as co-president of ASLE (the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A garbage can is always like a box full of surprises.
—Julio Ramon Ribeyro, “The Featherless Buzzards” (1955)

I THE ENVIRONMENT IN (ECO)CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In a not-too-distant future, archeologists will no longer dedicate their time to collecting rudimentary inscriptions from sedimentary rock in seawater. Instead, they will examine plastic and glass bottles from different “eras” within a unique, modern, industrial, and global period that includes artifacts that have evolved as rapidly as the technological changes of

Translator’s note: All translations of original Spanish and Portuguese citations are mine unless another published English translation is available. The parenthetical information after each citation either reflects the original Spanish or Portuguese source, which I have translated to English, or the available English translation, which can be found in the bibliography. If English translations of book, article, or film titles are available, then they appear in parentheses after the original Spanish or Portuguese and in the bibliography. Titles in brackets reflect my translations of book, article, and film titles. Many thanks to Arthur Dixon for his review of a draft of the entire manuscript in its late stages. GCW.

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the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: syringes and needles that unexpectedly connect remote cultures, spaces, and times; multiple types of lighters; computers of all kinds; cell phones; iPads; iPods; printers; scanners; disposable and non-disposable cameras; household appliances such as televisions, refrigerators, and radios; daily objects like pens, headphones, coffee pots, and mattress springs, and endless matter that dominates our daily lives.¹ Each object we throw away ends up somewhere, although we may not know where. Proof of the magnitude of this problem is the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” a zone in the northern Pacific Ocean covered with scraps (located between 135° and 155° West and 35° and 42° North) that some scientists estimate is equal to double the land surface of the United States.² This oceanic garbage dump is made of exceptionally high concentrations of suspended plastic and other waste material trapped by the rotating currents of the northern Pacific. Despite its size and density, the patch of oceanic trash is difficult to see with satellite photography, and

¹This era has been dubbed the Anthropocene. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), the period of human history generally associated with what we now understand as the institutions of civilization—the beginning of agriculture, the foundations of cities, the emergence of religions as we know them today, and the invention of writing—began approximately 1000 years ago when the planet moved from one geological period, the Ice Age or the so-called Pleistocene, to the most recent and warmer Holocene. Supposedly, we are presently in the Holocene period, but the possibility of an anthropogenic climate change (i.e., one whose transformation is the result of activities and actions on the part of humans—in contrast to those changes whose causes are natural and operate without the influence of humans) has begun to call into question the pertinence of that term. Given that in the present, because of our rapid demographic growth, the emission of toxic gasses, as well as many other daily practices, humans have become one of the planet’s geologic agents, some scientists have signaled the beginning of a new geological era, one in which the actions of human beings have the most influence and most determine the future of the environment and the planet. Therefore, to define this era, chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen (and his collaborator, a marine science specialist Eugene F. Stoermer) coined the term Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2009–2010, 59). Since this term was coined, others have proliferated, for instance Capitalocene (Moore 2016), Plantationocene (Haraway 2015), and more recently Wasteocene (Armiero 2021).

²The recent book *Junk Raft: An Ocean Voyage and a Rising Tide of Activism to Fight Plastic Pollution* (2017) by Markus Eriksen expands this notion and indicates that there is not a “trash island” but instead an ocean full of plastic fragments. He proposes to think of the ocean as a kind of smog, where swirls of particulate matter surround marine creatures who live, breathe, and eat underwater. After embarking with Joel Paschal, a sailing partner, on a trip to the gyre itself, he notes that seeing it from the bottom of the ocean would be like seeing “five massive clouds of microplastic” and “dark clouds of larger plastic pieces coming from the world’s largest rivers and densely populated coastlines” (162).



Fig. 1.1 Chris Jordan, *Albatross*, 2017, video still

it is impossible to pinpoint using radar (Dautel 2009). Working on a smaller scale, the photographer Chris Jordan embarked on a documentary project to capture images of birds that have died in disturbing ways: a third of the small albatrosses photographed in the project perished because their parents had mistakenly fed them some of the plastic material that inundates the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1.1).

As Jordan indicates, this new layer of plastic fossils represents a “macabre mirror” in which dead birds have become an emblematic reflection of the critical and decisive moment in which our lives of unlimited consumption, together with out-of-control industrial growth, are immersed.³ While real icebergs are melting away at a dizzying rate, these “plastic icebergs” have become an adverse contaminating deposit in which the strata, or layers, that are forming prevent the development and growth of animals and

³“For me [...] kneeling over their carcasses is like looking into a macabre mirror. These birds reflect back an appallingly emblematic result of the collective trance of our consumerism and runaway industrial growth.” See Claire O’Neill (2011): “How Soda Caps Are Killing Birds.” See <http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2011/10/31/141879837/how-soda-caps-are-killing-birds>. Accessed May 4, 2023.

other living beings (Allsopp et al. 2006).⁴ Thus, the question of devastation as well as that of preserving nature affects all beings alike because, as the world grows progressively smaller, contamination and pollution are becoming more and more globalized. From the emission of toxic gases to the pollution of aquifers, either by means of the ever-increasing use of chemicals in agro-industry or the disposal of hazardous substances in rivers and oceans, these “hyperobjects” (Morton 2013) are widely distributed across time and space, connecting humans and non-human beings. Yet the debate concerning sustainability takes on a different dimension when read from those cultural constellations that implicitly or explicitly generate a dialogue with differing conceptions and positions regarding the planet’s fate. What’s more, this dimension engages with the arguable notion of “sustainable development,” positing it as a strategic concept to help save the future of planet Earth by promising a “new balance” between the use and the conservation of potential natural resources (Grober 2007), and connecting this notion to the current and tangible exhaustion of these resources by considering a wide range of aesthetic and cultural figurations. Culture manifestations are here defined as a process or a set of practices “rooted in a shared understanding of the world(s),” and it is also understood that taking the form of an artifact or a performance creates and conveys meaning jointly through symbolic representations (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2016).⁵

⁴In the spring of 2005, *National Geographic* sent the environmental photographer James Balog to the Arctic for the purpose of capturing images that might help to understand climate change. Balog’s images are part of Jeff Orlowski’s documentary *Chasing Ice* (2012) that tells the story of this process. Along the same lines, David Breashears’s photographic project “GlacierWork” (2007) compares old photographs with new images from Mount Everest and shows the effects of global warming on the mountainous landscape, while Ethan Steinman’s “Glacial Balance” (2013) addresses this issue in the Andes Mountains by traveling from Argentina to Colombia. See respectively <http://www.glacierworks.org/> and <http://www.glacialbalance.com/>.

⁵The notion of “sustainable development” entered the global platform during the Earth Summit (Cumbre de la Tierra) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The United Nations introduced it as a strategic concept to help save the future of planet Earth and promised to make it a key term in defining the new balance between the use and conservation of potential natural resources. The Brundtland Report that paved the way for the Rio Summit defined sustainable development in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Grober 2007, 5). However, the use (and marketing) of the term has simultaneously been called into question, and a movement emerged demanding the “liberation” of the term. See Richard Peet and Michael Watts (1996): *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*.

In recent decades, these cultural components, in association with the need to understand the challenges posed by accelerating environmental change, have required a new critical glossary, given the difficulties of “intercommunication” arising in both the disciplines of environmental humanities and sciences (Buell 2011, 107). The emergence of an ecological awareness in the fields of art, literature, and, more broadly, cultural studies has opened up a space for inquiry as well as an ethical and aesthetic engagement with theory, criticism, and literary and cultural history (Marrero Henríquez 2011, 18). It is by now well known that in academic production, principally in the United States and Great Britain, this articulation has been defined as “ecocriticism.” By now, there is a general consensus that ecocriticism, especially as it was defined in its “first wave,” examines the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment. One of the most widely cited definitions comes from the work of American scholar Cheryll Glotfelty. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), she suggests that ecocriticism is a proposal focused on the Earth, in which one studies, analyzes, and explores literary and cultural artifacts (xviii). Of course, this definition, formulated in the first decade of ecocriticism, would evolve in tandem with the emergence of other theoretical concepts and scholarship such as posthumanism and new materialism.⁶ This paradigm of critical inquiry invites a broad series of questions that will be considered in the following chapters. Equally important to this need for a new critical glossary is the examination into how environmental studies combines the production of knowledge on anthropogenic change with textual, visual, and aesthetic expressions stemming from Latin America that grapple with the “environmental imagination,” whether by form, content, directly or tangentially.⁷ Furthermore, which distinctive traits can we identify in the continent’s cultural practices? Is it possible to establish categories of analysis based on these specific characteristics? How can we define an innovative disciplinary field? Which categories should be kept, and which should be discarded? And in what way

⁶It is worth noting that Glotfelty’s definition dates back to the *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice - Sixteen Position Papers from the 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting*. The text can be found in the tab “Definitions of Ecocriticism Archive” of the ASLE (the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment*) website: <https://www.asle.org/explore-our-field/ecocriticism-and-environmental-humanities/definitions-of-ecocriticism-archive/>.

⁷I am, of course, referring here to Lawrence Buell’s seminal work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1996).

can we classify and categorize (if this were the purpose) the wide range of features that emerge in a dispersed and enormous corpus of literary and cultural representations? This association has become even more problematic when the connections “among self, society, nature, and text” (Cokinos 1994) are not always the direct result of a pre-existing ecological agenda. In these instances, to what extent can we nonetheless harken back to a holistic, interconnected view of the universe (Dean 1994) that precedes the emergence of the institutionalization and implementation of environmental studies as an academic discipline? And what is the role of this consciousness in the effort of defining the contours and range of a Latin American ecocriticism?

This book is the result of an ecocritical reading of a wide range of texts—from brief tales and short stories to chronicles, theater pieces, and novels—as well as documentaries and feature films, works of art and urban performances. Despite this broad range of source materials, they are all anchored in a specific territory: the space of the Latin American city from the early twentieth century to the present. Through an interdisciplinary and analytical methodology, the proposed reading draws from ecocriticism as a tool of literary and cultural inquiry all the while interrogating the extent to which this critical apparatus—originating and circulating in Anglo-American scholarship—can account for a Latin American phenomenon. By “phenomenon,” I refer to an extensive (though by no means exhaustive) and varied corpus of textual, visual, and cultural material interwoven with specific engagements with the natural world. My central argument is that Latin American literary and cultural contributions amount to a theoretical apparatus and overarching framework broader than ecocriticism. Although ecocriticism represents a fundamental discipline for generating a systematic reflection on the relationship that aesthetics and epistemology establish with environmental questions such as the interplay between the human and the non-human, nature and culture, and subject and object, as well as imagining alternative visions for the not too distant future, there is still a need to construct both a conceptual and theoretical apparatus capable of reassessing the emergence of a phenomenon that up to some years ago was only latent. Thus, this book poses the following crucial question: How do we construct a conceptual theoretical apparatus to address issues of value, meaning, tradition, perspective, and language that contributes substantially to environmental thinking, and that is part and parcel of Latin America?

The phenomenon analyzed here operates at the intersection of the built environment and urban settings in Latin America. Given the distinctiveness of Latin American “urban ecosystems” (Heynen 2016, 192), I have established three categories that each correspond to paradigmatic environmental tropes whose distinguishing features relate to the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by environmental inequality and to the uneven dynamics of dominance that have enabled the overexploitation and abuse of the natural resources that surround these spaces, as well as a—not always visible—demarcation of physical itineraries informed and intersected by biopolitics. That is, what Michel Foucault referred to as the “biological existence” reflected in “political existence”; in other words, that the “fact of living” now passed into “knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention” (1978, 142). By “trope,” I allude to the classic definition of a rhetorical figure as it relates to an image capable of giving a different meaning to a word or phrase to which it belongs. Classical rhetoricians describe this change or transformation of meaning as a “movement,” namely, the divergence of a word from its common signification which involves the replacement of a word or concept with another (Bahti and Mann 2012, 1463).⁸

Each of these three tropes embodies three distinct sections of the book, all of which are undergirded by an environmental dimension that conceives “environment” as a means of interrogating power dynamics between the human and the non-human (Alston 2007, 103). These tropes correspond to the themes of *destruction*, *sustainability*, and *preservation*. The three tropes can be read autonomously and as a series.⁹ Each trope relates in different ways to each urban ecosystem which it understands as a complex entanglement between humans and non-human animals, trees, plants,

⁸With the rise of rhetorical treatises, figures of speech began to assume a systematic character, which was rather heterogeneous depending on their respective origin and purpose. And consequently, figures of speech increased in number and were “located in systematic arrangements of ever-growing complexity” and based on the fundamental distinction of “tropes (Gk. *tropoi*) and schemes (Gk. *schēmata*, Lat. *Figurae*)” (Plett 2001). Although most rhetorical works in the Greco-Roman tradition maintain the same dichotomy, and despite several attempts “at a terminological and systematic reformation of the figures of speech,” the classical model, in the course of the nineteenth century the traditionally strict distinction between tropes and figures/schemes was abandoned (Sharon-Zisser 1993).

⁹Although most of the material discussed in the book stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the implementation of a relentless neoliberal ideology through economic policies constitutes one of the most visible scars in Latin American’s uneven distribution of wealth, nature (whether recreational or commodified), and risks.

and toxins, matter such as waste, microbes, and concrete, all of which branch out across place and space, intertwining bodies, politics, and ecologies (Adamson et al. 2016, 4). As a series, each one of these tropes evokes through a particular image—the landfill and the garbage dump; the practice of recycling; and the utopian imagination—three fundamental components for reflecting on what Marco Armiero (2021) has recently coined as the “Wasteocene,” namely, a “planetary mark of our new epoch” not merely for its ubiquitous presence but rather because “what makes the Wasteocene are the wasting relationships, those really planetary in their scope, which produce wasted people and places” (2021, 2). Both human waste and wasted lives are at the core of this book; they emerge in unequivocal correlation to each trope represented in each section. Because of the ambivalent nature of these tropes, each image sparks multiple meanings while destabilizing established assumptions. Hence, the garbage dump evokes environmental destruction at the same time as it enables human survival; recycling suggests sustainability, rag-picking, and scavenging; nature preservation conjures up utopian imageries along with tales of exclusion.

A one-dimensional reading of the already ingrained modern binaries nature/culture, subject/object, and material/immaterial can therefore erode theoretical and critical positions aligned with the conceptualization—and hence representation—of the very idea of what is natural. Gabriela Nouzeilles, in her introduction to the collection of essays *La naturaleza en disputa* [Nature in Dispute] (2002), delineates a tentative formulation of nature based on three temporalities that each coincide with a different empire, with each formulation articulated in accordance with the modern ideology of Western progress. These phases are based, in fact, on the tripartite model Immanuel Wallerstein formulated with respect to the “modern world-system” (see 1974, 1980, 1989).¹⁰ The first stage corresponds to the commercial, bureaucratic, and cultural expansion of the Iberian empires in American lands and the colonization of their millions of native inhabitants. The second refers to the cultural history of nature in the Americas. This distinct period begins with the Scientific Revolution and corresponds to the historical events in which the imperial project emerges aligned with the rise of rationalism and capitalism, displacing the center of power from Spain to England and France. The epistemological

¹⁰ Enrique Dussel’s analysis of Wallerstein’s model and the limits of modernity can be found in “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity” (1998).

paradigm that came to dominate all these representations of nature was that of modern science, according to the assumptions established by Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century, through which nature became the target simultaneously of reason and commercial calculations. The third and final phase of Wallerstein's schema is the span of globalization in which the United States began to compete for imperial domination with the War of 1898 and the consolidation of its leadership after World War II. This period extends to the present and is characterized by the extraordinary acceleration of previous tendencies, facilitated in part by technological and scientific advances and through less violent methods of domination, such as economic dependence, the monopoly of knowledge production, and cultural homogenization. The commodification of daily life, the predominance of the culture industry, and the conversion of society into spectacle are the defining traits of the logic of cultural production that were imposed until late capitalism, when they came to dominate the totality of its social aspects. In this context, the concept of nature has also been modified. Nouzeilles identifies two moments, one belonging to modernism and the vanguards, where what is natural and what is primitive function as "residue," a critical outside from which to question capitalism; and a second one corresponding to postmodernism (Jameson 1991), which takes place when the separation between culture and nature collapses along with other distinctions specific to modernity (Nouzeilles 2002, 27).

The three environmental tropes discussed in this book belong to this last phase. I argue that the reading and discussion of these aesthetic productions as a trope reveals, in a prismatic way, that nature, in addition to becoming an exclusive and commodified object, yields a different relationship with each trope. To be sure, this formulation would not be possible without putting together a conceptual framework that encompasses works from disciplines as varied as anthropology and cultural ethnography, archeology, and sociology, as well as urban, environmental, and utopian studies. This apparatus informs my critical analysis of distinctive Latin American literary and cultural works focusing on the overexploitation of human and non-human resources. I suggest that the aesthetic praxis that emerges in/from Latin America is permeated with a rhetoric of waste—a significant trait that overwhelmingly defines it. By waste, I refer, on a first level, to those objects that are discarded, reused, and/or preserved, and to what is linked, in turn, to the irreversible and destructive way resources are extracted and disposed of, the toxicity embedded in its fabric as well as in

the methods used in manufacturing goods, and the impacts that transporting these products have locally and globally. Waste is socially unequal. I am concerned, on a second level, with mapping waste and its ability to generate relations among subjects and the materiality of objects that no longer hold any “value.” Moreover, I am interested in the definition of value itself vis-à-vis the usability or caducity of an object, and its correlation with the assignment (or not) of “value” to human and non-human species. I agree with William Viney (2014) that waste can also aim at “doing philosophy” and can be a lens through which to better understand how “material things have us looking sideways, at our material relations, at our ecologies and at ourselves” (1).

Although waste constitutes a manifold concept that can stretch out in myriad directions, this book will focus primarily on literary and artistic productions that intersect with everyday patterns of behavior, consumption, and waste in the urban ecosystems of Latin America. It spans aesthetic works from the early twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first, with a focus on cities in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, and Paraguay.

This general introduction offers the reader a mapping of the genesis and foundation of ecocriticism and environmental studies, first in the United States and the United Kingdom, and subsequently in Latin America, and the successive chapters expand on the three previously mentioned tropes with the purpose of formulating new schemes of thought. Environmental destruction is the central focus of the second chapter. Here, waste is not limited to its flow and circulation or to the appropriation or disposal and disposition of objects. I instead look at waste as a testimony through stories from and about the garbage dump. If the Anthropocene marks an era of human-driven geological change, what is the geology that defines the layers of these equally human-driven formations, these monstrous mounds of waste that feed the dispossessed while soaring as a marker of unrelenting daily consumption? I am primarily concerned with a collection of textual and visual works that, besides promoting a complex debate about the social and ecological places inhabited by human and non-human species, are usually marked by abandonment and oblivion through a narration embedded in what Jussi Parikka (2015) has defined as the “geological view both to the historical layers of discourse concerning technology, waste, and time and the geological realities where we collect and dispose of resources” (xi). This geological view sheds light on how space is reconfigured by a process spanning from the

commodification of nature to its transformation into a manufactured object fated to become disposable matter. Paradoxically, assembled by disposed (manufactured) “nature,” waste shapes its host space as one devoid of “nature.” Of course, abandoned objects “rotting quietly in the landscape” are, as Gay Hawkins suggests, “alive with the activity of corrosion,” which has become a “habitat” and a “home” in its twofold disposition that is both “organic and machinic” (2005, 10). However, I am thinking of waste concentration in tandem with an ongoing process of “accumulation by dispossession,” as David Harvey (2003) argued. Marco Armiero suggests that the dump is a “function of the safe and green,” and, quoting Rebecca Solnit (2008), states that it “is the wall that makes the paradise, that is, the othering of someone or something that creates a safe ‘us’” (cited in Armiero 2021, 10). As the dump is located either on the outskirts of urban centers or in rural spaces, this chapter contends that it embodies a third liminal space, one of invisibility, or—borrowing a concept coined by Giorgio Agamben (1998)—a territory of “exception.”

Chapter 3 addresses the trope of sustainability through an examination of a varied corpus of aesthetic expressions and manifestations, ranging from texts and visual material to urban performances and artistic involvements in what may at times overlap with eco-art. At one level, this chapter aims to understand the interactions and intersections of humans and non-humans, and questions to what degree these engagements grasp the displacements and flows that define human and non-human relations when they interface with the materiality of the urban ecosystem. On a different level, it also relates to an extralinguistic context, as it pertains to “extending the rather narrow definitions of site, context, and relationship that have been central to much [of] contemporary art” (Irland 2016, 60). It evokes a broader definition of eco-art, which contemplates non-human species with which we share multiple environments, to advance a conversation on “restoration, remediation, and reclamation,” in addition to the conventional notion of “reduce, reuse, and recycle” (Irland 2016, 60). This trope thus looks closely at the notion of sustainability in correlation with those of use, value, function, and obsolescence. It considers the subjects that interact with scrap and waste in order to highlight how their bodies are penetrated by toxic matter, thus undermining the narratives that support the “development paradigm of recycling and reusing,” be it obsolete technologies, medical waste, or any sort of “former” manufactured good (Leurs et al. 2018, 466).