

The Trope of Nature in Latin American Literature: Some Examples

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On October 21, 1492, Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) writes, “Here and in all the island, the trees are green and the plants and grasses as well, as in the month of April in Andalusia. The singing of the small birds is such that it would seem that a man would never willingly leave this place. The flocks of parrots darken the sun. Birds great and small are of so many kinds and so different from ours that it is a wonder” (qtd. in Todorov 23). As Tzvetan Todorov points out, this is an “intransitive admiration of nature, experienced with such intensity that it is freed from any interpretation and from any finality” (23). This originary myth of the New World as paradise constitutes the pervasive text upon which subsequent writers will inscribe their nuances and found their interpretations not only of nature but of mankind’s role therein. Even as Cristóbal Colón discovers and commits to history the encounter with Paradise regained in the New World, as Carlos Fuentes asserts, the explorer inserts this epiphany within the context of possession and transformation: “queremos al mundo para transformarlo” ‘we want the world in order to change it’ (Fuentes 46, my translation). As part of the colonizing process, the Spaniards conceived the New World as “the passive object of transplantation and grafting” (O’Gorman 142). The literature of discovery and conquest reiterates the motif of a utopian land of plenty in which natural phenomena, including the indigenous populations, were to be named and catalogued. Nature as abundance is transformed into resource; discovery gives way to conquest.

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of the “natural” world undergoes modifications consistent with the changing political and cultural landscape. In particular, the motif of the natural world in the literature of the latter half of the 20th century in Latin American literature has undergone a radical change. To discuss this change, however, entails some brief reference to the trope of nature throughout Latin American literature, specifically in 19th century and early 20th century narratives. To that end, the text that most clearly determines the character of the natural world in Latin American literature from the inception of independence on is Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s treatise, *Facundo*, subtitled significantly “*Civilización y barbarie*” ‘*Civilization and Barbarism*.’

In the 19th century, the challenges of nationhood determine the manner in which nature is conceived. Nature is inextricably tied to national identity in that the land itself is surveyed, and national borders are set and disputed among the different nations. The definition of the nation depends on the correspondence between natural and artificial borders, and the natural landscape, having lost the commonality of its colonial status under the Spanish empire, is further carved into foreign and domestic and into resource and obstacle among the various nations of the Americas. Indeed, the admiration with which Colón imbues his journals is not absent in Sarmiento; however, what has intensified is the symbolic transformation of nature into national property both constituting and constituted by the nascent state. Nature (conceived as boundless) is set against nation (nature conquered through domestication). However, this domestication depends on a process in which nature is reconceptualized, denaturalized, and contained. In the founding literature of the Americas, the expansionism of discovery and conquest and subsequently of nation building foregrounds the image of borders, and this delimitation and reconceptualization of nature creates various conflicts and oppositions that come to characterize the state and the political, economic, and social concept of that state. These same images of the containment of nature are problematized in contemporary postmodern literature influenced by an awareness of globalization and by ecological movements such as social ecology and ecofeminism in which these oppositions are disputed, broken down, or erased.

Strongly influenced by positivistic and deterministic perspectives, Sarmiento, convinced that the milieu determines the character of those that inhabit it, rejects the natural world (along with its original inhabitants) as one in which the goals of enlightenment and modernization are continually subverted. In order to change this dynamic and to ensure mankind's dominance—the emergent Argentine nation—over nature and the land, the pampas are to be incorporated as a resource into the national project by their modification and use, and the original inhabitants are to be eradicated. Sarmiento's program for the colonization of provincial Argentina erases the existence of indigenous peoples and favors immigration from Northern Europe:

La inmensa extensión de país que está en sus extremos, es enteramente despoblada, y ríos navegables posee que no ha surcado aún el frágil barquichuelo. El mal que aqueja a la República Argentina es la extensión: el desierto la rodea por todas partes y se le insinúa en las entrañas: la soledad, el despoblado sin una habitación humana, son, por lo general, los límites incuestionables entre unas y otras provincias. Allí, la inmensidad por todas partes: inmensa la llanura, inmensos los bosques, inmensos los ríos, el horizonte siempre incierto, siempre confundiendo con la tierra, entre celajes y vapores ténues, que no dejan, en la lejana perspectiva, señalar el punto en que el mundo acaba y principia el cielo. Al sur y al norte, acéchanla los salvajes, que aguardan las noches de luna para caer, cual enjambre de hienas, sobre los ganados que pacen en los campos, y sobre las indefensas poblaciones.

The immense expanse of land is entirely unpopulated at its extreme limits, and it possesses navigable rivers that no fragile little boat has yet plowed. The disease from which the Argentine Republic suffers is its own expanse: the desert wilderness surrounds it on all sides and insinuates into its bowels; solitude, a barren land with no human habitation, in general are the unquestionable borders between one province and another. There, immensity is everywhere: immense plains, immense forests, immense rivers, the horizon always unclear, always confused with the earth amid swift-moving clouds and tenuous mists, which do not allow the point where the world ends and the sky begins to be marked in a far-off perspective. To the south and the north, savages lurk, waiting for moonlit nights to descend, like a pack of hyenas, on the herds that graze the countryside, and on defenseless settlements. (56, 45-46)

The extermination of indigenous populations was part of the nationalist project in 19th-century Argentina. For Sarmiento, only certain types of populations were visible in this symbolic, political conceptualization. Those of Northern European descent were to be transplanted to the wilds of Argentina and the figurative “weeds” of indigenous origin were to be eradicated. This binary opposition of civilization (represented by the city based on European models and by specific populations or races) and barbarism (represented by the natural world and by those elements—including the indigenous and the mestizo—which were associated in the Europeanized Argentine’s mind with the natural world) dominates much of the discourse of 19th- and 20th-century narratives.

We see its effects in writers such as Rómulo Gallegos in *Doña Bárbara* and in Jorge Rivera’s *La vorágine*. These narratives, strongly influenced by the tenets of positivism via the literary styles of realism/naturalism accord Manichaeic values to nature. The modernization project requires the domination of man over nature, and nature—no longer a Paradise but rather the image of fallen man—is associated with evil, with primitivism, and constitutes an obstacle to progress. The trope of nature in Latin American literature follows the general scheme that David Arnold describes as the environmentalist paradigm in history. In *The Problem of Nature*, David Arnold explains that the paradigm arises from the belief that there exists a significant relationship between mankind and his environment, the latter either reflecting or determining the human condition. However, the particular relationship between environment (usually defined as “nature” or “eco-system”) varies from the “strictly determinist” in which there is little or no room for human free will to a “possibilist” interpretation, which Arnold describes in the following way:

the physical environment restricts human societies in some ways but not in others, or only does so in the more primitive stages of human development. The more mature and civilized a society becomes, the less it lies in nature’s thrall: indeed, the mark of a civilization is precisely its ability to rise above narrow environmental constraints.
(10)

In the early 20th-century novel, *Doña Bárbara*, this is the foundation

for Santos Luzardo's optimism and determination when he returns to the plains of his youth in Venezuela and seeks to wrest control of the land from the hands of doña Bárbara, who in turn represents those forces of nature and primitivism that, according to the author, Rómulo Gallegos, obstruct economic, social, and political progress.¹ Nature in this novel is bifurcated into the unruly, destructive forces of the quagmire (doña Bárbara and Lorenzo and her stolen land, *El Miedo*) as opposed to nature conquered and transformed, domesticated nature, represented by the fenced-in property, *Altamira*, which is forced into productivity as well as by Marisela, daughter of doña Bárbara, whom Luzardo educates and eventually marries. Here, too, as in *Sarmiento*, the binary opposition dominates the narrative and nature exists "out there," in opposition, to be vanquished and modified by the positivistic program of an enlightened patriarch.

As a woman in a position of power, doña Bárbara represents a perversion of the rational order Luzardo champions. She is an image that continually spills over the borders Gallegos's hero advocates. The romantic depiction of her past only reinforces the violent and destructive impulses of her version of dominion. As an orphan, she lacks the tie to the land that Gallegos emphasizes as the basis of rights in Luzardo's case. She spends her youth on the rivers, and her desire for land cannot be legitimized for she never owned any. Her ownership of *El Miedo* and the land between this estate and Luzardo's is a usurpation. The fact that she is mestiza also contributes to her liminal aspect. The indigenous is continually erased or marginalized in the novel. Luzardo refers to the resistance to progress as due to "la indolencia del indio que llevamos en la sangre" 'the laziness of the Indian that we all have in our blood' (351, 287).

The conflict hinges on Luzardo's plan to fence in *Altamira*, thereby fencing "out" the barbaric influences of doña Bárbara: "Luzardo quedó pensando en la necesidad de implantar la costumbre de la cerca. Por ella empezaría la civilización de la llanura; la cerca sería el derecho contra la acción todopoderosa de la fuerza, la necesaria limitación del hombre ante los principios" 'Luzardo nevertheless kept thinking of the necessity of implanting the custom of fencing. Through that the civilizing of the Plain would begin. The fence would be a bulwark against the omnipotence of force, the necessary limitation of man prior to his undertakings' (233, 137). The resolu-

tion of the novel rests on the legal restitution of property rights that allow Santos Luzardo to contain once again the lands that had fallen outside the progressive administration of a civilized patriarch. The principles that Luzardo envisions in the landscape of the plains are based on the need to domesticate and pacify nature which he associates with doña Bárbara and her “laws”:

Mientras tanto, ya tenía también unos pensamientos que eran como ir a lomos de un caballo salvaje, en la vertiginosa carrera de la doma, haciendo girar los espejismos de la llanura. El hilo de los alambrados, la línea recta del hombre dentro de la línea curva de la Naturaleza, demarcaría en la tierra de los innumerables caminos, por donde hace tiempo se pierden, rumbeando, las esperanzas errantes, uno solo y derecho hacia el porvenir.

Meanwhile, he had other ideas which made him feel as though he were riding a wild horse in the dizzy career of his breaking, sending the mirages on the horizon. The fence-wire, the straight line of man before the curving line of nature, would represent one sole unswerving road towards the future in this land of untold paths where wandering hopes had been lost since time immemorial. (234, 137-38)

While the forces of reason are aligned with Santos Luzardo, the irrational incarnates in the monstrosity of doña Bárbara who “resultaba incapaz de concebir un verdadero plan. Su habilidad estaba, únicamente, en saber sacarle enseguida el mayor provecho a los resultados aleatorios de sus impulsos” ‘was incapable of conceiving a real plan. Her skill lay solely in the ability to derive the best immediate profit from the chance results of her impulses’ (252, 163).

Quiroga, writing in the earlier decades of the 20th century, distinguishes himself from the ethos of positivism and expansionism in his depiction of nature. Nature in Quiroga is not so much Mother Nature as it is the ultimate truth of the nature of man set in the verdant landscape of las Misiones, man’s unquestioning isolation and inescapable death. Man, an animal that makes and uses tools, sets himself apart from Nature, works upon Nature, but cannot escape this aspect of Nature, that all things die. “El hombre muerto” ‘The Dead Man’ chronicles this recognition as in the first few lines of the story the man trips on his own handiwork—a fence—and lands mortally wounded on his machete. Indeed this beginning with the

“climax” and the fact that the story is narrated from the point of view of the dead man questions the moment in which one can say death begins. Isn't it always there, from the moment of birth, from the beginning of life? This is the lesson of “El hombre muerto,” who is always already dead. The point, however, is that one does not wish to recognize this fact, to envision oneself among the creatures of the forest, but rather creates illusions, fables and mythologies of salvation as the man in “A la deriva” ‘Drifting’ does. Death closes in on the character in this story in mid-sentence as he lies in his canoe floating with the current downstream metaphorically already in Charon's care. Bitten by a poisonous snake, he sets off down river looking for help; however, he lies in the canoe, his body numbed by the parallel course of the venom, making plans for the day and grasping at the illusion that he is getting better. Such is also the case for the father in “El hijo” ‘The Son,’ who walks arm in arm with the illusory vision of his son, who actually lies dead after tripping over a fence and shooting himself with a rifle. In this case, the father, cognizant of the surroundings and trials of living in the wilds of the Misiones area has taught his son how to survive by giving him the latitude to explore and learn through experience. However, Quiroga ceaselessly undermines his protagonists' authority and control over their environment—from the naive and arrogant Benincasa who, like his name, is better off at home rather than roaming through the jungle to prove his manhood in “La miel silvestre” ‘Wild Honey’ to the father in “El desierto” ‘The Desert’ who lives with his two young children in isolation never considering their fate if he were to die. Then, too, death often comes in small packages, not the obvious threat of wild beasts, but in carnivorous ants, or parasites that lie hidden in bedding or the viper carelessly trodden upon or the slip of the foot. In all this, Nature in the form of the Misiones remains majestic, the screen upon which the characters have projected their own illusions, eternal and indifferent.

In “Juan Darién,” Quiroga most directly posits the binary opposition of Sarmiento's “civilización y barbarie” as a fable, implying the naiveté of such reductionism, but aware of the didactic possibilities of entertaining a representation of clear principles. However unlike Sarmiento, Quiroga casts the Christ-like conversion of the little tiger into the form of a human baby through maternal love

and its torture and mutilation by a society which cannot tolerate its superior virtues or its “otherness.” Juan Darién rises from death meted out by the society of man and returns to his original form, the tiger, to declaim the moral of the story: “el hombre y el tigre se diferencian únicamente por el corazón” ‘man and tiger are different only in their hearts’ (80, 116).

Carolyn Merchant explains the patriarchal assumption Quiroga’s narratives contest. Merchant points out that Western cultures have operated under the ideology of a strong interventionist version of Genesis which “legitimizes recovery [of the original Paradise] through domination” (*Earthcare* 31). In this perspective, “[c]ivilization is the final end, the telos, toward which ‘wild’ Nature is destined. . . . Nature passes from inchoate matter endowed with a formative power to a reflection of the civilized natural order designed by God” (*Earthcare* 44). Quiroga’s short stories ironize the ideology of the colonization of nature and most certainly put in doubt man’s assumption that nature is that which he must transform. On the contrary, nature contains man and transforms him in spite of his best laid plans. Nevertheless, Quiroga is not an environmentalist in the current use of that label, even though his narratives have more in common with the narratives of the recent past than with the “foundational fictions,” to use Doris Sommer’s term, of Sarmiento and Gallegos.

It is tempting to read into Quiroga’s stories a sympathy with current environmentalist protectionist ideologies. He places his protagonists on a continuum with the natural environment, and exhibits an amateur naturalist’s care for detail. The narratives also suggest the interdependence of the flora and fauna in the health of the eco-system and continually show the failure of his protagonists’ attempts to control it. However, in Quiroga’s stories, man’s appearance on the landscape is an intrusion. Nature in Quiroga is complex, baroque, indifferent, and horrifying. It dwarfs mankind. Like the previously mentioned authors—Sarmiento, Gallegos, Rivera—Quiroga finds nature to be an obstacle to development. But unlike these authors, Quiroga does not posit mankind’s superiority over nature, nor does he promote a positivistic enthusiasm for the modernization and progress of civilization over inchoate nature. Indeed Quiroga gives nature a form and concedes that it exists in and for it-

self. Although this brings him closer to viewpoints expressed by late 20th-century authors—Montero, Belli, Sepúlveda—his narratives in most cases do not portray nature as the victim of containment and development. His vision of nature waxes romantic:

El Paraná corre allí en el fondo de una inmensa hoya, cuyas paredes, altas de cien metros, encajonan fúnebremente el río. Desde las orillas, bordeadas de negros bloques de basalto, asciende el bosque, negro también. Adelante, a los costados, detrás, la eterna muralla lúgubre, en cuyo fondo el río arremolinado se precipita en incesantes borbolones de agua fangosa. El paisaje es agresivo y reina en él un silencio de muerte. Al atardecer, sin embargo, su belleza sombría y calma cobran una majestad única.

The Paraná there cuts through the depths of a great ravine whose walls, a hundred meters high, enclose the river in funereal shadow. From the shores, bordered by black blocks of basalt, ascends the forest, also black. Ahead, as well as upstream, the eternal lugubrious ramparts darken the whirling muddy river, ceaselessly boiling and bubbling. The landscape is menacing, and a deathlike silence reigns. At dusk, nevertheless, its somber and quiet beauty assumes a unique majesty. (“A la deriva” ‘Drifting’ 15, 71)

In this landscape, Quiroga’s protagonists are small and vulnerable. Like Sisyphus rolling his stone up hill only to see it roll back, they carve away at the landscape only to find that “[d]esde hace dos minutos su persona, su personalidad viviente, nada tiene ya que ver con el potrero, que formó él mismo a azada, durante cinco meses consecutivos, ni con el bananal, obra de sus solas manos” ‘For two minutes now his person, his living personality, has had no connection with the cleared land he himself spaded up during five consecutive months, nor with the grove, work of his hands alone’ (“El hombre muerto” ‘The Dead Man’ 82, 123). In short, in Quiroga’s narratives there is still an implicit opposition between humans and nature. Only in death is this opposition resolved.

Many narratives of the latter part of the 20th century foreground the issues of globalization, ecology, and technology. They question the enterprise of modernization and the optimism of technology and progress. The year 2000, like the year 1000, inspired some to imagine the second coming, the culmination of human history, and

the recovery of Paradise. However, the other side of the same coin conjured the coming millennium as the product of ecological mismanagement and political and social inhumanity. Arnold remarks on the change in the environmentalist paradigm in more recent decades:

the basic paradigm has been reversed: mankind has won mastery over nature, it is argued, but has abused and mistreated it, and now must live with the environmental and social consequences of its Promethean act. This kind of environmentalism tends to concentrate on the harm humans have done to the environment (and hence to themselves) through industrial pollution, mechanized farming, the destruction of forests, and the extinction of animal and plant species. . . . The 'natural' environment is seen to be intrinsically healthy. It is we who make it unhealthy by our abuse of it or endanger our health by interfering with nature. (10-11)

This adequately describes the attitudinal shift that characterizes much of the literature of the last decades of the 20th-Century. Authors such as Mayra Montero, Gioconda Belli, and Luis Sepúlveda directly attack the exploitation and abuse of the ecosystem and advocate environmental ethics. An unabashed ecological focus is central in novels such as *Tú, la oscuridad* 'In the Palm of Darkness' by Mayra Montero and *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* 'The Old Man Who Read Love Stories' by Luis Sepúlveda.²

Gaard and Murphy in their introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* explain that "[e]cology is not a study of the 'external' environment we enter—some big outside that we go to. Ecology is a study of interrelationship, with its bedrock being the recognition of the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us" (5-6). In the writings of Luis Sepúlveda in particular, the theme of nature arises as habitat populated not only or more importantly by humans but by a plethora of symbiotic species of which we are but one. No longer the barrier to an expanding civilization, nature is depicted as the victim of unbridled greed and mismanagement. In *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, Sepúlveda refashions the Sarmiento theme of "civilización y barbarie," whereas Mayra Montero in *Tú, la oscuridad* documents, in a style using grotesque deformation, an eminent ecological disaster. Montero's novel portrays the revelation

and fulfillment of our worst premonitions, a hell on earth, brought about by the imbalance between the forces of destruction and those of creation.

Nature in Montero's novel is in the act of disappearing or in its final agony. The foothills where the scientist, Víctor, searches for one of the last specimens of a frog thought to be on the verge of extinction or already extinct are deserts. Mounds of bones warn trespassers that the area is under the control of the tonton macoute, Papa Doc's secret police, or one of many other "secret" societies. Thierry, Víctor's Haitian guide, describes the situation of Haiti as one in which nature has rebelled against the humans:

Usted quiere saber adónde van las ranas. Yo no puedo decírselo, señor, pero le puedo preguntar, ¿adónde se fueron nuestros peces? Casi todos abandonaron este mar, y en el monte desaparecieron los puercos salvajes y los patos de temporada, y hasta las iguanas de comer, éstas también se fueron. Nada más tiene que ver lo que queda de los hombres, mírenlos con cuidado: los huesos se les asoman desde adentro, empujan por debajo de la piel como si quisieran escapar de allí, abandonar esa carniza floja donde son golpeados, ir a esconderse en otra parte.

A veces pienso, pero no lo digo, que llegará el día en que venga un hombre como usted, alguien que atraviese el mar para buscar un par de ranas, quien dice ranas dice cualquier otro animal, y encuentre sólo una gran loma de huesos en la orilla, una loma más alta que el pico Tete Boeuf. Entonces se dirá: "Haití se terminó, gran Dios, esos huesos son todo lo que queda."

You want to know where the frogs go. I cannot say, sir, but let me ask you a question: Where did our fish go? Almost all of them left this sea, and in the forest the wild pigs disappeared, and the migratory ducks, and even the iguanas for eating, they went too. Just take a look at what's left of humans, take a careful look: You can see the bones pushing out under their skins as if they wanted to escape, to leave behind that weak flesh where they are so battered, to go into hiding someplace else.

At times I think, but keep it to myself, I think that one day a man like you will come here, someone who crosses the ocean to look for a couple of frogs, and when I say frogs, I mean any creature, and he will find only a great hill of bones on the shore, a hill higher than the peak of Tête Boeuf. Then he will say to himself, Haiti is finished,

God Almighty, those bones are all that remain. (Montero 26, 11)

The novel, however, goes a step further than simply to record the devastation of the ecosystem.

Karen Warren explains that one of the basic tenets of social ecology is “that plant, animal, and human communities are properly viewed on a nature-society continuum, stressing the nonhierarchical continuities between nature and society” (85). Interwoven with the pseudo-scientific excerpts from journals documenting the decimation and disappearance of diverse species of frogs are the narratives of the two main characters in the novel, Victor and Thierry. The story of Victor’s failing marriage and the violent autobiography of the Haitian are inextricably tied to the documentation of ecological disaster foreshadowed by the extinction of the frogs. As Thierry’s description of the disappearance of wildlife and the effects of famine on the people of the island makes evident, there is no distinction among the living inhabitants of the island; whether human or animal or vegetable, all are victims of scarcity.

The ecosystem hence includes not only the plant and animal kingdom but also the human realm. The ecological devastation goes hand in hand with the social and political repression in Haiti. This convergence of ecology with a socio-political critique is one of the basic tenets at the heart of ecofeminism: “Ecofeminism from its inception has insisted on the link between nature and culture, between the forms of exploitation of nature and the forms of the oppression of women” (Murphy 23). In a similar sense, Montero casts the ecological crisis in gendered terms, but does not limit it to these.

The national product of Haiti comes down to one, death itself. The world is upside down. Sons sleep with their mothers, children predecease their progenitors, trees bring forth “strange fruit” (“un árbol que en lugar de dar su fruta daba zapatos viejos” ‘a tree that grew old shoes instead of fruit’), carcasses—both human and animal—line the streets and dot the hillsides. It is death itself that grows in Haiti (Montero 151, 110). At the root of the ecological, economic, and political devastation is the spectacle of the death of life itself (Eros), and Montero represents this global destruction in gendered terms.

First the females die. Although referring to a species of frog,

Thierry explains: “Al parecer, ya no encontraban suficientes hembras. Algunas extinciones empiezan de ese modo, primero desaparecen ellas, se esfuman con sus vientres repletos. ¿Adónde van, qué es lo que temen, por qué demonios huyen?” ‘Apparently there were no longer enough females. Some extinctions begin this way, first the females disappear, vanish with their wombs full. Where do they go, what is it that they fear, why the hell do they run away?’ (67, 45). The botanist Sara is also in Haiti searching for a specific plant, a type of cactus of which three or four remain throughout the world, all of them “male.” She unsuccessfully seeks “un ejemplar femenino” ‘a female specimen’ (159, 119). Ironically, just like Víctor, she has been warned not to remain in the area, but she insists on continuing her search and like the female specimen she covets, she will most likely die. These gendered images are reiterated in the scenes of physical abuse between men and women in the novel.

The nature-culture continuum erases borders and justifies the apparent oxymoron of the Caribbean island as trope for global ecological disaster. Montero’s depiction of the particular (Haiti) and of the global reiterates that all previous borders and limits have been and are transgressed. The island is not isolated, nor separate from other territories. Ostriches are being raised in Indiana, Indian women pray to Hindi goddesses in Haiti, a man from Vietnam works on a farm in the U.S., the African Diaspora has forever changed the face of the Caribbean. Although the novel limits its story to the contemporary, situating this crisis in the postcolonial Caribbean suggests that we have arrived at the end of a story of self-destruction that dates from the first encounters between the Old and New Worlds. What ironically stands out is that there are no islands; all phenomena are globalized and interconnected for better and for worse.

The issue of borders and the containment of nature is central to Luis Sepúlveda’s novel of the jungle, *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*. As in the case of Montero, Sepúlveda problematizes the enterprise of colonization. Set in the Amazonian region of Ecuador, a land whose possession is disputed by the Peruvian government, the novel challenges the dichotomy of “civilization” or “barbarism” in that it creates various margins and borders that demonstrate the difficulty of containment and put in question the nature of that which is being contained. Antonio José, the protagonist, comes to

the jungle from the highlands of Ecuador with his wife, seduced by empty promises from the government:

El Gobierno prometía grandes extensiones de tierra y ayuda técnica a cambio de poblar territorios disputados al Perú. . . . [L]es entregaron un papel pomposamente sellado que los acreditaba como colonos. Les asignaron dos hectáreas de selva, un par de machetes, unas palas, unos costales de semillas devoradas por el gorgojo y la promesa de un apoyo técnico que no llegaría jamás.

The government was promising large tracts of land and technical help in exchange for settling the territories disputed with Peru. . . . they were handed a pompously stamped piece of paper which accredited them as settlers. They were assigned two hectares of jungle, a couple of machetes, some spades, a few bags of seed almost eaten up by weevils, and the promise of technical aid that never came. (41, 30-31)

From the sierra, Antonio José and his wife come with the intention of clearing the land and farming. However, this project fails miserably for the “colonos” ‘settlers’ die off, some consumed by illnesses, others victims of boas, still others swept away by flash floods or despair (42-43). The goals of such colonization are political not socio-economic or humanitarian. The incentives form part of a plan to populate and thereby claim for national sovereignty what is in nationalistic terms a no-man’s land, land without meaning, “free land,” a frontier open to development and possession. Only by the establishment of Ecuadorian settlements in the rain forest can the government establish the national character of the land. We learn that Perú, too, repeatedly sends “expedición[es] civilizadora[s]” ‘civilizing expeditions’ to the rain forest, during one of which Nushño, Antonio José’s Shuar friend, had been wounded (49, 38).

It is only when the settlers die that Antonio José becomes aware of other communities that live in the forest. The Shuar teach Antonio José how to live in and with the jungle. Sepúlveda, through the character of Antonio José, affords us a view into the complexity of the societies that inhabit the Amazon region. Thus his novel critiques and rejects the illusion of pristine, virgin jungle that the colonizing mission assumes. It is a question not of economic development vs. protectionism, but rather of ways of living with and

using nature.

El Idilio, the border town, marks the incursion of “civilization.” Its marginal aspect and the unsavory characters, with some exceptions, that inhabit it suggest the contamination that the incursion of colonization into the Amazon brings with it. Sepúlveda’s choice of the Amazon area of Ecuador and Perú underscores the issue of borders. In the first place, Ecuador and Perú have historically disputed each other’s claim to this area and the disposition of national borders. This is in part due to the minimal nature of settlements of Ecuadorian and Peruvian nationals in eastern regions of the two countries. In the second place, the setting calls our attention to the issue of indigenous rights. The establishment of the border between Ecuador and Peru actually cuts across tribal communities, sometimes separating relatives within a same community between two nations. This situation puts into question the definitions of nations and their borders. For the Shuar do not recognize Peruvian and Ecuadorian borders. And in the last place, the Amazon itself has attained a peculiar status globally as in some way belonging to us all regardless of specific national claims. Concern for the greenhouse effect, deforestation, biodiversity, the protection of indigenous peoples has made of the Amazon an ecological “cause célèbre.”

Sepúlveda prefixes a note to Chico Mendes, a rubber-tree worker whose fight against the cattlemen in Brazil brought him to a leadership role in the ecology movement and led to his murder. He also dedicates the novel to Miguel Tzenke, a representative of the unionized Shuar. These allusions clearly indicate the ecological interests of the novel. The story itself—the hunt for a man-eating tigress whose litter was viciously killed for their worthless pelts and whose mate was left half dead—places Antonio José, the tracker and hunter, between the two opposing fields of “civilization” and “barbarism.” But these fields are both presented in the story as highly complex. The border town and el gordo, the municipal authority, are far from the enlightened, modern urban ideal of 19th-century thinkers. El Idilio is a frontier town where adventurers, gold miners, big game hunters, and criminals flock. Those who do not belong anywhere else include the “jibaros,” Shuar rejected by their tribe because of alcoholism and other vices associated with the colonos, as well as Antonio José, who lived among the Shuar, but came to realize

that although “[é]l era como ellos, [...] no era uno de ellos” ‘[h]e was like them, but he was not of them’ (53, 43).

“Civilization” brings the gold miners and adventurers whose stupidity and cruelty form the backbone of the novel’s conflict. On the other hand, the tigress represents “barbarism,” and yet the novel assigns to her all the noble sentiments of the loving mother and mate, intelligence and righteous wrath, “era un animal soberbio, hermoso, una obra maestra de gallardía imposible de reproducir ni con el pensamiento” ‘she was a superb animal, a beauty, a masterpiece of grace impossible to re-create even in the imagination’ (136, 130). The novel ends with an indictment that transforms Sarmiento’s opposition, “civilización y barbarie,” into “la barbarie humana” ‘the barbarity of man’ (137, 131).

Sepúlveda and Montero do more than contextualize their human dramas within a natural setting that mirrors the plight of their characters. Traditional assumptions of the depiction of nature as either Paradise regained or wild, violent, formless nature crumble as the borders between the natural world and the world of civilization break down, disappear, or reveal their artificial and arbitrary character. Today’s world is small, and there is no frontier, no “free” land that invites the spirit of conquest. Rather the *fin de siècle* literature of the 20th-century conjures a world of confluence and contamination in which we have committed violence upon ourselves through our misuse and domination of the natural world. In the novels of Sepúlveda and Montero, the natural setting steps forward as protagonist that in prophetic mode explains and foreshadows a tragedy that outstrips the individual characters to encompass the global.

Notes

1 Arnold’s paradigm is useful for the study of Sarmiento and Gallegos; nevertheless, there arise contradictions and sophisticated arguments that undermine a simplistic view of nature and modify the basic opposition of man/nature even in the foundational texts of Colón and Sarmiento.

2 As useful as Arnold’s paradigmatic shift is for the ecologically focused literature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it still posits a binary opposition that in general terms more recent texts problematize. The oppo-

sition in Arnold's paradigm places us outside of nature. The texts that I discuss here go a step further in order to break down the false dichotomy between humans and the natural world. Nor are civilization and its effects outside of this natural world; on the contrary, civilization infests and modifies the face of the ecosystem and the novels continuously challenge the borders conceptually separating these realms. In addition to Arnold, I refer the reader to the growing literature on ecology and ecofeminism. For further reading: *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* and *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* by Carolyn Merchant, *Ecofeminism* by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether, and *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* by Anne Primavesi.

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