Returning to Nature as Habitat? The Ecocritical, Non-Canonical Voice of the Environmentally Dispossessed in *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro*

Claudia Hachenberger

ABSTRACT: Neoliberal capitalist growth and ecological exploitation have been raising formerly unknown problems and pose significant difficulties for the environmentally dispossessed, for instance, in terms of meeting an ever-increasing consumer demand concerning natural resources and simultaneously coping with a massive and indisputable waste problem. The virulent topic of inconsiderate environmental destruction and improper waste disposal is addressed by Gioconda Belli's 1996 utopian novel *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro* in different ways. With its postcolonial-ecocritical agenda, the novel detaches itself from narrow dichotomous and stereotypical conceptions and aims to draw the readers' attention to the negative and fatalistic impact that neoliberal capitalist consumerism has on the environments of the poor. The Nicaraguan novel furthermore highlights the underrepresented, non-canonical voices of the environmentally dispossessed and depicts environmental exploitation and ecological damage through their perspectives. This article demonstrates how *Waslala* articulates a powerful anti-capitalist, ecological, and postcolonial critical perspective and helps imagine alternative convivialist scenarios of returning to nature as habitat in ethically and ecologically more inclusive terms. My close reading focuses on the novel's critique of the waste policies of capitalist and industrialized nations and the challenges resulting from what Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence." Hereby, the article illuminates the ways readers are addressed by the drastic depiction of tragic historical events. In its critical examination of stereotypical dualistic thinking, *Waslala* concretely proposes the bioregion of the river as a promising and convivialist alternative space for returning to nature as habitat.

KEYWORDS: Utopia; Slow Violence; Capitalist Waste Policy; Environments of the Poor; Convivialism

> How could one not want to believe in an enchanted place without conflicts or contradictions? In a *doomed country* like this, it is an irresistible idea.
>
> (*W* 170; emphasis added)[1]

Introduction

Contextual Framework and Research Question

In her recent TED Talk "The People Who Caused the Climate Crisis Aren't the Ones Who Will Fix It" (2020), Colombian-American activist and climate justice leader Angela Mahecha Adrar talks about her experiences of being environmentally dispossessed and tells the listeners about her childhood. After leaving Colombia, she and her family came to the US, where they lived alongside landfill sites, nuclear power plants, oil refineries, or waste treatment plants. She further states that those poor neighborhoods inhabited mainly by immigrants and minority groups "serve as the sacrifice zones to fuel the economy of this nation [the US] and oftentimes the world." In this context, she speaks of being "assaulted by pollution violence" her whole life. With her talk, Mahecha Adrar joins a debate that has already existed for some time.

Over the last few decades—despite the increasingly mindful attitude towards nature associated with ecological movements—environmental habitats in Latin America have been destroyed in the name of unsustainable capitalistic progress stimulated by other neo-imperial countries' interventions like the US or neoliberal decrees enacted by Latin American governments. However, the destruction of ecosystems is not only a problem in Latin American countries. The negative impact and imminent environmental degradation caused by capitalist industrialist nations is reflected in literary publications across the entire American hemisphere. As early as 1962, for instance, the US-American biologist Rachel Carson starts her non-fiction book *Silent Spring* with the sentence: "There was a town in the heart of America where all life *seemed* to live in harmony with its surroundings" (21; emphasis added). The deliberate use of the verb '(to) seem' already indicates that the described environment might appear to be positive on the surface. Hence, there is much more to the apparent harmonious balance between humanity and nature. The first chapter of the publication tells "A Fable for Tomorrow," a story about an imaginary community that is desolated by "a shadow of death" (21). The source of the appalling transformation in the town's natural environment is neither "witchcraft" nor "enemy action;" the explanation given is that the "people had done it themselves" (22). Drawing the public's attention to the systemic problem of the destruction of natural wildlife (flora and fauna) through the use of pesticides as well as its neg-

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all following translations from the Spanish original are my own.

ative and sometimes lethal consequences for human beings, *Silent Spring* attempts to make readers aware of the importance of appreciating their natural environment as they depend upon it. The publication initiated environmental debates in both the public and the political realm and is thus often considered to be one of the major influences on ecocriticism. The ecological and environmentalist concerns articulated in *Silent Spring* led to a fundamental shift in the ecocritical focus that goes beyond dualistic conceptions of nature and culture.[2] Furthermore, it conceptualizes nature as habitat, which is particularly important for the close reading of the Latin American text brought to the fore in this article. The publication of *Silent Spring* thus contributed towards bringing the importance of habitat protection and the conservation of natural environments into public awareness.

The virulent topic of inconsiderate environmental destruction and more specifically improper waste disposal is also addressed by Gioconda Belli's 1996 utopian novel *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro*.[3] In *Waslala*, Belli's focus lies on the Nicaraguan society and ecology shaken by centuries and decades of first colonial and then neo-imperial intervention as well as dictatorial regimes that have been accepting environmental destruction and contamination in the name of neoliberal progress. She uses the utopian novel to criticize the Nicaraguan regime implicitly, as the fictitious country of Faguas resembles Nicaragua. As an activist in the Nicaraguan revolution, Belli has always been frank about her opinion on the intrigues of the Nicaraguan dictatorship, which she also addresses in her literary texts. The politically engaged writer wishes to resolve the ecological injustices and problems of her home country. In this article, I understand Belli as a "historian of subalternity" (Spivak 216) who explicitly aims to voice existing social and political grievances through her literary work and thus dismantles the marginalization that the environmentally dispossessed have to endure when affected by pollution and the destruction of their natural habitats. I consider working with Belli's novel to be highly promising as it construes the world from a non-white and non-Eurocentric perspective and generates a space of possibility for change.

Combining fact and fiction, the author takes the reader on a journey to a utopian community through the fictitious country of Faguas. Readers accompany the curious protagonist Melisandra, who only begins to understand the extent of her country's environmental destruction on her journey and soon is convinced that she actively wants to change something about it. In this article, I argue that Belli constructs her characters as the environmentally dispossessed Other who are directly affected by what Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence." My reading thus contributes to the ongoing fruitful dialogue between postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism. As I will show, the novel develops its full critical potential only by

---

[2] For further explanation on why the 'absolute' concepts of nature and culture are often seen as being separate from one another and why it is important to overcome that biased dichotomy, see the chapter on "Dichotomous Natures" in *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene* (Büscher and Fletcher 47-77).

[3] In this article, the title will be shortened to *Waslala* when mentioned in-text or simply to *W* when indicating the pagination from which a specific sentence or paragraph is quoted.

engaging with both these critical perspectives. By depicting the daily life of the Faguenses and by articulating their hopes and dreams, the novel brings the underrepresented voices of the subaltern to the fore and demonstrates ways to rewrite environmental (hi-)stories related to foreign interventions and the negative and fatalistic impact of unsustainable and outsized consumerism.

Methodological Considerations

In the preface to his 2011 monograph *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon includes an interpretation of *Silent Spring*. According to him, Carson's politically engaged non-fictional publication warns its readers that neoliberal capitalism's "appetite for the unregulated, specialist consumer product would leave behind a trail of nonspecialist fatalities" (Nixon xi). In the majority of the cases, those nonspecialist fatalities do not occur simultaneously with the act of pollution and do not occur at the same place. The ecological exploitation and environmental deterioration advanced in the name of outsized capitalist consumerism have a particularly severe impact on the habitats of the postcolonial Other and environmentally dispossessed and are thus unequally distributed across time and space. In relation to an environmentalism of the poor, Rob Nixon terms this effect "slow violence." Slow violence is defined as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). As mentioned already at the beginning of this article, his point of view is also shared by climate justice leader Angela Mahecha Adrar. The effect of what Nixon has termed slow violence therefore does not only hold true for the environmentally dispossessed in countries of the American hemisphere outside the US but includes ecologically marginalized groups living in the US as well.

As Nixon further argues, slow violence—being an invisible and formless threat—can only be confronted by being given a shape (10). Literary texts from regions affected by slow violence are incredibly suitable for such a process of shaping. In their critique of illicit governmental practices and ecological exploitation, they demonstrate to readers the extent of environmental pollution including both an ecocritical and a postcolonial perspective. There has been a mutual indifference between the two fields of study in the past, as they have a distinct critical approach to literary texts. Postcolonial literary critics, for instance, focus on cultural artifacts that reflect social issues affecting human beings in the first place. By contrast, scholars of ecocritical literary studies bring environmental issues affecting nature or non-human beings to the fore (Nichols 100). In addition to Nixon's *Slow Violence* (2011), publications such as Huggan's and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) or Deloughrey's and Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) have initiated a long overdue debate between the two disciplines calling for postcolonial studies to also include the depiction of environmental problems in their analyses and for ecocriticism to engage more with colonial and (neo-)imperial history. Thus, they introduce a way of combining the different points of view in a joint perspective. In their intersection, they are able to make visible an ongoing destruction

of ecological environments that has frequently been marginalized by scholarship and dominant media coverage as well as historical accounts on environmentalism (Nixon 233-34).[4] The diversification of both fields appears to be particularly fruitful in the analysis and close reading of fictional texts that reveal the occurrence of slow violence and highlight the underrepresented voices of the postcolonial Other and environmentally dispossessed. By offering a reading of Belli's utopian novel *Waslala*, my article contributes to the highly productive dialogue between the two areas of ecocriticism and postcolonial criticism in literary studies.

Starting with a summary of the novel, I discuss the importance of hope and the utopian imagination for the postcolonial and environmentally dispossessed Other. Thereafter I introduce the Nicaraguan author Belli as a voice for the voiceless enraged by the injustices prevailing in her home country. Furthermore, I examine how the novel depicts environmental exploitation and ecological damage as I focus on the novel's critique of the waste policy of capitalist and industrialized nations. Here, I am especially interested in how readers are addressed by the drastic depiction of tragic historical events that are oftentimes silenced in essentializing historical accounts. By analyzing the novel through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, I aim to demonstrate how Belli's *Waslala* articulates a powerful anti-capitalist, ecological, and postcolonial critical perspective and helps to imagine alternative convivialist scenarios. In its critical examination of stereotypical dualistic thinking limited to dichotomies like civilized *vs.* uncivilized, colonizer *vs.* colonized, or, more related to the ecocritical aspect, nature *vs.* culture, *Waslala*—as I argue—concretely proposes the river as a promising and convivialist alternative space to the environment of the poor. It therefore shows readers how a dynamic process of change can be initiated and how returning to nature as habitat becomes possible when ecological violence is overcome successfully.

Waslala as a Place of Hope in the Environment of the Poor

Similar to the fictitious community presented in the dystopic fable as the prologue to the non-fictional *Silent Spring*, the Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli introduces the imaginary country of Faguas as the setting for her utopian novel *Waslala*. With the creation of Faguas, which highly resembles Nicaragua, Belli is able to implicitly voice social, ecological, and political grievances pertaining to her home country. The close and little concealed connection to political events and debates in Nicaragua established by the text gives the novel an explosive political dimension (Fernández Carballo, "El Autoritarismo Político Militar" 23, 25; Layh 44). Faguas is the "doomed country" referred to in the epigraph to this article and serves as a landfill site to which waste is shipped from industrialized countries in exchange for the oxygen produced in Faguas' tropical forests. The majority of Faguas' citizens are directly impact-

[4] For instance, the Goiânia nuclear accident or details about the daily destruction of the Amazon rainforest by foreign companies was and is hardly covered by mainstream media. That is, the degradation of ecosystems or accidents due to illegal agreements between Latin American governments and foreign companies have hardly been reported beyond a local framework on a regional, national, and even international level.

ed by the consequences of capitalist consumerism as well as the unjust waste policy of neo-imperial governments and thus are directly affected by ecological injustice. Within such a negatively perceived environment, the novel suggests that utopian longing as well as hope for a better and more positively perceived social reality are irresistible and help the population to bear hardships and endure social injustices.

The Faguenses' hopes are tied to a specific place: Waslala. As told by the heterodiegetic narrator and by some of the characters, Waslala is an isolated community founded by a group of poets and intellectuals, who rejected all structures associated with (neo-)imperialism, environmental destruction as well as armed conflict. The community is hidden in a time gap and therefore is difficult to access. As a constantly retold legend circulating among the citizens of Faguas, it has been raising and fueling their hopes and has become a collective obsession (Zinani 123). The story of that enchanted place enables the Faguenses to temporally escape their social reality in thought and sometimes even in person. Hope is also brought about by the main character Melisandra, the granddaughter of one of the founders of the utopian community. From early childhood onwards—as she was left by her parents who went on a mission to find Waslala after having heard her grandfather's exciting stories and alluring memories—her biggest wish is to find Waslala and, as a consequence, also her parents. One day, a diverse group of travelers arrives to rest at her grandparents' house at the river. Among them is the journalist Raphael, with whom the protagonist later begins a relationship. Melisandra takes the opportunity to accompany them on their journey further inward Faguas. The novel is divided into four sections that follow the stations of her journey: "Travelers on the river," "Upstream," "Inland," and "Waslala." Just as readers start their imaginary journey following the novel's plot, Melisandra herself, who has never been away from home, starts to travel to different zones of Faguas. Simultaneously, the protagonist and the readers also get to know the dark regions of Faguas under the grip of the feared Espada brothers leading a violent empire of drugs and weapons; they meet Engracia, who runs the waste importation system with the help of some orphans, who profits from the upcycling and reselling of whatever can be recovered, and who later dies after a radioactive release on the landfill site; and they make it to Waslala, where Melisandra finally finds her mother. Before getting to Waslala, Melisandra and her newly made friends from the landfill site carry out a coup and successfully liberate the country from the brutal dictatorship of the Espada brothers. All hopes now lie on Melisandra who is supposed to guide the country into a better future. For that reason, she sets off in search of the utopian community whose way of life is to be extended to the whole country.

The encounter with her mother confirms to Melisandra and to the readers what only the fewest of the Faguenses know and what is just gradually revealed in the course of the novel: The seemingly perfect community of Waslala has been abandoned by nearly all its citizens who either returned to their old lives in Faguas or simply have not been seen ever since. Waslala, as the imagined utopian alternative to Faguas' negative reality, is represented as a failure. It has literally turned into a "no place" considering one of the etymological meanings

of the term "utopia."[5] Finding the utopian place does not therefore automatically mean that Faguas' problems are solved. The spirit of hope associated with the utopian idea nevertheless lives on in the Faguenses as a utopia's "principal function is to provoke changes in consciousness by imagining a variety of conceivable futures" (Pereyra 3). Utopia, in its traditional meaning as an ideal, perfect, and flawless place, is *de*constructed; however, at the same time, the utopian imagination of characters and readers is *re*constructed (Layh 57). Waslala and the nostalgic hope projected onto it function as an inspiration for the behavior of Faguas' inhabitants after the elimination of the two dictatorial brothers (DeVries 48). The vacuum of power opens as a space in which a new societal and political structure can be created, in which existing structures need to be reorganized, and in which dreams might be concretized (Pereyra 20; *W* 275, 277). Maria Katharina Lauritsch points out that an important driving force for the realization of a better functioning convivialist society is a group dynamic with a common dream (57). Based on this idea, I argue that the legend of Waslala as a common dream forms one of the fundamental elements for the construction of the Faguenses' group identity and becomes the connection between past, present, and future.

The importance of time and the message that time might be linear but that some incidents of the past are able to shape the future is also immanent in the subtitle of the novel. *Memorial del Futuro* "plays with the close utopian relation between past and future" (Lauritsch 54) and also with the definition of the word "memoria/memory."[6] Melisandra's mother is convinced by the fact that even if "we always think/thought that remembrance has to refer to the past, […] [however,] there is also a remembrance, a memorial of the future; that we also harbor a memory of what is going to be" (*W* 329). A change of Faguas' (post-)colonial and environmentally destructive history is not possible. However, as past, present, and future are interconnected, the present reality can be remodeled through the decision to actively change the underlying structures that were crucial for the negative living conditions perceived by the environmentally dispossessed Faguenses. The utopian dream remembered in Waslala might thus become a signpost and warning for Faguas' ecological future as it underlines that past events should be remembered through several different perspectives, not only one essentialist one. Still, a change in how past events are related and written about becomes possible. As the novel highlights the underrepresented, non-canonical voices of the environmentally dispossessed, it takes a central role in the rewriting of (hi-)story/ies, in the politics of remembrance, and as an instrument of collective memory and identity formation.

---

[5] Concerning the term "utopia," there are two possibilities of etymological derivation: As societies in utopias mostly exhibit positive characteristics compared to present societal patterns, a utopia can be denominated as the "good place." Another etymological derivation focuses on the utopia as an imagined, non-existent place, the "no place" (Vieira 3-7).

[6] In general, the term "memorial" is defined as a text or object whose function is to preserve and to perpetuate remembrance of key events, places, people, *inter alia* (*Merriam Webster*, "Memorial").

The Potential of Ecocritical Accounts Told from a Non-Canonical Perspective

Belli took an active role in Nicaragua's armed conflicts by supporting the communist case of the guerrilla group Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in the 1970s. In the 1980s, she turned towards being exclusively an author and since then has been committed to inciting (political and social) change through the publication of prose and poetry in her mother tongue Spanish. For her, writing implies endless possibilities of being critical and revolutionary (Mohor). Belli is a "combative writer" (Nixon 5) enraged by both neo-imperial and ecological injustices in her home country. In her publications, she openly resists and confronts slow violence and thus tries to dismantle the silence through her denunciatory criticism on a fictional level. As an intellectual *letrada* of the post-Boom era,[7] Belli considers herself to be a speaker for the voiceless, lending her authorial voice to the marginalized majority who cannot speak, write, or vote (Mackenbach 38).[8] Many critics might follow literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approach and warn not to fall into the 'essentializing trap' in this context. However, I argue that—by positioning herself and identifying as a subaltern historian marginalized in multiple ways—Belli manages to highlight the heterogeneity of the Eurocentrically termed Other(s).[9]

The novel, as written by a "historian of subalternity" (Spivak 216) and representative for the environmentally dispossessed, presents a new way of experiencing environmental destruction through the perspective of the non-canonical Other. *Waslala* depicts the undeniable impact of colonial and neo-imperial intervention as well as of brutal dictatorships on the thereby severely affected ecology and society of Nicaragua. The utopian text relates to the "idea of literature as public witness" (Clark 78) as it is able to make abstractions through the representation of personal narratives that are rendered tangible for readers. With the creation of the fictitious country of Faguas, which highly resembles Nicaragua, the author is able

---

[7] The era emerging after the Boom of the Latin American novel in the 1980s and 1990s is referred to as the post-Boom era (González Echevarría 115). There were several movements attempting to distance themselves from the Boom novelists due to various reasons. For instance, writers portrayed Latin American countries as puppets of US American culture in their critical literary works (González Echevarría 115-16). From a political point of view, the period of re-democratization in the 1980s and 1990s lead to the emergence of grassroot movements—whose members were discriminated because of their gender, race, or class—that were supported by authors and intellectuals who started to understand themselves as intermediaries (Franco 18).

[8] In this respect, the figure of the intellectual has played an important role in the (literary) history of Latin America: "The *letrado* as a political or revolutionary leader has a long and important tradition in Latin America […]. His or her person and *obra* are the place where the 'unlettered' (*iletrado*) voice of the people can become or find itself mirrored in a discourse of power equivalent to and thus capable of displacing the official culture of the exploiting classes" (Beverley and Zimmermann 16).

[9] Nevertheless, this interpretation raises the question of authenticity that intellectuals, including Spivak, frequently ask. As Joanne P. Sharp summarizes Spivak's inner conflict, "[w]hen she does try to 'speak as' she worries if she has any right to represent those whose diverse experiences she cannot ever really share. She also worries about 'generalising [sic] herself' about reducing herself to an essence, to a set of characterisations [sic], fearing that she will become a token gesture in western academic circles" (114).

to criticize the negative results of capitalist growth and ecological exploitation in her home country. As Gisela Heffes notes, for readers, imaginary "cities [or countries] lose their fictional quality and depict instead a space in a more 'real' or mimetic way" (43). By experiencing social injustices and ecological destruction to which the environmentally dispossessed fictional characters are exposed to in their minds, emotionally engaged readers are able to vividly undergo a variety of affects during their reading process. In *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Timothy Clark argues in the context of ecological prose that "[t]he stronger our [the readers'] sense of immersion in a narrative, of human empathy with the reaction and characters, then the more likely it is to enhance our understanding of how others think" (79). Even for readers from nations not directly affected by pollution violence, formerly intangible phenomena concerning inconsiderate environmental destruction and improper waste disposal are rendered tangible. That may have effects on their (political) opinion and attitude towards their own possibly unsustainable consumer habits. In its critique of environmentally destructive practices threatening the lives of the postcolonial, non-canonical Other, the novel can therefore especially provoke a change of perspective in those readers who might *not* share the reality mirrored and presented in *Waslala*.

Belli not only situates her narrative in a fictional space but furthermore places her plot in the future,[10] a fact that again helps to produce a new sense of reality (Fernández Carballo, "Utopías, Desencantos y Esperanzas" 54), in which the slow violence resulting in social as well as ecological problems is confronted and an environmentally conscious alternative is presented. Only this clear spatial and temporal separation from Nicaragua in her fictional work enables Belli to word her imagination of a sustainable alternative to its society and to offer a fictitious space in which a return to nature as habitat can be negotiated. I identify the bioregion of the river as a promising alternative space in which environmental dispossession does not occur. But before I go into more detail on that specific argument, I first would like to examine how *Waslala* depicts environmental exploitation as well as ecological damage and severely criticizes the waste policy of capitalist and industrialized nations.

Ecological Exploitation and Damage in the Name of Neo-Imperial Capitalism

In *Waslala*, Belli explicitly addresses the threats of "assaults from slow and direct violence on increasingly marginal ecosystems vulnerable to resource capture by transnational corporations; by third-world military, civilian, and corporate elites" (Nixon 254). The utopian novel depicts greed for profit as being closely linked to ecological damage that is accepted in the name of excessive capitalist consumerism. In fictitious Faguas' real-world counterpart Nicaragua, both the extraction of natural resources that form the basis of existence of the majority of its inhabitants and the exploitation of natural habitats already began with its coloniza-

[10] Several indications in the novel prove that from the readers' point of view, the plot is set in the future. For instance, the planet Mars has already been visited by humans (*W* 178).

tion by the Spaniards. They started to destroy Nicaragua's (rain)forests in order to export high-grade timber to Europe. The unregulated ecological degradation has been proceeding ever since, having a negative impact on the climate (Schwiebert 118-20) *inter alia*.[11] In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, for instance, Nicaragua's dictator Anastasio Somoza "raped nature for financial and political gains, and eagerly sold the same opportunity to foreign companies" (Miller 208). For this reason, the country suffered severe ecological damage due to state-supported deforestation, water contamination as well as the exportation of endangered species (DeVries 40).

In *Waslala*, environmental deterioration becomes a point of critique and is presented as a deeply troubling issue representative of the American hemisphere. For readers, the scenario painted seems to be an almost absurd, unthinkable, and intangible phenomenon at first sight. However, the novel only extrapolates current trends. The intangible scenarios are rendered tangible as they are presented as highly memorable, an effect that strengthens the impressive warning and criticism of the text.

As overly industrialized nations have depleted all their oxygen and water reserves, the imaginary and futuristic Faguas serves as a supplier for natural 'resources.' In exchange for such essential supplies, all the garbage produced in supposedly more advanced countries is shipped to Faguas (DeVries 38; Mackenbach 498-99; Poust 221; Zubiaurre 80). Alice J. Poust describes the oxymoronic 'agreement' as follows:

> [The] demands of the developed economies require the export of the little raw material that is left in Faguas after the colonial and capitalist exploitation; at the same time, the 'First World's' preoccupation with oxygen results in imposing a ban on felling trees in Faguas; the consumerism of the hegemonic countries leads to an 'agreement' according to which certain areas of Faguas have to function as landfill sites for the garbage generated in consumerist societies. (218)[12]

Established historiographical accounts argue that imperialism or colonialism is over and we live in *post*colonial times (Colley 134).[13] However, today, it is not colonialism which still determines global structures, but rather a profound neo-imperialism. In contrast to imperialism, neo-imperialism is rather characterized by (implicit) influence and intervention than by

---

[11] For exact numbers that show the level of increasing deforestation, see Peter Schwiebert 119-20, however, it needs to be kept in mind that his book chapter was published in 1986. Current figures nevertheless confirm the trend explained by Schwiebert. For further information see, for instance, the recent data provided by the websites *Journeys at Dartmouth* ("About Nicaragua: Deforestation") or *Global Forest Watch* ("Nicaragua").

[12] Even though certain areas of forest are being protected (not in the sense of conservation, but because of the 'agreement' with more developed countries (*W* 29), there are "ecological terrorists who, under the slogan 'We do what we want. This is our land,' dedicated themselves to burning the forests" (*W* 110) and thus criticize the top-down neo-imperial approach of capitalist consumerism advanced by highly industrialized nations.

[13] In their monograph *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri postulate that "[i]mperialism is over. No nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were" (xiv).

(explicit) military invasion (Colley; DeVries 45). Particularly, it has a negative impact on what is Eurocentrically referred to as 'Third World countries.' At the expense of those countries' own political, social, and economic stability, their cultural traditions as well as their environmental well-being, capitalist economies act as beneficiaries and highly profit from what they can extract without being emotionally and economically affected by the multi-level destruction they leave behind. For the most part, the industrialized nations' behavior is tolerated and even supported by puppet regimes like the ones in Nicaragua (under dictator Somoza) or in its imaginary equivalent Faguas (under the Espadas' rule).

In the novel, this policy is highly criticized. *Waslala* further underlines this dualistic hierarchical constellation and depicts Faguas as an unknown and unchartered territory. In the text, the environments of the poor affected by ecological destruction and severe pollution are represented as gradually regressing and thus take on the status of *terras incognitas*. This process is described by the heterodiegetic narrator in free indirect discourse from the perspective of Melisandra's grandfather as follows:

> It was impossible for him [Melisandra's grandfather Don José] to exactly define the moment in which the development of Faguas started to regress and the country began its return to the Middle Ages, losing its outlines as a nation and going on to be no more than a simple geographical mass on the maps, like once the rainforests of the Amazon and today vast regions of Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean: green spots without any features, without an indication of cities, remote regions, cut off from development, from civilization, from technology, reduced to rainforests, forest reservations, functioning as a lung and as a landfill site of the developed world that exploited them in order to let them sink into oblivion afterwards, into their poverty and misfortune, condemning them to ostracism, to the category of *terras incognitas*, doomed lands of war and of epidemics where lately only the smugglers came to. (*W* 19)

Don José thus describes his home country Faguas as standing for a series of countries that have been sunken into oblivion and have been exploited by the hierarchically better-positioned nations ever since their 'discovery.'[14] The neo-imperialist mindset introduced above—that can be compared with the colonialist mindset and uses outdated binary oppositions like self and Other, civilized and uncivilized, or superior and inferior—is also referred to in *Waslala*. For instance, other countries issue travel warnings alerting about violence and epidemics (*W* 26), which is why mainly smugglers of arms and drugs find their way to Faguas. At one point, Melisandra calls on the dichotomous thinking of one of the travelers, who is a business partner of the Espadas, when she says that "for that man, we are all only savages" (*W* 24). The open-minded traveler Morris also recognizes and judges the patroniz-

[14] Werner Mackenbach comes to a similar conclusion in his reading of the novel when he discusses Nicaragua and other Central American countries as "areas in which not only colonial structures are perpetuated, but also regression towards semi-feudal forms of life proceeds and are characterized by the recurring invasions of foreign powers" (31; my translation from the German original).

ing and dichotomizing attitude towards Faguas' inhabitants, an opinion that might also convince readers who get to know the living conditions in Faguas through narration as if they were themselves present. The narrator explains that Morris "hated the paternalism of those who treated all of those persons, irrespective of their age, like naïve and helpless *creatures*" (*W* 97; emphasis added).[15] This humiliating behavior also psychologically harms the Faguenses, who develop self-deprecating tendencies and constantly underestimate themselves (Fernández Carballo, "El Autoritarismo Político Militar" 26).

Improper Waste Policy of Industrialized Countries

In the context of ecological damage and capitalist intervention, the radioactive release on Engracia's landfill site appears to be particularly tragic. The waste being shipped to Faguas is both re- and upcycled by waste pickers:[16] "the objects arriving in the containers gained new life as they were repaired, painted, and then turned into coveted goods" (*W* 119). However, the waste pickers frequently find objects which are not broken at all. The inherent irony expressed within the following conversation between the lovers Melisandra and Raphael underlines the absurdity of outsized capitalistic consumer thinking: "Tell me, Raphael, why are all these devices thrown away if they do still work? […] Because every year, the manufacturers offer more sophisticated devices, with new accessories, and the people love new things and think they only need the latest fabrications […]" (*W* 136). One day, Engracia and the orphans working for her open a container with a lethal amount of Cesium-137. Not knowing the hazardous element, they start to body paint themselves. To their amusement, their bodies can now be seen in the dark because of the element's luminous and reflective quality. Reporting her thoughts when watching her contaminated friends that are doomed to die, the narrator expresses Melisandra's incomprehension concerning the fatal incident: "It was hard to imagine that something so beautiful could be lethal" (*W* 187). Again, the "I-don't-care-because-I'm-not-affected attitude" of capitalist countries leaves affective readers speechless as their irresponsible act of not disposing of the radioactive material correctly contaminates the environment far away from their doorstep and also kills innocent people (Pereyra 18). The fatal incident makes clear that economically and environmentally exploited nations have to deal with the consequences of (capitalist) progress at any cost. Morris, one of the travelers and Engracia's lover, who contaminates himself deliberately in order to die with her, shares his thoughts on hierarchical injustices imposed by environmental destruction, neo-imperial behavior, and death:

---

[15] The wording ('creatures') reiterates the binary opposition of civilized *vs*. uncivilized/barbaric.

[16] Here, the fictional text from 1996 proves to be ahead of its time as it takes up a relevant topic in Latin American countries and draws attention to another socially and historiographically underrepresented group directly impacted by slow violence. As Patrick O'Hare documents in his 2020 article on Uruguay's waste pickers, "Latin American waste-pickers [, their practices, and their living conditions,] have, in recent years, been the subject of much political, cultural and academic attention" (53).

> Human beings are used to seeing people die. Nobody is overly scared by the impersonal death of an unknown person, of hundreds of unknown persons. They are even less concerned about the death of the ones who live in those regions [the *terras incognitas* or environments of the poor]. Because of that fact, it is still not considered a punishable crime if lethal substances are improperly disposed of in the garbage. As long as the rich countries are not contaminated, as long as it only affects those, whose death will anyway be premature, this [the contamination of the environmentally dispossessed] will always be the lesser of two evils. (*W* 192-93)

Melisandra expresses what readers might ask themselves when she observes that "if things like this happen, I am asking myself what all this development has been good for" (*W* 190). As Scott DeVries points out in this context, "for readers, the strong cathartic effect of having literary characters exposed to toxins because of irresponsible ecological behavior produce strong reactions against such irresponsibility and may prod readers to react against similar ecologically bad behavior in the real world" (44). Readers are thus enabled to experience positive as well as negative feelings. The affective reading process in which intangible phenomena are rendered tangible can incite the decision to profoundly alter the readers' possibly unsustainable and consumerist way of life that additionally contributes to the environmental destruction advanced by the illegal businesses of Latin American governments.

At the end of the novel, in the section "Two notes from the author," Belli explains that the radioactive accident is based on a real incident that happened in Goiânia, Brazil, in 1987 (*W* 342). At the time, two waste pickers found a device for radiotherapy and started to dismantle it until they found the radioactive capsule containing 19 grams of Cesium-137. Not knowing what to do with the individual components, they sold them. The blue-shimmering powder attracted several people's attention and was handed around like a precious gift, contaminating those who came into contact with the cesium. Four of the contaminated persons died in the same year. Many of the town's inhabitants are still contaminated and have not been supported by the government of Brazil or medically supervised properly, and many persons affected are still discriminated against out of fear of further contamination (Pontes; *W* 324).[17] The accident that happened one year after Chernobyl is not as well-known and, as Eduardo Galeano argues, is only one example of a Latin American case that has been silenced by media coverage as well as historiography and thus has been ignored by the world: "Chernobyl still sounds familiar to all of us. But almost nobody has heard of Goiânia ever again. Latin America is news condemned to be forgotten" (Galeano qtd. in *W* 342).

Waslala, as a fictional utopia written by a combative writer, tells a Latin American country's (hi-)story from the postcolonial-ecocritical perspective of the environmentally dispossessed. The novel calls upon a forgotten politics of collective remembrance and stands up for a new, non-essentializing and non-canonical way of writing history. For the purpose of overcoming

[17] For more information on the Goiânia accident and its consequences more than thirty years after the incident, see also Nádia Pontes' online article "Goiânia."

outdated stereotypical thinking[18] and exploitative ways of living, the novel proposes a sustainable alternative in which the citizens of Faguas can experience a convivialist return to nature as habitat that prioritizes a communal living together that is not threatened by slow violence.

A Promising Alternative Space for a Sustainable Return to Nature as Habitat

Besides the utopian community of Waslala, readers are introduced to another space in which the binary and discriminatory rules of slow violence imposed on the environmentally dispossessed Faguenses are not applied: the bioregion of the river. With reference to Homi Bhabha's concept, I read that space as in-between space, which "provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1). In the novel, the river appears as a third space in between dichotomies, in between the utopian place of Waslala and the dystopic state of Faguas. Readers already get to know and experience the environment of the river at the beginning of the novel and on their fictional journey upstream in the second part of the novel. The river is characterized as a peaceful habitat close to nature, a neutral, environmentally protected zone isolated from wars, slow violence, and the negativity common in the other regions of Faguas (*W* 29). From this zone—its environment being protected because of the agreement with other countries—originates the oxygen that leaves Faguas in exchange for the waste of capitalist societies.

The in-between space of the river has hardly been taken into account by scholars working on the novel. Nevertheless, I claim that it has the great potential to function as fertile ground and an innovative site for the establishment of a sustainable society in which the relationship between humans and nature is prioritized. The protagonist Melisandra originally stems from the neutral zone of the river. Throughout the novel, she, little by little, turns out to be the character on whom the Faguenses' hopes are pinned. In fact, she is the one that enters the utopian community of Waslala hidden in a time gap and aims to improve the Faguenses' living conditions for several reasons. During her journey through the country, the protagonist experiences the social reality of her environmentally dispossessed fellow citizens and gets to know the environments of Faguas' poor. The city of Las Luces is, for instance, described as "a combination between human settlement and waste dump" by one of Melisandra's fellow travelers (*W* 99). Similar conditions prevail on Engracia's landfill site, where orphans have to work as waste pickers in order to survive (*W* 117-291). Furthermore, Melisandra experiences the violent rule of the dictators firsthand. The Espadas consider her a threat to their criminal activities and kidnap Melisandra. She is held captive in their fortress, where

[18] *Waslala* purposely addresses injustices through the thematical integration of oppositional pairs hinting at (post-/neo-)imperial, geographical, economic, or social asymmetries or differences that readers can transfer to their own social reality: civilized and uncivilized, North and South, or rich and poor.

she is brutally raped by a guard (*W* 257-58). When Waslala turns out to have failed as it is uninhabited and very difficult to reach *inter alia*, she decides to make the way of life at the river accessible to all.

The few citizens who live by the river are self-sufficient[19] and its bioregion is not directly affected by the environmentally degrading results of neo-imperialism, capitalist growth, or the Espada's brutal dictatorship. Nonetheless, the bioregion of the river shows traces of Faguas' colonial past. In *Waslala*, several passages function as a critical reminder of the colonial occupations whose traces are still visible in the fictitious country and thus also in Nicaragua. Faguas' landscape bears architectural remains as, for instance, the (also in Nicaragua) still existent Fortress of the Immaculate Conception from which the Spaniards "controlled the contraband trade and prevented the British from passing upstream towards their territories" (*W* 41). Furthermore, there are rumors circulating about the ghost of Lord Nelson, who frequently appears to sailors on the river (*W* 77-80).[20] Moreover, the anti-imperialist battle cry "Away with the British" (*W* 88), articulated by the inhabitants of villages near the river when a boat with foreigners on board passes, in an ironic way shows that the despicable acts executed in the name of colonialism are still part of contemporary Faguas. The dynamic connection between the fictional text and the political and historical reality is established through the image of the journey towards the utopian community of Waslala as well as other stylistic figures that suggest a critical perspective on the extratextual reality. As for example the ghost metaphor demonstrates, the Faguenses are literally haunted by the impact of colonialism, in some cases being afraid of the possibility of another colonial invasion. Despite numerous attempts in the time after the independence of Faguas from the rule of the colonizers, foreign companies were not able to establish themselves in the region or to modernize river transport (*W* 67).

The Faguenses living on the riverside are described to be extraordinarily open-minded and liberal towards ethnic and cultural differences (e.g., in interaction with the foreign travelers arriving; *W* 21-63) and show respectful behavior towards their natural environment. The stories they tell themselves over and over again reflect the magical features they attribute to the river. Nature, as represented by the river, is considered to bring life and cause death, a motif that can repeatedly be found in Latin American literary texts.[21] On her journey, Melisandra is excited by the danger of the river and the "life-threatening effect, the suicidal

---

[19] As explained in the novel: "With minimalist resources and tireless work, the land produced a sufficient amount of vegetables and grains for the self-consumption of its inhabitants" (*W* 47).

[20] The fortress built by the Spaniards was taken by the British several times, who thus were in control of the river San Juan. Young Horatio Nelson was one of the soldiers that attacked the fortress in 1779 (Arghiris 174f.; *Río San Juan*, "El Castillo").

[21] Latin American *novelas de la tierra* represent nature in various ways, for instance using the trope of displaying nature as both, life-bringing and death-causing. This trope can be found in Guillermo Henrique Hudson's *Green Mansions* (1904), José Eustasio Rivera's *La Vorágine* (1924), or Rómulo Gallegos' *Canaima* (1935) *inter alia*.

attraction" (*W* 91-92) of the vortex.[22] Still, on the other hand, nature provides new life. The cycle of life and death establishes a balance in the bioregion of the river, as long as it is not in danger of becoming a victim of slow violence. As an in-between space, the river can add the value of non-human life to the multi-ethnic and highly heterogenous community of Faguas, whose inhabitants are united in their desire for a better future. Having experienced the negative results of neoliberal capitalist growth and ecological exploitations but also having lived through the possibility of overcoming those imposed and harmful structures, the environmentally dispossessed Faguenses share a new common vision. This vision criticizes slow violence and an outsized capitalist economic system based on continual and almost incontrollable growth. Besides the structural transformation of the environments of the poor, Faguas' "good place" proposes both an active process of decolonization and environmental justice for the underrepresented and non-canonical Other. By introducing the promising alternative space of the river, *Waslala* therefore suggests a sustainable return to nature as habitat through the direct confrontation with and rejection of illegal intrusions into the ecosystem.

Concluding Remarks

With her utopian novel *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro*, Gioconda Belli actively guides the readers to focus on several cases of environmental destruction. The postcolonial-ecocritical agenda of the Nicaraguan text thus draws its readers' attention to the negative impacts that capitalist growth and ecological deterioration have on the environments of the poor. By outlining the perspective of the environmentally dispossessed, the non-canonical and underrepresented voice of the Faguenses gains strength and leads them to take their fate into their own hands. Through a successful coup d'état, a small group already condemned to die manages to liberate the country from its dictatorship and thus to strengthen the Faguenses' group identity. The narration of personal fates in direct relation to environmental destruction and improper waste policy therefore renders the formerly intangible phenomenon of slow violence tangible for readers and might provoke a change of perspective or attitude. The novel underlines the importance of a community's shared vision of hope and suggests several alternatives for a life without the occurrence of slow violence and pollution, including the life in the utopian community of Waslala that is revealed as 'no place' in the course of the novel, as well as the life as inhabitants of the neutral zone of the river. The text introduces the in-between space of the river as 'good place,' where returning to nature as habitat beyond capitalist growth becomes imaginable. As the region of the river is neither environmentally contaminated nor threatened by incontrollable ecological destruction, its inhabitants have been able to adapt to a convivialist lifestyle *with* and not *against* nature. This out-

[22] This passage in the second part of the novel, "Upstream," bears a strong intertextual connection with Rivera's *La Vorágine*. The danger of the river and the fascination with the vortex are experienced by the protagonists in both novels.

look on alternatives that show how to possibly overcome slow violence and how to return to nature gives hope and—with attention to the epigraph of the novel—brings the narrative full circle to close on a positive note. Gioconda Belli starts her novel by quoting the famous invitation from Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," which also seems to be a fitting and encouraging conclusion for this article: "Come, my friends. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (*W* 9).

Works Cited

"About Nicaragua: Deforestation." *Journeys at Dartmouth*, https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/hernandez_lacs20_fa15/?page_id=42. Accessed 15 Mar. 2021.

Arghiris, Richard. *Footprint Nicaragua Handbook*. Footprint, 2014.

Belli, Gioconda. *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro*. 2nd ed., Seix Barral, 2019.

Beverley, John, and Marc Zimmermann. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. U of Texas P, 1990.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Büscher, Bram, and Robert Fletcher. *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene*. Verso, 2020.

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962. Penguin Books, 2000.

Clark, Timothy. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge UP, 2019.

Colley, Linda. "What is Imperial History Now?" *What is History Now?* Edited by David Cannadine. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 132-47.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George B. Handley. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford UP, 2011.

DeVries, Scott. "Garbage Out: Space, Place, and Neo-imperial Anti-Development in Gioconda Belli's Waslala." *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2010, pp. 38-50.

"El Castillo." *Río San Juan*, https://www.riosanjuan.com.ni/el-castillo/. Accessed 04 June 2020.

Fernández Carballo, Rodolfo. "El Autoritarismo Político Militar y los Círculos de la Violencia y la Guerra en la Obra *Waslala Memorial del Futuro* de Gioconda Belli." *Revista Káñina*, vol. XXX, no. 2, 2006, pp. 23-31.

---. "Utopías, Desencantos y Esperanzas en la Construcción de una Comunidad Imaginada. *Waslala Memorial del Futuro* de Gioconda Belli." *Filología y Lingüística*, vol. XXXII, no. 1, 2006, pp. 51-66.

Franco, Jean. *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*: *Latin America in the Cold War*. Harvard UP, 2002.

González Echevarría, Roberto. *Modern Latin American Literature*: *A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2012.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard UP, 2000.

Heffes, Gisela. "Reimagining Contemporary Latin American Cities." *World Literature Today*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2009, pp. 42-45.

Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.

Lauritsch, Maria Katharina. *Utopía Reinventada en Dos Obras de Gioconda Belli*. Editorial Académica Española, 2015.

Layh, Susanna. "Hythlodaeus' Female Heir: Transformation of the Utopian/Dystopian Concept in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala. Memorial del Futuro* (1996)." *Spaces of Utopia*, vol. 2, 2006, pp. 42-58.

Mackenbach, Werner. *Die Unbewohnte Utopie: Der Nicaraguanische Roman der Achtziger und Neunziger Jahre*. Vervuert, 2004.

Mahecha Adrar, Angela. "The People Who Caused the Climate Crisis Aren't the Ones Who Will Fix It." *TED. Ideas Worth Spreading*, Dec. 2020, https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_mahecha_adrar_the_people_who_caused_the_climate_crisis_aren_t_the_ones_who_will_fix_it. Accessed 19 Mar. 2021.

"Memorial." *Merriam Webster*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memorial. Accessed 2 June 2020.

Miller, Shawn William. *An Environmental History of Latin America*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

Mohor, Daniela. "Gioconda Belli: La Escritora Rebelde Que Ya No Cree en la Lucha Armada." *El Tiempo*, 17 Oct. 2016, www.eltiempo.com/cultura/musica-y-libros/gioconda-belli-la-escritora-rebelde-que-ya-no-cree-en-la-lucha-armada-47591. Accessed 29 May 2020.

"Nicaragua." *Global Forest Watch*, https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NIC/. Accessed 15 Mar. 2021.

Nichols, Molly. "Review: *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2011, pp. 100-05.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

O'Hare, Patrick. "'We Looked After People Better When We Were Informal': The 'Quasi-Formalisation' of Montevideo's Waste-Pickers." *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2020, pp. 53-68.

Pereyra, Marisa. "Paradise Lost: A Reading of *Waslala* from the Perspectives of Feminist Utopianism and Ecofeminism." *The Natural World in Latin American Literature: Ecocritcal Essays on Twentieth Century Writings*. Edited by Adrian Taylor Kane. McFarland, 2010, pp. 136-53.

Pontes, Nádia. "Goiânia: Brasiliens 'Supergau' Wirkt weiter." *DW Online*, 13 Sept. 2017, www.dw.com/de/goi%C3%A2nia-brasiliens-supergau-wirkt-weiter/a-40474238. Accessed on 08 June 2020.

Poust, Alice J. "La Desestabilización de los Constructos Binarios en *Waslala*, de Gioconda Belli." *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. LXXV, no. 226, 2009, pp. 217-27.

Rivera, José Eustasio. "La Vorágine." *La Vorágine. Edición de Montserrat Ordóñez*. Edited by Montserrat Ordóñez. Cátedra, 1990, pp. 75-390.

Schwiebert, Peter. "Einst Tropen-Urwald, Jetzt Bald Wüste? Nicaraguas Ökologie vor dem Desaster." *Vulkan der Träume: Nicaragua – Utopie und Alltag*. Edited by Dieter Eich and Willi Germund. Vervuert, 1986, pp. 117-27.

Sharp, Joanne P. *Geographies of Postcolonialism: Spaces of Power and Representation*. Sage Publications, 2009.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography (1985)." *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. Routledge, 1996, pp. 203-35.

Vieira, Fátima. "The Concept of Utopia." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Edited by Gregory Claeys. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 3-27.

Zinani, Cecil. "Nicarágua e Gioconda Belli: um Diálogo Possível." *Revista de Letras*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2004, pp. 105-28.

Zubiaurre, Maite. "Discurso Utópico, Basura Tóxica y Reciclaje Ecofeminista en Gioconda Belli: El Caso Waslala/Goiania." *Letras Femeninas*, vol. 30, no. 2, Winter 2004, pp. 75-93.