Invisible Geographies: Oil, Time, and Ecology in Venezuelan Cultural Production

By

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To the anonymous Tochitos, Enguerrands & Phoebes.
In hopes you will be taken seriously.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Despite its political and economic significance in Venezuela, cultural critics have often argued that oil has remained absent in the country's cultural production. *Invisible Geographies* disputes the idea of oil's cultural absence in Venezuela. It does so, in part, by engaging with a wide range of overlooked texts, which deal with oil's social, material and ecological impact. The project's chief aim, however, is to challenge the conceptual practices that have rendered oil invisible in the Venezuelan cultural imaginary—in particular, the conventional modes of conceptualizing the nation's territory and history. Through analyses of regionalist literature, early twentieth-century poetry, state documents, and oil industry propaganda, the project first shows how representations of nature as a timeless realm at the margins of human history, have been deployed to veil oil's ecological imprint. A reading of the overlooked subgenre of *la novela del petróleo* delves into how sites of extraction and their literary representations have been exiled to a "no place" (a term famously used by Amitav Ghosh's) imagined to exist outside the proper bounds of the nation. When reinserted into visions of the Venezuelan nation, these sites of extraction unsettle the usual ways of periodizing political change. The effects of oil's invisibility in urban life and consumer culture are explored in relation to the literary work of Arturo Uslar Pietri, as well as the films produced by the Shell Oil Film Unit. Of particular interest in this portion of the project is the extent to which mid twentieth-century urban growth in Venezuela as well as in much of the world implicitly depended on the oil industry's promise to liberate modern societies from the material and temporal limits. The project closes by examining the unwillingness to contend with long-term ecological harm as a political problem by delving into the controversy unleashed by the documentary *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (2005). As a

whole, *Invisible Geographies* argues that the global ecological crises of the twenty-first century require a reexamination of the spatial and temporal categories that have been central to the idea of the modern nation.

Introduction

Das Petroleum sträubt sich gegen die fünf Akte.

(*Petroleum resists the five-act form*)

—Bertolt Brecht

Over space, man has begun to win his victory—Space for All!

—*To New Horizons* (1939)
(sponsored by General Motors)

When does an awareness of home provoke
terror and awe? When it's burning.

—Lee Rozelle

"Your home is a house that oil built" declares a 1957 advertisement for Royal Dutch Shell. Part of the campaign "A to Z of Good things about Petroleum," the copy for "H for Home" explains that oil derivatives made the typical mid-century U.S. American home possible: "quick-drying paints, no polish floor tiles, durable plastic table tops, weather-defying asphalt-shingled roofs" are all oil products that helped commercialize certain ways of living. This advertisement campaign was one among many, reminding mid-century consumers that petroleum had seeped into the material basis of work, dwellings, and even nourishment. Oil companies no longer try to remind consumers of oil's ubiquity, perhaps because to say that oil is everywhere today is also to conjure images of oil-soaked coasts, dead marine life, or injured birds. It is also to be reminded of the CO2 in the atmosphere slowly warming the planet. I

nonetheless open with the image of *the house that oil built* in order to abolish the sense of distance that accompanies contemporary discourse about oil. Even if we are tacitly aware that oil sustains contemporary ways of life and pollutes much of the planet, it nonetheless tends to be imagined as existing elsewhere, properly contained. Home as a site of comfort and refuge seems antithetical to fossilized plankton, offshore platforms, underground pipelines, or even to the foul smell of gasoline—the closest we appear to get to a commodity solely associated with "oil." Thus, to remember that oil products not only populate your house, but also make your daily life possible is also to remember that a global oil-fueled economy has seeped into the many ways in which homes can be constructed and imagined. From the physicality of our dwellings, to globalized economic systems, and a warming planet, we all inhabit several *oikoi built by oil.*[1]

This dissertation focuses on one *oikos* that oil built: the modern Venezuelan nation-state. In doing so, the project questions the degree to which the somewhat hazy notion of a "modern Venezuelan society" and its cultural corollaries can be said to exist as coherent, self-evident entities. I argue that the idea of modern Venezuela has depended on exiling oil to a "no place" (Ghosh) existing outside the proper bounds of the nation. By relegating oil to conceptual *no places*, society itself appears to be a rational human *oikos* existing in selective isolation from the non-human world. Oil's expulsion from visions of modern Venezuela, in turn, creates the belief that oil is nothing short of miraculous, given that the swift transformations that follow oil's appearance seem to come *out of nowhere*.

In particular, this dissertation examines oil's crucial role in building the idea of a "modern Venezuela" by emphasizing how the twentieth-century understanding of modernity was in itself a myth sustained by oil. *Petromodernity*—or the social assemblages that were made

[1] Recall that *oikos*—meaning the family, house, and household in ancient Greek—is the root word for *eco*nomy, *eco*logy, and *eco*system.

possible by the mass exploitation of crude petroleum—depended on and solidified the belief in the human mastery over the planet's material conditions. Although the struggle to master the biosphere precedes the growth of the oil industry, the mass deployment of oil in the twentieth-century so thoroughly modified humanity's relationship to geography and materiality that the myth of human liberation from nature became the implicit premise of oil-fueled social and economic progress. This mythical liberation, and its close ties to the oil industry, has remained altogether unexamined in relation to Venezuelan culture; yet as this project explores, the conceptual victory over space and materiality (to echo General Motor's promise in 1939) underlies the ways in which the Venezuelan nation and its history have been imagined since the early twentieth century.

The project's organization follows oil's trajectory from the subsoil to extraction sites, to a dispersed circulation network, and lastly, to contaminated air and waterways—the outcome of oil extraction and consumption. This focus on distinct nodes of the vast petroleum network is meant to steer us away from the tendency to imagine oil's relevance to its extraction or to the coffers of the petrostate. It bears repeating: oil's imprint is everywhere, even if it is not always perceptible. The first half of the project examines the different ways in which oil has been made invisible in Venezuela. Chapter I, "Before and After Oil," examines early twentieth-century essays, poetry, and regionalist novels in order to show how cultural producers adopted visions of a transcendental Nature as the symbolic antithesis of the oil industry. However, through analyses of advertisements and industrial publications I show that transnational oil companies and the Venezuelan state appropriated these visions of a timeless Nature to argue that oil's environmental impact is minimal. The chapter thus argues against the proverbial return to Nature as a political tool against the oil economy, as there has never been a timeless natural realm to

which we can return. Chapter II "Extraction," examines the oil industry's history of hiding its own infrastructure and local presence. In order to do so, I analyze Venezuela's largely forgotten oil literature, focusing in particular on *Mene* (1936) by Ramón Díaz Sánchez, *Oficina No. 1* (1961) by Miguel Otero Silva, *Guachimanes* (1954) by Gabriel Bracho Montiel, and *Memorias de una antigua primavera* (1989) by Milagros Mata Gil. By shedding light on sites of extraction—thus peering from up-close at processes and materials designed to remain unseen—these texts present an overlooked picture of Venezuelan history and geography. Most importantly, these texts undermine the myths accompanying the idea of a modern Venezuela, particularly that of a nation that repeatedly abolishes its past, as a new, oil-fueled social order is said to emerge whenever the country experiences an oil boom.

The second half of the project examines the cultural and political effects of oil's partial invisibility. One effect is the tendency to interpret Venezuelan twentieth-century history in isolation from the material world, thus viewing historical change as a series of actions and decisions taken by the state and the citizenry. This vision of history is unable to take into account continuities of the extraction process, climate change, and at times even the existence of the oil industry. Chapter III, "Circulation," analyzes the mid-century urban narratives *Un retrato en la geografía* and *Estación de mascaras* by Arturo Uslar Pietri, as well as *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* (1949), an industrial documentary produced by the Shell Oil Film Unit. Through these texts, the chapter shows how oil's transnational network, far from absent, is intrinsic to Venezuelan politics, and also to the spaces and habits constitutive of everyday life. Examining the reception of the documentary *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (2005), Chapter IV, "Pollution," argues that in twenty-first century Venezuela the ecological impact of oil extraction is either relegated to the past or deemed inexistent. The chapter further argues that the usual ways of periodizing social

and political change cannot account for ecological harm. Consequently, in order to make sense of oil's relationship to Venezuela, and to the multiple *oikoi* built by oil, twenty-first century cultural criticism must contend with the ways in which the traditional temporal frameworks of modern thought have rendered ecological harm invisible.

Chapter I

Before and After Oil: The Idea of Nature and Its Ecological Limit

On February 4th 2012 a ruptured pipeline in the Jusepín complex in Monagas state in eastern Venezuela sent a 295-feet jet of oil into the air (see Figure 1.2). Official figures estimate that 5,000 to 6,000 barrels of oil subsequently spilled into the Guarapiche River, the main source of water for the state capital, Maturín. Unofficial estimates, however, fear that "as many as 300,000 barrels may have been spilled into a river that services 500,000 residents" (Devereux and Crooks, my translation). Scientists and environmentalists became particularly concerned with the spill not only because of the threat it posed to the residents of Maturín, but also because the Guarapiche flows into the mangroves lining the Gulf of Paria, a delicate and unique ecosystem (once declared to be Eden itself by Columbus), and further into the Atlantic Ocean. The secretary of the Environment Alejandro Hitcher, promptly assured those concerned that the spill was unlikely to inflict considerable damage, as the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* (PDVSA) had swiftly resolved the issue.[2] Little else was said about the spill's ecological impact, other than a photograph taken twenty days after the spill, depicting Eulogio del Pino, PDVSA's vicepresident of Exploration and Production, drinking a glass of water from

[2] "En estos momentos la situación es de total control por parte de nuestra petrolera. El derrame está confinado en las barreras de retención y se están haciendo todas las labores de colección de los dispositivos vacuum para disponer del petróleo en forma correcta." ("El Mundo Hoy").

the Guarapiche River (Figure 1.1).[3] The image provides a vision of efficiency and sanitation, meant to reassure us that PDVSA takes proper care of the environment. After all, in less than a month the state and its oil company deployed their resources to address a crisis that was symbolically resolved by a drink of water—the symbol of purity par excellence. del Pino put his own body on the line to make this point.

Figure 1.1 Source: *El Universal.*

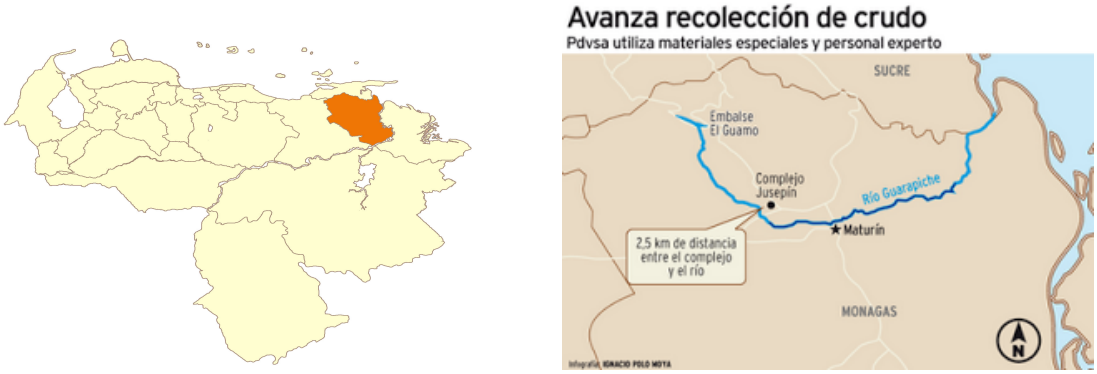

Figure 1.2: To the left: State of Monagas. To the right: Guarapiche River and the Jusepín Complex.

Environmental scientists, and ecological organizations voiced skepticism over PDVSA's swift response, maintaining that the impacts of spills cannot easily be detected, contained, and mended within days. While some effects are immediately visible—water and animals covered in crude oil—others not only take time to materialize, but may do so in a different time and place—miles away in the Atlantic Ocean or years later in the bodies that consumed contaminated water.

[3] Founded upon the nationalization of Venezuela's oil reserves in 1976, *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* is the state-run oil company. Eulogio del Pino was appointed the company's president in September 2014.

Generally, these displaced effects cannot be traced back to the source, a fact that highlights the complexity of ecological accidents like oil spills: a spill is not a singular event with marked temporal and spatial boundaries; instead, it can continue happening through its delayed effects. Nonetheless, in the rush to deem the Guarapiche spill a resolved and *past* event, the Venezuelan government did not grant independent scientists and ecological organizations access to the affected sites (Contreras, González and Zerpa, CDCH-UCV), which means that PDVSA's confident reassurances continue to be the only information available regarding the spill.

*

A recurrent punchline in *El Chiguire Bipolar,* a popular Venezuelan blog devoted to political satire, involves the claim that the country's many problems—ranging from the banal, such as lost soccer matches, to the somber, like alarming violent crime rates—are of little importance when one takes into account that Venezuela has "the most beautiful beaches on Earth.[4] As with the best pieces of satire, this recurrent joke reveals one of the most enduring myths in and about Venezuela: the belief that underneath its myriad social ills, the country is at its core a natural paradise unlike any other. The fact that the belief in an unspoiled natural paradise is an entrenched feature of Venezuelan culture is highlighted not only by the joke's recurrence in *El Chiguire Bipolar*, but also by how rarely studies about the representation of

[4] *El Chiguire Bipolar* or The Bipolar Capybara (http://www.elchiguirebipolar.net) is a satirical news blog resembling *The Onion* in the United States. The site was created by Juan Andrés Ravell and Oswaldo Graziani in 2008, who are better known outside Venezuela for their online animated mini-series "La Isla Presidencial," (http://www.elchiguirebipolar.net/isla-presidencial).

On June 11, 2013 an article about Venezuela's loss to Uruguay in the FIFA 2014 qualifying games quotes Cesar Farías, the former trainer of the Venezuelan national soccer team: "'Dimos lo mejor de nosotros en el campo; es verdad que esto disminuye nuestro chance de ir a Brasil, pero miren el lado bueno de la vida: todavía tenemos las playas más hermosas del mundo.' Exclamó Farías ante la mirada atónita de cientos de periodistas deportivos que realmente sí lo odian" ("Farías pide calma"). On October 21st, 2013 an article about the country's violent crime rate states, "Luego de ser despojado de su teléfono celular, dinero en efectivo y camioneta, Castro aseguró sentirse feliz porque al menos su robo ocurrió en una de las playas más bellas del mundo" ("Venezolano feliz")

natural landscapes in the country's art and literature question the existence or even the implications of Nature as a transcendental entity existing either outside or beyond historical specificity. Considering that the word "nature" has numerous connotations, I will capitalize it (as in the prior sentence) to refer to the aesthetic, transcendental entity depicted in this chapter's texts.

*

I juxtapose these news-items—the latter fictional, the former real, though both straddle the line between reality and fiction—to illustrate why a project concerned with the relationship between oil, ecology, and the nation-state must delve into temporal understandings of Nature. Eulogio del Pino's glass of water and the *playas más bellas del mundo* reassure us that Nature is the realm that remains pure, unchanged (and in the latter example, beautiful) in the face of harrowing events. This chapter argues, however, that a timeless Nature is not only inexistent, but that it also helps erase actual existing ecosystems—changing, contingent systems that are rarely pure. In the first example, a river and mangroves disappear as ecosystems undergoing slow anthropogenic transformations, and are replaced by abstracted sites—inert externalities of oil exploitation—under the management of PDVSA and the state. In the second example, Nature is the timeless backdrop for society. Within the purview of an external, ahistorical Nature there is little room to consider oil's slow, displaced imprints on the biosphere, let alone incentive to rethink the politics of the petrostate.

The first portion of this chapter examines the ways in which Nature has been conceived as a transcendental entity in Western thought generally and specifically in Venezuelan literary production prior to the twentieth-century. The second portion analyzes the foundational novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by author and former president Rómulo Gallegos (1884-1969), as a central

text informing the conceptualization of Venezuelan Nature in the twentieth-century. My interest in these texts stems from their central role in creating a conception of Venezuelan identity rooted in Nature. The chapter's final section shows how visions of a nation located within a natural paradise have influenced oil's role in the country's cultural imaginary. Indeed, Nature has been understood as the antithesis to the oil industry, and the return to a natural paradise has been recurrently posited as the most viable alternative to an oil-fueled social order. By examining the historical and discursive emergence of a timeless Nature, this chapter explores why this entity is neither a viable alternative to oil, nor is it synonymous to ecology. Consequently, in order to rethink a culture's relationship to oil, it is also crucial to examine underlying assumptions about the biosphere, in particular the propensity to de-temporalize it. Without taking time into account—and therefore change and entropy—it is particularly difficult to conceptualize the large-scale impact of an oil-fueled global economy on the biosphere. Thus, to delve into the idea of natural landscapes, or more specifically Nature*,* as a transcendental entity is not only a discursive exercise meant to unsettle the comforts of a recurrent nationalist trope, but more crucially, it is a first step in developing an ecological critique of petromodernity.

Locating Nature

Although this chapter primarily focuses on *Venezuelan Nature*, we should acknowledge that to delineate the meanings of Nature in accordance to national borders comprises a highly reductive heuristic device. In the same way that there is nothing natural about the partition of land in terms of nation-states, the meanings of "nature" are constantly overflowing cultural and historical boundaries. Nature is not a definable singular entity, and accounts of it are always multiple, contradictory, and partial. The idealization of the Venezuelan landscape in nationalist discourse is thus not purely a Venezuelan phenomenon, as it is intimately tied to European

colonization, scientific explorations, as well as to transnational commercial interests. It is important to remember then, that to try to trace a concept of Nature that is altogether endogenous to Venezuela would be to pretend that cultural and terrestrial colonialism did not occur; in other words, it would require believing in nature and space as transcendental realms. Therefore, this chapter focuses on Nature within a set of territorial borders, in order to explore how the institutions within one particular nation have made use of their immediate environment; that is, to reiterate that these institutions are intrinsically tied to an embodied existence within a particular terrain. And while space and institution make and modify one another, on some level, there is nothing particularly "Venezuelan" or more generally "Latin American" about this. Rather than a regional phenomenon, the externalization of Nature, and its relegation to an *ahistorical* realm is instead related to the modern circumscription of the cultural as that which is particular, and the natural as that which is universal.

The externalization of Nature in cultural and social analyses in particular, stems in part from the dislocation of space in modern knowledge production. As Michel Foucault argued, "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (Foucault, 177). Thus, whereas time was the realm of the philosopher, space was the domain of the technocrat (Foucault, 178). This duality is further explored by Bruno Latour who argues that to be modern means an act of "purification," as the social and the natural worlds are to be understood independently from each other: a purified cultural realm may *no longer* (and this temporal aspect is key) be understood alongside God, magic, or alternatively, alongside scientific and material phenomena. Natural phenomena, on the other hand, should not be polluted by the cultural (which encompasses God and magic), the historical and contingent. These processes of purification ultimately solidified a specific way of

understanding time, which frames Latour's understanding of modern temporality as, "the result of a retraining imposed on entities which would pertain to all sorts of ontological statuses without this harsh disciplining" (72).[5] Yet "the moderns" continually undermine their own purified temporality as they create culture-nature hybrids: even experiments in the laboratory are culture-nature hybrids, never entirely reduced to one or the other. This contradiction led Latour to famously claim that modernity, *as it promises itself to be*, has never existed. The Latourian concept of modernity provides a thought-provoking framework to help us explore the ways in which natural landscapes are human-nature hybrids that nevertheless help maintain the very conceptual distinction between natural and social spaces.

Along with Bruno Latour, historians and theorists have pointed out in recent years that the clear distinction between nature and society is not only one of the foundational myths of modernity, but also one of the conceptual pillars that separates the study of human institutions and the material world—the classic distinction between *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft* (or knowledge/science of culture versus knowledge/science of nature) central in nineteenth-century Germany, and influential in setting contemporary disciplinary boundaries.[6] The distinction between the natural and the cultural

[5] Political theorist Barabara Adam, further traces back the de-temporalization of Nature in modern thought to the Newtonian vision of time, which functions as a measure of motion devoid of qualitative variations "Bereft of direction, time is de-temporalized and the world subject to the laws of predictability. In this physical world of single parts in motion everything is present now; change is merely the rearrangement of already existing bits" (40). Such a concept of time, she argues, informed industrialism's relationship to temporality, through the assumption that time—in society, in the factory, in the laboratory, and in an ecosystem—invariably consisted of "repetition without change" (14). Within this framework, the temporality of environmental degradation does not exist (12).

[6] It would be misleading to claim, however, that this circumscription of the natural and the social has gone undisputed in modern thought. According to David Harvey, Karl Marx one of the most influential thinkers of modernity, did not himself ascribe to this division: "There is, in Marx's view, no such clear separation […] between "man and nature," culture and nature, natural and artificial, mental and physical [The labor process] is wholly natural and wholly human at the same time. It is constructed

would at first seem to be a way of purifying objects of study or even entire disciplines by granting them self-enclosed identities. Culture and politics can thus be studied without falling into the pitfalls of scientific, biological, or technological determinism. Alternatively, the phenomena of the physical world can be studied without being "polluted" by the contingencies of human history and politics.[7] These distinctions should remind us that the study of any phenomenon is itself a process of drawing the boundaries that define the very object of study.

To speak of a separation between "the natural" and "the social" ultimately tells us little about these words. Although often treated as self-evident, *Nature* and the *natural* are slippery terms. Raymond Williams famously claimed that "Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (*Keywords,* 224), as its meanings range from the most basic and contingent materials to the abstract and transcendental. Timothy Morton responds to William's own definition by reiterating that,

> Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask, stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it, otherwise known as a metonymic list: fish, grass, mountain air, chimpanzees, love, soda water, freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets… Nature. A metonymic series becomes a metaphor. […] Nature wavers in

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dialectically as a moment of 'metabolism' in which it is impossible to separate the natural from the human" (Harvey 115).

[7] This is a distinction particularly relevant for economics, a "human science" that, especially in its neoliberal permutation, legitimizes itself as a hard science, freed from the cultural and historical contingencies of the humanities. However, unlike most scientific fields, economics does not always take into account the material world outside the "human realm" that is the global economy. Timothy Mitchell is particularly critical of this aspect of economics, as it neither looks at its own historical development, nor its commodification of nature. Mitchell argues that the twentieth-century concept of "The Economy," as a singular, independent entity is intrinsically tied to a vision of nature as a vast space containing endless supplies of resources (a vastness facilitated by oil's erasure of physical limits): "This was an object that no economist or planner prior to the 1930s spoke of or knew to exist. Of course, the word "economy" existed prior to the 1930s, but it referred to a process, not a thing. It meant government, or the proper management of people and resources, as in the phrase 'political economy'. The economy would now become the central object of democratic politics in the West—a process that paralleled the emergence of 'development' outside the West." (131, 139).

between the divine and the material. Far from being something "natural" itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost. It slides over the infinite list of things that evoke it. (14)

Arriving at a comprehensive overview of Nature's slippery meanings would be an endless project on its own, and possibly not a particularly worthwhile one if it aimed to either provide an encyclopedic display of different terms, or alternatively to find the best, most suitable definition of them all; the *one* definition that for once and for all settles the question of Nature. Thus, rather than trying to identify, this inquiry intends to call attention to the fact that an aestheticized, timeless Nature has little to do with the constant irreducible flux of the biosphere. As Theodor Adorno reminds us, "Natural beauty, purportedly ahistorical, is at its core historical" (65). Yet, the deployment of a pristine natural landscapes as symbols of timelessness is intrinsically tied to the different timescales operating within so-called "social" and "natural" spaces. Social spaces operate within historical time, as they exist in a perceivable constant flux. Natural spaces are similarly in flux, however, at rhythms that can be simultaneously too fast and too slow—also too small and too large—for direct human observation.

As social formations come and go in the span of centuries, the basic traits of a landscape appear to remain intact. Yet, making landscapes synonymous to Nature serves to de-contextualize and detemporalize a vast set of biological processes:

> [A vision of nature] as countryside and meadows, mountains and forests, wild animals and birds, […] refers exclusively to the *products* of nature, to the externalized outcomes of processes, to decontextualized physical phenomena without activity or process. As a living entity, however, nature is active and changing and its processes are contingent upon contexts […] That is to say, temporality and context are essential to life and thus to any representation of living phenomena and processes. (Adam, 11-12)

Yet as symbols of permanence, impermanent landscapes have played a key role in nationalism. A defining features of nationalism is the attempt to project its symbols back to a time immemorial; this is a way of asserting and maintaining an unchanged historical authenticity rooted in an origin that transcends historical specificity and temporal change. It makes sense then, that odes to natural landscapes are a common nationalist trope, since both, Nature and national traditions are meant to function as essential truths that transcend historical change. As George White points out, the concept of "nation," unlike country or nation-state, refers to a social and not a spatial category (that being why there are more nations than there are states). However, nations and more specifically nationalism, are generally invested in the question of territory and spaces designated as *natural* as a defining feature of national essences:

> Landscape description is the most useful for identifying those elements in the natural landscape to which a nation becomes emotionally bonded, and thus fall within a nation's sense of territory. […] Nationalist writers often put more effort into describing the nation's territory than the social and cultural characteristics of the nation itself [...] In essence, the nation is depicted through descriptions of place and territory. (59)

Nationalist representations of natural landscapes help solidify a community's claim to a territory, as that which could be considered to be the external limit of the nation-state—land and nature—become integrated into the identity of a nation. We could consider nationalist representations of landscapes as an attempt to create spatial anchors, inscribing a social identity onto otherwise undifferentiated land. However, as *El Chiguire Bipolar*'s joke implicitly highlights, the discourse surrounding natural landscapes, (synecdochically referred to as "las playas más hermosas del mundo") also function as a temporal anchor: while society, as an inherently historical entity, is characterized by—cultural, political, technological—change, vast

natural landscapes are thought to be located in a realm outside history and politics. They function as the symbol of unchanging truths, binding the community to a terrestrially-based essence. Venezuela's natural landscapes are thus a consolation and a promise: unpolluted by the uncertainties and instabilities of the contemporary nation-state, these spaces are constitutive loci located *within* the nation that simultaneously manage to escape it as a historical entity—that is, as it exists and changes in time.

Notably, since the mid-twentieth century the *sensory* absence of petrochemicals has been a defining characteristic of natural landscapes. That is to say, natural landscapes are now characterized by a series of absences: that of cars, roads, synthetic objects, buildings, or any other contemporary human structure. Yet petrochemicals do not need to be perceived to be present in the atmosphere, water, and glaciers; on the contrary, the risk posed by their presence is often related to their perceptual untraceability. [8] Their material imprint, albeit unseen, should remind us that the transcendental natural landscape outside human reach does not exist.

It might at first seem paradoxical or overly pessimistic to claim that an unpolluted Nature does not exist. After all, even in the catastrophically toxic twenty-first century it still seems possible to escape into the wilderness, and be at Nature's mercy. The biosphere is still vast and beautiful. I am, thus, not trying to solipsistically argue that nature does not exist. However, what does not exist is Nature as an identifiable, isolatable *thing*. While this idea is not exclusively applicable to modernity, it is particularly relevant to it. Modernity—if, unlike Latour, we are to believe has existed—is characterized by the proliferation of natural-social hybrids, and therefore by a receding dividing line between what was traditionally understood as the natural and the

[8] As Ulrich Beck reminds us, in early industrial capitalism pollution was directly perceptible, as was the case in London and its industrial "fog" or the "foul-smelling poisonous fumes of the [Thames]." Contemporary pollution, however, often goes unnoticed: "the risks of civilization today typically *escape perception* and are localized in the sphere of *physical and chemical formulas*" (21).

social. Paradoxically, however, modernity is also the epoch that defines itself by the growing chasm between Nature and society. In terms of Latin American literary production, this idea resonates particularly with the genres of *la novela de la tierra* or *la novela de la naturaleza* (sometimes labeled as *novelas criollas*, *regionalistas, rurales*, *costumbristas, telúricas*, *de la selva*). The uniting feature of these twentieth-century novels is their exploration of man's (gender is key here, of course) struggles against the natural world (often associated with Woman). It is precisely within the modern imagination that the qualifying "*de la tierra*" or "*de la naturaleza*" make sense when designating a particular type of Latin American novel. One would be pressed to find a narrative altogether divorced from *la tierra* and *la naturaleza*. Even the most fantastical science fiction implicitly needs some notion of the terrestrial and the natural even if in the context of other worlds. It is only as these entities are seen as external, and objectifiable, that it makes sense to name a literary genre as such. The fact that a group of novels have received such imposing labels, should remind us that distance and marginalization (imposed, or sometimes perceived) often hovers over qualifiers (the concept of "woman's literature," for instance, exists because canonical literature historically excluded an entire gender). *La novela de la tierra/naturaleza* as a genre is thus symptomatic of a worldview where one can distinguish society from nature. It should come as no surprise then that the narratives within *las novelas de la tierra* are particularly concerned with the creation, imposition, and maintenance of proper borders—be they between nature and society, barbarism and civilization, good and evil, what belongs to the nation and what does not.

The inexistence of a pure, independent Nature gains significance if we consider the concept of the Anthropocene. This term (originally coined by biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, and popularized Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist), suggests that human

activity since the eighteenth century has so severely affected global ecology that the planet has left the Holocene and entered (or is in the process of entering) a new geological epoch.[9] Thus, thinking of Nature in the Anthropocene requires demystifying its transcendence. The inability to encounter a pure Nature is, however, not simply a material result of human activity. As we will more closely explore in our analysis of Gallegos' own *novela de la tierra* (*Doña Bárbara*), representations of Nature often attempt to re-present an unmediated encounter with the natural, as a method of domesticating and conferring identities onto the non-human world, while simultaneously pretending that these identities originate in Nature itself. Thus, Nature writing often functions as a series of echoes: the human sounds that vibrate and resonate against its surroundings and return to the human ear, but which appear to be a disembodied voice that originates in Nature itself—a Nature with a second-order human voice. Perhaps the very notion of an Anthropocene is yet another echo. However, unlike the messages we once heard Nature the Anthropocene is one of the worst possible outcomes of a Nature in our most distorted, unintended image. Nature in the Anthropocene becomes a crippling confine from whence we want to escape; not even the *dream* of an escape is now tenable. The distinction between the junkyard and the beautiful landscape becomes troublingly thin in the Anthropocene.

Writing the Venezuelan Landscape

The myths of the Venezuelan—or more accurately, American—landscape as a vast, ahistorical expanse can be traced as far back as Christopher Columbus' letters to the Spanish monarchs. However, the image of natural landscapes as a locus of truth, or alternatively as nationalist essence, has arguably been most exploited during two tumultuous historical epochs: the decades ensuing independence from Spain in the early nineteenth-century, and nearly a

[9] The Holocene is the roughly 10,000 year-old geological epoch characterized by stable climates, which likely contributed to the growth of the human population. Agriculture and human civilization have benefited from the relatively warm climate of the Holocene, both of which emerged during this epoch.

century later, during Venezuela's transformation from an agrarian to an oil-financed urban society. Although most representations of the Venezuelan landscape we examine in this chapter were written during these two periods, they continually reference Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci's accounts of their reactions as they arrived in what is now the northern Venezuelan coast. Even Ramón Díaz Sánchez's *Mene,* an oil novel analyzed in chapter II, references the explorers' texts to describe Lake Maracaibo in the 1930s. That the earliest written records of Venezuelan land immediately and overwhelmingly express awe over the land's extraordinary beauty has enabled if not the construction, at the very least the maintenance of a form of Venezuelan exceptionalism whose basis lies on topography itself. We already noted in *El Chiguire Bipolar*'s joke that, despite the particularities of social formations or those of the present moment, this vision of Nature posits that the real Venezuela is that of "las playas más hermosas del mundo." Thus, while there is nothing particularly a priori "national" in the northern Venezuelan coast, its early inscription as paradise in the explorers' chronicles has been read as prophetic: the society settled within the territory is destined for greatness.

Allegedly overpowered by the natural beauty of the Venezuelan Caribbean coast, Columbus not only dubbed the region "Tierra de Gracia," but went as far as to claim that he had found Eden itself: "Y digo que si este río no procede del Paraíso Terrenal, viene y procede de tierra infinita, del Continente Austral, del cual hasta ahora no se ha tenido noticia; mas yo muy asentado tengo en mi ánima que allí donde dije, en Tierra de Gracia, se halla el Paraíso Terrenal" (Colón). Three years later, Amerigo Vespucci, who allegedly named the country, similarly spoke of Venezuela's northern coast as paradise: "Los campos producen mucha hierba, flores y raíces muy suaves y buenas, que alguna vez me maravillaba del suave olor de las hierbas y flores, y el sabor de estas frutas y raíces tanto que entre mí pensaba estar cerca del Paraíso

Terrenal: entre todos estos elementos hubiera creído estar cerca de él" (q. in Cunill, 9). The fact that both Columbus and Vespucci referenced paradise upon first encountering the American continent discursively creates a timeless landscape. As the foundational rendition of these landscapes, these texts project themselves onto the past—suggesting that this initial encounter reflected the way these lands have always been. The same idea applies as we fast-forward a few centuries: although the 20th century tourist of "las playas mas hermosas del mundo" might be encountering a deeply altered landscape, *El Chiguire Bipolar*'s joke highlights how the paradise of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is thought to remain unchanged. This might all seem harmless enough. After all, odes to nations' natural beauty are part and parcel of nationalism. However, As Jerry Hoeg reminds us, this on-going myth of paradise and its endless bounties morphed into "a romantic anthropocentric [vision] of the American natural world […] at the root of a colonial myth of Eden that has not only silenced and damaged the Caribbean landscape but has also interred a violent and unjust history that equally contributed to the degradation of this landscape" (60). That Columbus and Vespucci spoke of Paradise should reminds us that northern Venezuela's first appearance in Western texts is coded with numerous assumptions about the limits of the natural world and humanity. As Clarence Glacken examines in his extensive exegesis of the concept of nature, scholars during the so-called "Age of Discovery" largely drew from scriptures to conclude that the Earth was divinely designed to suit the needs of humankind. Finding a "New World" filled with beautiful landscapes and warm climates reinforced this view: "What greater proof of the wisdom, and the creativity of God, then could one ask for than these unexpected tidings from the New Lands" (Glacken, 357-358). As the echoes of religious beliefs resonated with beautiful lands, it became easy to erase human traces: indigenous peoples blended into the background in what continues to be a long history of viewing them as decorative

elements of a past when humans and Nature lived in harmony. Conversely, the process of writing about Nature is itself erased, when these texts are read as direct renditions of an ahistorical landscape. As such, no human institution appears to intervene in the creation of "beauty," as the human hand—be it Columbus' or Vespucci's—are simply observing and reporting their encounters with unknown lands.

Although the legends of a vast and pristine natural landscapes were instrumental in the European colonization of the American territory and its peoples, the Independence movements of the nineteenth century and the ensuing nation-building efforts drew from a vision of a natural blank slate upon which "history was about to begin" (Pratt, 122). Independence fighters such as Andrés Bello and Simón Bolívar portray national Nature as both transcendental and calculable—a vision that easily opens itself up to the extraction of natural resources. The American nation-state becomes the site destined by its wild, vibrant Nature to re-energize civilization. One of the most famous instance of this impulse is Andrés Bello's foundational poem "Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida."[10] The poem posits a chronological vision of America's tropical landscapes, which are first described as a bountiful paradise slowly transformed by agriculture, ultimately leading to the appearance of cities and the vices of urban life. The poem argues that the health and future of the new nations depends on a return to rural life. This return to the land is not only a necessary economic motor, but also a way of healing from the violence of the independence wars. He addresses the "young nations" emboldening them to return to a rural way of life:

Honrad el campo, honrad la simple vida

del labrador, y su frugal llaneza

[10] The poem was written in 1826, when Bello was exiled in London. Bello went to London with Simón Bolívar in 1810 in a diplomatic mission to secure funds for the independence effort. During his stay of nineteen years, he wrote "Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida," as part of a larger epic poem entitled "América," which he never finished.

Así tendrá en vos perpetuamente

la libertad morada

y freno la ambición, y la ley templo. (Bello)

Interestingly, northern South America was predominately rural when Bello composed the poem—Venezuela's rapid urbanization, for instance, did not begin until the 1930s, more than a century later. That is to say, that Bello's idealization of a past rural life preceded urbanization itself. Thus, Bello's poem should be a reminder that the proverbial return to Nature is not entirely a reaction to modernization, city life, or pollution but part of a long tradition.[11] As it speaks of freedom's perpetual dwelling ("tendrá en vos perpetuamente/la libertad morada"), the poem projects onto Nature and its bounties, visions of the future. Indeed, the rest of the poem provides an extensive inventory of the region's natural riches as evidence of a bright future.[12] While Nature is the blank slate upon which history happens, it determines the shape that history will take—a vision of Nature and history that persists.

We can see the continued tendency to equate natural riches with future prosperity in two research projects from the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries: the first project was carried out

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[11] In Western literature, the call for a return to land and Nature can be traced as far back as Ancient Rome. Trained as a Latinist, Bello styled "Silva" on the Virgilian call for a return to traditional Roman values to be found in rural life and farming (Hoeg, 54).

[12] Although a generation before the late nineteenth-century's "export reverie," studied at length by Ericka Beckham, we can certainly see Bello's text as a direct precursor. Beckham argues that *export reverie* is a "discursive mode […] by which liberal visionaries imagined the intense benefits to be wrought through incorporation into global commodity networks, conjuring national wealth before it had materialized in production" (*Capital Fictions*). However, unlike the modernist export reverie, and its implicit praise of export and consumer capitalism, Bello does not seem to be concerned either with commodities or with mineral exports (already one of the more potentially lucrative, if undeveloped enterprises within Venezuelan territory). As Mary Louise Pratt points out: "Bello moves resolutely from the pastoral mode into the agricultural (Georgic), not the industrial or the mercantile […] At the same time, neither cleanliness nor comfort has any place in Bello's call for a frugal, simple life on the land" (175).

by the *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* in 1830, the founding year of the modern Venezuelan state after the dissolution of Gran Colombia. The document's concluding statement declares:

> Al ver por la lente del patriotismo que sólo nos falta la voluntad para colocarnos entre los primeros y más felices pueblos de la tierra, preciso es, señores, que cada venezolano se sienta conmovido por los estímulos del bien común que envuelve al individual. Nuestra posición geográfica es la más comercial, y nuestro país reúne cuanto hay de más útil y más precioso en la naturaleza. (Cunill 16)

The study continues to list the nation's riches ranging from produce and lumber, to the types of soil, and variety of climates. The document's final sentences reiterates that Venezuela's fortunate soil should be reason to hope for a bright future, "¿no nos ofrecen mil motivos de conveniencia y de interés público para dedicarnos a poner en acción todos los resortes que alientan y animan la industria territorial, y esparzan sobre este afortunado suelo la abundancia y la prosperidad?" (my italics, Cunill 16). Although written almost a century before oil became Venezuela's main export, this passage already states a belief that, according to numerous critics, originated (at least in the social sciences) with oil: Venezuela is not only a fundamentally rich country, but due to its natural resources and lucky geography, it is also privileged over other nations. While the basis for such prosperity already exists in Nature, it is up to the nation's citizens to fulfill this potential by appropriately administering, managing and redistributing Nature's gifts. As a foundational social science text for a nation whose territory was still in process of being defined, the tone and context of the *Sociedad Económica*'s study makes sense; it is, after all, an inventory meant to identify the country's territorial contours, and to enable the identification of disparate and loosely populated regions within a single and unified territory.

The *Sociedad Económica*'s text, however, hardly differs from twenty-first century political discourse and scholarship. Notable in this regard is Pedro Cunill Grau's extensive and renowned work on Venezuelan geography. In "Pórtico de Venezuela," written in 2006, he gives a panoramic overview of how the country's landscapes and natural resources have been conceptualized in the country's literature and political institutions. His article examines the previous statement by the *Sociedad Económica*, and notes that these dreams of prosperity did not come to fruition in the twentieth century (even as the country turned out to have an a degree of natural resource wealth that would have been unimaginable in the 19th century). Yet, Cunill paradoxically concludes his study on an almost identical note as the text from 1830:

> A pesar de hondos problemas que nos ha legado este período de la Venezuela contemporánea, se nos ha transmitido un país que puede surgir positivamente. *A diferencia de otras naciones que no cuentan en sus paisajes con posibilidades ciertas de alcanzar el despegue económico, los paisajes de Venezuela la podrían proyectar como una potencia de media significación planetaria,* de utilizar estratégicamente sus amplios territorios, conservar el ambiente y la biodiversidad, capacitar tecnológicamente a través de la modernización de sus sistemas educativos a sus mujeres y hombres, manejando de manera sustentable, en forma ordenada y planificada sus materias primas.
>
> Es necesario abrirse a las nuevas e innovadoras generaciones para no perder la apuesta al destino inmediato. (29, my italics)

The core of Cunill's argument poses that the problems of contemporary Venezuela might be profound, yet its natural riches—will? could? should?—manage to erase them. Once again, geography becomes destiny. Not only that, but like the *Sociedad Económica* predicted, the country's exuberant landscapes and abundant natural resources set it above other nations.

Oil's absence in these remarks is notable, as Cunill's statement would seem to posit that Venezuela's richness stems from the landscape (he, after all, refers to "paisajes" as the source of the nation's riches), while the veritable source of Venezuela's wealth throughout the 20th century is secondary. In fact, despite writing specifically about a petro-state's natural resources and "paisajes," there is no mention of oil's ecological impact. Instead, we see a call for "conservation" which upholds Nature as a precondition of economic activity. [13] The point is to "manage" specific ecosystems and resources "in a planned and orderly manner"—not to question, let alone upend the wider social and economic structures whose existence depend on the exploitation of these same resources at massive scales. Cunill's conclusions exemplify why to yearn for a future when the nation's grandeur mirrors that of its landscapes, far from an ecological dream, is instead a dream of mastery over the biosphere (note his use of words: "manage," "planned," "ordered"). As we are about to see in our analysis of the most "natural" of Venezuelan novels, Rómulo Gallego's *Doña Bárbara*, this anticipated control over the biosphere is largely tied to the ability to determine what changes and what remains static—a dream whose fulfillment the oil industry promised through its deployment of petroleum's chemical properties (see chapter III).

Literature, Geography, and Conquest in Rómulo Gallegos' Oeuvre

The question of the proper management of Nature in the service of the nation is central to Rómulo Gallegos' oeuvre as a whole, and *Doña Bárbara* in particular. Gallegos' literary output is characterized by his intricate depictions of Venezuela's multiple landscapes, and the moral imperative to unify and civilize a geographically, economically and culturally disjointed nation.

[13] We should, once again, highlight the temporal aspect of these arguments: in the same way that caring for the environment is so frequently a concern for the future, nature too will on a phantom date magically turn Venezuela into a prosperous land.

Gallegos oeuvre presents, for better or for worse, one of the most influential representations of the Latin American landscape.[14] Critical of the violence and *caudillismo* that had characterized Venezuelan politics since independence, Gallegos has been an emblematic figure of a modernizing political project that emphasizes national unification through an educational and cultural agenda.[15] Highly esteemed as an intellectual committed to Venezuela's progress, he was elected president in 1948, despite his lack of political experience.

Doña Bárbara, Gallegos' most famous novel, opens with Santos Luzardo's return to the southwestern state of Apure, intending to sell Altamira, his family's plantation. After years of living in Caracas, Santos Luzardo no longer wishes to take care of the remote plantation, to which he is the sole inheritor. However, upon his return he is so overwhelmed by the llanos' beauty and outraged by Doña Bárbara's illegitimate reign over the lands surrounding Altamira that he decides to prolong his stay and become a civilizing force in the region. The power-hungry and tyrannical Doña Bárbara has established a reign of terror, not only through corruption and

[14] A major figure in Latin American regionalism, and its subgenre of *la novela de la tierra*, Gallegos' political and cultural project fits within the epic struggle depicted by the likes of Sarmiento in Argentina, of civilization in an epic struggle against barbarism. Gallegos' interpretation of barbarism differed from Sarmiento's, as evidenced by one of his essays on the influential magazine *El Cojo Ilustrado* in 1912: "Pero no se ofendan ni la susceptibilidad ni el patriotismo porque yo emplée tratándose de nosotros el mismo término que para un caso análogo aplicó en su país el genial argentino Sarmiento, porque, si bien se mira, barbarie en estos casos quiere decir juventud, y juventud es fuerza, promesa y esperanza" (84, 2010). As Arturo Osorio reminds us, Gallegos' vision of *barbarie* should be read dialectically, "El mundo poético que construye su discurso muestra que el llano no es la "barbarie" en el sentido de Sarmiento, porque ya se ha visto que "no todo era malo y hostil en la llanura". En realidad los términos opuestos de "barbarie y "civilización" [deben ser entendidos] […] como "tesis" y "antítesis" de una contradicción dialéctica. La síntesis, hegelianamente hablando, sería la superación de ambas, un mundo nuevo que habrá de surgir de la conjunción de la *realidad* del llano con los *ideales* de la civilización. La síntesis es, por consiguiente, una promesa, una esperanza" (80, 1570).

[15] Gallegos worked for decades as a high school teacher and principal, directly influencing key members of the *Generación del '28.* The group's name stems from protests staged by university students in 1928, which became one of the most powerful resistance movements against José Vicente Gómez's dictatorship. Some of Venezuela's prominent twentieth-century political such as presidents Rómulo Betancourt (1945-1948, 1959-1964) and Rafael Caldera (1969-1974, 1994-1999) participated in this movement.

violence, but also by creating an aura of mystery and magic, feared by the superstitious *llaneros*. Thought to possess mystical powers, Doña Bárbara frequently consults *El Socio*, a supernatural voice, which further creates her image as the embodiment of primitive powers. Her cruel and authoritative persona, however, hides a life filled with loss and trauma. Determined to free his family's land from the feared woman's influence, Santos Luzardo's civilizing efforts initially entail determining Altamira's proper boundaries. To make sure these borders are preserved Luzardo not only plans to build a fence around the plantation—a practice unknown in the llanos of Apure where borders were imprecisely delimited by landmarks—but he requests that Doña Bárbara and other landowners do so as well. Even Luzardo's workers find the idea absurd: "Puede que usted tenga razón, pero para eso sería menester cambiar permanentemente el modo de ser del llanero. El llanero no acepta la cerca. Quiere su sabana abierta como se la ha dado Dios" (158). This statement prompts Luzardo to reflect on "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" (159). Over time Luzardo's efforts to civilize the plains extend to the domestication of Marisela—his distant cousin and Doña Bárbara's estranged daughter—who thanks to him learns the manners and vocabulary of a proper "señorita" from Caracas. However, after Carmelito, his right-hand man, is murdered with impunity, Santos Luzardo loses faith in his own civilizing efforts, and briefly decides to play Doña Bárbara's game of corruption and arbitrary violence. He justifies his change of heart by claiming the need to use force in the name of the llanos' future: "Un golpe aquí, otro allá, en seguida una afirmación de fuerza en cada oportunidad que se le deparara, y el ancho feudo sería suyo para la futura obra civilizadora" (357). Santos Luzardo's murderous rage and Doña Bárbara's dominion are both placated at the end, thanks to the union of Luzardo and Marisela. The young woman

inadvertently shows her mentor the fruits of his civilizing efforts, and further reminds her mother of the shred of tenderness of which she was once capable. Seeing herself in her daughter for the first time, Doña Bárbara relinquishes her land and returns to the rivers from whence she came. The book's ending appears to suggest that with Doña Bárbara's departure and under the rightful and lawful dominion of Luzardo, "El progreso penetrará en la llanura y la barbarie retrocederá vencida" (160).

My plot summary thus far suggests that *Doña Bárbara* is a text endorsing the transformation of the llanos, especially as the text makes a case for the need to relinquish old ways and make way for the new. However, despite the call to radically alter the llanos by civilizing the region, the novel paradoxically attempts to accomplish the opposite: in its effort to capture the essence of the landscape and of the *llanero*'s way of life, *Doña Bárbara* works toward the preservation of the region as it existed in a particular moment. *Doña Bárbara*'s vision of Nature is essential in its dialectical relationship to transformation and preservation. Nature, on the one hand, is a site of purity and salvation—that being why *Doña Bárbara* is often treated as the embodiment of the *novela de la tierra*. On the other hand, Nature is also a site of chaotic misplacements in need of order and domestication. Devoid of patriarchal rule, Nature and women rule the llanos. Santos Luzardo arrives to fulfill *El Socio*'s prophecy—repeated throughout the last third of the novel: to return things to their proper place. Notably, even the novel's own stylistic realism is out of joint in Apure, as the voice of *El Socio* emerges. Although the extradiegetic, omniscient narrator—the voice of authority—tells us that *El Socio* does not exist, this ghostly figure nonetheless accurately predicts the novel's outcome. *El Socio* thus functions as an intradiagetic narrator of sorts, inhabiting a liminal zone within the reality of the text.

Doña Bárbara exemplifies how the impulse to preserve and monumentalize is paradoxically tied to its destruction. In other words, the belief that something no longer exists, or is under threat of disappearing prompts its exaltation.[16] This preservation-via-destruction, or alternatively, destruction-via-preservation—that modern paradox par excellence—has a number of implications in *Doña Bárbara,* as its call to transform the llanos is continually undercut by the impulse to apprehend it as an object at which to marvel. [17] Indeed, transforming the llanos would require doing away with their seductive power. The novel, however, attempts to resolve this tension by creating the sense that the incorporation of primitive (natural) forces can reinvigorate the modern nation. The successful union of Santos Luzardo (a white civilized man) and Marisela (at first a young and uncouth *mestiza*) enables this incorporation of wild vitality into modernity.[18]

Doña Bárbara's equivocal relationship to the llanos as symbols of a timeless, wild essence should be a reminder that exaltation does not lie very far from hostility. Indeed, expecting either

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[16] Borges famously made a similar observation in "El escritor argentino y la tradición":

> Gibbon observa que en el libro árabe por excelencia, en el Alcorán, no hay camellos; yo creo que si hubiera alguna duda sobre la autenticidad del Alcorán bastaría esta ausencia de camellos para probar que es árabe. Fue escrito por Mahoma, y Mahoma, como árabe, no tenía por qué saber que los camellos eran especialmente árabes; eran para él parte de la realidad, no tenía por qué distinguirlos; en cambio, un falsario, un turista, un nacionalista árabe, lo primero que hubiera hecho es prodigar camellos, caravanas de camellos en cada página; pero Mahoma, como árabe, estaba tranquilo: sabía que podía ser árabe sin camellos. (Borges)

[17] Bruno Latour persuasively ties this idea to modernity's relationship to Nature and the past (entities that are often conflated in modern thought):

> the moderns suffer from the illness of historicism. They want to keep everything, date everything, because they think they have definitely broken with their past. The more they accumulate revolutions, the more they save; the more they capitalize, the more they put on display in museums. Maniacal destruction is counterbalanced by an equally maniacal conservation. (69)

For similar analyses about modernity's relationship to preservation and destruction, see Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity*, John Muckelbauer's *The Future of Invention*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*.

[18] Julie Skurski examines this idea in relation to "the redefinition of the elite's link to the pueblo" (606). While she acknowledges nature and geography's role in this process, she does so in passing, "the discourse of authenticity sought to present the nation's geography and untutored population as a source of untapped energy for resolving the opposition between the forces of "civilization" and "barbarism"' (606).

perfection or purity from any one entity is to negate its existence, if we are to understand organic existence as a process of becoming. The eternal, unchanging ideal cannot be said to exist in time, and therefore, cannot be *living.* Transcendental Nature is a dead nature. As Timothy Morton further explains: *"*Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (Morton, 8). Mortons's comparison is particularly apt in the context of this analysis, given that the Apure's wilderness is tied to the figure of Doña Bárbara throughout the novel—yet another iteration of a long history of likening Nature and Woman. Doreen Massey further shows how, not just Nature, but the very notion of bounded space (territory) has historically been deployed to limit women's mobility: "the need for the security of boundaries, the requirement for such a defensive and counterpositional definition of identity is masculine. [Consequently], we need to have the courage to abandon such defensive—yet designed for dominance—means of definition" (7). Most of *Doña Bárbara* would appear to make us want to marvel at Nature's beauty. However, the outcome of the text requires fencing natural space and domesticating wild cattle—which according to Santos Luzardo's fantasies is the first step towards a civilizing process that will culminate with the arrival of trains. We can thus conclude that an anxiety about defining the dividing line between loci drives this text: it tells where Nature is, it points to its indeterminacy, and it promises either its incorporation into the nation's modernizing project, or similarly its disappearance through domestication. That same civilizing move gets rid of the text's powerful female, and relegates a once-free Marisela to the proper role as wife.

Doña Bárbara's status as a faithful representation of the llanos, and as an effective analysis of the political issues plaguing early twentieth-century Latin America, stems from its ability to

inhabit the tensions between past and present, Nature and civilization. However, it is precisely the potential disappearance of the llanos that makes its apprehension through a meticulous, representation necessary: the text becomes a literary museum as it displays, with a careful attention to detail, disappearing objects. Notably, *Doña Bárbara* was published in 1929, only four years after oil exports became Venezuela's principal source of income, and only a year before the boom of industrial oil exploitation in the llanos. The growth of the oil economy devastated agricultural production and the countryside—the world depicted in *Doña Bárbara*—further leading to one of the fastest processes of urbanization in world history. *Doña Bárbara* and the literary figure of Rómulo Gallegos undeniably accommodate a wide range of contradictory readings—many of which are still under contestation today.[19] However, we should understand the novel's success and appeal in relation to its preservation—through meticulous representation—of a fantasy which oil was feared to sweep away: a Venezuelan essence tied to the land.

Oil's Ecology

At first glance it might seem paradoxical for a project about oil to examine a set of texts which seem to have little to do with the topic at hand, and which, on top of that, were written before oil became central to Venezuelan society. The texts under analysis thus far are generally interpreted as representations of an old order—visions of Venezuela before it transformed into an oil nation. As such, Bello's "Silva a la agricultura" or Gallegos' *Doña Bárbara* are treated as the

[19] In his analysis of the use of Gallegos' work in twenty-first century Venezuelan politics, Juan Cristobal Castro shows how those in favor and those against the presidency of Hugo Chávez similarly claimed Gallegos as their ideological predecessor: "Sin duda hay Gallegos para todos los gustos […] Su fantasma puede entenderse como una práctica de resistencia frente a la política del olvido promovida por la nueva hegemonía chavista, que se inició—y no hay que olvidarlo—ciertamente por la cultura mediática neoliberal que creó las condiciones para la llegada del teniente coronel a la Presidencia. […] La paradoja está en preguntarse por qué […] ha reaparecido de manera indirecta—a veces con ironía y otra veces por error (como un *slip of the tongue* freudiano)—en sectores del Gobierno" (69).

object of nostalgia, symbols of what was lost as the country began relying on oil.[20] While these texts are read as representations of a lost past, they are just as often interpreted as encapsulations of a timeless essence—a truer and more long-lasting reality than the world created by oil: "lo legítimo, lo auténtico, quedaba identificado con el escenario rural, [y su] 'pureza fundadora'" (Torres, 125).[21] While the world of oil is associated with the artifice, pollution, and speed of capitalist modernity, visions of a timeless and plentiful natural paradise continually return to the Venezuelan imaginary as oil's antithesis—as that which preceded and might one day replace the oil years.

We can see the use of Nature as oil's antithesis in "La palmera y la torre de acero," a 1922 poem by Ismael Urdaneta, which candidly expresses the literati's attitude towards oil in the first decades of the twentieth century. The poem opens and closes with a palm tree, symbol of the nation:

> Palmera señoril, antes dabas al cuadro
> del paisaje lacustre
> la pincelada esbelta de tu airón tropical.
> Ahora te suplanta la torre del "taladro",
> menos poética y menos ilustre;
> ¡pero de más efecto…comercial!

[20] These visions of a lost paradise are not unique to Venezuela or Latin America. In "Toxic Discourse" Lawrence Buell discusses of a "long-standing mythography of betrayed Edens" (647) in U.S. American literature.

[21] Ana Teresa Torres's analysis in *La herencia de la tribu* is one of the few works of cultural criticism that explores and critiques the tendency to treat Nature as the nation's timeless symbol. She further ties these visions of nature to oil: "El pueblo, la tierra, el alma de la nación, todo ello conformaba un imaginario y el petróleo había llegado para modificarlo. Es desde esa perspectiva de la pérdida, de la nostalgia, y aun de una utopía de la 'esencia' de la nación, como podemos entender los argumentos y diatribas contra el petróleo" (114).

La torre del taladro vendrá al suelo algún día […]

Entonces, cuando se alce

de nuevo, solitario, tu lírico realce,

venezolano, tropical,

ese día,

más que la torre exótica de acero,

se elevará en las ribas tu penacho altanero,

palmera mía,

¡símbolo de la Patria porque eres inmortal! (43)

In the diegetic present an oilrig—a foreign implant lacking roots and poetry—has replaced the palm tree. The text nonetheless promises that the times of oil and its brazen commercialism will pass; the oilrig will fall, and will be replaced by a palm tree. Immortal like the nation, the palm tree is not subjected to time. Even in the beginning of the poem, there is no clear distinction between the palm tree, as it might have once existed, and its timeless rendition in a painting. There might have never been a palm tree at all, only the "pincelada esbelta" of an idealized landscape—"a myth functioning as a memory" (Williams, *The Country and the City*). This memory of a natural paradise that might not have actually existed is nonetheless expected to one day replace the steel oilrig. Although Urdaneta's poem dates to the infancy of industrial oil exploitation in the country, visions of a natural paradise that preceded and will replace oil have persisted in Venezuelan cultural and political critique since. For instance, Arturo Uslar Pietri spoke of two Venezuelas in 1949, a feigned one created by oil, and the real Venezuela, characterized by "los canales de irrigación, las terrazas de conservación de suelos […] los tractores, los arados, los silos" (*De una a otra Venezuela*). More recently, Max Efraín Pérez and

Leonardo Gustavo Ruiz derided the entirety of contemporary Venezuelan literature for its tendency to focus on globalized urban life, which voices "fuertemente su carga negadora de lo propio" (Ruiz, 10).[22] While Ruiz calls for a return to the nineteenth century couplets of the *llanos*, Pérez boldly claimed in 2006 that no text has been able to capture Venezuelan reality—a reality rooted in man's relationship with Nature—since *Doña Bárbara*.[23] Although not representative of Venezuelan cultural criticism as a whole, Pérez's and Ruiz's texts have been awarded prizes in literary criticism by the Ministry of Culture. Their work, in fact, aligns well with the Venezuelan state's ideological line in the early twenty-first century, which has been characterized by a return to nationalist, anti-imperialist politics—in great part a reaction against neoliberalism.

While the Venezuelan state, as a petrostate, strengthened its reliance on oil during Hugo Chávez's presidency (1999-2013), the pro-government cultural realm (of which Pérez and Ruiz are examples) saw a revival of anti-oil rhetoric, aimed not at the state, which has been the owner and exporter of the country's oil since 1976, but at transnational oil companies: an inherently alien threat which irreparably polluted Venezuelan culture. Though the Venezuelan state owns, exploits, refines and exports oil, a popular strain of nationalist politics exists, even within the

[22] This type of analysis is closely aligned to the Bolivarian Revolution and the cultural politics pushed forward by the Ministry of Culture and its editorial *El perro y la rana*. Other intellectual circles tend to focus on urban themes and preoccupations. For instance, Edmundo Bracho claimed in 2007 that Venezuelan writers, "se sienten más contemporáneos y mas próximos a los proyectos generados en Nueva York o París, por ejemplo, que a los de su vecino" (10). Luis Barrera Linares similarly described, "la indiscutible ambientación urbana de esta contemporaneidad del siglo XXI" (10). Thus, the discursive return to Nature no longer entails Santos Luzardo's return to the wild llanos, but is expressed indirectly through depictions of a dystopian city on the verge of collapse. Among these, we have such as *Nocturama* by Ana Teresa Torres or *En rojo* by Gisela Kozak Rovero.

[23] Pérez more generally speaks of the *novela de la tierra* as a genre that successfully encapsulated the unified reality of Latin America: "Son de permanente consulta para los lectores latinoamericanos, porque ellas reflejan las palpitaciones del ayer y hoy del ámbito nacional y conducen a reflexionar que Latinoamérica conforma una sola realidad […] Ahora se habla de la globalización como un sistema conciliador, cuando en realidad destruye o paraliza la cultural nacional."(48)

state, which continues to oppose oil as a foreign imposition that must be overcome by a return to the nation's traditional roots in Nature. Perhaps only a transcendental Nature might appear to be unchanged and durable enough to provide an alternative and opposition to petromodernity. These visions of Nature, however, are not just an outdated, if persistent, cultural or political habit. An atemporal Nature, in fact, poses a particular threat today: as awareness of our global ecological crises grows, these depictions of Nature—ultimately concerned with order and human mastery—are not only considered to be a viable stance against the oil economy, but more alarmingly still, they might be seen as ecological.

What a century of Venezuelan cultural criticism has failed to grasp is that this vision of an atemporal, transcendental Nature, intrinsically tied to national culture, aligns well with the transnational oil industry's vision of Venezuela in particular, and the biosphere in general. Far from oil's antithesis, an aesthetic Nature has been central to an oil-fueled social order. In fact, one of oil's appeals in the early twentieth-century was its cleanliness vis-à-vis coal.[24] Additionally, oil companies (not to mention petrostates) have consistently invested in parks and wilderness areas as part of their social responsibility programs. The transnational oil industry's interest in environmentalism increased in the 1980s, due to greater public awareness of oil extraction's ecological toll, which further intensified after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989.[25]

[24] Switching to oil as a source of energy, helped improved the air quality of industrial cities in Great Britain and the eastern United Sates. London's air pollution, the famous "London fog" was particularly well known: "Coal's black smoke was so thick that it could be seen hovering over English cities from miles away, in some cases blocking the sun's rays entirely. Londoners, squinting by their sooty windows, switched on their lamps to read the morning papers" (Shah, 2).

[25] "In an attempt to turn the tide of public opinion welling against them, the Exxon PR department targeted the friable minds of the young. In 1993, they offered free videos about the company's stellar cleanup efforts in Alaska to ten thousand science teachers across the land" (Shah, 74). British Petroleum also changed their corporate image by literally "greening" their logo, investing in alternative sources of energy, and claiming that their initials now stand for "Beyond Petroleum." As of 2003, BP was the second largest solar energy company in the world ("The Unrepentant Oilman").

Visions of a harmonious natural order, of which oil is part, have been central to the industry's public relations campaigns in the last thirty years. For instance, *Fuel-less* a 1996 educational film financed by the American Petroleum Institute teaches that, as a product of the Earth, oil and its products are part of Nature: "Nature is elegant. You see these remains broke down into chemical compounds of hydrogen and carbon ... hydrocarbons." (Huber, 308, "Refined Politics"). The film proceeds to show how oil companies are fast at work making the extraction and refining processes environmentally friendly. Now it is up to *us* to help by not littering, recycling, and volunteering to plant trees:

> We sure don't want to pollute our water and use up our landfills with products from oil that could easily be reused. That's why it's so important to recycle plastics like our lunchroom cups, and to recycle used motor oil from your car ... Fortunately, the earth isn't close to running out of oil anytime soon, but we need to be responsible about using what Mother Nature provides. (309)

Fuel-less exemplifies how oil companies are often happy to comply with "La palmera y la torre de acero," taking down their steel towers and replacing them with trees—or in the case of offshore drilling, by turning their platforms into artificial reefs through the Rigs-to-Reefs program.

Indeed, the industry has deployed its Rigs-to-Reefs program as an example of how oil infrastructure exists in harmony with Nature. For instance, a Phillips 66 Petroleum ad from 1996 claims, "To understand our concern for the environment, sometimes you have to look beneath the surface," further describing the rich biodiversity that congregated on a now decommissioned platform on the Gulf of Mexico, which they cleaned and left behind as a home for marine wildlife. The ad concludes, "Although we left this underwater paradise years ago, we took with

us an unforgettable picture of life that will remain deep within us all. And it is one which will endure for generations to come." Chevron refers to one of its own decommissioned offshore platforms in the Gulf as "The Sanctuary That Was Saved;" a site where a symbiotic relationship between oil infrastructure and the natural world sprung. Showing a smiling turtle and colorful fish the ad reads:

> Over 140 feet down, the ocean floor in the Gulf of Mexico looks like a desert. Offering marine life few places with ample shelter and food. But sanctuary comes from a surprising source: oil platforms. Over time, they become thriving habitats for entire populations of sea creatures. So when certain platforms are retired, people carefully clean, then place them. Maintaining an extraordinary oasis, and *an ideal place for nature to call home*. (Chevron, my italics)[26]

The environmentalism of the oil industry is ultimately concerned with the preservation or restoration of *specific* sites and ecosystems—so long it does not interfere with the maintenance and growth of the oil economy. Indeed, it is hardly coincidental that oil companies deploy the imagery of natural beauty—boasting their role in preserving and even creating it—given that such images convey a concrete and recognizable vision of a resilient natural world existing outside or beyond human society.

The oil industry's interest in Nature, however, precedes the environmental politics of the late twentieth century—a fact best seen in the industry's cultural politics in Venezuela. As part of corporate responsibility programs initially sponsored by the Rockefeller family, oil companies

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[26] This 1999 ad belongs to Chevron's campaign "People Do" (1985-2009). The campaign reminded consumers of the company's valiant efforts to preserve the environment (without mentioning many such efforts were state-mandated). Notably, the theme of providing a "home" for nature was repeated in the 1990 ad "The owls who couldn't be moved" about owls nesting on oil rigs. The ad praised Nature's ability to remain unmoved despite social innovations.

operating in Venezuela promoted cultural production dealing with Venezuela's natural landscapes and its traditional cultures (often understood as part of that very landscape). As Venezuelan cultural institutions were weakened during Juan Vicente Gómez's dictatorship (1907-1935), "oil companies stepped into this void and portrayed themselves as promoters of a national culture" (196). For instance, Royal Dutch Shell and Creole Oil (now part of ExxonMobile) published Spanish-language cultural magazines, as well as books on Venezuelan agriculture, folklore, and photography.[27] Creole's magazine, *El Farol* claimed to "give preference to everything Venezuelan, to promote our traditions, our folklore whether in literature, art, science, or history" (q. in Tinker Salas, 196). Another Creole publication, *Defendiendo lo Nuestro,* further promised "to promote and nurture expressions of Venezuelan culture" (197). Royal Dutch Shell also financed art exhibitions, performances, and even a documentary film about Venezuelan traditions.[28]

Venezuelan nationalism tends to depict the transnational oil industry as a neocolonial enterprise, which aimed to take Venezuela's oil, and also to destroy its culture by imposing a new one. Upon a closer look, however, we can see a more complicated picture of an industry simultaneously disdainful of and fascinated by the landscapes and cultures of this "primitive country" (Langley, 97).[29] More importantly, the very symbols meant to constitute an opposition

[27] Some of the cultural books published by Royal Dutch Shell include, *Orquideas de Venezuela* (1960) by G.C.K. Dunsterville, *25 cuadros de pintores en Venezuela* (1965) edited by Miguel Otero Silva, and *Artesanos de Venezuela* (1964) by Jaime Tello.

[28] *Llanero adentro* (1954) is likely the first full-length documentary about Venezuela. There are no surviving reels of the film, however, it is known to have focused on the landscapes of the *llanos* and on the traditions of the *llaneros*—the same objects of fascination as *Doña Bárbara*.

[29] Anne Rainey Langley's article, "I Kept House in a Jungle" published by *National Geographic* in 1939, conforms to the vision of Venezuela (outside the confines of Caracas) as nothing but wild Nature. Langley describes her oil settlement as a secluded "self-sustaining colony" in the midst of "an expanse of steaming jungle, which stretches savagely devoid of habitation to the Caribbean" (97). Filled with racist condescension towards Venezuelans, her article nonetheless expresses great admiration for the

to oil—national traditions and Nature—were, in fact, part and parcel of the oil industry's incursion into the country. A vision of Venezuelan identity rooted in Nature and traditions that are antithetical to oil poses no threat to the industry. In fact, a Venezuela focused on defending its cultural essence was advantageous to the oil industry. To visibly promote Venezuelan culture, and to claim that such a culture is antithetical to foreign oil extraction, is also a way to discourage further incursions into the world of oil.

Oil companies not only deployed nationalist symbols to their advantage, but as early as the 1950s, they began appropriating the language of ecology as part of their cultural politics in Venezuela. *Revista Shell* (1952-1962) explored the topic throughout its run, either by publishing articles about the need to value Venezuela's beautiful landscapes, or about various conservationist efforts.[30] Notably, in 1952 the magazine published a manifesto by Venezuelan botanist Tobias Lasser entitled, "El ecologismo, doctrina política del futuro." The manifesto argues that the planet's ecological problems boil down to the improper use of renewable natural resources. The article points to Africa and the Middle East, as the prime examples of civilization's "irrational management" of nature's "gifts" (41, my translation); the regions' poverty stemming from their inability to find the proper equilibrium between society and Nature.

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country's awe-inspiring landscapes. Notably, Langley's piece conflates this wild Nature with women, just as Gallegos (among many), had done in *Doña Bárbara:* "It is a country of sharp contrasts, where day descends into the darkness of night without any interlude of twilight. With the people it is much the same. Wide-eyed little girls bloom into womanhood with a swiftness which ignores adolescence" (97)

[30] For instance, the article "Un problema de conservación resuelto" by Francisco Tamayo details the ecological problems that had once plagued the region of Tacagua, near Caracas. According to the article, the region's forests had been cut down by local inhabitants, who used it for wood and fuel. Through the planting of new trees, and better soil management, the article claimed the region's ecological problems had been successfully solved (13-16). This is a notable example of a reactionary view of ecology, where environmental issues are blamed on the poor and their use of specific natural resources for survival, while large-scale extraction and exploitation remain invisible. As Robert Nixon and Ramachandra Guha explore in *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor* and *Environmentalism: A Global History* respectively, this type of environmentalism has dissociated ecology from social justice movements—problematically overlooking the extent to which pollution and resource degradation overwhelmingly affect poor communities.

Ecology, according to Lasser, is a quasi-religious movement that restores man's [sic] peaceful coexistence with the landscape ("*paisaje*")—a coexistence rooted in "el amor mismo por la madre tierra" (40). Notably, the manifesto critiques socialism and communism for their aim to subsume society and its issues to the economy, whereas love for Mother Earth, must be "extento de consideraciones económicas, como lo han estado los grandes amores" (40). Notably, capitalism and its monetization of the biosphere, and colonialism and its plunder (particularly relevant in the aforementioned regions), remain conspicuously absent from Lasser's analysis. So does petroleum. In fact, the manifesto goes out of its way to point out that ecological issues revolve around water, soil, flora and fauna, but not around solar energy or the atmosphere, both of which are beyond the realm of "man's" control (40). Lasser's ecology, tacitly promoted by an oil company, comprises a classically Romantic stance, in its call to withdraw from economic concerns, and therefore to find in Nature a space of love and harmony.

Lasser's ecological manifesto, along with the oil industry's environmentalism, should help us better understand, on the one hand, why a twenty-first century critique of the oil industry in Venezuela should include a critique of Nature. Nature as an atemporal realm has functioned as an effective tool to bypass the question of oil's effect on the biosphere—to add difficulty to the already complex topic of climate change and its slow effects on the natural world. In short, in questioning the discourses and practices of the oil industry, it is crucial not to fall into the temptation of confusing *Nature* with ecology.

Colonial powers, postcolonial nations, global capital, environmentalists, and defenders of the local are frequent unlikely partners in the maintenance of a vision of an atemporal, transcendental Nature. The view of empty wilderness as a timeless space outside history and civilization has been able to survive the contingencies of Spanish colonialism in the Americas

due to its ability to adapt to the needs of the colony, the nation, and capital alike. Maps, political denominations, power relations, and even particular ways of viewing Nature can change, but the vision of an eternal, primordial realm continues to be tweaked to function as the hegemonic vision of the biosphere. If the Marxist tradition and its focus on dialectical change should remind us of anything, is that *things* do not persist—be it capital, Christianity or the belief in transcendental Nature—because they stay exactly the same. On the contrary, things remain precisely because they are sufficiently malleable to *change enough* to be appropriated into different contexts and ideological projects, without being altogether overturned. Or—to draw from a different methodology and its set of metaphors—as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, the Darwinian notion of "fitness" (as in "survival of the fittest"), is ultimately meant to signify the preservation of traits best suited for *changing circumstances*. Change and permanence as opposing entities are thus subverted, as that which can remain, is precisely that which changes. This means that a timeless, transcendental Nature cannot possibly exist, as it is continually changing. Yet, it also means that this pervasive view of Nature persists precisely because of its ability to take up different representational and ideological shapes.

Even cotemporary understandings of wilderness as a threatened space in need of protection (as opposed to civilization's barbarous other in need of proper domestication) contains traces of a vision of Nature as the possible space outside the dangers and toxicity of contemporary societies. Underlying much ecological thinking lies the assumption that Nature should be returned to and kept in the condition in which it existed when humans had not yet intervened. Yet, that timeless space is not only impossible, but it is also tantamount to requiring that the biosphere and its living entities stop existing and becoming. That human-less

Nature is, after all, what Columbus and Vespucci thought to have found, even as the evidence of human societies and their effects on the landscape was in front of them.

Nonetheless, I cannot stress enough that to critique this vision of Nature is not an argument against attempting to undo the violence humans inflict on the environment, or against creating spaces meant to preserve and take care of the natural world. On the contrary, the reminder that Nature is not and has never been some external entity *out there* is an acknowledgment of the distressing fragility of any attempt to protect specific natural spaces. The attempt to solve ecological problems by designating spaces—now not just people—that must, in a sense, *return to Nature* runs the risk of failing to address the interconnectivity of the biosphere: oil spills, radioactivity, green house gases, invasive species do not obey the borders designating the proper spaces where Nature is to be protected. As Ulrich Beck reminds us, "the dangers of highly developed nuclear and chemical productive forces abolish the foundations and categories according to which we have thought and acted to this point, such as space and time, work and leisure time, factory and nation state indeed even between the continents" (22).[31] Thus, the nature reserve is, at the moment, an impossible, if necessary promise. As our analysis of the oil industry's environmentalism shows, parks, reserves, and wilderness areas often help maintain the status quo of a proliferating and borderless toxicity, as governments, corporations, and individuals can "help" the environment by caring for or investing in specific "nature sites." The "natural" thus becomes a compensation for modernity's ruins.

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[31] "Forests have […] been dying for some centuries now—first through being transformed into fields, then through reckless overcutting. But the death of forests today occurs globally, as the implicit consequence of industrialization—with quite different social and political consequences. Heavily wooded countries like Norway and Sweden, which hardly have any pollutant-intensive industries of their own, are also affected. They have to settle up the pollution accounts of other highly industrialized countries with dying trees, plants and animal species" (Beck, 21).

Conclusion

The need to challenge the myth of a transcendental Nature as the stage for the nation's unfolding explicitly addresses the fact that questions of politics and history generally possess a bracketed, a priori vision of Nature that largely determines the conceptual and material boundaries of nations and their histories. For instance, the consolidation of the Latin American creole states in the nineteenth century was largely based on a vision of the American territory as a space of Nature. Consequently, the question of Nature has often mediated the relationship between modern Latin American states and global capital, as visions of the nation's destiny have often been tied to the export of raw materials and their integration into the world market. This has serious implications for Venezuela as the nation with the largest reserves of crude oil in the world.[32] The exploitation of such reserves cannot be purely considered either in terms of natural impacts or of social needs, as is generally the case—the perils of local pollution and global climate change versus the needs of the Venezuelan economy, and therefore a significant segment of the Venezuelan people. However, as long as Nature continues to signify an ahistorical essence that is both external and constitutive of nation and capital, it will be difficult to break away from the vision of social and historical change as the epic battle of "man" against his surroundings. In other words, the boundaries surrounding the idea of an allegedly eternal Nature in cultural and political thought create particular understandings of time and history that place human

[32] Venezuela's heavy crude oil (similar to tar-sand reserves), while abundant, is much more difficult to extract and has a significantly greater environmental impact than Saudi and Iraqi reserves. In fact, it is still disputed whether the entirety of Venezuela's reserves can actually be extracted with current technology, and whether it is environmentally and fiscally responsible to try to exploit these reserves. Lastly, although the existence of Venezuela's vast reserves is widely accepted *at the moment* the question of reserves is always easily disputed: oil geologists are still paid by oil transnationals and the OPEC nations to not disclose their findings.

subjectivity not only at the center of historical change, but also as the agent and object of such changes, while everything else becomes passive background.

Chapter II

Extraction: Oil's Invisibility and The Novel of the Oil Encounter

> *¿Cuánto tiempo duró el esplendor de aquel pueblo nacido de hombres y mujeres que llegaron en naves portentosas, atravesando tormentas y quietudes llenas de resolana? Apenas veinte años después, el rumor de las máquinas se había apagado definitivamente, y las cabrías habían sido desmontadas. Desde una alta torre de concreto y de cristal, situada a miles de kilómetros, hombres pulcrísimos dirigían el funcionamiento de los balancines y los pozos, registrando en tiras de papel milimetrado que brotaban de exactos cerebros electrónicos, la calidad, la cantidad de aceite, las posibilidades de venta y el porcentaje de la ganancias que repartirían entre los grandes de Wall Street. Apenas treinta años después cada vez eran menos los contingentes de obreros y empleados que salían de los portones del Campo Giraluna, y aunque la ciudad había crecido ostentosamente hacia los cuatro puntos cardenales, sus hermosas avenidas se iban quedando solitarias, los árboles que las flanqueaban se iban llenando de polvo, y las casas se cerraban, quedaban abandonadas a la erosión, a los insectos devastadores y a las ratas, mientras sus antiguos ocupantes huían hacia otros rumbos, preferiblemente hacia el sur, donde ya resplandecían las nuevas hogueras del progreso. Apenas cuarenta años después, a pesar de la ilusión y la esperanza, se descascaraban las paredes de los altos edificios y un silencio untuoso caía tenazmente sobre los techados, e impregnaba la cabeza de los tenaces habitantes. Y ahora, cuando se han cumplido cincuenta años, sólo los sobrevivientes se aferraban a los palos del desastre, sin querer salvar realmente la memoria del avance indetenible de la disolución.*
>
> —Milagros Mata Gil

> *Oil fills us with such arrogance that we begin believing we can easily overcome such unyielding obstacles as time.*
>
> —Ryszard Kapuściński

The first paragraph of Milagros Mata Gil's 1989 novel, *Memorias de una antigua primavera* gives a rather complete overview of the entire novel, which details the birth, explosive growth, and slow death of Santa María del Mar, a fictionalization El Tigre, an oil town in eastern

Venezuela. The novel, in turn, draws from older Venezuelan petronarratives—most of which depicted the growth of real oil towns in the first four decades of the twentieth century—and chronicles what happened after the end of the boom. In this sense, Santa María del Mar functions as a composite of the historical mining town, as both a historical site and the central subject in what in Venezuela has been termed the *novela del petróleo*. From a certain vantage point, the novel's opening paragraph tells us everything we need to know: in the span of fifty years, a town is founded, achieves great splendor, and turns into a ghost town. Its fate was all along manipulated thousands of kilometers away—perhaps in Caracas, Houston or New York—by refined men working in towers made of glass and concrete. Just as this passage conveys more, so does *Memorias de una antigua primavera* as it textures multiple narratives transpiring during the boom and death of Santa María del Mar: the disorienting feelings elicited by growth and decay happening simultaneously, the knowledge that the cycle will be repeated elsewhere. The narrative also plays with the disjuncture between the experience of this cycle in situ, and its abstraction. From afar, the birth and death of a town is little more than a question of pumpjacks, wells, the quantity and quality of extracted crude, sales, and earning opportunities.

This distant, abstracted vantage point is mirrored in much of Venezuelan cultural production, as well as social and political analyses, as oil's place in society is often reduced to a question of petrodollars and the health of the national economy. Notably, the invisibility of oil exploitation and its aftermath is the norm within major oil-exporting nations, where exploitation has traditionally been represented as taking place in secluded, uninhabited regions. Oil towns are thus continually depicted—if at all—as distant, disposable, interchangeable, and in the case of Venezuela, outside the proper bounds of the nation.

This chapter explores the ways in which the localities and labor of oil extraction are kept out of sight—an issue of particular significance when we consider that oil production and consumption has for a century arguably been the human enterprise with the greatest impact on the distribution of global space. In other words, this chapter implicitly sketches a picture of what *was made to remain unseen.* I argue that ignoring oil extraction in the petro state (be it through active concealment, or inadvertent forgetting) is symptomatic of a desire to erase the dirty and violent process of extracting, transporting, refining and consuming oil. Furthermore, to pretend that oil has little to do in the material existence of the modern Venezuelan state is to operate within the modern myth that human societies have successfully liberated themselves from nature and geography. Thus, to act as if an oil nation could be liberated from the processes of extracting its oil is also to aim to live without "having to think about the material processes that make an individual life possible" (Huber, *Lifeblood*).

In order to carry out this line of inquiry, I look at the few sustained efforts to contend with the experiential aspects of oil exploitation in Venezuela—texts to which I will refer as the *narratives of the oil encounter*. The narratives of the oil encounter present life in small, isolated towns, which came into existence or exponentially grew as a result of oil exploitation.[33] I adapt the term from novelist and cultural critic Amitav Ghosh, who uses it to describe the handful of Middle Eastern novels depicting "the human experiences that surround the production of oil […] lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international" (140, 142).[34] My analysis orbits around three novels: *Mene,*

[33] Among these we have *Mancha de aceite* (1935) by César Uribe Piedrahita*, Mene* and *Casandra* (1936 and 1957) by Ramón Díaz Sánchez, *Guachimanes* (1954 although written in between 1934-36), Mario Briceño-Iragorry, *Campo Sur* (1960) by Efraín Subero, *Talud derrumbado* (1961) by Arturo Croce, *Oficina No. 1* (1961), *Memorias de una antigua primavera* (1989) by Milagros Mata Gil, and the digital novel *Tierra de extracción* (2000) by Domenico Chiappe.

Guachimanes and *Memorias de una antigua primavera*, all depicting fictionalized accounts of real oil towns in the first half of the twentieth century. The texts portray how in a relatively short period of time, every aspect of a particular place and the people inhabiting it were incomprehensibly transformed by oil. *Mene* by Ramón Díaz Sánchez was published in 1936 as a testimonial of contemporary events in the Lake Maracaibo region. Also depicting the eastern shores of Lake Maracaibo, *Guachimanes* by Gabriel Bracho Montiel was first written in the 1930s, but was edited and published in Chile in 1954 during the author's exile. I also briefly juxtapose the milieu presented in *Guachimanes* with that of *Oficina No. 1* by Miguel Otero Silva published in 1961. I close my analysis by examining Milagros Mata Gil's *Memorias de una antigua primavera.* Published in 1989, the novel depicts the contentious history of Santa María del Mar, a fictionalized El Tigre.

Before turning to the novels, it bears pointing out that the texts analyzed in this chapter were intended for a national readership assumed to be unfamiliar with the depicted milieus. Consequently, the novels are explicitly concerned with the conspicuousness of the oil industry, aiming to grant visibility to a largely invisible world. Yet, despite the novels' best effort, the unfamiliarity continues, and even extends to the texts themselves: novels about oil have never been particularly popular among readers or critics. The ambivalence with which novels of the oil encounter have been received possibly stems from the sense that these texts do not fit within conventional ideas of Venezuelan literature. Neither depicting sublime nature nor a gritty Caracas, their settings remain out of place in taxonomies describing the country's twentieth century literature. Furthermore, the world they depict seems to be out of step with conventional

[34] I also speak of *petronarratives* (of which narratives of the oil encounter are a subset) over *la novela del petróleo,* the preferred term in Venezuelan scholarship because it better highlights the fact that we are talking about a particular type of petronarrative—thus not falling into the common assumption that a petronarrative need to be about sites of extraction.

national and literary periodizations. Graeme Macdonald argues that oil literature is ill fitted for national literatures because oil's "multinational structures, routes and determinations" (31) makes it impossible to speak of oil, or even of specific sites of extraction, in purely local or national terms. His claim that "oil literature is simultaneously global and domestic" (31), certainly applies to the Venezuelan narratives of the oil encounter, a fact that literary critics—in their bounded, if understandable focus on the nation—have not sufficiently explored. As the opening of *Memorias de una antigua primavera* concisely conveys, Venezuelan oil, consumed and profitable in other latitudes, is not exclusively national. This chapter proposes ways of reinserting the complex topography and rich history of oil exploitation into Venezuelan literature, further placing this particular national context within the global contexts of the exploitation and consumption of fossil fuels.

Mene in and out of Place

Despite being the symbol and material substratum of Venezuelan modernity, little is new about *mene*—the local word for petroleum. The dark, viscous liquid has been known and used for medicinal purposes, fuel, and insulation in the Lake Maracaibo region since pre-Columbian times. So abundant were the region's reserves that before its industrial exploitation it was known to seep out of the ground on its own. In the twentieth century, oil became the region's defining feature, as foreign oil companies began to settle and exploit the subsoil surrounding Lake Maracaibo. Ramón Díaz Sánchez's novel *Mene* (1936) is one of the first fictionalized accounts of the early days of oil exploitation in the neighboring towns of Cabimas, Lagunillas and Mene Grande. [35] Depicting events that transpired in the 1920s and early 1930s, when Díaz Sánchez

[35] The early novels of the oil encounter—César Uribe Piedrahita's *Mancha de aceite*, Ramón Díaz Sánchez's *Mene* and Gabriel Bracho Montiel's *Guachimanes* inevitably focus on the greater-Cabimas region (which includes Lagunillas and Mene Grande), as they were written before oil extraction successfully expanded to other regions in the country. However, the greater Cabimas region continues to

worked as a journalist and municipal judge in Cabimas, the novel was initially read as a work of fictionalized journalism. *Mene* has since gained recognition as a rare observer's accounts of life in oil towns as industrial oil exploitation emerged in Venezuela. While the text predominately focuses on a short period of time, it carefully ties the region's sudden transformation into a center for oil extraction with a long history of resource exploitation, depicting oil as its newest iteration: "Hace cuatrocientos años dolió por vez primera este desgarramiento. Sin embargo, era más lento, más parsimonioso entonces." (27). Indeed, a question left unresolved in the text is whether oil exploitation represents a new economic order, and therefore an irreparable break from a previous way of life, or whether it is ultimately a continuation of a long history of resource extraction. As the quote above suggests, however, even if oil exploitation continues a history of extraction, it nonetheless stands apart in its speed and scale, appearing to overturn a region's way of life within two decades.

To better situate our analysis we now briefly turn to the historical events documented by *Mene.* The first oil well exploited for industrial production was *Zumaque I/Mene Grande,* roughly fifty miles south from Cabimas, claimed in 1914 by Caribbean Petroleum (later acquired by Royal Dutch Shell). However, it was not until the 1922 explosion of *Barroso II* (also known as *Los Barrosos*) near Cabimas that Venezuela gained widespread attention as one of the most fertile lands for oil-exploitation in the world.[36] The explosion released a forty-meter jet of crude

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be a source of interest for newer petronarratives such as the digital novel *Tierra de extracción* by Domenico Chiappe, or Jacobo Penzo's fictionalized documentary *Cabimas: donde todo comenzó* (2012), both of which depict it as the site of an original transgression: not only is it the first major oil town in South America, but unlike other mining towns, it is located near a large metropolitan center, and was long settled before the arrival of transnational oil companies.

[36] *La Compañía Minera Petrolia del Táchira* (1878-1934) was the first oil company in Venezuela. Its activities, however, centered on turning crude oil into kerosene for national consumption, which greatly differentiates it from the foreign firms that began exploiting oil in the 1910s.

petroleum that took nine days to contain, visible forty-five kilometers away in the city of Maracaibo. After nine days, the story goes, Cabimas was covered in crude petroleum. While not the beginning of oil exploitation in the region, the explosion of *Barroso II* is often depicted as an event that forever marked Venezuela, as it signaled the intensification of industrial oil extraction. Three years later, oil exports replaced coffee as the main source of national income, initiating the country's absolute dependence on its petroleum reserves. By the mid-1930s, a national road system connected much of the country's territory, new cities were emerging, investment in agriculture plummeted as cheap imports flooded the market, and a mass migration from rural to urban areas exploded.[37]

Barroso II proved to be a significant event, on the one hand, because of the unusual visibility it granted a resource that tends to remain unseen. On the other hand, the grand explosion spectacularly signaled a place where oil could be found, thus attracting migration to Cabimas. In this regard it is important to point out that during the early years of oil exploitation in Venezuela oil companies were highly secretive about their exploration sites in order to fend-off competition, as well as to avoid possible legal disputes with landowners or the state. Of course, once a particular site was known to contain a productive well, as was the case with *Barroso II,* the usual secrecy could no longer be maintained: the arrival of machinery, technicians and laborers was followed by individuals attempting to profit from the new

[37] In his study of oil infrastructure and technology, Alfredo Cilentosarli documents these dramatic demographic and territorial changes: "A partir del siglo XIX todas las nuevas ciudades formadas en Venezuela, a excepción de Ciudad Guyana, fueron originadas por las actividades de exploración y explotación petrolera, en el estado Zulia, al sur del estado Anzoátegui, y al norte, noreste y sur del estado Monagas. Entre 1941 y 1950 el crecimiento de la población en los estados petroleros Zulia (62,1%), Anzoátegui (55,4%) y Monagas (42,9%), sólo es superado por el Distrito Federal (86,7%). Los campamentos, pueblos y ciudades petroleras nacieron y crecieron a la sombra de cada nuevo campo petrolífero descubierto, y también languidecieron cuando el petróleo dejó de manar los pozos de la región" (139).

discovery, either by directly working for the company, or by setting up modest commercial enterprises (grocery stores, bars, brothels are common subjects in the novels of the oil encounter) to service or even permanently establish the new settlement. *Mene* depicts the effects of oil's myth of great wealth: "llegaban sin cesar a las playas petroleras […] La leyenda de la riqueza del petróleo, de los salarios fabulosos, de las transacciones fantásticas, se irradiaban por toda la nación y atravesaba sus fronteras. Venía un ejército delirante de todos los vientos del globo" (68).[38] The dramatic population growth in regions known to contain productive oil wells had a profound demographic and territorial impact, turning a predominantly rural country into an urban society at unprecedented rates.[39]

The threat posed by the scale and speed of the transformations following *Barroso II* is a driving concern throughout *Mene.* The depicted towns—Cabimas, Lagunillas, and Mene Grande—appear to be on the brink of disappearing, even as they rapidly grow and prosper. Given the intense volatility of these sites *Mene* is ultimately more invested in capturing the growth of the oil town as it is in the development of its characters. Critic Gustavo Carrera Damas agrees, "Se trata de esto, de una novela que plantea un tema y capta un ambiente. Los mismos personajes están creados como una consecuencia y a su vez *como un aditamento de la ambientación, que es el lo central y determinante"* (Carrera Damas, 60, my italics). In other

[38] *Mene* explores the cultural and racial implications of this demographic change by depicting the racial hierarchies established by oil companies. For instance, the text tells the story of Enguerrand Narcissus Philibert, a Trinidadian immigrant blacklisted by U.S. American oil companies for using a "Whites Only" bathroom. Unfortunately, literary scholars have failed to adequately explore the question of immigration and racial tensions in the novel of the oil encounter, beyond analyses of national sovereignty and cultural authenticity. This chapter attempted to address these issues. However, upon further analysis I realized that questions of race, gender, and the chauvinism in oil literature and literary criticism deserved a chapter all its own. Consequently, as I turn this dissertation into a book manuscript I will expand my analysis of these issues.

[39] Venezuela underwent the fastest rate of urbanization in Latin America in the first half of the twentieth century (Karl, 82). "Migration flows that took over a century to accomplish in the advanced industrialized countries occurred in a mere twenty years in Venezuela. The proportion of the workforce engaged in agriculture declined rapidly—from 72% in 1920 to 44% in 1950" (281).

words, the text aims to grasp onto a place in constant existential crisis: "Pueblos oscuros—Cabimas, Lagunillas, Mene,—se incorporaban al frenesí del mundo. Las veredas se convertían en calles, los cujisales en viviendas: unas viviendas presurosas, hechas con los cajones de las máquinas y tapadas con planchas de zinc" (30). While the transformation of paths into streets and trees into houses points to growth and urbanization, the passage also illustrates the flimsy nature of this growth in its brief material description of these new houses—a different kind of *house that oil built*. Built hastily with scrap materials thrown out by oil companies, these precarious houses are disposable in their very material basis. This sense of instability, the existential threat posed by industrial oil exploitation, prompts *Mene* (and the novels of the oil encounter as a whole) to attempt to capture, through its detailed descriptions, a place in time. In this way, the text simultaneously tracks and attempts to make sense of a changing environment.

Oil's imprint is most palpable in the text's ambiance, and its effect on people's bodies as they are introduced to and adapt to new sensorial experiences. Noise and smell are particularly important in this regard. In order to highlight the changing experiences of life in an oil town, *Mene* opens by presenting a world that quickly vanished with the advent of oil exploitation. Cabimas is in the midst of one of its most important annual events, the celebrations honoring the *Virgen del Rosario*. Little happens during the celebration, as the text mostly provides a sense of place: Cabimas is a small, isolated, and modest town, whence the waves of Lake Maracaibo can be heard, its shores smelled. In the midst of a celebration, *Mene'*s first chapters also buzz with the sounds of music, fireworks, and the recently renovated church bells: "El jubiloso despertar del campanario […] atrajo a la feligresía […] Toda la noche fue de música y cohetes" (11). A few years later, the city is imbued with the smell of gas, as well as perspired, burned, or dead bodies. Along this sensorial line, the rest of the novel is further filled with references to relentless

thundering noise:

> … tenían que alzar la voz para entenderse. Ya era un hábito gritar. El pueblo todo, de un confín a otro, estremecíase en un trueno constante. Vibraban sirenas, repercutían los martillos de aire comprimido, zumbaban los motores de los balancines. Cada taladro tiene un balancín tiene un motor que succiona el negro óleo de la tierra; cada balancín tiene un motor que palpita *como el corazón de un cíclope*; cada motor tiene una caldera que regurgita como una *monstruosa arteria roja*. […] De la calle subían los rugidos de los automóviles y el *herido grito* de los gramófonos. (54, my italics)

New persistent noise has altered sensorial habits. Local inhabitants, in turn, have no choice but to become accustomed to a new soundscape, screaming to communicate and ultimately learning to tune out their surroundings,[40] "Ya su oído, familiarizado […], no se resiente de los ruidos que forman el nuevo ruido de la vida en esta tierra" (50). While the above passage depicts the naturalization of this soundscape through habit, it simultaneously highlights its uncanny nature by creating a hellish vision that combines the monstrous and the corporeal (*a Cyclops's heart, a monstrous artery*, *wounded screams*). This passage further exemplifies the way in which *Mene*, as well as later novels of the oil encounter, continually describe the infrastructure of oil exploitation: it is monstrous, dangerous, inherently alien. Notably, while the style of the novel could for the most part be described as realist (in its recourse to factual, linear, straightforward descriptions of everyday life within a particular milieu), its depiction of oil and its technology is hyperbolic and filled with references to horrific, often fantastical imagery and personae. Indeed,

[40] Emily Ann Thompson defines soundscapes as "an auditory or aural landscape. Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture to make sense of that world. The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds." (1)

the small change of descriptive style in the above passage is noticeable in the metaphor and similes that begin appearing after "cada balancín tiene un motor."

We can see these moments of horrific imagery as traces of the Romantic legacy in its rejection of industrialism. Notable in this regard is the fact that the novel's first mention of oil extracting technology describes it as inherently unnatural, "Maquinarias fornidas, saturadas, diríase, de un espíritu de odio contra todo lo verde" (30). These moments illustrate the anxiety elicited by a new, loud, ugly "vegetación fantástica" (31), not only in its sensorial strangeness, but also as a tangible symbol of the plunder foreign oil companies carried out in the region. Furthermore, the very strangeness and intricacy of this equipment, accompanied by sudden material and social transformations, makes this new infrastructure synonymous with an uncertain future, the unmooring of ways of life and vernacular ways of comprehending the world.

An exchange between two long-time residents Casiano and Casildo further illustrates the way the local population comprehends the speed and intensity of these changes:

> —Esto ha cambiado mucho, Casildo.
>
> —Sí, señor: mucho. No se conoce. Esta no es Cabimas, la Cabimas de nosotros.
>
> —Ni su sombra, ni su sombra. Mira todas esas cosas nuevas. Fíjate en esas calles, en esas torres; acércate a ese muelle. ¿Quiénes son esas gentes que parecen que se han vuelto locas?
>
> —¡Virgen del Rosario! ¿Y la iglesia? ¿No la abren? [...]
>
> —Puedes darte cuenta por el estado de la torre. Con tantas cosas nuevas, la pobre iglesia *parece que ha envejecido de pronto*. (44, my italics)

This conversation conveys the disorienting effects of Cabimas' abrupt transformation, which has rendered it unrecognizable to its inhabitants. Even its shadow proves elusive as new streets,

buildings, and faces appeared, and old ones were displaced or neglected. Notable in this regard is the way in which the old center of town, its church, has suddenly ("de pronto") turned into a ruin, "cuyo campanario albergó a todos los murciélagos del pueblo" (31). Such rapid dilapidation, along with the fact that the church as an institution no longer participates in events of local significance, underlines the temporal disturbance of the town's internal rhythms. Notably, timekeeping is one of the traditional functions of the Catholic Church (both in its local and global iterations): the millenarian Gregorian calendar, yearly and seasonal celebrations, weekly mass and parochial festivities (baptisms, communions, weddings, funerals) all help punctuate the passage of time. Alternatively, we can see the church's timekeeping as a framework that helps make change legible, providing ways of understanding it. The church's sudden ruination illustrates a disruption of Cabimas' former rhythms. The new streets, towers, people, and ruins noted by Casiano and Casildo, are the visible, localizable effects of the region's new relationship to capitalism—an intensification of a long history of resource extraction.[41]

Casiano and Casildo are not simply disconcerted by the speed and intensity of Cabimas' transformation. Theirs is not purely an anxiety about the loss of an idealized way of life. Indeed, much of what is at stake in this conversation is the fact that the two men's families have been deceitfully displaced from their homes. Casildo's home and land were purchased at a low price by oil companies, which did not inform him of his property's true value. Unable to settle anywhere else, he tells Casiano:

[41] It is important to note, however, that largely defined by the Catholic Church, this previous local rhythm was neither entirely self-enclosed nor auto-constitutive. I further hesitate to go as far as arguing that oil exploitation signaled the region's opening to the world market, not only because of a long history of resource extraction, but also because during the century preceding oil exploitation, the Lake Maracaibo region was a stopping-point for the coffee trade grown in the northern Andes and shipped from Lake Maracaibo to Europe. More specifically then, the region went from a peripheral crossroads for trade, to a key site of extraction, experiencing a sudden influx of capital, technology, imports and a disposable working force.

> Desde que salí de mi casa he andado como el judío errante, de un lado para otro. De donde quiera tengo que salir. Me metí primero por allá, por *Pueblo Aparte*, y enseguida me dijeron: "Desocupe que van a perforar aquí". Después cogí para *El Menito*, y apenas había empezado a quemar unos tablones, otra vuelta lo mismo: "Desocupe". Ahora, hace tres meses, me metí por ese monte adentro y ya me vuelven con la misma. (45)

Casiano's family suffers a similar fate, as the jet of oil released by the explosion of *Barroso II* covered his house, rendering it inhabitable: "También Casiano y sus hijos se vieron relegados. Eran como tantos matojos, arrancados de cuajo y aventados" (31). These families have been deprived from their capacity to belong—to articulate their place in the world materially and symbolically.

In its emphases on displacements, disorienting transformations, and attachments (or lack thereof), *Mene* participates in the process of creating a sense of place for the oil town in particular: it attempts to make intelligible how oil exploitation is experienced from up-close. In regards to the symbolic articulation of place, a statement such as "Esta no es Cabimas, la Cabimas de nosotros," only makes sense through the implicit acknowledgment that places are not simply specific locations possessing certain topographic traits. Imbricated in *place* are ideas of the proper and belonging (as in, *to be in one's place*): "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan, 3). Thus, while *place* refers to material locations, it is also a way of seeing, experiencing, and making the world legible: "not so much a quality of things in the world but an aspect of the way we choose to think about it" (Creswell, 11). Place further implies a sense of *permanence,* even as that permanence is not necessarily real—it rarely is. Instead, this permanence is more "a myth functioning as a memory" (Williams, 43) of securely dwelling within a knowable locus where change can be, if not entirely predicted,

at least assimilated. Such a sense of security, of course, requires a degree of stability and continuity, as a coherent relation between past, present, and future can be established. Or, in other words, *place* requires a past (whether real or imagined), as well as the possibility to extend itself in the future.

While the core of the narrative centers on Cabimas' explosive transformation, *Mene* also depicts the nearby town of Lagunillas del Agua as a remnant of the past at the brink of disappearing. It is in Lagunillas del Agua that oil exploitation appears not as an unprecedented event, but rather as an *intensification* of a long history of violent resource extraction. The last of the *Pueblos de Agua*, Lagunillas was one of the few pre-Columbian towns surrounding Lake Maracaibo to survive the Spanish conquest. Its symbolic significance partially stems from the fact that the name "Venezuela" comes from these towns: after seeing the stilt houses atop the lake, a practice that continued in Lagunillas into the twentieth-century, Alfonso de Ojeda, a member of Amerigo Vespucci's crew, named the region *Venezoila*, or "Little Venice." *Mene* reminds the reader of this fact,

> Pueblos como éste, rancherías más bien, impregnados del olor del pescado fresco: Venezuela. Aquí nació este nombre. —Eran muchos [los pueblos indígenas] pero apenas queda este: Lagunillas. Todos los otros han desaparecido. Los agentes de los Welsares y especialmente Ambrosio Alfínger, hicieron gran devastación entre los indios. (29)[42]

The text's depiction of Lagunillas is a reminder of the extent to which the very existence of "Venezuela" has historically been tied not only to resource extraction, but specifically to *mineral* exploitation. The mythical El Dorado, after all, was believed to be located in what is now

[42] The Welser family received colonial rights to exploit mineral deposits and import African slaves in what is now contemporary Venezuelan territory by King Carlos I in 1528. One of their key enterprises involved the search for El Dorado (Leveratto, 123). They hired Ambrosio Alfinger, or Ambrosius Ehinger, a Bavarian explorer who worked for the Welsers, who founded Maracaibo, at first named Ulm in 1531 (Marley, 839).

Venezuela and Colombia. *Mene* attributes Lagunillas' long-term survival to its strategic location, which allowed it to resist attacks from land ("la tierra enemiga") and water: "La gente de Santa Rita y Cabimas debió vivir bajo un constante terror del lago que no conocieron los lagunilleros" (29). At the end of the text, however, most of Lagunillas lies in ruins. The last standing site of a long contentious history that included conquest, centuries of colonialism, wars, and pandemics is swiftly set ablaze. By dwelling on its long history and swift destruction, *Mene* implies that a process begun by the Spanish conquest is quickly, albeit accidentally, culminated by oil exploitation.

The Lagunillas fire appears and ends abruptly in the text, and its causes are never explained. The event is over in less than a page. Some chapters later, Lagunillas is being rebuilt in the distance. It may at first seem paradoxical that *Mene* devotes such little time to one of its most climactic scenes. However, as Manuel Caballero argues, despite its short presence, the entire text centers around this brief moment of destruction, which remains present "from the first paragraph to the last" (170, my translation). Indeed, throughout its narrative, *Mene* explicitly chains together a series of fires, most of them killing no more than a handful of workers; a trace of destruction that culminates with the burning of Lagunillas del Agua: "Cada semana registrábase un nuevo evento de la muerte. A lo largo de los itinerarios de la explotación el fuego iba trazando una roja cadena" (67).

Although *Mene* only depicts the burning of Lagunillas del Agua once, the town was widely known for fighting off fires throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The text likely depicts the grand fires of 1928 or 1933, both of which were followed by the reconstruction of the town in the same place—a reconstruction we see at the end of the text. However, even as Lagunillas is being rebuilt at the end of *Mene* we are to understand its briefly depicted fire and reconstruction as part

of a cycle that will likely continue. In fact, another fire destroyed Lagunillas del Agua a year after the publication of *Mene.* The fire killed approximately two hundred people and prompted the federal government to relocate the remaining inhabitants to the newly built Ciudad Ojeda.[43] The burning of Lagunillas del Agua could accurately be seen as the annihilation of the region's history, as one of the few remains of its pre-Columbian past was set ablaze. However, the fact that a town was destroyed as a result of resource exploitation, and a new one was founded in its wake—a town named after a Spanish conquistador no less!—ultimately repeats a centuries-long process. The leveling of a town as a result of resource extraction is itself a form of continuity.

As we have thus far examined, *Mene* is highly concerned with the swift and devastating transformation of these sites, be it through their complete physical destruction as is the case with Lagunillas, or through the effects of new technology and infrastructure as felt in Cabimas. However, the swift transformation of these sites is not in itself the central problem. A key concern in the text is the fact that transformations stem from and produce a homogenizing view of place. Consequently, different types of smooth surfaces and seamless geographies that conceptually and sometimes literally flatten the particularities or histories of a place recurrently appear in the novel of the oil encounter.

In *Mene*, the imposition of a smooth, uncomplicated geographic perspective emerges early in the narrative, as a group of oil industrialists and geologists tour eastern Lake Maracaibo soon before the extraction process begins. A tour guide provides a thorough description of the region's

[43] A 1937 Presidential Decree ordered the construction of Ciudad Ojeda in order to substitute Lagunillas del Agua, and other precarious housing developments lining Lake Maracaibo (Gaceta Oficial, 145). Earlier fires in Lagunillas also prompted other executive orders, as the *Ley de Vigilancia para impedir la contaminación de las aguas por el petróleo,* one of Venezuela's earliest environmental laws was enacted in 1937, in an attempt to address pollution in Lake Marcaibo (Cilentosarli, 144-145, *Gaceta Oficial*). Today a town of Lagunillas continues to exist: the inland portion of Lagunillas del Agua, widely polluted by a gas compression plan. Chapter IV talks about the town's environmental problems in the twenty-first century.

history; this is where we first find out about Lagunillas' pre-Columbian origins. This historical information is juxtaposed with descriptions of what surrounds the men: vegetation, people, houses, the colors and movement of water. At the end of his tour, one of the engineers sums up what he saw: "Todo esto ser petróleo; todo esto. Basta viendo este Montecito. Es el petróleo que no dejándolo crecer. ¡Oh! mucho puede la naturaleza produciendo estos arbolitos. Miles de años debió haber una selva gigantesca que se hundió y está ahora convertida en petróleo" (30). Lagunillas, Cabimas, Mene Grande, the lake, and the history of the region are imperceptible to him. Instead, his vision brings to sharp focus all the elements that indicate to the existence of oil. This narrowing vision is, of course, understandable when it comes someone searching for a resource existing underground—he is not interested in what is readily visible, and thus, does not need to see it. His narrow vision, nonetheless, adheres to the region's proper place in a transnational extractivist network: these are sites whose existence is purely defined by their subsoil. Rob Nixon describes the attitude of U.S. American oil employees as they traveled to other lands: "Possessed of a bewildering incuriosity, they reserve their most intense investigations for the earth below, not the surface people; bewitched by the unseen geology, the Americans remain indifferent to the eco-cultural history" (85). In its juxtaposition of environmental and historical description, *Mene* implicitly contests this indifference to eco-cultural history by pointing to the inherent multiplicities of a single region. In this passage, the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo is a site with a long history of resource extraction. As the omniscient narrator shows, this is also a place with certain sights, smells, where sunlight, water, fauna, flora, and human beings commingle and affect each other. It is also *petróleo*. Not only are its topographical features affected by it, but the very existence of the fossil fuel points to an even longer temporal trajectory, as a gigantic jungle (more accurately, plankton), extant millions of

years in the past, is at the brink of becoming the region's most distinguishable feature.

While *Mene* is largely concerned with the speeding of time that accompanies oil extraction, this passage points to what cannot be contained within the diegetic frame—the extremely long time-frames under which oil operates. Oil is, after all, a material manifestation of the passage of time: millions of years of sunshine, buried, compressed into a viscous fossil. This slower, less tangible temporality, points to what is simultaneously a strength and limitation of the novels of the oil encounter. These texts provide thorough and tangible accounts of oil's impact in particular communities, detailing forgotten encounters among people, capital, and a natural resource before its transformation into other commodities. In other words, these texts dwell on the materials and social relations at stake in oil exploitation before they are rendered invisible. However, the exclusive focus on particular places at a moment in time runs the risk of framing these sites as self-enclosed entities with little connection to wider processes of resource extraction, circulation of commodities, and long-term ecological degradation. I would argue, however, that such reductionism is not entirely a problem in the texts themselves, but is more closely related to the way they have been interpreted in the last fifty years.[44] Indeed, for all their focus on a local reality, this analysis shows how the reverberations of wider spatial and temporal scales are part of and even constitutive of a text like *Mene*. This is also the case in this chapter's epigraph, as the first paragraph from *Memorias de una antigua primavera* depicts an *elsewhere* of glass and concrete buildings and businessmen distantly hovering over a locality. The ways in which the local is pierced through non-local times and objects could be understood as one of the central tensions of the novel of the oil encounter given that oil itself—the defining feature of these localities—can never be local. When Cabimas' inhabitants consume what used to be the content of their subsoil, more often than not they are consuming petrochemicals transported from

[44] See Carrera Damas, Caballero, Campos.

Lake Maracaibo's subsoil to refineries in Amuay, Curacao, Texas or Louisiana. There, crude oil might be turned into gasoline and other lubricants. Alternatively, it may further be transported to any number of sites and turned into asphalt, plastics, pesticides, or fertilizers, all of which might once again be part of other production processes before being transported back to northwest Venezuela.

Given that *Mene*'s local setting is penetrated by non-local processes, practices, and materials, it is important to briefly turn to the ways in which oil and a transnational oil industry make and unmake the places they inhabit. For instance, oil's very materiality informs the significance *place* acquires in the novels of the oil encounter: the permanence or fixity expected of place becomes a way of contesting the mobility of capital in general, and the oil industry in particular. A clean binary split between place (as permanence) and capital (as mobility) is, of course, reductive. However, we should highlight that the infrastructure of oil extraction and consumption exists to facilitate travel and motion, intensifying capitalism's "annihilation of space by time." Not only that, but the very fact that oil is a liquid grants it a mobility that has been key in the industry's successes and vulnerabilities: it is easier to transport and store than other fossil fuels such as coal, but it also spills and dissipates with greater frequency. The very materiality of crude petroleum further requires that it stay mobile, given that it is "a dirty liquid, and in some of its forms it is volatile and dangerous. It is best managed if allowed to flow continuously from the well, through pipelines, into tankers if necessary, and through refineries, *unseen and untouched*. Storage is expensive and dangerous" (Penrose, 46, my italics). Keeping oil *unseen* and *untouched* has also been key in the industry's labor practices. As early as 1860 pipelines were introduced in Pennsylvania "to circumvent the wage demands of the teamsters who transported barrels of oil to the rail depot in horse-drawn wagons [thus] reducing the ability

of humans to interrupt the flow of energy" (Mitchell 35-36). Pipelines were soon borrowed by the oil industry in Azerbaijan (one of the most prosperous early oil exporters), and further replicated in much of the oil-exporting world, becoming the industry's standard mode of transportation since (Mitchell, 36). [45] Consequently, petroleum (even more so than other fossil fuels) is one of the least labor intensive, most secretive industries on the planet even as it is one of the industrial practices with the greatest impact in the global distribution of space. This is starkly manifested in present-day Venezuela, where oil makes up more than three quarters of the country's economy, while the oil industry only employs approximately two percent of the population (a figure that has remained fairly stable since the 1930s). In other words, invisibility has been a crucial and very much planned strategy for the oil industry.

This tireless effort to keep oil mobile, invisible, and secured informs the optic of the novel of the oil encounter: to peer from up-close at processes and materials designed to remain unseen. I speak of an *optic* to highlight that what the novel of the oil encounter does is a method, a way of seeing, as opposed to an attempt at straightforward representation of a totality or unadulterated reality. In other words, the novel of the oil encounter does not aim to depict oil in all its material and political complexities; instead, it zooms in onto its imprint in certain localities. Like any optic or method, a narrative of the oil encounter highlights certain traits, and occludes others. However, this optic's significance stems from the ways it points to the uncanny materiality of modern comforts. Schiller's characterization of *die Unheimlich*, famously cited by Sigmund

[45] Mitchell further adds:
Since oil comes to the surface driven by underground pressure, either from water trapped beneath it or from gas trapped above, sometimes assisted by the action of pumps, its production required a smaller workforce than coal in relation to the quantity of energy produced. Workers remained above ground, closer to the supervision of managers. As the carbon occurs in liquid form, the work of transporting energy could be done with less human labor. Pumping stations and pipelines could replace railways as means of transporting energy from the site of production to the places where it was used or shipped abroad. (Mitchell, 35)

Freud, compellingly describes why the oil encounter (be it real or represented) is uncanny: "Unheimlich is the name of everything that ought to have remained… secret and hidden and has become visible" (199). To encounter the oil town is to face the ways in which roads, electric grids, and plastic objects populating everyday life are haunted by the extraction sites and processes on which they depend. Consequently, the familiarity and comfort of quotidian spaces—filled with petrochemicals and fuel as they are—requires that the oil town remain invisible.

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Despite being the best-known novel of the oil encounter in Venezuela, *Mene* suffers from a paradoxical form of invisibility. Because it was published in 1936, the novel depicts a setting prior to the death of Juan Vicente Gómez, Venezuela's dictator from 1908 to 1935. His long, oppressive regime benefited from the first two decades of industrial oil extraction in the country. Although *Mene* depicts a world far from state institutions, Gómez's regime tends to be used as a way to classify and periodize much of the literature from the period, *Mene* included. This type of periodization implicitly suggests that upon Gómez's death everything that happened during the regime died with him. This has serious implications for how *Mene* is read today. Juan José Martín Frechilla suggests that as public perceptions of the oil industry slowly improved in Venezuela, the type of critique carried out by Ramón Díaz Sánchez in *Mene* altogether disappeared after the 1950s (44).[46] Consequently, *Mene* is today read not as a text about the localized effects of oil exploitation, but instead as a text about oil exploitation *during the Gómez*

[46] Martín Frechilla points out that beginning with 1936 a different type of collective memory emerges vis-à-vis the oil industry, "a partir del ejercicio progresivo de la soberanía—por más dudas que se tengan de sus alcances—; de la adecuada y justa utilización de los beneficios; del rescate de la dignidad nacional, a lo cual se suma, es cierto, un efectivo ejercicio de promoción y relaciones públicas por parte de las compañías petroleras" (44).

regime. As such, key continuities in processes of extraction and exploitation are ignored.

Contemporary literary and cultural criticism in Venezuela thus invalidates historical critiques of oil extraction, be they fiction or non-fiction, by holding them at arm's length: their concerns frequently dismissed as being informed by "obsolete ideologies."[47] Read as outdated remains of a bygone era, the political force in the novels' critique is altogether neutralized. That no alternative critiques of the oil industry are proposed in the same literary circles that disparage extant oil literature suggests that the very act of questioning and critiquing oil extraction is currently perceived as an outdated enterprise. The following sections scrutinize how this periodization around presidential figures informs reading and analytical practices in Venezuela, furthering the invisibility of oil exploitation.

Smooth Surfaces and The Magical State in *Oficina No. 1* and *Guachimanes*

The novels of the oil encounter are filled with newly paved roads. Many begin as characters drive into an oil settlement, and end as they drive away from it. The narratives are thus often framed as a sojourn in the oil town. Not simply a narrative device, this framing is particularly significant in the context of the novel's subject matter (the effects of industrial oil extraction), as well as their historical setting in early twentieth-century Venezuela, a country with isolated geographical regions, and barely any paved roads in the early 1920s. Paved roads thus acquired a particular political meaning as the physical manifestation of the state, and its power to unify the nation through its newly acquired oil wealth. Thus, the emergence of a national road system has been represented as a tangible, smooth connective thread essential in the project of national

[47] Luis Dávila, for instance, speaks of anthropologist Rodolfo Quintero's work on the oil enclaves (a one of a kind project), as deeply flawed for its moral judgments and Marxist framework, which prevented objective interpretations (389).

unification carried out by Juan Vicente Gómez's regime.[48] We can further understand these paved roads in relation to a transnational context: a planetary change in mobility resulting from the growth of automobile travel and the infrastructure to support it. That is to say, along with the growth of national infrastructure, these roads point to Venezuela's integration into a global fossil fuel market. Although the roads populating oil narratives might easily be overlooked as background information leading to the essential plotline, these roads are in fact replete with assumptions about the relationship between oil, the state, and their role in the country's transformation in the twentieth century.

A particularly iconic road scene takes place at the beginning of Miguel Otero Silva's 1961 *Oficina No. 1*, a sequel to his 1955 novel *Casas muertas.* Both novels fictionalize key moments in Venezuelan history, as seen through the experiences of Carmen Rosa, a young woman who moved from Ortiz (the setting of *Casas muertas*) to the oil settlement of Oficina No. 1, later renamed El Tigre. The earlier novel depicts Ortiz's decline, as the lingering effects of the 19th century Federal War decimated the town's population and ruined its agricultural economy.[49] Ortiz appears to be stuck in time, its few remaining inhabitants similarly stuck as they lack the resources either to improve their lives in Ortiz or to find a different place to live. Consequently,

[48] Alfredo Cilento Sarli further points out that almost 70% of public works during Gómez's regime consisted of infrastructure that physically connected the country, among these "roads, bridges, ports, and airports" (110, my translation) The Gómez regime functioned as a unifying force not only geographically, but also culturally and politically: "A pesar de que para el comienzo del siglo XX ya se era formalmente una nación, muy pocos lo creían y menos lo sentían. Lo que unificaba al venezolano era lo que lo dividía, y la gente se afiliaba a regiones, causas políticas, labores, clases sociales, bandos políticos o montoneras caudillescas. Se era andino, central, oriental, occidental, llanero o zuliano, campesino o citadino, gomecista o antigomecista, abogado o comerciante, agricultor o zapatero, pobre o rico, mucho más que venezolano. El rasgo distintivo y gran logro del siglo XX venezolano fue, entonces, tomar a un conjunto humano heterogéneo y disímil y construirlo como una nación, regido por un proyecto sociopolítico de carácter democrático y moderno alimentado por el petróleo" (Dávila, 362-63).

[49] The war took place between 1859 and 1863 in the country's central plains or *llanos*. Roughly ten percent of the country's population died, a percentage even higher in *llanos*. Venezuela, did not recover politically, economically, and demographically from the conflict until the oil bonanza of the mid-1920s.

when Carmen Rosa hears of oil settlements as places for fresh starts and new fortunes, she decides to leave behind a past plagued by destruction from war, waves of tropical illnesses, and the repression of the Gómez dictatorship. *Casas muertas* ends where *Oficina No. 1* begins, on the open road.

The open road that links both novels presents a dramatic change to the content of *Casas Muertas*. Motor vehicles are a rare momentous sight in the earlier novel, often represented as a brief glimpse of changes taking place elsewhere in the world. The inhabitants of Ortiz meet these changes with apprehension. This is particularly the case when it comes to the major political events of the period. Indeed, the fate of political dissidents is intrinsically tied to the rare automobile sightings, as Ortiz is one of the designated stops for buses carrying prisoners from Caracas to labor camps in the southern regions of the country. This brief contact with the young men alerted the inhabitants of Ortiz (otherwise isolated from and forgotten by Venezuelan political institutions) to the violent suppression met by any sign of rebellion during the Gómez regime.

The automobile at the beginning of *Oficina No. 1* battles the unpaved terrain of the Venezuelan plains. Notably, this embodiment of new technologies meant to facilitate mobility, finds itself out of place as it struggles with "an aggressive and abrupt road that appeared to defend its own lumps of dirt with thorns and blades" (11, my translation). Driver and passengers fret that they might never make it to their destination as the car, assaulted by the road, continually breaks down. However, as they get closer to the oil rich region of southern Anzoátegui they witness an abrupt change:

> al bordear una meseta todo cambió y el camión comenzó a correr alegremente como una cabrita cuando la libran de las amarras. Esta de ahora era una carretera *apisonada por*

> *herramientas y acondicionadas por manos humanas*, no senda abierta por las patas de los animales de éxodo […] todos comentaron risueñamente aquel imprevisto deslizarse sin saltos por encima *una superficie lisa y racionalmente orientada*. (15, my italics)

The reaction elicited by this "smooth and rationally oriented surface," which at last allows the automobile to function properly, points to its novelty. A jagged national territory, through which few are able to travel, is being smoothed out. The road initially promises the arrival of ordered mobility; a conquering of territory by tools and human hands—a local fulfillment of General Motor's victorious battle cry: "Over space, man has begun to win victory!" (*To New Horizons*). This moment could also be read as the fulfillment of another iconic fantasy: Santos Luzardos' dream of national progress and unification through a railroad in *Doña Bárbara*, now updated to the automobile age.

The passengers' admiration of the smooth road disappears unexpectedly as they encounter the people building it:

> A Carmen Rosa se le secó la sonrisa cuando vislumbró en la lejanía el motivo del inesperado bienestar. Una larga hilera de hombres se alzaba a cada lado del camino. A medida que el camión se aproximaba eran más precisos los rasgos de los brazos prolongados al cielo por la continuidad del pico que esgrimían; se divisaban en detalle las ropas andrajosas que cubrían, el grillete que les encadenaba los tobillos, las barbas hirsutas y amarillas de polvo, finalmente los ojos. Cuando estuvieron frente a ellos, los forzados detuvieron un instante el trabajo para verlos pasar. (16)

The car's passengers are thus confronted with the price of their brief comfort: the forced labor tasked with building the roads that materialized throughout Venezuela in the 1920s. We are to understand these men are political dissidents—perhaps the same ones that passed through Ortiz.

Carmen Rosa thus witnesses the fate of the young men that had haunted her throughout *Casas muertas*: grim men in rags, shackled together slowly building the terrestrial symbol of Venezuela's 20th century unification. As Carmen Rosa watches and is watched by the prisoners, she is haunted by their "melancholic… enraged … despaired… inexpressive … sick" glances. One screams, but his words are drowned by the sound of the whip commanding him to stay quiet. Carmen Rosa cannot look away from the horrific scene before her eyes, even when she could no longer see it: "no logró apartar los ojos de los doscientos desventurados sino cuando fueron apenas una mancha parda y se sepultaron en una vuelta de camino" (16). Soon after, the road breaks down again, the ease of mobility it provided only a temporary comfort.

Oficina No. 1's opening scenes illustrate one of the central aims of the novel of the oil encounter: pointing to the processes, material price, and even coercion, that helped build the smooth surfaces and seamless geographies of a *Venezuela petrolera.* Indeed, while the texts take place within the confines of Oficina No. 1/El Tigre, this opening scene provides a glimpse into the connective tissue joining isolated, largely unknown oil towns, with the transformations the rest of the nation also undergoes during this period. Thus, as we saw in our analysis of *Mene,* the oil enclave's isolation is relative. While its small labor force and circumscription to small and well-secured areas tends to keep oil extraction largely out of sight, its material presence is nonetheless disseminated in the modifications of space it both requires and enables.[50] Indeed, the dividing line between the country's oil infrastructure and its public works is neither clear nor is it always extant. The same roads, aqueducts, electrical lines, state bureaucracy, and federal armed

[50] As Fernando Coronil points out, "Despite the limited space occupied by its productive structures, the oil industry reconfigured space nationwide. The oil industry destructured the social and economic relations associated with Venezuela's agricultural past and structured the urban-commercial organization of space of contemporary Venezuela" (110).

forces that unified isolated regions prone to secessionist uprisings, were also built to enable and protect oil exploitation.

Roads are particularly important in this regard, as essential infrastructure enabling the growth and consolidation of the Venezuelan state and the global oil industry—as well as a product of both. However, as *Oficina No. 1* exemplifies, the paved road's smooth surface is also the product of arduous, collective, coercive, anonymous labor. The fact that multiple local, national, and transnational factors and actors were involved in the construction of Venezuela's paved roads should prevent us from seeking a single origin or author that neatly explains their emergence in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, many factors could be logically translated into an origin story for these roads We could, for instance, talk about their emergence in relation to the seizing of needed land at a local level, the use of the national penitentiary system as a source of labor, the planning and design carried out by engineers, the decisions of the federal state, the harnessing of bitumen by industrial scientists to develop modern asphalt, the growth of the automobile industry and the increasing accessibility of its products. I provide this non-exhaustive list of sprawling but related phenomena to highlight that *Oficina No. 1* is not necessarily providing the most authentic or accurate representation of a road's construction. Instead, this scene exemplifies the way in which novels of the oil encounter make sense of wider phenomena by examining their reverberations in embodied experiences—be it sights, sudden sensorial change, as a dirt road becomes a paved road, or the slave labor making this change possible. This is a position of particular significance within the context of a hypervisible petrostate.

We can see the state's dazzling visibility in the way the roads constructed in the 1920s and 1930s were remembered late in the twentieth-century, in a comment made by playwright José Igancio Cabrujas in his famous interview "El Estado del disimulo." Lamenting the way in which

Venezuelan history is told and interpreted in terms of morality, Cabrujas lists a number of historical figures and the moral judgment history has imparted on them. The list ends with a tongue-in-cheek characterization of Juan Vicente Gómez: "Gómez era un vampiro, pero hizo la Trasandina/Gómez was a vampire, but *he made* the Transandean Highway" (369, my translation). Gómez is likened to a fantastical undead creature that extracts blood from living beings. More fantastically still (although perhaps insidiously so), he is said to have *made* "La trasandina." *La Trasandina* refers to the Transandean Highway, inaugurated in 1925, the first paved road uniting the Andean mountains bordering Colombia with Caracas. The hostile terrain upon which it is built makes *La trasandina* the most impressive infrastructural project carried out during the Gómez regime, a veritable conquest over geography.

Cabrujas statement, meant to signal a generalized historical memory of the Gómez regime, is exemplary, on the one hand, of what Fernando Coronil calls *the magical state*. The statement, on the other hand, points to the magical state's effect on the way historical change is often conceptualized in the country. The *magical state* refers to the "appearance of the Venezuelan state as a transcendent and unifying agent of the nation" (4). Coronil understands this magic as both "an extraordinary reality" (the swift, often incomprehensible transformation of economic and governing systems, and of the lives and cultures within a territory) as well as "the selective presentation of the elements that *create the illusion of its existence through invisible tricks that exploit distraction and diversion*" (3, my italics). The magical state is, thus, invested in perception, intricately selecting that which shall remain seen and unseen, or alternatively that which shall be remembered and forgotten.

So far, this description need not apply exclusively to the Venezuelan nation-state, given that one of the key functions of the modern state is that of transcendental national unification.

The unique magic of the Venezuelan state stems from oil, as this "magic" is intrinsically tied to the grand scale and spectacularity of the oil economy. Indeed, wherever humans find and exploit oil, words of magic and enchantment emerge (a topic I explore at length in chapter 3). "El petróleo es fantástico y por lo tanto induce a lo 'fantasioso'" conceded CabrujasRyszard Kapuściński similarly asserts that, "oil is a fairy tale, and like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie" (*The Shah of Shahs*, 35). He further argues that those individuals with power over oil appear to possess magical qualities that can overturn work and even time.[51] Oil's political magic consists of endowing the state with what appears to be the power of *creatio ex nihilo.* "State representatives, the *visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money*, appear on the state's stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat" (Magical State, 2, my italics). This dazzling visibility of state representatives more often than not congeals in the figure of the president, the apparent source of all power. Coronil traces the inception of the magical state to the Gómez regime:

> The more the state expanded institutionally and tightened its control over the body politic, the more Gomez [sic] *appeared to be the source* of its growth and the embodiment of its power. […] At the time when oil's presence began *imperceptibly to permeate the body politic*, the state, personified in the figure of Gómez, expanded its role as mediator between the national and the international domains and between the social and the natural orders.

[51] In the context of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's tenure as Shah of Iran (1941-1979), Kapuściński compellingly illustrates the importance of the novel of the oil encounter vis-á-vis the magical state, as he notes the ways in which the spectacularity of oil helps erase work, creating the illusion that even time itself has been conquered:

> Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free. Oil is a resource that anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts. […] The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident, through a kiss of fortune and not by sweat, anguish, hard work […] Oil fills us with such arrogance that we begin believing we can easily overcome such unyielding obstacles as time. With oil, the last Shah used to say, I will create a second America in a generation! He never created it. (35)

> Through the effects of this double mediation*, the powers of numerous social actors and institutions were condensed in Gómez*. His figure, and the state he represented, was elevated above society as a transcendental agency, and *its sacralized appearance was projected as the original source of these powers* and the single expression of national will. (84, my italics)

Gómez thus becomes the visible actor and author obscuring other actors, networks, and material processes involved in any notion of national change. All else is kept out of sight, it became possible to believe that Gómez *made roads.*

The dazzling visibility of the magical state makes it necessary to explicitly state, and even repeat, the obvious: Gómez (be it the mortal human, Cabrujas's vampire, or the symbolic embodiment of the state) did not *make* the Transandean Highway. One might be tempted to say today, *Gómez era un vampiro y no hizo la Trasandina*— a combination of tools, materials, as well as the exploitation of human labor and natural resources did most of the building. The magic of the petrostate is thus very similar to that of oil, as understood by Kapuściński: to create the illusion of "a life without work," or alternatively, a society without labor. Consequently, the opening scenes of *Oficina No. 1* gesture to the contrary: without explicitly invoking the presidential figure (and therefore not granting it visibility), the passage shows the labor behind the smooth surfaces of a national territory increasingly associated with the state and its executive branch. And it shows the ease with which one is beckoned to drive away from such sights.

As we have seen, even the country's territory is marked with the presidential figure, as its changes are imagined to have been conjured into existence by the president. There is also a crucial temporal dimension to the magical state: an intensified version of modern temporality's tendency to see the passing of time as a series of progressive breaks, severing ties to the past,

where the *break* itself is placed within state actors. This tendency to see change—of which infrastructure is one factor—as limited to the state, specifically the figure of the president, is not exhausted in the Gómez regime (were that the case, we could speak of a *magical regime* as opposed to a *magical state*). Indeed, one of the central aims of Coronil's *The Magical State* is to reveal the "effective prestidigitation tricks" (3) that relegated the Gómez regime to a primitive past, thereby hiding key continuities that structure the Venezuelan state: a past and present dependence on oil, and the spectacular personalization of state power.

Not surprisingly, the temporality of the magical state reverberates in most forms of periodization in Venezuela, as new regimes (especially those lucky enough to benefit from oil booms) are meant to inaugurate a new period that eradicates the past. This reliance on the sovereign body as the embodiment of groundbreaking change leaves little room for complexity, as a wide range of effects tend to be boiled down to perfectly understood causes. This has serious consequences not only for the periodization of Venezuelan history, but also for the very conceptualization of change, as it becomes wrongly equated with the severing of continuity by the state. Paradoxically, this view of change is itself a form of continuity, an instance when "gesturing toward a different future becomes one of the most traditional gestures of all" (Muckelbauer, 143). Within the realm of Venezuelan literature, novelists and cultural critics Ana Teresa Torres and Gisela Kozak argued that continuity itself is rendered invisible by the magical state.[52] This tradition of renewal is of particular salience in the twenty-first century as critics

[52] Twenty-first century Venezuelan novelists have been attentive to this issue, seeing the reverberation of the magical state's temporality in the way Venezuelan literature is read. Ana Teresa Torres, for instance, writes about Venezuela's *"utopía de la renovación,"* describing it as a "suicidal stance" aiming to "[eradicate] everything that came before" (97). Torres speaks not of an aesthetic avant-garde, but of a way of visualizing history and aesthetics as intrinsically tied to the state: each regime change is a revolution that transforms everything that existed and was produced before it into an anachronism that must be overcome in the name of a new society. Novelist and literary scholar Gisela Kozak Rovero (in conversation with Torres' work), argues that this phenomenon (whether we call it the

acknowledge the erasure of continuity by the temporality of the magical petrostate as a phenomenon *of the past*. Yet, Hugo Chávez's regime is continually depicted (by friends and foes) as the *true* break from a past filled with feigned moments of renewal. Similarly, the opposition's rhetoric has consisted of calling for another radical break from the current regime. Thus continues a tradition of national rebirths.

The temporality of the magical state, and the periodizations it incites—a quarantining of phenomena, things, and texts within their proper presidential regime—ultimately functions as another smooth surface granting historical coherence to the idea of a unified nation. This temporal quality of the magical state is made explicit in Gabriel Bracho Montiel's *Guachimanes,* as it points to the cracks of the new Venezuela meant to emerge after Gómez's death in December 1935—a moment believed to be so monumental that Mariano Picón Salas famously deemed it to be Venezuela's delayed entrance into the 20th century. Conceptualized by its author as a series of sketches ("aguafuertes") for an unwritten novel, *Guachimanes* probes the temporality of the magical state by deploying the optic of the narrative of the oil encounter: it zooms in to a particular oil enclave, and brings the forgotten material, cultural, psychological effects of oil extraction to the surface. As we saw with *Mene,* the multiplicity and often long duration of these effects means that the world depicted in these narratives is incommensurable to the temporality of the magical state—even if the latter materially depends on the maintenance of orderly and subordinated oil enclaves. In this sense, these texts attempt to reverse a particular historicity where the emphasis is placed on the grand transformations of and in the state. Instead,

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temporality of the magical state, or *la utopía de la renovación*) turns Venezuela into "el país que siempre nace." Literary critic Miguel Angel Campos explicitly ties this phenomenon to the state, as he states that "Parece que en Venezuela sólo tuviéramos la historia efectiva del poder, y éste reducido a la gestión del Estado" (Campos 9, q. in Kozak Rovero 107). While I cannot fully delve into the ways in which the temporality of the magical state reverberates in contemporary Venezuelan literature, this is indeed an issue for which further examination is needed.

these texts unearth the continuity of oil extraction as a way of highlighting that different temporalities exist in a single place, not to mention a nation.

Despite its brevity, *Guachimanes* has two diegetic levels. Notably, both levels begin on paved roads. The main diegesis opens by drawing an explicit connection between the Gómez regime and the paved roads:

> Gómez está en el poder y hay alcabalas fraccionando los caminos. El nombre del viajero se repite innumerables veces en esas alcabalas destinadas a controlar los movimientos de los ciudadanos, en las aduanas, en las rutas de toda la nación.
>
> Al final de una carretera angosta y asfaltada […] estará el pueblo petrolero, siempre bullicioso, siempre sucio, siempre agitado por algún suceso. (21)

Rather than the labor behind paved roads, *Guachimanes* highlights the policing of people by the state as a different form of disruption to the mobility roads are supposed to facilitate. The promise of freedom gained through a human conquest of geography (or victory over space), can conversely turn into a technology of population control. The rest of this central diegesis does not vary much from *Mene*. Also set in the greater Cabimas area, the text depicts the ugly world of oil extraction as a seemingly all-powerful oil company displaces the local inhabitants. Like its predecessor, the text depicts the way in which migrants in search of work or quick fortune begin populating the area, the deplorable labor and living conditions, the constant threat of violence, and the circumscription of local Venezuelans from contact with newcomers from the United States.

The final event in the main diegesis involves the anti-government 1935-1936 uprisings following Gómez's death, as the townspeople threaten to set on fire all local institutions (police station, city hall), slowly moving to the oil extraction infrastructure. However, the

representatives of the oil company cunningly side with the protestors against the local authorities by giving them free gasoline and food.[53] This move ensures the survival of the extraction infrastructure, as depicted in the last lines of the text:

> La llama del quemador se quedó esperando, meneando su lengua como fiera hambrienta.
>
> El cráter de cenizas no había crecido como lo deseaba el pueblo.
>
> La madrugada aclaró el paisaje y volvieron a verse los balancines al pie de las cabrias, cabeceando sus palancas indiferentemente. (86)

The survival of the oil machinery illustrates how oil companies distanced themselves from the oppressive regime not out of sympathy, but as a self-protective measure: local politics, the specificities of the state are of little significance, as long as the pumpjacks continue sinking their levers into the subsoil. Thus, while *Guachimanes'* main diegesis is not a story that diverges much from *Mene*, its final scene provides a crucial reframing to the tale of the oil town: this diegetic world, meant to be understood as a faithful depiction of Cabimas, not only continues existing, but its very existence poses a threat to nationalist myths of unity and progress. In her prologue to the 2010 edition of *Guachimanes*, Coral Pérez Gómez sees this final scene as "la propuesta de nuevas condiciones futuras en la realidad social para que los obreros se organizaran en función de la creación de sindicatos y la promulgación de huelgas" (15). Pérez Gómez's

[53] While the historical accuracy of the events at the end of *Guachimanes* could be disputed, this final scene embodies the ways in which the oil industry attempted to distance itself from the Gómez regime after his death. The uprisings, along the nationalization of the oil industry in Mexico 1938, prompted oil companies, especially those tied to the Rockefeller family, to strategically develop concepts of corporate responsibility and citizenship as a way to "allay nationalist concerns over their role in Venezuelan society (Tinker Salas, 10, González Casas, 181). For instance, oil companies began scaling their security forces (the reviled *guachimanes*) after the uprisings, since they had become targets of nationalist rage (Tinker Salas, 104). Furthermore, in the 1940s companies began a process of "Venezolanization," which involved recruiting Venezuelans for the upper administrative ranks: "doing so allowed companies to replace unpopular administrators and managers from the United States who had been associated with the policies and practices of the Gómez years, thus appearing to cleanse the enterprise and to bring it into line with the positions of the new political leadership" (Tinker Salas, 185).

interpretation makes sense in purely linear terms: these uprisings served as an initial step for Venezuela's labor movement, as well as the bedrock for the relative liberalism of Eleazar López Contreras's regime (1935-1941), and more inclusive policies in transnational oil companies. Yet, the constant and indifferent motion of the pumpjacks' levers tells a different story: regimes, ideologies, social relations might change dramatically, but the basic structure sustaining them remains.

Guachimanes' second diegetic level—its first chapter, which chronologically depicts the text's last events—specifically deals with the ways in which the Gómez era hovers over the post-Gómez years. Some indeterminate time after the dictator's death, an unnamed narrator (the implied author) travels to the greater Cabimas region. The purpose of this trip consists of seeing firsthand, "ese vibrar de progreso que entraña la ambicionada riqueza negra […], el trepidar de la máquina junto al entusiasmo del obrero que se sabe parte de aquella riqueza" (17). Now that the dictator has died, the narrator believes to find himself, literally and figuratively, on "a new road" that has "erased even the footprints of yesterday's old and dismal paths" (17, my translation). As there is no explicit policing of the road he is on, and its construction is now years in the past, his travels occur without a need to call attention to the materiality of the road: the new times come with surfaces that appear to be finally smooth.

Immediately after expressing his desire to see a "renovation that must have erased even the traces [of the past]," the narrator asks to be taken to the remains of the *Barroso II* explosion, very much a symbol of that past he wishes would vanish. Notably, he speaks of the site with great reverence, "así ahora deseo ver de cerca el cráter de hierro de aquel volcán enano cuya erupción estremeció edificios hasta en Wall Street" (18). The narrator's enthusiasm is unmatched by his tour guide, who grants the event little importance. In fact, the site would not seem to hold

much symbolic relevance locally, as it is simply an indistinguishable plot of land. Paradoxically, this lack of reverence for the explosion annoys our narrator. Is this not exactly what he hoped to see—the past vanished without a trace? Is he not an apostle to the utopic renewals promised by the magical state?

The narrator's disappointment is the other face of a conception of time that sees each new beginning as an obliteration of the past. This rush to beckon new times simultaneously triggers the impulse to preserve, each revolution prompting the impulse to "keep", "date", "save" and "display in museums," lest every trace of the past vanish, or worse, lest it not be past at all (Latour, 69). Thus, in these initial scenes we do not exactly see a desire for renewal, nor for preservation, but instead an attempt to name and domesticate the times: to be able to point to what exactly is past, present, and to come, and thus to be sure that the past will not haunt the present. *Barroso II* as an undifferentiated plot of land begins to challenge this orderly vision of the times; its very mundaneness threatens to be of a past that is neither dead nor even past. . Consequently, a number of questions emerge in novel's prologue: has a new era really begun upon Gómez's death? Does the belief in absolute renewal help veil fundamental continuities? Provisional answers appear as the narrator finds that the living conditions at the oil camps have not significantly changed since Gómez's death. Neither has the policing and coercion characteristic of the prior regime. In fact, a labor organizer was murdered hours before the narrator's arrival in town. The narrator thus witnesses how the myths, narratives, and smooth surfaces of the magical state crumble in the oil town.

Soon after his arrival, our narrator finds himself recoiling in terror from the world he witnesses. His surroundings make him want to look away and escape. Yet, the most ghastly of sights, the open eyes of the murdered labor organizer, paralyzes him and beckons him to keep

looking. While Gómez's dead body was supposed to signal a new beginning, this other dead body puts to question whether that new beginning is possible at all. Similar to Carmen Rosa at the beginning of *Oficina No. 1*, the narrator is haunted by the eyes in front of him, feeling watched even as he is the one meant to do the looking: "¡Debo irme lejos—pienso—lejos de todo esto tan feo, tan desolador, tan insultante! Pero ¿cómo apartar la vista del obrero víctima?" (19). Indeed, those eyes summon him to write the narrative we read,

> El cadáver tiene los ojos entreabiertos y una morena guapa se empeña en cerrarlos inútilmente. Siento la impresión de que aquellos ojos fueron hechos para no cerrarse jamás y que *sus turbias pupilas me reclaman algo*. Tal vez una protesta. ¿La narración de aquello que he empezado a ver, por ventura? (19, my italics)

This crucial moment is a reversal of the unnamed narrator's initial intentions. He, after all, traveled to the eastern shores of Lake Maracaibo in order to *see* from up-close, to observe the past vanish and a new national reality emerge. Rather than the outside observer he aimed to be—simply a tourist, as he calls himself—the narrator finds himself haunted by the cadaver's eyes. *He* is now under scrutiny. This moment muddles the exact distinctions between observer and observed, presence and absence, self and other. The unnamed cadaver (from this point forward provisionally named "Tochito" by the narrator, the protagonist of the main diegesis, although he acknowledges this not to be a real name) is both absent and present, observer and observed. In this instance of a cadaver observing the living, we find a past that is not past. It is instead a spectral—if still material—trace perturbing a present moment of new beginnings. Not only that, but these eyes are said to *demand something* ("*reclamar algo*")—Justice? The eschewing of closure? An alternate narrative? Overturning a power structure that led to his death? It would be unfair to decidedly outline the content of that silent protest. Yet, it is nonetheless essential to

acknowledge one of its demands: to let the present be perturbed by that which it believes to have buried; to be willingly haunted.

On some level it might seem paradoxical to speak of hauntings and specters along with the materiality of roads, pumpjacks, and eyes. Yet, as Jonathan Gil Harris poses, even the simple immateriality of the figure of the *specter*—be it Marx and Engel's, Hamlet's or Derrida's—possesses a key, if often overlooked, material significance. Harris poses the question "Is there a specter haunting the discourse of spectrality? And what might his specter be?" to which he replies, "I would suggest it is matter itself, and more specifically *a surplus mineral matter* that 'haunts'—though that is perhaps too immaterial a term for what is thoroughly material—the very phrase "the time is out of joint" (619, my italics). He further expands his explication by pointing out that in *Hamlet,* "This dislocation is realized […] by the insistence that the objects of today's material culture are riddled with the remnants of antique bodily (and bony) matter" (620).[54] A reminder that time is not only sedimented in, but also continues through things, Harris' argument is ultimately less about the specificities of Shakespeare's play, but about an expansive notion of each moment as always potentially "polychromic and multitemporal" (620). In this regard, it is significant to note that the narrator in *Guachimanes* refers to the crafting of his story as "reaching into the subsoil," a gesture meant to pierce grounds and times— to further disjoint a time out of joint. His process of inquiry is filled with material imagery as he speaks of disemboweling with

[54] Jonathan Gil Harris thoroughly builds his point for the corporeality of the concept of "a time out of joint" as expressed in Shakespeare's play: "Hamlet's phrase would have had a more insistently corporeal connotation for the play's first audiences. The OED notes that "out of joint" was used in Shakespeare's time primarily to refer to a 'a bone displaced from its articulation with another; dislocated; also of the part of member affected.' [..] Hamlet's "time… out of joint" thus implies a dislocation of matter as much as time. The dislocation is realized in *Hamlet* less by any ghostly apparition than by the play's insistence that the object's of today's material culture are riddled with remnants of antique bodily (and body) matter." (619), Harris makes his point by citing the gravedigger's scene where Hamlet encounters Yorick's skull, and muses about Alexander the Great being reduced to nothing more than bodily matter (620).

his own hands that which he could not have accessed had he not descended to the subsoil—once again blurring the distinction between narrating voice and dead body: "Y comienzo a averiguar, a desentrañar lo que nunca habría podido alcanzar mi mano de no haberse metido en el subsuelo de mi tierra, aprovechando el propio hueco por donde se fue aquel luchador, en una tarde zuliana" (19). Of course, the imagery of descent and subsoil is apt considering the subject matter of oil exploitation. Yet, something else is at stake here in terms of the novel of the oil encounter and its optic: the importance of the material conditions of these sites, and the ways they might help disrupt a vision of a seamless nation productively taking advantage of its oil rent, and moving to a better future. Not much unlike the continuous motion of the pumpjacks—machines whose function is to quite literally unearth the remains of the dead for the energy of the living—these material objects point to a present full of cadavers, specters, and disquieting continuities. We see this, on the one hand, in the fact that *Guachimanes'* final chapter motions to what appears to be a revolutionary moment; a moment that is nonetheless undercut by the indifferent motion of the pumpjacks' levers. In this sense, this is a text about the times of pumpjacks extracting oil from the subsoil—be it 1935, 1945, 1948, 1958, 1998 or 2013—tempering the monumental weight of each of those years, as something equally monumental, albeit invisibly so, remains.[55]

However, one need not think of *Guachimanes* purely in terms of *continuity*, which on some level retains a sense of orderliness and linearity. Indeed, the text sets a contrast between

[55] I refer, of course, to key dates for the magical state: Gómez's death (1935), the beginning and end of the *Acción Democrática Trienio* (1945-1948), the beginning and end of Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorial regime (1948-1958), Hugo Chávez's election (1998), and his death (2013). I should point out that I am treating the nuances of the magical state and its regimes/periods in a reductive manner. I consciously do so, given that much scholarship on Venezuela focuses on the nuances and differences of these regimes, while eschewing many other points of inquiry. There is nothing inherently wrong with that kind of work. I am, however, trying to push against its hegemony in intellectual circles by highlighting a different temporal framework.

that linear continuity, to which the pumpjacks at the end gesture, with the muddling (of identities, times, visions) in the prologue. Indeed, the prologue simultaneously sets up the narrative at the same time it disjoints it. In narrative terms it adds little to the main diegesis, which stands alone as a self-enclosed novella of the oil encounter. The only connective thread is the implicit suggestion that the cadaver before the narrator's eyes is, could be, or has inspired the fictional Tochito, the protagonist in the main diegesis. Consequently, in the same way that the prologue is haunted by an unknowable, yet not quite absent past, the main diegesis is also pierced through its construction: the prologue prevents it from being part of self-contained past, to be read as a seamless historical narrative, from which history has moved on. Instead, what we have is a muddled narrative presenting a similarly muddled setting, where multiple times and things coexist.

Guachimanes ultimately uses the materiality of the oil exploitation machinery as a way to unsettle the temporality and periodization of the magical state. In this sense, it attempts to encourage other ways of seeing. Reframing Venezuelan modernity, characterized by the state's imprint on the territory, by beckoning the reader to behold a material reality that is not exactly visible. Yet, the text argues that it is imperative that we look. To acknowledge at all the very existence and continuous presence of oil infrastructure, as well as its lasting effect on its surrounding area and inhabitants is a crucial step in dispelling the petrostate's magic, its seamless geographies and temporalities.

A cursory reading of *Guachimanes,* and my analysis thus far, might assert that the text creates an alternative narrative that straightforwardly counters the myths of the state. *Guachimanes'* alternative to the myths of the magical state seems to gain its own strength and solidity through its focus on the immediate, the concrete, and the material. As such, the text

could claim to have a better, more local grasp on reality than the state. In this regard, it is important to point out that the novels of the oil encounter are concerned with verisimilitude, attempting to decrease (although not necessarily abolish) the distance between the world they depict, and the depiction itself. *Mene* and *Guachimanes* claim much of their authority from what the author is assumed to have witnessed. This is a fact remarked by critics such as Julia Elena Real: "Escribir para Díaz Sánchez y Bracho Montiel era aropiarse del terreno, recordemos que ellos vivieron los campos del mene, testimonios que les otorgan mayor funcionalidad y credibilidad a sus discursos, una manera de darle una visión adecuada a fines más trascendentes que la pura lectura de distracción" (58). *Oficina No. 1* and *Memorias de una antigua primavera* also anchor their representation in historical and ethnographic research carried out by Miguel Otero Silva and Milagros Mata Gil in El Tigre (formerly named Oficina No. 1).[56] This thirst for direct access is thus a key trait in the novels of the oil encounter—a trait that been interpreted as part of a realist aesthetic characterized by a naïve trust in representation. For instance, literary critic Miguel Angel Campos asserts in his analysis of the novel of the oil encounter: "Todo realismo suele ser conservador porque duda de toda mirada que no sea directa; pero tratándose de realismo social, hay el agravante del culto a lo inmediato" (q. in Carrera, 11). Even critics more sympathetic to the realist aesthetic of the novel of the oil encounter (Luis Gustavo Carrera Damas, Julia Elen Rial, and María Elvira González come to mind) tend to trust the straightforwardness of its representation.

[56] Literary critic Carlos Pacheco describes the meticulous research process undergone by Miguel Otero Silva to craft his novels' "convincing reality effect": "El novelista se prepara mediante una indagación bibliográfica y sobre todo a través de una técnica reporteril con visos de trabajo de campo, incluyendo visitas de trabajo de campo, incluyendo visitas a los lugares donde se ambientará la acción y entrevistas a los protagonistas reales o testigos privilegiados. Intenta lograr así un lenguaje perfectamente adecuado al lugar, la época y la edad de los personajes, así como la máxima precisión en los más pequeños detalles—las plantas, las comidas, las enfermedades, las noticias, los personajes característicos que el narrador realista tanto anhela y tanto busca" (189).

Guachimanes, however, explicitly lays bare its own inability to represent this material world faithfully. In the prologue, the narrator states that after feeling haunted by the cadaver's eyes, he intended to carry out research, and gather enough information about the man to craft a story "a partir de los ojos opacos del obrero asesinado" (19). He anticipates stories about rousing speeches, bravery, and defiance. Yet, when he asks others for details that may help him write his story, he finds nothing. A man's life and death are summed up as, "cuatro tiros, medio mundo corriendo… y un hombre muerto. ¡Eso fue todo!" (20). He marvels at this last phrase, "Eso fue todo! [*That was all!*]" (20), in its claim to contain all he might be able to know. Consequently, the narrator ultimately decides to write a narrative that accompanies *his own visions* elicited by the cadaver and the woman mourning by his side. Inspired by the impulse to grasp a real person, an event, and the particularities of a place, yet unable to do so, the text acknowledges the incompleteness of its own attempt at representation. Notably, *Guachimanes'*s subtitle is "doce aguafuertes para ilustrar la novela del petróleo" [*twelve sketches that illustrate the oil novel*], from the start alerting us that this text is not meant to be read as a finished, enclosed literary work. The title even references the visual arts, not a small detail considering the centrality of eyes and vision in the text, as well as the title's Hispanicization of the word *watchmen*. In other words, this is a novel that never came to be—or that perhaps was never meant to become a novel. Unfinished as it is, *Guachimanes* has no closure, instead illustrating the ways in which past and present make and unmake each other. Consequently, even if we could speak of a "cult of the immediate" (11) displayed by the realism of the text, to use Campos' language, we should understand this thirst for immediacy as a reaction to the very fragility of the world presented by the novel. Novels of the oil encounter indeed attempt to grasp on to the material, the immediate, the concrete. However, as *Guachimanes* exemplifies, this depiction of life at the oil town does

not contradict the sense that the *no place* of the oil encounter is far from concrete. *Guachimanes* in particular gestures to the futility of the enterprise (a life reduced to "Eso fue todo"), as it ultimately conveys the urgency to contend with a world that is simultaneously alien and essential to the nation and to the comforts of global mobility.

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The trajectory of *Guachimanes* as a text tells us a lot about the current status of the narrative of the oil encounter in Venezuela. Its political content prevented it from being published in the 1930s, when Bracho wrote its first draft. The text more straightforwardly connects the events in oil towns with the federal government than *Mene*, going as far as naming Gómez the ultimate *Guachimán.* Its initial publication in Chile in 1954 also stems from the political leanings of text and author, as Bracho lived in exile during the Marcos Pérez Jimenez dictatorship (1948-1958). *Guachimanes* was reedited and first published in Venezuela in 2010 as a key historical text about the early years of oil exploitation by the state pubisher *El Perro y La Rana*, thus conferring it a degree of institutional legitimacy and recognition. As part of a wider attempt by the Bolivarian Revolution to rescue texts and voices excluded from previous versions of official history, sites of oil extraction have been increasingly acknowledged in the twenty-first century as key aspects of Venezuelan history. This is a commendable effort on its own, and on a cursory view, a faithful continuation of the very aims of the novels of the oil encounter: to inscribe these sites—always at the brink of extinction—into Venezuela's official history. However, reading these texts as purely historical texts runs the risk of replicating the same problem we have examined throughout this chapter: continuities are erased, given that "in the name of respecting the past, we make sure that it cannot disturb the sovereignty of our moment" (Harris, 618). Published thirty-five years after the first edition of *Guachimanes,*

Memorias de una antigua primavera further challenges the temporality of the magical state, by positing a past that cannot entirely be disentangled from the present.

Irruptions of the Past in *Memorias de una antigua primavera*

Memorias de una antigua primavera is one of the handful novels of the oil encounter written after the resource's nationalization, the spectacular bounties of the late 1970s, and the equally spectacular economic disasters of the early 1980s.[57] While remaining largely faithful to the basic thematic traits of the novel of the oil encounter, *Memorias* eschews their characteristic linear structure and omniscient narrator, in favor of a multiplicity of fragmentary voices and documents, which provide different and often contradictory ways of understanding Santa María del Mar's history (a fictionalization of El Tigre, also the subject of *Oficina No. 1*). As such, the text fails to provide a singular, stable account of Santa María del Mar's history.

The text revolves around the celebration of Santa María del Mar's fiftieth anniversary. Notably, this celebration, in the book as in real life, coincided with the collapse of Venezuela's economy in February 1983, an event that inevitably colors the way fifty years of local oil exploitation are remembered. The narrative continually contrasts the content of the 1983 celebration, with the different ways in which the town's inhabitants experienced the advent and

[57] As a consequence of the worldwide energy crisis after the oil embargo in October 1973, the Venezuelan treasury increased by $10 billion in the fiscal year of 1973-1974. With a population of 12 million, this dramatic windfall became a "modern equivalent of El Dorado" (Karl, 71). A second oil boom followed in 1979. Carlos Andrés Pérez's regime (1974 -1979), directly benefited from the bonanza, as his regime's fiscal revenues were higher than all prior regimes since independence combined (117). Consequently, his regime aimed to use the fiscal windfall to swiftly transform Venezuela into a modern, industrial nation, a plan he termed *La Gran Venezuela*. There was little debate about the scale and specifics of the project, leading to a greater concentration of power in the presidential figure since the Punto Fijo Pact in 1958, which established the parameters for Venezuelan democracy. Reckless borrowing and spending damaged the country's economy once the booms ended: "permitting state expenditures to rise massively, abruptly, without a plan and with no clear relationship to production was the single most important (non) decision of the government. An action that could never be reversed, it immediately changed the dimensions of the domestic economy, set off a 'boom effect' that could not be contained, and accustomed some Venezuelans to a standard of living that could not be sustained" (135). Venezuela's fiscal woes overlapped with the 1979 boom, and thus its effects were not fully felt until February 18, 1983, commonly referred to as "Black Friday."

growth of oil exploitation. Consequently, *Memorias* can be understood as a text that, from the perspective of the catastrophic 1980s, responds to the novels of the oil encounter of the early twentieth century. *Memorias* shows the way in which the early years of the oil industry in Venezuela gradually gained a degree of visibility, but only as a primitive past that the nation-state overcame in the 1960s through the consolidation of liberal democracy, and later, through the never-before-seen fiscal bonanza of the 1970s. The early years of oil exploitation thus became symbolic of all the things Venezuela had ceased to be: poor, backward, violent, subservient to foreign firms and to an international capitalist market. No longer part of the present, those menacing traits could become part of anniversary celebrations.

Memorias counters a narrative of progress by overlapping, at times confusing different historical moments. Positing a vision of national and local histories that neither moves forward nor backwards—a vision where distinctions between past and present are not always clear—the text asks "¿Estamos al principio o al fin de los tiempos?" (14). The narrative, nonetheless, orbits around three key years: 1933, 1973, 1983. The first year marks the founding of Santa María del Mar (an apocryphal foundation according to the text), depicted in the text's first two sections, *Fundaciones* and *Libro de Santa María del Mar.* The other two years designate the town's fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries, the subject of the last two sections *Hechos* and *La Fiesta.* Each of these sections contains a series of subsections made up of different voices and objects (description of photographs, an artifact from the anniversary celebrations, newspaper clippings) constructing a sense of what happened that year. However, each section also contains narratives and re-interpretations from different times, be they past or future. I structure my analysis around those key years, in part for the sake of narrative coherence. However, this structure is also meant to highlight the temporal complexity of each year.

1933: *"aquel pueblo nacido de hombres y mujeres que llegaron en naves portentosas"*

The first section of *Memorias* deals with the tension between two ways of remembering the founding of Santa María del Mar. On the one hand, we have a committee made up of representatives from the local government, the founding oil company, and the local elites organizing a fiftieth anniversary celebration. On the other hand, we have Castor Subero, one of the town's unintended founders who worked as a driller for *La Compañía*, along with a group of disembodied voices, reflecting on their memories and how they differ from the content of the anniversary celebration: "Los oficiantes, ocupados en sus ritos propiciatorios, dicen: ven ven ven ven ven ven. Y el pasado viene claro, invocado por una liturgia tan esperanzada y solemne" (34). The voices conjured by the anniversary preparations bring with them a past in conflict with that of the planned celebrations. Instead of "el bálsamo de unos héroes que legitimaran su incierto origen" (54), the returned voices of Santa María del Mar's past speak of "ruinas, odio, ambición corrupción y sangre: ésas son las pautas de esta historia" (56).

In this way the voices roaming Santa María del Mar not only draw a clear distinction between the anniversary events and the past itself, but they also dwell on their incompatibility. Indeed, as Subero illustrates, the tone of the celebration whitewashes the cyclical disasters that have characterized the town's short history, replacing it instead with ornamental folklore:

> Ahora sólo quedan los agudos ritmos del desastre, disfrazados por un tiempo de bailes populares, casas maquilladas, murales y guirnaldas, luces multicolores y famélicas flores perdurando en los jardines, e indios, […] bailando maremares con impuestos trajes típicos, invenciones de maestros de escuela, sobre un tinglado de madera para el aplauso de la concurrencia. (57)

This passage obliquely delves into the ethics of commemorating the past, illustrated by the idealization of indigenous populations as symbols of the past: their performance of invented traditions is their only role in the anniversary celebration. In other words, local and national histories of dispossession are transformed into little more than symbols of an authentic past. Despite their continuous existence, the original inhabitants of Venezuela are here depicted as if suspended in time: adhering to timeless traditions and ways of life thought to have remained largely untouched by European culture. This passage implicitly highlights the way in which indigenous cultures are expected to embody, and in the case of this passage, *perform* pastness. Whereas this alleged *pastness* makes Native cultures attractive for a celebration of cultural heritages, this very feature conversely makes them objectionable to the world outside the anniversary. This performance thus becomes one of the few ways in which the existence of indigenous populations is acknowledged—to be seen requires shedding any trace of the present in order to incorporate the present's vision of the past. While this process of commemoration in lieu of justice is a long one when it comes to indigenous populations throughout the Americas, this first third of *Memorias* points to how the history of oil exploitation approaches a similar fate: its transformation into monument, that in its very monumentality erases the past and its ongoing consequences in the present. Even *Memorias* as a text is guilty of depicting indigenous cultures as passive observers of a changing world, problematically turning them into a convenient counterpoint to the transformations that accompanied the advent of oil exploitation:

> Y todo cambió de pronto. Las cuchillas relucientes cortaron el suelo y las ruedas del sismógrafo trazaron sus señales sobre la paja, que se fue raleando por el aceite y los incendios. Los indios miraron en silencio la invasión. La cabria empezó a elevarse entre el tropel de la gente. La Compañía ni se preocupó en comprar las tierras. A los escasos

> dueños que se pudieron comprobar su propiedad los atrapó en contratos que parecían ricos, pero que, después se demostró eran miserables. Yo no sé, ni nunca supe, que se sentía, pero debía ser terrible ver como pasaban los tractores arrasando conucos y hogares para que los siguiera la planchada del taladro. (27)

Notably, Subero's description bears resemblance to the world depicted in *Mene*: colossal equipment, fires, land seizures, the destruction of homes. In the midst of these descriptions, the gaze and silence of "los indios" provides a comparative juxtaposition to this changing world, rehashing the tired perceptions of native peoples as having "missed out on modernity" (Deloria, 6).

As the passage above indicates, the traditional themes of the novel of the oil encounter emerge through Subero's memories, as well as through the disembodied voices that haunt *Memorias*' first section: a small, isolated town that grew as a result of the migrations entailed in oil-exploitation; the backbreaking work of laborers battling an unfriendly terrain and ghastly machinery; the incomprehensibly rapid changes in people's living conditions, expectations, and behavior as well as that of the territory itself. However, rather than a seamless, self-contained narrative, this past emerges in fragments, continually disrupting and disrupted by its remembrance and conflicting interpretations in 1983. In other words, 1933 and 1983 make and unmake each other throughout the first third of *Memorias*, neither moment containable to its proper temporal bounds. Consequently, in a more self-reflexive style than *Guachimanes*, *Memorias* digs into the impossibility of grasping, let alone representing a past that has not been contaminated by the present—and conversely, of creating presents and futures that have broken from that past.

1973:"a pesar de la ilusión y la esperanza, se descascaraban las paredes"

Santa María del Mar celebrates its anniversary for the first time in 1973: "el Ayuntamiento decidió por primera vez celebrar el aniversario de la ciudad (en una fecha determinada, sin duda, azarientamente)" (88), an event depicted in *Memorias'* third section "HECHOS." The section revolves around the rise and fall of *Pensión Lutencia*, expanded into *Hotel Triunfo* as the town prospered. A beneficiary and victim of the oil economy (in its local, national, and global iterations), the tumultuous history of *Hotel Triunfo* explicitly mimics the trajectory of boom and busts of the 1970s and 1980s: built in early 1970s when "el país comenzó a prosperar en forma vertiginosa, y por supuesto, también la región" (87) and officially founded during the February 1973 celebrations, the hotel retracted back to a small pension within a few years, its two upper floors turned into dilapidated apartments for rent. "HECHOS" thus revolves around the attempts to celebrate the founding of entities that already existed, and beginnings that never solidified. First, we have the founding of *Hotel Triunfo*, which ultimately is only an addition to *Pensión Lutencia.* Secondly, Santa María del Mar similarly existed prior to February 1933, its actual founding unknown. On a related vein, the section also focuses on the emergence of a prosperous Santa María del Mar as a growing city of *La Gran Venezuela. La Gran Venezuela* refers to the grand project of national growth and modernization fed by the oil booms (elsewhere, an energy crisis) of the 1970s. These events of a national and international scale are continually, if implicitly, alluded to in the text through the sudden and brief prosperity enjoyed by Santa María del Mar and its inhabitants:

> Todo auguraba felicidad y prosperidad. El Toto Molinari se retiró de La Compañía. Quizá por eso no se enteró a tiempo del cambio de los planes. […] De todos modos, pocos se enteraron y la *ciudad vivió un tiempo por el puro impulso de su ilusión y su*

> *esperanza* […] esa ciudad que había crecido súbitamente en la época de los 70, que había sido poblada de edificios de aluminio, concreto y plexiglás, la ciudad de los múltiples anuncios luminosos y los jardines esplendorosos, la de los placeres y el confort, se fue desmoronando como si hubiera sido la escenografía de alguna filmación monumental. La Compañía despidió casi todo el personal. Los inversionistas se declararon en quiebra. Los desempleados, perdida la esperanza, comenzaron a emigrar. (89)

This passage conveys how the dreams and hopes of an oil boom can outlast the fiscal boom itself, thus blurring times of prosperity and crisis. Most importantly, the passage notes the ways in which the prosperity afforded by the boom masks the activities of the oil industry even within an oil enclave. I am not only referencing the literal withdrawal of the oil industry, in its shrinkage of production, investment, and labor force described above. I refer also to the way in which the imagery of oil fields—the pumpjacks, screw jacks, gas flares, relentless noise—vanishes from the text as it depicts the 1970s and 1980s. Oil infrastructure is displaced by the imagery of a growing and dying city illustrated in the above passage. This is not to say that oil disappears from the text. Instead, oil gains a more spectral presence, as it now appears through all the things afforded by an influx of petrodollars: new businesses, advertisements, a growing availability of consumer products. Although not made explicit in the text, we should note that the material existence of tall buildings made with aluminum, concrete, and Plexiglas, and the electrically lit billboards (certainly containing synthetic, water-resistant paints), which populate the above passage, are made possible through the harnessing of petrochemicals. Thus, oil continues to be a central presence in *Memorias* even after *La Compañía* fires its workers, stops extracting oil, and its administrative offices depart from Santa María del Mar. In this sense, the text depicts the ways in which, once established as a long-running industry, oil's impact on

society appears through delayed effects having little to do with the extraction process: "it is by metamorphosing society that oil money is fully incorporated into it" (Coronil, 110). Notably, while *Memorias* presents the metamorphosis of Santa María del Mar through the dramatic influx of petrodollars in the 1970s, it fails to mention a key aspect of these transformations: the state and the nationalization of the oil industry, at a time when "no one challenged the notion that the state could effectively be everywhere at once" (Karl, 126).

While many oil companies extracted petroleum in El Tigre/Santa María del Mar, neither the above passages nor the novel as a whole differentiate between them. This flattening out of a variety of oil companies could be read as an homage to the novels of the oil encounter, which generally only refer to *La Compañía*—names like *Creole*, *Shell*, *Gulf Oil* are practically absent from Venezuelan oil literature.[58] Thus, nameless northern companies populate Venezuela's oil narratives, their exact identity or geographic origin of little importance. Rather than the series of companies that have extracted Santa María del Mar's oil, *La Compañía* functions as a stand-in for the oil industry's vast network. This makes particular sense when we take into account the changing identities of oil companies. One could perhaps interpret *La Compañía*, as a way of gesturing to the similarly predatory actions of foreign oil corporations in Venezuela, which had no stake in the specific places whence they obtained much of their wealth. This is an argument that makes sense in all prior novels of the oil encounter, which were, after all, written before the

[58] In contrast, Milagros Mata Gil's non-fiction work frequently references oil companies, meaning that absence of names in *Memorias* is exceptional in her oeuvre. For instance, in a 2011 essay commemorating El Tigre's seventy-eighth anniversary, she carefully outlines the different oil companies that inhabited the area: "En aquellos días, SOCONY era el rótulo que identificaba todo cuanto hubiera de vivo o de muerto en esta meseta"…"Los registros de la Standard Oil hablan muy veladamente de un proceso de exploración que se iniciara a mediados de 1920."… "Así que los trabajos de exploración (que realizaban paralelamente la Shell, la Mobil, junto con la Standard Oil (madre de la Esso) y otras compañías más pequeñas, como la NY and Bermúdez and Co.) Y se ejecutaban secretamente, en un muy activo y a veces sangriento juego de intereses y espionajes" ("Setenta y ocho años").

nationalization of Venezuela's oil reserves in 1976. *Memorias*, however, continues depicting a singular *Compañía* even after the Venezuelan state takes over oil extraction. That a novel about the history of a Venezuelan oil town grants no importance to the distinction between state owned and foreign companies suggests that a change in administration and ownership at the upper levels of the oil industry has a limited effect in the oil-producing enclave. This perhaps less nuanced way of representing oil companies has the added benefit of highlighting the fact that from numerous (if not most) nodes in the petroleum network, the difference among corporate or governmental owners are not necessarily discernable or even important. For instance, the past, present, and future lives affected by the oil spills that polluted Lake Maracaibo or the Gulf of Mexico cannot trace nor be entirely concerned with the degree of responsibility belonging to one of the many iterations of ExxonMobil (an entity that has had past lives as Creole Oil, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Esso and Exxon), or BP (now divested of its imperial and nationalist vestments, as well as most of its letters, the company has had past lives as the Anglo-Persian Company, Burmah Oil, Anglo-Iranian Oil, Standard Oil of Ohio, Amoco, and British Petroleum. They now like to claim that BP stands for *Beyond Petroleum*). Likewise, the spill in the Guarapiche River mentioned in Chapter I is not ameliorated by the fact that the ruptured pipeline owned and operated by a new PDVSA that finally belongs to the people, as the company's slogan "La nueva PDVSA es del Pueblo," asserts.

Not only does *Memorias* ignore nationalization, but it also makes sure to render the state altogether invisible in its depiction of the 1970s. The state's absence is not gratuitous. After all, Venezuela's federal government, while not a central aspect of the narrative, remains present in other portions of the novel: Gómez's death is replayed in the first two sections of the novel; the text depicts the president's blatant denial of the 1983 crisis (an unnamed Luis Herrera Campins

visiting Santa María del Mar during its fiftieth anniversary). Most significantly, however, is the fact that the text looks away from the state at the time of its greatest visibility. In the style of the magical state, the effects of the 1970s bonanza became congealed in the presidential figure: Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1979, 1989-1993), fortunate enough to be elected president two months after the inception of the oil embargo, he promised to use these funds to swiftly modernize Venezuela. While, according to Cabrujas, Gómez was the vampire who made the Trasandina, the figure of Pérez was enveloped in its own mythos: "Carlos Andrés Pérez was not a president. He was a magician, a magician who was capable of propelling us toward a hallucination" (Coronil's translation, 1). Cabrujas' comment is not simply the embellished language of a celebrated playwright. the discourse surrounding Pérez and his *democracia con energía/democracy with energy* is filled with hyperbole. OPEC founder Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo described the grandiosity of the regime in similar terms, "*He acted as if we had no cages, as if we could shed our poor history*, as if we were somehow different from the rest of Latin America. Of course we are different. We look more like Saudi Arabia than Brazil. We are *Venezuela Saudita*" (Karl, 178, my italics). Once again, the magnanimous wizard of the magical state is portrayed as an agent with the power to overcome limits, to not be bogged down by a world of matter, people, and history, a nationalist iteration of the oil industry's own promise to conquer all limits to human progress.

This frenzied disappearance of cages and history appears in *Memorias* through the recurrent references to dreams and hopes that have no source or object. *Hotel Triunfo*—itself a place of movement and transience—ultimately functions as the boom's focal point, as its growth and collapse mirror the country's economic situation.[59] In other words, the text tells a story about

[59] Hotels have, in fact, been iconic items of a prosperous Venezuela. For instance, when Nelson A. Rockefeller (of Standard Oil, now the "Baby Standards" of ExxonMobil and Chevron) visited

a bonanza as a hallucination, in which oil and the state remain largely absent. These key absences point to a morphing oil industry. Indeed, *Memorias* suggests that, if anything, the apparent departure of *La Compañía* was part of a long term process that simultaneously made *La Compañía* more powerful yet more invisible, its power scattered among its many parts: "Dicen que la compañía se marchó. No es cierto. No es cierto. Su omnipresencia se ha sutilizado de tal manera que uno olvida que preside, envuelve y determina los destinos colectivos individuales" (136). *Memorias* further argues that the processes depicted in the classic Venezuelan novel of the oil encounter were the first steps in a wider process of accumulation; initial steps when the industry still *appeared to exist in particular sites as a specific entity* and further seemed to be ran by identifiable human beings:

> El oro comenzó a llegar directamente a las arcas, fluyendo por higiénicos conductos. La cara y las pasiones de los hombres, sus gestos, y sus palabras, se fueron borrando, y el poderío de los señores creció […] Hombres como Mr. Patrick, Mr. Turner, Mr. Carter (y sin contar los para ellos impronunciables nombres de tantos y tantos otros: nativos, extranjeros de otras latitudes: los vencidos) fueron peones que abrieron camino a los innominados seres pulcrísimos que desde el clima amable de California o Florida, dirigen los asuntos de los aún más innominados señores cuyos negocios se esconden tras el muro anónimo de la palabra *Compañía*: abogados, secretarias, vendedores, agente de Bolsa, que, a su vez, son manejados por exactas computadoras cuyo objetivo consiste en aumentar cada vez más las riquezas de nuestros amos. Así, pues, no nos engañemos. La Compañía no se fue y nunca se irá mientras exista una gota luminosa que extraer en cualquier parte. Todos nos encontramos bajo su égida. (136)

Venezuela as part of his campaign of corporate citizenship, he asked president Eleazar López Contreras, about the Venezuelan nation's greatest need. The president replied "a good hotel" (González Casas, 181), a notable response to say the least in a country that has never ceased to be plagued by extreme poverty.

Mr. Patrick, Turner, and Carter, mentioned in the above passage are the U.S. American engineers and managers depicted in the first section of *Memorias*. They are presented as seemingly all-powerful men within early oil settlements. In this passage, however, they are themselves rendered mere pawns, who unlike their successors, had to themselves work and contend with life at the oil fields (even if dismissively, violently). In this sense, *Memorias* explores the increasing difficulty of pointing to any tangible thing or place that embodies the oil industry, as it appears to be everywhere and nowhere in particular. Chapter III focuses more intently on the representational challenges posed by the oil industry's ubiquity. For now, we shall turn to the way in which the withdrawal of *La Compañía* from Santa María del Mar engenders the emergence of the early days of oil exploitation as a historical object.

The year of 1973 and its significance are insidiously evoked in the novel's second section, which consists entirely of a document titled *Libro de Santa María del Mar*, a memoir penned at least partially by petroleum engineer Jason Patrick. A short prologue mentions that the text we are about to read was found among other archival documents abandoned by *La Compañía*. The book deals with Jason Patrick's experiences working for different oil companies throughout the 1910s and 1920s, focusing in particular on his arrival in Venezuela in the 1930s, where he settled until his death in 1963. Notably, the memoir repeats much of what Castor Subero and the voices narrated in the first part of the novel—already stories that retold much of what appears in the novels of the oil encounter. Consequently, Jason Patrick's memoirs function as a repetition of a repetition, telling the already-told story of an oil encounter from the vantage point of a U.S. American worker.

Presented as the finished document itself, Jason Patrick's memoir ends with the editorial information in the book's last page, typical of Venezuelan publications:

Fin del **Libro de Santa María del Mar**

Impreso en febrero de 1973 en la Imprenta del Ayuntamiento de Santa María del Mar. 1.000 ejemplares. Distribución Gratuita. (76, original bold)

While a seemingly minor detail, an attempt at verisimilitude perhaps, this short postscript links the published memoir with the exuberant sense of prosperity at the time the government of Santa María del Mar decided to designate an official date for the city's founding. Published by city hall, and handed out freely on the town's newly designated anniversary, the memoir functions as an artifact from the celebration. The attempt to turn the text into a foundational text can be glimpsed through the fact that the memoir of a man from the United States, writing about traveling the world with oil companies, is titled *Libro de Santa María del Mar*.

Notably, the prologue suggests that *Libro de Santa María del Mar* is as much a product of Jason Patrick's writing, as it is of the processes of archiving, editing, and publication—which might have involved censorship and confabulation. Specifically, the prologue notes that the manuscripts found in the abandoned archive were visibly altered, as pages had been torn and entire passages erased. Given the incompleteness of the manuscript, the editor decided to organize it chronologically and fill in the blanks where needed. Most importantly, the prologue closes by pointing out that despite the fact that some specialists consider the manuscript to be apocryphal, Santa María del Mar's city hall decided to publish it for its historical value. Notably, the acknowledgement that *Libro* emerged from forgotten and incomplete fragments, which were granted narrative coherence at a later date, can also be said of *Memorias*, a novel providing a fragmented overview of fifty years of history. Nevertheless, unlike the published memoir of Jason Patrick, *Memorias* is concerned with showing the cracks and inconsistencies of its own narrative. In this sense, *Memorias* is as much about remembrance and representation, as it is

about their impossibility—at least in a seamless, objective, unadulterated form. That blanks had to be filled in order for *Libro de Santa María del Mar* to make sense as a coherent narrative further points to the confabulations needed if the past, in all its inaccessible complexity, is to be transformed into a narrative—especially one that can make sense in the present. In other words, *Libro de Santa María del Mar* is a product of both, the attempts to write a history for a town that seems to lack it in written form, as well as of Jason Patrick's actual memories. This filling of blanks as a way of creating and narrating a sense of past also occurs during Santa María del Mar's anniversary celebrations: a random date is chosen to celebrate an event that did not occur.

Significantly, *La Compañía*'s withdrawal from Santa María del Mar—another event *Memorias* posits did not exactly happen—is a key factor in the publication of *Libro de Santa María del Mar*. The book is, after all, comprised of forgotten documents in an abandoned archive. As *La Compañía* leaves a few years before the town experiences the effects of almost simultaneous bonanza and crash, the early years of oil exploitation become an object of memory and thus commemoration. In this sense, 1973 comprises not only the beginning of an oil boom, but also the beginning of Santa María del Mar's official history. Given our discussion throughout this chapter, it should not be surprising that this official history, with its city hall sanctioned celebrations and publications, emerges at a time of disorienting transitions. Treated as a foundational document, *Libro de Santa María del Mar* inaugurates a dividing line between a past and present that quarantines the first forty years of oil exploitation to a bygone era. A bygone era can be commemorated and written about, it poses no real threat to the present state of things (to "the sovereignty of our moment" as Jonathan Gil Harris describes it) because it no longer exists as anything beyond its representation. Indeed, this is why *La Compañía* could leave behind an entire archive, Jason Patrick's memoir being only one document, and why city hall could publish

it: its content does not matter enough to keep hidden, as there is nothing to be done with its depictions of a *Compañía* that can no longer be located.[60]

Interestingly, there is a parallel between Jason Patrick's memoir and the retrospective creation of *la novela del petróleo* as a literary genre. As we have examined throughout this chapter, novels dealing with Venezuelan oil exploitation began to be published in the 1930s. However, these texts were not grouped and examined in conjunction until the publication of Gustavo Carrera Damas' monograph, *La novela del petróleo en Venezuela* in 1972. Notably, *Libro de Santa María del Mar* fits Carrera's requirements for a proper *novela del petróleo*, with the crucial exception of not technically being a novel: Carrera argues that to write about oil in Venezuela a text should faithfully represent life in the oil camps, particularly commending texts that document the author's first-hand observations of the sites. Like the *novelas del petróleo*, *Libro* had remained largely unread and unnoticed until its re-inscription as a text about the early days of oil exploitation. As recovered voices from a bygone past, the reemergence of these texts provided a necessary account and texture to a series of events that might otherwise be remembered as a smooth process of unification, pacification, and modernization. However, this re-emergence is also a disavowal: now that a gradual process of nationalization, a stable liberal democracy, and a great bounty protects Venezuela from the threatening milieu depicted in narratives of the oil encounter (be it the *novela del petróleo* or *Libro de Santa María del Mar*), one can be free to engage with their depictions of the past's "sweet barbarism" (Mata Gil, 136).

[60] Likewise, city hall can publish it despite the fact that the memoir describes the ways in which *La Compañía* acted as a governing body, with its own security forces, as well as power over legislation, public works, given that local and state politicians as being "bajo la tutela de La Compañía, y a ella solamente remitían sus juicios" (72).

1983: "sólo los sobrevivientes se aferraban a los palos del desastre"

As expected, Santa María del Mar's fiftieth anniversary spectacularly shines a light on the past as a way to conceal the present. Among banquets, parades, musical, theatrical and dance performances, as well as speeches by local beauty queens, politicians, and even the president, a protest emerges that briefly brings the celebration to a halt. While a local politician asserts that the dark days of oil exploitation are far behind, replaced now by the strength of the country's institutions, and the stability of its democracy, a crowd emerges with a wide range of demands: solutions to unemployment, healthcare, and housing crises, clean water, better schools, more access to higher education, and less repression. Their last demand is an end to pollution: "Fuera la contaminación del petróleo" (158)—a topic continually silenced in Venezuelan political discourse. The protesters are removed, the celebrations postponed, and the media decides not to report on the irruption: "las emisoras, decididas a ocultar lo mejor posible el pequeño desastre, invitaron como si nada a eso que se llama el Público en General para el acto de la tarde, cuando en el Campo Giraluna se develaría el Obelisco Conmemorativo" (159). The unveiling of a monument serves as an excuse not to acknowledge the wide list of demands that would puncture the façade of a Santa María del Mar that has overcome "esos tiempos sombríos," to which the politician's interrupted speech alludes. Yet, as the commemoration occurs on February 1983, the shadow of economic collapse hovers over the celebration—a collapse straightforwardly denied by the president during a television interview in the text. We are thus to understand that Santa María del Mar's darkest times have yet to begin.

Structurally speaking, *Memorias de una antigua primavera* ends the way *Guachimanes* begins: an unnamed narrator (an explicit stand-in for the implied author) travels to an oil town some considerable if indeterminate time after the events in the main diegesis. The narrating voice

looks around, notes certain key landmarks, and reflects on what led her to write the narrative contained in the novel (*Memorias* even features that symbol of smooth, seamless geographies, the perfectly paved road). Whereas in *Guachimanes* the narrator discovers that a new beginning is haunted by a recent past, the implied author of *Memorias* looks at the same period (the 1930s) from the vantage point of the 1980s, as a distant past she must look for in its material ruins, memories, and words:

> los múltiples elementos de un mosaico que debes formar. […] Elementos de distinta extensión, difícil de ubicar cronológicamente. Elementos a los que difícilmente se les puede atribuir (o restituir) la calidad de lo real. *Quieres construir una ciudad sobre las ruinas de otra, y te das cuenta de que solo tienes palabras y recuerdos*. Y comprendes que debes entregarte a su culto con minuciosa pasión de la que no debes excluir ni el placer ni el dolor. (173)

Once again, her words echo the aims of the narrator in *Guachimanes*: the impossibility to adequately write about these sites, yet the responsibility to do so. Or, in other words, to provide as meticulous an account—despite language's inherent limitations—of a place in time that has remained invisible elsewhere. The words we read are *not* Santa María del Mar/El Tigre, yet it may very well be the closest approximation available outside the site itself. The novel's epigraph asserts as much, "Esta es una obra de ficción. Sólo la ficción garantiza la supervivencia de la realidad."

Significantly, despite its backward gaze, *Memorias* continually condemns the violent erasures at the heart of national rememberings. Indeed, the end of the text gestures to the open ended nature of the past it represents. The narrator warns herself not to seek endings or closure: "Y no ansíes la noche en que este pueblo desaparezca de su lugar, para ver terminada tu misión,

porque en cualquier parte que te encuentres llevarás contigo el opaco resplandor de sus historias, como un crepúsculo cobrizo en primavera" (173-174). The narrating voice closes the novel in the second person telling herself to resist the impulse to wish away, whitewash, or bury that tragic history. Indeed, while the text's title refers to *old springs*, its final sentence speaks of continuous spring twilight, an approximation but not the actual fulfillment of an ending. Even if the material entity of *Memorias de una antigua primavera* ends—finished in Mexico City, February 7, 1988, as stated on the page—these stories do not. The novel's final line gains immense significance in the context of the historical oil town as a site whose disappearance, materially and symbolically, is continually longed for. As I further explore in Chapter IV, the oil town has been treated in Venezuelan political thought and cultural production as a site that must be forgotten, moved away from, or transformed into something entirely other; the site of an abject wound that must be not only healed, but smoothed over for a true Venezuela to emerge and prosper. It is to be remembered (either by celebrating anniversaries, reading *Mene*, or publishing *Guachimanes*) as proof of everything Venezuela has overcome, everything that no longer exists.

As it provides multiple vantage points whence a local history of oil exploitation can be understood, *Memorias* points to the ways in which modifying taxonomies and the optic that comes with them can recast what counts as past or present. In doing so, the text contests the temporal logic of the magical state, which would beckon us to see little in common between 1933, 1973, 1983 and today—too many things have irreparably changed to see these times as coeval. Yet, by boldly asserting, "no nos engañemos. La Compañía no se fue y nunca se irá mientras exista una gota luminosa que extraer en cualquier parte. Todos nos encontramos bajo su égida" (136), the text beckons us to shift our gaze to a more elongated and flexible form of duration. Yes, the novels of the oil encounter are texts about twentieth-century Venezuela: *Mene*

about the early years of exploitation, *Guachimanes* about the transition following the Gómez dicatorship, *Memorias de una antigua primavera* about re-interpreting fifty years of history in light of the economic crises of the 1980s. Nonetheless, as the above passage suggests, these texts are also about the expansion of the oil industry, a time when *the buried corpse of the sun* (Negarestani) became increasingly central in and threatening to human societies. These times, far from the content of one nation's history, have yet to pass.

The Oil Town as Liminal Space

Gustavo Luis Carrera Damas inaugurated the scholarly conversation on the *novela del petróleo* in Venezuela by famously asserting its nonexistence. He then proceeded to analyze sixteen novels depicting the oil industry's activities in Venezuela. Carrera could nonetheless support his thesis about these novels' inexistence by arguing that only a handful of them depict oil in terms he found adequate. Carrera's position is representative of the treatment literary criticism has bestowed upon Venezuelan oil narratives: there is a continuous insistence that *something* is not quite right with these texts, and therefore they do not deserve to be taken seriously. For Carrera the issue boils down to the scant number of texts that, like *Mene*, meticulously depict the process of oil extraction. More recently, the perceived inadequacies in Venezuela's oil literature have been attributed to formal traits. Miguel Ángel Campos, for instance, takes issue with the novels' outdated "social realism," which he believes aligns them to equally outdated anti-imperialist politics (*Las novedades*, 23). In a more sympathetic reading, Cósimo Mandrillo argues that texts such as *Mene* and *Mancha de aceite* failed to conform to the literary taste of their time: their depictions of an ugly, technological world could not generate much interest at a time when the folklorism of *criollismo* and *regionalism* was most popular (52-53). By the time the texts were rescued from obscurity in the 1970s, neither naturalist realisms

nor life at the oil fields were in vogue.[61] In short, when it comes to Venezuelan literature, the novels of the oil encounter appear to be out of place, of the wrong time. Even as the above critiques are valid, I would argue that the discomfort generated by these novels does not entirely stem from the texts themselves. Indeed, the peripheral role of the novel of the oil encounter within Venezuelan literature (which, in turn, leads to its complete absence from panoramic views of Latin American literature) points to the challenge oil extraction poses to notions of a national community represented through its literature.

As scholarship on the novel of the oil encounter often focuses on textual inadequacies (be it their form, their political stance, or the scope of their representations), possible shortcomings in reading and interpretative practices tend go unquestioned. For instance, Manuel Caballero echoes the generalized dissatisfaction with the novels, attributing it to the ways in which the novels depict a world altogether detached from Venezuela. More specifically, he claims that even the two novels he finds most compelling, *Mene* and *Oficina No.1*, ultimately have nothing to do with most people's experience of life in Venezuela: "both are novels where oil is seen from the outside [in] a land that has nothing to do with one's own" (172, my translation). The texts instead depict "a foreign country where the Devil and the Minotaur rule" (172, my translation). Caballero's statements are accurate; they also miss the point. While these novels are by no means faultless, I would posit that those traits that have been deemed their greatest weaknesses—their ill-fitting content and form, their inability convey a recognizable picture of oil's role in

[61] One might thus want to read the novel of the oil encounter as precursors, or even as displaced members of the gritty urban narratives that exploded in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the truism among the literati is that Venezuelan literature was predominately rural in the first four decades of the twentieth century, and had become exclusively urban by the second half of the century. The narratives of the oil encounter, of course, do not exactly fit in this binary; yet the fact that the connection between oil and urban narratives has not received the attention it deserves is indicative of oil's chronic invisibility in social and cultural analyses.

Venezuela—are strengths. The fact that the novels depict an uncanny site that is simultaneously inside and alien to Venezuela is in itself a compelling picture of oil's place in society: after all, the space of the oil encounter is *no place at all*. As Amitav Ghosh compellingly argues, this *no place* is "intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, international […] a world that poses a radical challenge not merely to the practice of writing as we know it but to much of modern culture: to such notions as the idea of distinguishable and distant civilizations, *or recognizable and separate societies*" (Ghosh, 142, my italics). Consequently, the novels of the oil encounter offer a vision of sites that cannot be comfortably internalized into Venezuelan identity. Oil, the oil town, and the novels of the oil encounter instead function as jagged shards thwarting visions of a seamless, unified nation. Paradoxically, however, they also provide the material basis for the smooth surfaces that comprise these very visions of a unified nation. Simultaneously internal and external to Venezuelan society, oil and its literary representation have posed a monumental conceptual challenge to Venezuelan thought. Thus, it is much easier to say that there is no adequate oil literature, than to try to contend with its contradictions.

An additional contradiction in the novels of the oil encounter is the fact that despite their individual focus on specific, local experiences, the texts largely portray similar, sometimes indistinguishable milieus. As we will shortly explore, the similarities among these texts is directly related to their inability to fit within conventions of Venezuelan literature. The fact that *Mene, Guachimanes, Oficina No. 1* and to a point *Memorias de una antigua primavera* tell similar stories, makes it easy to dismiss them as unimaginative reiterations of the same idea. That this story reappears in other media (for instance in Domenico Chiappe's digital novel *Tierra de extracción* (2000) and in Jacobo Penzo's fictionalized documentary *Cabimas: donde todo*

comenzó (2012)) should lead us to ask *why* the oil encounter looks so similar in texts produced by different authors, more than seventy years apart.

As our close readings have thus far exemplified, marked by the machinery, infrastructure, capital, and conventions of the oil industry, oil towns grow at such a swift pace that they appear to sever ties to their immediate past and to their surroundings. Notably, this severing of ties with known worlds and experiences is a key unifying feature among the narratives of the oil encounter, as the texts focus on the impact one industry inflicts on what originally were different localities. *Mene* and *Mancha de aceite*, written in the 1930s, depict the arrival of machinery, condescending English-speaking engineers, and Venezuelans looking for work, land seizures, the building and policing of fences, the proliferation of makeshift houses and bars that act as one of the few sites for socializing, the maiming of workers at the oil rigs, and the failed plans to organize workers. With a more historical optic, *Guachimanes, Oficina No. 1*, and *Memorias de una antigua primavera* also depict the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in December 1935, the ensuing national strike, and the birth of the Venezuelan labor movement.

We can more specifically trace the similar ways in which the narratives of the oil encounter depict sites detached from their immediate surroundings, by comparing their depictions of characters' enigmatic first encounters with oil towns. Suffused with light and cadavers, this first encounter often functions as a Dantean descent into the underworld. The oil town is not only unrecognizable to those who lived there, as was the case with Casiano and Casildo in *Mene*, but also to newcomers from nearby regions, who have never seen anything quite like it. For instance, the opening to the digital novel *Tierra de extracción* is marked by infernal flames,

La noche intentaba cerrarse sobre las llamaradas de fuego que surgen de dentro de la tierra.

> Es el infierno, pensó Matías Gracia. –Son las entrañas del mene explicó Miriam Fuentallana como si lo hubiera oído. […] Esta tierra tiene su encanto pero debes descubrirlo –dijo ella, como si dictara su sentencia. La suya, la de ambos, la de quien elige los infiernos para vivir. (Chiappe)

The central diegesis of *Memorias de una antigua primavera* similarly opens under the watchful eye of the omnipresent flare and its evocation of the underworld: "Uno llegaba por cualquier camino y veía la llamarada de los mechurrios iluminando con su perenne resplandor […] por donde pasaban las animas rumbo a los países paralelos de la muerte, iluminados entonces por el escandaloso fulgor con que se quemaba el gas" (Matas Gil, 13). The continuous flames lighting the tropical sky, a gas residue from the extraction process, points to a disruption to the local environment's rhythms, as days are brighter, nighttime no longer brings darkness, and the smell of gas imbues the area. The flare also points to the sense that these are nightmarish sights that remain unseen elsewhere. Beyond these visible markings of radically modified landscapes, first encounters with the oil towns also tend to be marked by gruesome deaths. Indeed, when Carmen Rosa and her mother arrive in the eponymous oil settlement of Oficina No. 1 they are welcomed by smoke, the smell of gas, and a huge explosion that kills two workers, leaving their bodies dispersed all over the ground. The first thing the two women see in the settlement is the collection of dispersed body parts. Likewise, as mentioned in our reading of *Guachimanes*, the sight of a dead body welcomes the text's narrator to Cabimas, and compels him to write the narrative that unfolds.

The more these texts appear to zoom-in on these sites, attempting to capture their specific social and material conditions, the more these specificities would appear to become generalities. Thus, in their attempt to represent faithfully, to bring light to a concealed world, these texts

paradoxically replicate much of the oil industry's inconspicuousness: the novels attempt to represent the specificities of these places, but in doing so they end up with no place at all. To say that these sites are "no place", however, is not meant to set an opposition between place and non-place. I use the term to highlight the extent to which these sites exist at the margins of conventional forms of belonging, to singular identities, and clear-cut borders. Deep inside the Venezuelan territory oil towns, "transgress national borders" functioning instead as "liminal margins, regions, or border zones in which individual and national identities migrate, merge and hybridize" (Jay, 76).

It should not be terribly surprising then, that the similarities among narratives of the oil encounter are not confined to Venezuela. For instance, Abdul Rahman Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* (*Mudun al-milh*), published in Beirut in 1984, but set in an unnamed Middle Eastern nation, depicts a similar story of an isolated setting, dramatic transformations, an existential anxieties about a locality's ability to survive the booms and busts of oil extraction. We can understand these analogous experiences of *cities of salt* in the Arabian Peninsula and northern South America, as spatial iterations of Terry Lynn Karl's institutional argument about petrostates. Karl posits that mid-sized petrostates such as Venezuela, Nigeria, and Iran are structurally more similar to each other, than to their non-oil producing neighbors. (Karl's thesis echoes an earlier comment by Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso when he speaks of Venezuela's greater resemblance to Saudi Arabia than Brazil during the 1970s boom). Notably, the inconspicuousness of oil exploitation and its aftermath is shared by major oil-exporting nations where oil extraction has traditionally been represented as taking place in secluded, uninhabited regions. This remoteness is a common myth in nations as varied as Venezuela, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Thus, while any notion of place is always already multiple, irreducible to a single identity or origin, the non-identity of the oil town is particularly intensified as a site shaped economically, materially, and culturally by transnational capital. Consequently, it is crucial to entertain the idea that the traits that make *Mene, Oficina No. 1, Guachimanes,* and *Memorias de una antigua primavera* ineffective representations of Venezuelan society, might very well be traits that unwittingly make them compelling depictions of the *no place* whence oil flows.

Conclusion

Soon after I began writing this chapter in 2014, I read an article in *The Atlantic* about Watford City, one of the many small towns in western North Dakota transformed by the Bakken oil boom (Haines). The region's transformation was even noticed in space, as a satellite photograph of the United States at nighttime showed a brightly-lit North Dakota (the third least densely populated state in the United States), as a result of gas flares, drilling equipment, and temporary housing. Satellite pictures aside, the article's descriptions of an isolated region suddenly transformed by the oil industry echoed much of what I had read about Venezuelan oil towns in the 1930s. I wondered, perhaps cynically, if it was only a matter of a few years for me to read another article about a bust and its effects on the region. As I finish this chapter in June 2015, *The Atlantic* published an article titled, "A North Dakota Oil Boom Goes Bust: What will happen to those who built their lives on it?" A fall in global oil prices, currently devastating the Venezuelan economy, has just as swiftly transformed western North Dakota. The article compellingly resonates with the anxieties populating the novels of the oil encounter in Venezuela, "What will happen to the towns that suddenly flourished? What will happen to those who pinned their dreams on the North Dakota oil boom?" (van Ells). Once again, I find myself

reading texts that, in trying to portray the specificities of a particular situation, echo stories from another time and place.

The deceptively straightforward representations of specific towns in the novels of the oil encounter have led critics to confine their view to the local and the national when they were also dealing with the planetary and the millennial. Indeed, for generations critics have asserted that the novels of the oil encounter depict Venezuela's past. I am more inclined to see them as texts dealing with a porous sense of time and place, not least because the world they depict keeps resonating with other times and places. Indeed, strict borders between past and present, *here* and *there* are complicated by the fact that the gases released from extracting, refining, and consuming the content of the wells depicted in Ramón Díaz Sánchez's *Mene* are still in our planet's atmosphere, and might be there to affect the lives of beings not yet born.[62] Similarly, the remains of those anonymous spills that made Lake Maracaibo's water flammable, subsequently destroying *Lagunillas del Agua*, likely continued affecting humans and animals for decades. These depictions of settings that are simultaneously local and not local, national and not national, carve an important space to begin questioning the spatial, material, temporal terms under which oil in Venezuela is discussed.

The story of oil, however, should not be limited to the oil encounter. After all, the oil encounter, as a meeting point of cultures, languages, materials, and temporalities, is ultimately one node in a much wider network. I emphasize this point because, if cultural production and analysis about oil are rare, it is rarer still to find works that do not "[start and end] at the site of

[62] "Between 65% and 80% of CO2 released into the air dissolves into the ocean over a period of 20–200 years. The rest is removed by slower processes that take up to several hundreds of thousands of years, including chemical weathering and rock formation. This means that once in the atmosphere, carbon dioxide can continue to affect climate for thousands of years" (Brief and Clark).

extraction and the self-evidence of the thing, oil" (Huber, *Lifeblood*). In other words, one need not depict oil or its extraction sites to contend with it—in fact, our contemporary ecological crises ask that we learn to contend with ecological threats that, like oil, often remain imperceptible. Thus, if oil literature is not exhausted in the oil town, we must remain aware of another conceptual and imaginative challenge: in what other ways can oil's invisibility be depicted and conceptualized? The second half of this dissertation explores this question.

Chapter III

Circulation: Vanishing Limits, Oil's Magic, and Their Narratives

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing.
But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding
in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.
—Karl Marx

That apple you're eating. The milk you drank at lunch.
Every little thing you touch, even just to lift it into your mouth.
It's there. It rubs off.

—Warren Cariou

In some sense, modernity is the story of how oil got into everything.
—Timothy Morton

Few people ever see, smell, let alone touch crude oil or encounter a barrel, or an oil platform. Yet, you would be hard pressed to find a single commodity that has remained untouched—in its packaging, transport, preservation, cultivation, or even chemical structure—by petroleum products. As the above epigraphs by Warren Cariou (from his manifesto against the Alberta tarsands) and by Timothy Morton assert, oil's absence is increasingly difficult to find. From "the apple you're eating" to "everywhere," oil's derivatives and its byproducts are there. Given the scale of its presence and invisibility, oil's relationship to texts and art-works is more complex than its explicit representation. Oil's presence, on the one hand, is too embedded in the habits and objects of quotidian life for it to be easily visualized, or turned into a straightforward narrative. As we consider the ways in which oil often functions as an invisible presence hovering over everyday habits, materials, and comforts, we must further infer that a text need not

explicitly depict the exploitation or transportation of fossil fuels, for it to contend with the multiple aspects of their use, circulation, and footprint. While acknowledging the near impossibility of accounting for such a vast range of phenomena, my interest here is nevertheless to find ways of engaging with cultural production—in particular, literary works concerned with questions of nation and history—while learning to account for how oil as an eco-political issue involves scales that are incommensurable to the traditional bounds of literary and cultural inquiry.[63] The possibility I propose here requires digging through what gets discarded as background, the very *things* habit renders unexceptional, and even invisible.

In order to carry out this line of inquiry, this chapter primarily examines texts that do not exactly exist: *unwritten oil narratives*, a recurrent trope in Venezuelan literary culture, calling for a text that will *at last* encapsulate the ways in which Venezuela was transformed by oil. The expectations placed on this unwritten narrative reveal what tends to be included and excluded when critics speak of oil in Venezuela. The first section of this chapter thus argues that the tendency to define petronarratives as realist texts depicting the specificities of the extraction process blocks the possibility of engaging with other ways of experiencing, understanding, or depicting oil. This tendency not to engage with oil outside the site of extraction has further reinforced the belief that oil has remained absent from Venezuela's literary culture, an assertion that is not only empirically false, but which also largely misunderstands what oil is and what it

[63] I thus take up María Elvira González's challenge, about the need to expand the traditional bounds of literary inquiry about oil in Venezuela: "Habrá que hurgar con el auxilio de otras disciplinas, enfrentar verdades que nos permitan crear desde el fondo claro de nosotros mismos [...] Necesitamos escudriñar informaciones históricas, técnicas, comerciales, estadísticas y bibliográficas. Al avance de las tecnologías de extracción, le siguen políticas más radicales de comercialización. Al poder estratégico y político que ejercen las corporaciones industriales en el mundo, le sigue la influencia hegemónica en la ciencia y la cultura, medios de comunicación, universidades, centros de investigaciones científicas y sociales" (1-2).

does—in particular its central role in the quiet reconfiguration of familiar spaces in the twentieth century.

In order to make room for a critical framework that looks at oil, and its cultural context outside the extraction site I rely on an unconventional oil product: *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* (1949), a documentary film made by Shell Oil's Film Unit, which, without directly advertising Shell, aimed to educate international audiences about oil's technological, scientific, and cultural contributions. *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* helps form a more complex and expansive context for two specific unwritten petronarratives: passages in Arturo Uslar Pietri's novels *Un retrato en la geografí*a and *Estación de mascaras*, where characters discuss possibilities for surrealist or fantastic petronarratives. Both of these unwritten or phantom narratives (as immaterial presences hovering over Venezuelan literary culture) mirror the documentary, serving as a negative image that turns the comfortable world on the screen into uncanny visions about a world sinking in oil. However, the striking similarities among these aesthetically, politically, and institutionally disparate texts highlight the degree to which the very rationality of extracting and consuming oil has gone unquestioned. Even Venezuelan cultural production, which has traditionally been remarkably critical of oil, has failed to critique one of the central premises informing the oil industry: the vision of its practices as rational, scientific enterprises leading to a more orderly, comfortable and *human* world. Consequently, another phantom emerges in our analyses of these three texts: a world of passive matter under the benevolent control of rational subjects—a world that never existed.

This Is Not a Petronarrative

"Petroleum resists the five act form" ["*Das Petroleum sträubt sich gegen die fünf Akte*"], claimed Bertolt Brecht in 1929 (29).[64] The statement hints at the ways in which the industrial, political, material (and I would add ecological) relationships created by petroleum elude straightforward representation. It is thus important to reiterate that the industrial use of fossil fuels is not reducible to a single *thing.* Indeed, to speak of any particular fossil fuel is to contend with a set of substances, objects, processes, and habits that often invisibly populate and modify our world at temporal and spatial scales that surpass the bounds not only of the properly historical but potentially those of human existence. The extent of oil's ubiquity, however, sets it apart from other fossil fuels: the ease of its extraction and transportation, as well as its high concentration of hydrocarbons allow its wider extension. Nonetheless, despite its extension, the oil industry is one of the least labor-intensive sectors of the modern economy.[65] Both of these factors inevitably make oil difficult to understand, imagine, and perceive, even if we are aware of its importance in vast arrays of social relations and ecological concerns.

The difficulty of depicting and imagining oil in Venezuela has often been expressed as bewilderment over its absence in cultural production. For instance, in 1977, as the largest oil

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[64] Originally published as 'Über Stoffe und Formen' in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, Brecht discussed the social relations that emerged from the "petroleum-complex" and the effect they must inevitably have on dramatic form and "subject-matter": "The extraction and refinement of petroleum spirit represents a new complex of subjects, and when one studies these carefully one becomes struck by quite new forms of human relationship. A particular mode of behavior can be observed both in the individual and in the mass, and it is clearly peculiar to the petroleum complex. But it wasn't a new mode of beaviour that created this particular way of refining petrol. The petroleum complex came first, and the new relationships are secondary. The new relationships represent mankind's answers to questions of 'subject-matter'; these are the solutions. The subject-matter (the situation, as it were) develops according to definite rules, plain necessities, but petroleum creates new relationships. Once again, these are secondary" (29-30)

[65] See *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* by Timothy Mitchell for an account of how the oil industry circumvented labor through infrastructural and shipping developments (36-37).

boom of the twentieth century unfolded, and a year after the nationalization of the country's oil reserves, the literary section of the newspaper *El Nacional* conducted a survey asking artists and critics to describe oil's role in Venezuelan literary production. The survey provided a noteworthy consensus: absence was oil's most salient feature in the country's cultural imaginary. We could thus argue that the wish to compellingly narrate and rationalize the historical accident of being a society sitting on top of a vast sea of petroleum is in itself a concrete manifestation of oil's role in Venezuelan culture. In other words, the repeated lamentations over a text that does not exist, a text that manages to encapsulate oil's role in the country, *is* a petronarrative pointing to the disorienting transformations, unfulfilled promises, and fragmented social orders that accompany oil's spectral ubiquity.

While assertions that something palpable is missing in the cultural and political conversation about oil have merit, it would be unwise to assume that this gap can be remedied by more or better representations of oil itself. In fact, analyses accompanying statements about oil's absence in cultural production, tend to misplace the issues at hand, as oil's perceived absence is often attributed to disinterest or scorn towards the subject matter: "Podría decirse que el tema petrolero es encarnado a regañadientes, perezosamente" (Campos, 481). However, as I have already argued, oil's apparent absence, which is far from an exclusively Venezuelan phenomenon, is more closely related to the conceptual and representational challenges posed by an issue of vast scale and complexity—the problem of how to represent that which is ubiquitous and invisible, but which is expected to be an obvious, trivial commodity. More precisely, oil's absence (or inadequate presence) in cultural production largely stems from the basic assumption that Venezuelan society, oil, and the oil industry are (once were, or should one day be) self-evidently singular and definable entities. In other words, the usual starting point of literary and

cultural inquiry regarding oil and Venezuela takes for granted the identities and borders of their objects of inquiry ("Venezuelan society or culture," "oil," "oil industry"). This framework continually tries, as Brecht would put it, to make petroleum fit in five acts, as that which exceeds a very concrete view of oil's role in society tends to be deemed inexistent (*there is no oil literature in Venezuela, oil extraction only poses a minimal ecological threat, there is no anthropogenic climate change*).

The foundational academic text on oil and literature in Venezuela, Gustavo Luis Carrera Damas' *La novela del petróleo en Venezuela* usefully highlights the usual assumptions in literary discussions about oil. The text famously declares that there is no such thing as Venezuelan oil literature, further claiming that only a handful of texts could be properly considered *novelas del petróleo.* Most notable about the study, however, are its exclusions—the narratives that, although depicting aspects of the oil industry, are not to be deemed proper *novelas del petróleo*. Such is the case with *El señor Rasvel* by Miguel Toro Ramírez, a novel about white-collar workers in the Caracas office of a transnational oil company. The text sardonically portrays the workplace dynamics, corruption, and class-aspirations of U.S.-American, British, and Venezuelan characters in charge of running the company's Venezuelan operations. Published in 1934, *El señor Rasvel* is indisputably the first Venezuelan novel about the oil industry. Yet, according to Carrera, *El señor Rasvel* cannot be considered a *novela el petróleo* because rather than portraying crude petroleum itself, as it rises from the ground, and is transported and refined, the text centers in the administrative side of a company, its relationship to local politics and global capitalism. His final point on the novel is particularly revealing: "En ella se desarrolla una trama asentada sobre asuntos relativos al gran tema, se amplían las perspectivas económicas y políticas internacionales. Ya se ha dicho: no es una novela del petróleo, pero es la primera en basar su

trama—o buena parta de ella en ambientes de tipo petrolero" (50). Within this framework oil is reduced to the oil encounter, thus reducing one of the most ubiquitous industries in the world to sites of extraction. Consequently, *El Señor Rasvel* and its depiction of the oil industry as it operates outside sites of extractions, has received little critical attention.[66] In this sense, the oil industry is treated as a straightforward enterprise, already understood by implied readers, and therefore in no need for further evaluation. These assumptions have informed subsequent studies about oil and literature in Venezuela, which, even as they vastly extend and improve on Carrera's initial inventory, ultimately fall back on the trap of providing an uncomplicated picture of what oil is, overlooking the fact that while most people's lives have been affected by the oil industry since the second half of the twentieth century (not only in Venezuela, but throughout much of the world), few individuals ever come close to the process of extraction.

Admittedly, contemporary scholars are more likely to concede the existence of Venezuelan oil literature. However, oil literature today tends to be understood as a historical genre about extraction sites (what I call the novel of the oil encounter), for which there have been few if any contemporary examples. Consequently, a similar argument as Carrera's persists: oil is absent from contemporary cultural production. For instance, the section on oil and literature in the 2013 *Diccionario General de la Literatura Venezolana* concludes that the most effective

[66] Literary critic Miguel Angel Campos has gone through great lengths to argue against Carrera's interpretation of *El señor Rasvel*:

> Cuán reveladora es esta afirmación asentada en *La novela del petróleo en Venezuela*, de Gustavo Luis Carrera. Cree partir de una constatación y termina siendo un juicio de amplias consecuencias sobre la personalidad del tema. Esta novela es, en puridad, la primera y, tal vez la única cuya acción resulta implícitamente deducible desde el universo cultural del petróleo. Al discurrir en su totalidad en oficinas o en espacios cerrados crea un equívoco o, al menos, confusión sobre un tema asociado al espectáculo callejero, al discurrir de grupos ruidosos en contrapunto de voces legitimándose entre sí y mediados por un paisaje *ad hoc:* máquinas y naturaleza. Cuando estos elementos faltan, cunde el desconcierto y novelistas y público parecen mirarse a la cara. Desde los papeles que firman los gerentes hasta el perfume que Rasvel se pone cuando va a visitar a sus amantes, todo rezuma el olor del petróleo. (*El Señor Rasvel*)

fictional depictions of oil were published in the 1930s: "no deja de ser preocupante que desde 1936 a nuestros días no tengamos otra referencia más plausible [que *Mene*] " (Bravo, 462). I would reverse this conclusion and assert that it is worrisome that scholars continue to overlook other "plausible references" because they fail to meet standards set in the first decades of oil exploitation. After all, as this dissertation attests, veritable Venezuelan petronarratives exist, notwithstanding the critical tendency to dismiss an extant corpus as not adequate, perhaps not *present* enough. Even if we were to conclude that texts like Ramón Díaz Sánchez's *Mene,* which concretely represent the transition of a small, isolated town into a bustling mining enclave, most effectively engage with the issues of oil's presence in Venezuela (and I would strongly disagree with such a conclusion), little is gained by prioritizing one manifestation of an undertaking as vast as oil exploitation and consumption, at the expense of looking at anything else. Thus, the tendency to disregard texts that do not look like *Mene,* far from an appraisal of the novel's literary value, betrays a desire for a narrative that concretely encapsulates a relationship between oil extraction and the ways Venezuelan society changed in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, as we concluded in chapter two, such an enterprise is not feasible, as the *no place* of extraction has little to do with conventional ideas of nationhood.

From a certain vantage point, however, it makes sense that the 1930s feature so prominently in texts and scholarship about oil. After all, from the mid-1920s through the middle of the century, the novelty of industrial oil exploitation in Venezuela granted the enterprise enough visibility for it to be questioned and critiqued as a new and foreign enterprise. In other worlds, the oil industry appeared to have set boundaries that made it a distinct endeavor with localizable practices and effects. A different set of concerns gained traction in the second half of the twentieth-century. As foreign companies no longer held the same degree of control over the

country's reserves, and as nearly every facet of Venezuelan society was financially and materially sustained by an oil economy and its products, the defense of a localizable autochthonous way of life against everything the oil industry represented, a central concern in the novels of the oil encounter, lost much of its urgency. By the 1970s, not only had oil been essential to the Venezuelan economy for more than a generation, but it had also been internalized as a resource nationalized by the state, and further absorbed as an ubiquitous presence in Venezuelan life. Thus, the boundary between nation-state and industry became indiscernible. The oil industry—once symbolic of predatory, foreign capital—became part of that authentic Venezuela in need of protection.

Memorias de una antigua primavera by Milagros Mata Gil posits that by the 1980s the oil industry had been so successfully rendered invisible, that some doubted that "La Compañía" (a stand-in for the oil industry as a whole) and its violent history of extraction had existed at all: "Hay algunos, blasfemos o incrédulos, que insinúan que La Compañía no existe, que no ha existido nunca y que no existirá jamás" (173). Notably, this short passage brings us back to the question of existence in relation to oil, its effects, and products: some do not believe in the existence of the oil industry and a history of extraction, just as others doubt the existence of the *novela del petróleo*. Most importantly, this passage fittingly closes *Memorias de una antigua primavera*'s depiction of the gradual dissolution of the oil industry as a single, identifiable entity, and its extension as a pervasive presence: "its ubiquity became more subtle to the point that one forgets that it presides over, envelops, and determines individual and collective destinies" (136, my translation).

The fact that petroleum became imperceptibly ubiquitous in the twentieth century—its boundaries and presence increasingly unclear—complicates the very idea of a *petronarrative* or *novela del petróleo*. As literary scholar Graeme Macdonald argues,

> All modern writing is premised on both the promise and the hidden costs and benefits of hydrocarbon culture […] it is everywhere in literature yet nowhere refined enough—yet—to be brought to the surface of every text. But it sits there nevertheless, untapped, bubbling under the surface, ready to be extracted by a new generation of oil-aware petrocritics. (31)

Thus, instead of looking for a petronarrative (extant or not) as a coherent whole that straightforwardly represents or says something about oil, it might prove more productive to turn towards the ways oil and its products flow through narratives that treat human cultures as if they exist autonomously from the biosphere. In this sense we can understand oil not as a *narrated object,* but instead, as novelist and theorist Reza Negarestani suggests, as a *narrative lubricant*:

> Take oil as a lubricant, something that eases narration and the whole dynamism toward the desert. The *cartography of oil as an omnipresent entity narrates the dynamics of planetary events*. Oil is the undercurrent of all narrations, not only the political but also that of this of life on earth. Oil lubes the whole desert expedition toward Tellurian Omega (either as the Desert of God or the host of singularity, the New Earth). As a Tellurian lube, oil simply makes things move forward. (19, my italics)

Notably, lubricants (often petrochemicals) do not exist for themselves. We take no effort to imagine, represent, or understand them. A lubricant's existence is wrapped up in facilitating the movements, flows, and functions of other things. Individually insignificant, they are nevertheless essential to the persistent movements of large mechanisms. Conversely, lubricants underscore

the fact that those large mechanisms in need of lubrication (be it combustion engines, narratives, or planetary events) are not independent, self-sustaining wholes, given that they are formed and animated by something other than themselves.

Negarestani's apt metaphor further highlights the fact that it would be difficult to find a geopolitical event, transformation of landscapes, or formation of new habits in the last hundred years that cannot be traced back to (or which has not been moved forward by) the oil industry's practices and materials. Theorist Zac Blas understands this idea in relation to the way in which "political models and global dynamics cannot be viewed as whole; they always have oil flowing through them at a subterranean level" (Blas, 10).[67] From this vantage point, we could understand the dissolution of borders between oil and Venezuelan society in relation to the blurring of the dividing line separating the state and industry. However, I would take Blas' interpretation a step further to say that the objects and habits that constitute quotidian life and spaces "cannot be viewed as whole" either, given that they too "have oil flowing through them" at subterranean, and I would add, atmospheric, levels. Indeed, as we will shortly examine, the blurring of oil, oil industry, and twentieth century societies was particularly manifest, if insidiously so, in the realm of quotidian life and spaces.[68]

To speak of an underground narrative lubricant, however, is not meant to reduce unreflexively everything to oil. Instead, the idea of oil as a narrative lubricant, whose function is essential in relation to the movement of other mechanisms, is a conceptual gesture meant to

[67] Imre Szeman similarly argues that the history the twentieth century could be rewritten casting petroleum as its protagonist. For instance, since the mechanization of the military forces, most military strategies: "can be encapsulated in the simple dictate to gain and maintain access to oil at any cost" (2).

[68] In *Carbon Democracy,* Timothy Mitchell goes as far as claiming that all industrialized societies are oil states: "Without the energy they derive from oil their current forms of political and economic life would not exist. Their citizens have developed ways of eating, traveling, housing themselves and consuming other goods and services that require very large amounts of energy from oil and other fossil fields" (5).

avoid a different kind of simplification: reducing all things—not just people, but also trees, jungles, fossils, pollution—to the smooth surfaces of the nation state and its national-popular imaginaries, or alternatively to the economy and the circulation of money.

We shall now turn to the *oikos* that oil built referenced in this project's introduction in order to explore oil's profound social and material impact outside extraction sites, as well as inside quotidian spaces. Notably, the *oikos*—as home, *eco*nomy, and *eco*logy—made of and filled with petroleum products (a luxury in the early twentieth century, an inevitability if one is to have a home or consume commodities in the twenty first) is at once a familiar, intimate space, as well as part of an impersonal, planetary network of circulating objects and waste. We will explore this site as presented in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* (1949) an educational documentary financed by Royal Shell Oil, meant to show the ways in which the materiality of the mid-century home is entirely dependent on oil.

The Comforts of Home

The Shell Oil Film Unit (SFU), which produced and distributed *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp,* is itself exemplary of the oil industry's attempt to overcome its own industrial and material practices, in order to be everywhere, do everything. Founded in 1933 as a semi-independent production company based in the United Kingdom and ran by John Grierson ("the father of documentary"), the SFU set up production branches in many other oil producing countries. It also established film libraries throughout much of the world to ensure the international circulation of its documentaries. The SFU specialized in science and technology documentaries not meant to advertise the company itself—the logo of Shell Oil generally only appearing in the opening and closing credits. The documentaries instead intended to educate an international

public about the wonders of a world filled with petroleum products.[69] In countries like Venezuela, the SFU made documentaries about infrastructure and national development, meant to quench political opposition to the industry and "aid host nations to see Shell as an interested and creative member of the community with a sympathetic understanding of their culture and a sense of public responsibility" (Canjels, 246-147).[70] In a sense then, SFU films encouraged its audiences to see petroleum as a basic building block in constructing any sense of home, the local, and even the nation.[71]

Oil for Aladdin's Lamp, directed by Boris Ivens, was made in the SFU's U.S. division. The documentary tours places that embody the prosperity of life in the United States after World War II—factory, suburban household, highway, supermarket, agricultural fields, scientific laboratories—in order to highlight oil's presence in all of them. Even the film itself is made of oil, a fact that the voiceover self-reflexively points out: "Today it is difficult for you to look in any direction without seeing something made possible or made better by petroleum. […] At this very moment you are looking at a film whose acetate base was made with petroleum. You can even hear oil: it's in the plastic in musical instruments" (*Aladdin's Lamp*). Before zooming into

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[69] The Shell Film Unit still exists, but it is currently focused on disseminating videos through YouTube and social media. Along with information on technology, the present-day SFU specializes on documentaries about ecology and renewable sources of energy.

[70] *Horizontes nacionales* (1949) and *Las bases del progreso* (1950) are the two known documentaries out of the sixteen that were planned. Unfortunately, no known reels of SFU's Venezuelan films exist today, and therefore they cannot be part of this analysis.

[71] Rudmer Canjels further describes the SFU's international presence:

> Other unites were set up in Egypt, Nigeria, India, and Southeast Asia. […] Although the films of the national Units were made for local consumption, some were distributed internationally, gaining fame and winning international film awards. With so much activity going on, it is perhaps no wonder that, during the 1950s, there were almost 160,000 screenings around the world with an audience of more than 8.5 million. In 1960, the international audience had grown to 45 million, and films were shown in some 30 countries. (Canjels, 247)

oil's role in the postwar home, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* addresses oil's best-known role in industrial society:

> oil made possible one of the greatest inventions of history: the internal combustion engine, which *gave us mastery over the air*, meant mass transportation to the world, *changed the face of continents, quickened the very pulse of civilization, provided man with an ease of living*. […] Practically every machine in the world would come to a grinding stop, if it were not for petroleum lubricants. (*Aladdin's Lamp*, my italics)

The film, thus, highlights oil's material role in the advent of an increasingly global modernity: it is, indeed, a lubricant propelling most forms of motion. Even as the documentary tours quotidian spaces, it continually returns to the themes outlined above: oil's mastery over air and land, the speeds of modern life, and a newfound ease of labor provided by oil-fueled machinery. Not only the substratum of industrial machinery, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* asserts, oil products populate every room of your house, your wardrobe, and even helps feed *you*: in addition to their role in the refrigeration and transportation of perishable food, oil scientists helped commercialize the ammonia that fertilizes crops as well as the pesticides that keeps them alive.

Cutting away from machinery and industrial agriculture, the documentary transitions into the bathroom of a middle-aged white man (likely the "neutral" stand-in for the implied audience) as he starts his morning routine. From that point forward the voiceover points out how everything he touches is (at least partially) made of oil—starting with the bathroom where oil takes credit for the synthetic glycerin in toothpaste and alcohol in shaving lotions. At the breakfast table, oil's presence proliferates, as it can be found in virtually every object: the seat cushions (artificial leather), the table (water-resistant overlays made of petrochemicals), ashtray (plastic, the oil-derived material par excellence), cigarettes (tobacco plants are sprayed with oil-

derived pesticides, and the wax in matchsticks is also made of petrochemicals), non-staining newspaper ink (made of petrochemicals), orange juice (the ammonia used in refining sugar, and to fertilize orange groves), eggs (synthesized Vitamin E used to produce greater quantities of eggs), sausages (synthetic glycerin), jam (pectin). Cutting away from the man, the voiceover proceeds to provide an inventory of other objects in a mid-century middle class house: fabrics in curtains, paint and gloss in walls. Oil's presence is further emphasized in the home's ability to protect its inhabitants from the elements: a woman reads by a window as it rains outside, at which point the voiceover mentions the roof-coatings and "safe, economical heat" developed by petroleum scientists. In short, oil is credited with creating the modern home, and therefore the belonging, security, comfort, and habits the term implies.

Still in the realm of the home, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* asserts that the markings of traditional femininity are petroleum products. As a young woman gets ready in front of her dressing table, the voiceover declares, "While we're on the subject of art and beauty, let's see *how close petroleum comes to the lady of the house* […] Whether you know it or not every single preparation in this beautiful lady's dressing table every single thing she's wearing is influenced by oil" (my italics). The voiceover, once again, proceeds to name all the oil-derived objects that contributed to the "beautiful lady's" appearance: shampoo, comb, lacer on her nails, makeup, the synthetic silk in her negligee, fake jewels, "a set of sparklers *that have never been closer* to a diamond mine than the Shell development laboratories" (my italics). Even as this scene depicts a private bedroom, the voiceover's descriptions betray an implicit concern with oil's ability to conquer distances and material processes. On the one hand, the question of distance emerges as the voice reiterates that neither the woman nor her jewels need to come close to the extraction of minerals for the contents of a well to be part of her morning routine. On the

other hand, the voiceover argues that real mines and extraction are not needed to make a "set of sparklers," since these were manufactured in a Shell laboratory. In other words, human-made laboratories and objects can replace these geographically specific sites, the contents of their soil, and the labor needed to extract them. One could, of course, point out that this scene simply displaces one form of mineral extraction with another: petroleum instead of diamonds. While this is partially the case, the documentary continually asserts that the "miracles" of oil originate in the laboratory, where oil scientists, "delve into the unknown in a never ending quest for facts," a quest that leads them to "[discover] that a barrel of crude oil will yield more than a thousand products." In confining the oil industry to a laboratory, at the same time that it portrays a vast array of sites and products, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* ultimately creates a narrow and linear picture of the oil network that involves on one end, scientists and engineers and on the other, consumer comfort in prosperous U.S. suburbs. This linear picture ultimately conceals extraction, transportation, and refining processes that precede oil's arrival in the laboratory—a notable example of commodity fetishism, or "the way in which markets conceal social (and we should add, geographical) information and relations" (Harvey, 423). We could, thus, imagine the world depicted in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* as the other side of the sites depicted in the narratives of the oil encounter. Unlike the sites of the oil encounter, the post-war society on screen is comfortable, prosperous, sanitized, aesthetically pleasing. It is, nevertheless, also filled with oil. However, while the narrative of the oil encounter is concerned with revealing the localized consequences of extracting oil, in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* such consequences do not exist.

Figure 3.1: Scene from *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*: "the woman of the house" and "her set of sparklers" during her morning routine.

Figure 3.2: Scene from *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*: the confused "woman of the house," as her objects begin disappearing.

The extraction process, however, is not altogether absent in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*. Images of oil wells, derricks, and crude oil are simply displaced to the past, as the processes of extraction are only mentioned in relation to the early days of the industry in 19th-century Pennsylvania at the very beginning of the film. The extraction process is implicitly relegated to the past, while the sanitized realms of the laboratory and the postwar home are posited as the present face of the oil industry. Notably, this depiction of extraction as part of the past, mirrors the way in which the local impacts of extraction are depicted in contemporary Venezuelan criticism as a foreclosed issue deserving little more than a historical footnote (see chapters II and IV). Furthermore, by treating the laboratory as the site of oil's origin in post World War II societies, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp's* (as the very title suggests), ultimately depicts oil as magical, as it appears suddenly and transforms everything on its path.

Despite the fact that *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* conceals social and geographical information and relations, the documentary's structure makes it seem as if the opposite is true. Indeed, its basic premise consists of *revealing* all the hidden ways in which oil is an essential, if invisible part of your life. At times the documentary even appears to provide an excess of information, as the voiceover tediously lists oil product after product. The sense that the documentary *reveals too much* is cemented in the scene depicting the woman getting ready in her bedroom. After listing all the ways in which the woman is wearing oil, the voiceover playfully exclaims: "Just for fun let's take away all these articles dependent upon petroleum!" One by one the woman is deprived of her objects and clothes until she is left embarrassed in her underwear—a brief reminder of what she and most consumers stand to lose if they were to live a life without

oil.[72] Oil is, thus, not only in the objects surrounding her, but it is also the basis of her way of life.

Oil for Aladdin's Lamp ultimately represents key changes in the oil industry's business model and material practices, which were in turn accompanied by a change in image: the industry no longer appeared to have much to do with extraction, as it instead seemed concerned with securing comforts, convenience, and leisure. The documentary's circumscription of crude petroleum, derricks, and the materials of extraction to a brief historical section—keeping them altogether out of sight in depictions of contemporary societies—is indicative of these changes, as the film presents an oil industry whose products are seamlessly integrated into everyday life. [73] This is precisely the oil industry cultural critics in Venezuela have been dealing with—and generally misrecognizing—since the second half of the twentieth century: a transnational network of proliferating objects, consumer comforts, as well as the commodity fetishism that enveloped them. In this regard, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* helps us add a crucial contextual layer to the relationship between oil and Venezuelan society, which in turn helps us reframe the question

[72] Notably, this general premise was repeated in 1996 by another educational film mentioned in Chapter I: *Fuel-less* (a parody of the 1995 teen-comedy *Clueless*), financed by the American Petroleum Institute. Aimed for middle-school classrooms, the film shows how all of Crystal's belongings disappear because she fails to properly appreciate oil. A key difference is that while *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* celebrates oil's conquest over nature, *Fuel-less* emphasizes that we must take care of nature, even reminding Crystal that oil is also *natural*. She has the following exchange with Ms. Walking, her Chemistry teacher, who helps her in her quest to better appreciate oil: "Nature is elegant. You see these remains broke down into chemical compounds of hydrogen and carbon ... hydrocarbons." Crystal responds, "So oil is like natural?" Ms. Watkins proceeds to show how hydrocarbons are present in all types of objects, including shopping bags, to which Crystal responds, "Gee, I never thought of plastic as natural before." The documentary ends with a lesson about the importance of recycling and preserving natural resources. In his analysis of *Fuel-less*, Matthew T. Huber argues that the film, "serves to literally naturalize the presence of petroleum products in everyday life and deflect particular critiques of the toxicity and artificiality of plastics and other synthetic petrochemicals" (308, "Refined Politics").

[73] Relegating oil extraction to the past despite the increase in investment and infrastructure in the mid twentieth century (much of it for off-shore drilling), implies that those sites that have not been transformed by oil consumption, are not coeval to the world depicted in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp.* The implication is, of course, that future progress is intimately tied to the oil industry, and its ability to provide the ease and speed of living depicted on screen.

of oil's alleged absence in cultural production. Indeed, the veiling of the extraction process, and proliferation of consumer comforts (however unevenly available among national and international populations) are significant marks of the oil industry in Venezuelan society—a society transformed not only by the extraction of its subsoil, but also by the circulation and consumption of oil products. We will now turn to Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Un retrato en la geografía* and *Estación de máscaras* in order to further explore oil's invisible, yet ubiquitous presence within the context of an increasingly urban Venezuela.

The Nation's Uncanny Objects

Un retrato en la Geografía and *Estación de mascaras* (published in 1962 and 1964 respectively) comprise the first two volumes of Arturo Uslar Pietri's unfinished trilogy *El laberinto de la fortuna*. Focusing primarily on the character Álvaro Collado, the first novel depicts life in Caracas after the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in December 1935. The second depicts the months preceding the 1948 coup d'état against the *Acción Democrática's Trienio* (1945-1948), leading to the decade-long rule of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Álvaro, a member of the prominent Collado family, begins the narrative as a politically engaged but naive college student. His collaboration with left-leaning activist groups led to his exile from Venezuela, which marks the ten years between one novel and the other. At the end of *Estción de máscaras* Álvaro is in his late thirties determined to build a better Venezuela outside the bounds of conventional politics (which could be read as a withdrawal from politics altogether, or as a transformation of his political energies). While much of the narrative surrounds the Collado family, the texts present a multiplicity of voices from different walks of life discussing personal and political concerns as two tumultuous political transitions unfold.

The novels' chief aim would seem to consist of articulating a complex and messy nationhood, as it continually reiterates multiple notions of Venezuelan identity. In particular, the texts attempt to make sense of an increasingly urban nation. However, not only do the novels' attempts at national articulation continually fail, but as we shall see through their intranarratives, both texts occasionally stand at the limit of what can be incorporated into the nation, which paradoxically enough, include two things the nation continually attempts to internalize: the past and natural resources.[74] Consequently, despite the minor role oil plays throughout the narratives, the texts gesture towards the difficulty of conceptualizing fossil fuels within the conceptual and temporal frameworks of the nation-state.

At first glance, the novels only mention oil in the most conventional of terms: corrupt politicians and amoral Yankees attempt to steal the nation's riches. Petroleum products abound, of course, especially as Caracas grows, and technology and consumer products become more accessible in the diegesis' near thirteen-year span (December 1935-November 1948). For most of the novel, however, the products of urban growth are simply part of an easily ignored background: automobile rides, newly paved roads, household appliances. Nevertheless, these background objects are brought into the foreground through conversations about the relationship between oil, nation, and literature. The characters in these discussions conclude that oil can only be depicted through myth and magic, and consequently they come up with ideas for fantastical novels about oil. These fantastical intranarratives—we could imagine them as phantom *novelas del petróleo*—embedded within two realist novels, engage with oil's uncanny yet mundane existence, providing imaginative possibilities for conceptualizing oil's multilayered presence.

[74] For instance, a turning point in *Un retrato en la geografía* involves Álvaro's trip to an old colonial house used as a storage unit for the antiques of a prominent Caracas family. There he tries to find an essence of Zulka Reyes, the woman who, in his eyes, embodies Venezuela by looking through the remains of the past. There, he realizes that he will never find an essence to woman or country.

The Melted Country in *Un retrato en la geografía*

The phantom *novelas del petróleo* in *Un retrato en la geografía* and *Estación de máscaras* emerge in the midst of two conversations roughly ten years apart. The unwritten petronarrative in *Un retrato en la geografía*'s is imagined by the fictional author Luis Sormujo, the novel's main intellectual figure. His phantom narrative emerges in the midst of a drunken conversation in a Caracas saloon in 1936. Late at night, Sormujo unwittingly participates in a veiled discussion about illegally obtaining the property rights for an oil concession. While trying not to disclose the real content of their words, Rubén Collado, Saúl Verrón and Jerry Dixon engage Sormujo in a conversation about the role of oil in Venezuela. Sormujo, who despite his literary career tends to be measured in his social and political stances, takes an uncharacteristic flight of fancy. Prompted by Saúl Verrón, "¿Es malo hablar de petróleo, Luis Sormujo, intelectual? Dime. Díselo a este" (47), Sormujo replies:

> —No Saúl. Cómo va a ser malo. Si todo esto es petróleo, todos nosotros somos petróleo. Esa orquesta tan chillona toca con petróleo, aquella mujer, vestida con esa seda blanca demasiado brillante, que parece un forro de urna mortuoria, es petróleo. Este whisky es petróleo. Esta noche es petróleo. Y hasta estas palabras que estamos hablando son petróleo. […]
>
> —Si por arte de magia alguien quitara bruscamente, en este momento, el petróleo de la vida venezolana, sería como si quitaran el esqueleto de una persona, o el sistema nervioso. Desaparecería de repente la orquesta, y la mujer con su vestido de forro de urna. Y yo con mi whisky, y Jerry con sus musiúes, y tú con tus leyes, Saúl. Y nos encontraríamos en un conuco de plátano y maíz, junto a un rancho en pierna, oyendo cacarear a unas gallinas flacas que pican gusanos en la tierra.

—Esto es muy exagerado—comentó Rubén.

—No, no es casi exagerado. Se podría escribir una especie de novela surrealista sobre el petróleo en Venezuela. En la que de repente las gentes se dan cuenta de que están vestidas de petróleo, de que comen petróleo, de que hablan petróleo y a la niña que toca piano se le empegostan los dedos y hay una gran nausea en el país porque de repente todo el mundo descubre que todo huele a ese olorcito medio podrido y pegajoso del petróleo crudo, y que todo está negro rojizo, pegajoso, derretido y mal oliente. Sería una especie de mito de Midas. No que todo lo que toca se le vuelve oro, sino que todas las cosas que lo rodean de pronto se vuelven petróleo.

—Magnífico, Luis. Qué libro de pesadilla podrías escribir con eso. Te voy a dar un título magnífico: "El país derretido," ¿qué te parece?—exclamó Verrón. (48)

On the representational scale of the nation-state this passage imaginatively portrays the ways in which oil, specifically oil *money,* inconspicuously infiltrated every aspect of Venezuelan society. In this regard, the setting in a trendy Caracas cabaret where U.S.-Americans and wealthy Venezuelans mingle is not gratuitous. Neither are the objects listed by Sormujo: gaudy orchestras, women in silk dresses, whisky, *musiúes* (a colloquial term derived from the French word *monsieur*, used to refer to white, foreign males)*,* are all emblematic of the changes in taste, habits, and consumption brought about by oil exploitation.[75] In other words, this particular setting and the objects within it function as oil's visible trace: the idle opulence of a select few, as they embrace U.S. customs and commodities as status symbols.

Beyond the rapid influx of wealth, new consumer products, and cultural influences, this passage points to the unseen ubiquity of oil, an idea that has gone largely unexamined, despite

[75] Whisky was notorious in this regard. Venezuela is infamously one of the highest whisky consumers in the world a trait that it shares with Mexico, the other major petrostate in Latin America. (http://beveragetradenetwork.com/en/top-10-scotch-whisky-consuming-countries-236.htm).

the fact that it cyclically returns to the Venezuelan cultural imaginary. The imagery of drowning in oil recurs in Venezuelan poetry and essays, albeit not in the novels of the oil encounter and their critical reception. It is in this metaphorical realm—where oil appears to colonize all of existence—that some of the most coherent statements about oil in Venezuela have surfaced. "Estamos hundiéndonos en el excremento del Diablo/we are sinking in the devil's excrement" famously declared Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso, founder of OPEC. Pérez Alfonso and Sormujo's statements ("todos nosotros somos petróleo. […] Y hasta estas palabras que estamos hablando son petróleo") can viably be understood as metaphors for a specific political and economic situation: the fragility of a country whose entire economy and body-politic depends on its oil rent, and thus, where entire institutions, inhabited spaces, and ways of life were overturned in order to accommodate *one* extractivist activity. These statements express a palpable existential anxiety about being nothing but an oil nation: the fear that Venezuela (or Cabimas, Lagunillas del Agua, or El Tigre) might be nothing more than someone else's mining post—a re-ignition of a prior colonial condition. Given this imagery of drowning in oil, the representation of oil in Venezuelan cultural production could be more accurately described as swinging back and forth between asserting that oil is nowhere to be found, and that it is, in fact, everywhere.

In fact, we can understand much of twentieth and twenty-first century Venezuelan cultural, nationalist, and political thought as a series of attempts to find or hold on to *anything beyond the very black well*. Poet Carlos Augusto León illustrates this angst regarding oil's ubiquity in "Ya no quedará sino un pozo muy negro," a poem where, as the title itself indicates, oil slowly overtakes fields, rivers, fruit, townships, ways of life, pasts, and futures. The poem illustrates the way in which the threat posed by oil in the first half of the twentieth-century was tied to the fear that the essence of localities and the nation could disappear under its weight.

[…] Todo habrá ido a parar a aquel pozo muy negro.

Si preguntas por la dorada fruta que no encuentras,

te dirán por consuelo que mires hacia allá.

Si piensas que hay pobreza en tu tierra

te dirán "somos ricos" señalando hacia allá.

Si preguntas "y las reses de antaño,

y aquellas ferias donde iban los abuelos,

en su traje los ricos de los llanos,

con botones de oro el garrasí?"

te dirán: "otros tiempos vinieron, es posible que una negra fuente

brote aquí mismo, *su sombra nos vendrá a iluminar*. (75, my italics)

Much like the novels of the oil encounter, "Ya no quedará…" beckons you to look *there,* to oil's illuminated shadows. However, there appears to be nothing else to behold besides absences—a former world now replaced by the darkness of the oil well. Thus, as we revisit the question of oil's apparent absence in Venezuelan cultural production, we ultimately find that oil, rather than absent, exists in a realm that cannot be described either as entirely present or absent, given that numerous texts dealing with the topic ultimately attempt to salvage anything that had yet to sink in the well. This search for that which exists *beyond the very black well*, often turned into the attempt to recover an agricultural past, interrupted by oil's emergence (see Chapter I). Even projects for the future, such as Uslar Pietri's most famous concept, "sembrar el petróleo" (to use oil to invest in economic activity independent from oil) exemplify the wish to escape from oil.

Sormujo's nightmare of a *melted country* touches upon a point often absent in other imagery of Venezuelan society dissolving into oil. On the one hand, Sormujo reverses the usual

imagery: rather than lamenting that which is lost or absent—all the things oil swept away—his description emphasizes presence, as he lists the objects surrounding him. On the other hand, by calling attention to oil's presence in tangible objects, Sormujo highlights that far from absent, foreign, or invisibly ubiquitous, oil is terribly ordinary—if uncanny in its very ordinariness. Indeed, what appeared most hyperbolic about his vision is not far from the truth: "Se podría escribir una especie de novela surrealista sobre el petróleo en Venezuela. Donde de repente las gentes se dan cuenta de que están vestidas de petróleo, de que comen petróleo, de que hablan petróleo." The petrochemicals populating bodies, food, tools, buildings, oceans and skies make this statement a reality, although not in the way Sormujo would seem to mean it. As *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* depicted, the fact that people wear, eat, speak oil is not a phenomenon unique to Venezuela. Thus, while Sormujo argues that a surrealist novel would befittingly depict a way of life made of petroleum, *Oil for Aladdin Lamp* does so as an industrial documentary, a genre that in its concern with accessing, recording, and reproducing reality, would seem to be diametrically opposed to a non-existent surrealist work of fiction. Nevertheless, the documentary's title and its frequent references to Aladdin and the Genie as ways of explaining oil's biophysical qualities (a topic we will shortly explore), decisively departs from realism, and enters the realm of the mythical and the magical. This break from realism also occurs in the scene depicting the vanishing items in the woman's bedroom, a notable parallel to Sormujo's imagery of disappearing objects: ("Desaparecería de repente la orquesta, y la mujer con su vestido de forro de urna. Y yo con mi whisky…"). The fact that *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* uses fantastical language to explain modern science and technology partially confirms Sormujo's intuition that oil's role in Venezuelan society might not be entirely grasped by a straightforward representation of reality (assuming such a thing exists).

Thus, while oil literature in Venezuela tends to be thought of as realist (and more often than not naturalist), this passage presents the possibility that the sheer vastness, ubiquity, and yet ordinariness of modern society's reliance on oil might be more appropriately expressed in exuberant, hyperbolic, even baroque language. This linguistic exuberance has been the case in academic language: the words *magical*, *miraculous, spectacular* recur in academic depictions of oil in Venezuela. Even novels aligned with realist and naturalist aesthetics rely on fantastical themes and imagery when depicting oil infrastructure. For instance, *Mene* describes oil infrastructure as a "vegetación fantástica," consisting of a Cyclops' heart and monstrous arteries: "cada balancín tiene un motor que palpita como el corazón de un cíclope; cada motor tiene una caldera que regurgita como una monstruosa arteria roja" (54). In other words, the language of oil continually negotiates its origins in industrial rationality and technological progress, and recurrent supernatural metaphors (be it the miraculous or the diabolical). This is not simply a thoughtless slippage of figurative language into the language of science and the economy. Instead, the frequent use of supernatural language is indicative of the vast scales of oil's use and existence in the modern world. For instance, to describe oil as "an omnipresent planetary entity," (Negarestani, 26) and modernity as "the story of how oil got into everything" (Morton, 54) may seem like grandiose hyperbole, and yet, as we have thus far seen, these statements could and should be taken literally. As the very existence of the Shell Film Unit exemplifies (which financed films by renowned figures such as John Grierson, and other members of the Documentary Film Movement in Great Britain), even the world of artistic production—often imagined as a realm apart from utilitarian industrialism—is filled with petroleum products.[76]

[76] The oil industry (in both its nationalized and private iterations) continues to heavily invest in arts and culture. PDVSA for instance, established *PDVSA La Hacienda,* a network of cultural houses. The Houston office of Saudi Aramco publishes the renowned magazine *Saudi Aramco World* (thank you Susan Abraham for the reference). As awareness over climate change increases, protests over private oil

Oil's multifaceted presence and power over homes and bodies, showcased in both Sormujo's phantom *novela del petróleo* and *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*, complicates the degree to which we can speak of an oil industry as a singular and identifiable entity. Its material presence in most commodities, as well as the planetary dispersal of its residues further makes it difficult to define oil itself. The amorphous vastness of oil and its industries provide an additional and necessary layer to the enduring argument that there are no oil narratives. Oil *could* have many narratives, but none will ever satisfactorily capture its vastness. This ungraspability manifests itself in both *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* and Sormujo's narrative through their respective use of lists: finding no way to narrate the topic at hand, they resort to listing as many objects as possible, each additional object meant to get us closer to the impossible totality of all things that contain (or are contained by) oil: orchestras, whisky, orange juice, eggs, curtains, fake jewels, women and their clothing, *this film*, *these words*. An attentive reader might notice that my initial description of *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* intentionally provided lists of objects that could have been succinctly summed up as "every object in the house." This list aimed in part to echo *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* meticulous tediousness; however it was also a short reminder of oil's uncanny presence in objects rarely associated with it, and with each other. The tiresome lists and Sormujo's hyperbolic non-hyperbole thus function as partial, but necessarily unsuccessful ways to convey planetary scales as they manifest themselves and blur into local and familial realms.

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money in cultural institutions have become more common. One notorious case, involved the 2015 occupation of the Tate Modern in London by the art activist collective Liberate Tate. The activists demand that Tate Britain stop receiving money from BP, which donates a quarter million pounds to the museum every year. The museum also sponsors exhibits for the company (Peers).

Vast and familiar, oil would appear to be simultaneously in constant withdrawal, and intimately close, inciting "a feeling of strange familiarity and familiar strangeness" (Morton, 55).[77]

Magical Thoughts in *Estación de máscaras*

A conversation about possible oil narratives emerges late at night in a house party in *Estación de mascaras*, the second half of *El laberinto de la fortuna*. The party takes place a few nights before the 1948 coup d'etat against the *Acción Democrática Trienio*, roughly twelve years after Sormujo's description of a melted country, and is attended by prominent Caracas bohemians and intellectuals. The host, Isotta Gavio, has banned conversations about the looming coup. Isotta encourages her guests to instead talk about art and literature, mentioning that Álvaro is in the process of writing a novel about oil. Álvaro corrects her, explaining that he is simply taking notes for a novel he does not know he can write:

> ...un libro sobre la nueva realidad que había surgido de la riqueza petrolera. No era que lo estaba escribiendo sino que tenía tiempo pensando en escribirlo. Un libro no sobre los hechos, sino sobre las concepciones y el cambio de mentalidad.
>
> —Ya no somos el país rural de hacendados y peones, de guerrilleros y leguleyos que sigue apareciendo en nuestras novelas. Nos hemos convertido en otra cosa y hay que reflejar eso en los libros. *La noción mágica de la realidad que el petróleo ha despertado en nosotros. Tal vez una especie de epopeya primitiva.* La *Odisea* del venezolano que *no puede regresar a su vida ordinaria perdido entre los dioses y los fantasmas malvados*. Todo este *delirio que los posee*. Ser ricos sin trabajo, ni ahorro. Alcanzar todo sin

[77] Oil is, in short, a hyperobject. According to Timothy Morton, hyperobjects are things massively distributed in space and time in relation to humans. They function at non-human temporalities, and in fact, can be imperceptible to human cognition for stretches of time. Additionally, hyperobjects are non-local (as their local manifestations are not the hyperobject itself), as well as viscous (as they stick to things) (2).

esfuerzo, los inmigrantes, los especuladores, los intermediarios, los traficantes de influencias, los peladeros que se convierten en urbanizaciones, la sensación de poderse topar en cualquier desván con una lámpara de Aladino. *Eso hay que buscar el modo de decirlo.*

—Tú me dijiste que estabas escribiendo—dijo Isotta

—Sí, tomo notas y hasta he desarrollado algunas partes. Sería una novela *mítica y realista a la vez*. (152-153, my italics)

Contrary to the goals underlying most Venezuelan petronarratives, Álvaro's phantom *novela del petróleo* eschews the attempt to zoom into the localities, materials, and labor needed to sustain oil's vast infrastructure. His impulse to write about a nation's struggle to cope with the disorienting transformations brought about by oil commendably discerns that a narrative about oil's effects on society need not come close to a pumpjack or a barrel, as these effects are dispersed in all manner of seemingly unrelated phenomena, including beliefs, ideology, and habits. In other words, Álvaro's desire for a less fixed oil narrative acknowledges that the more abstracted one is from the material processes involved in oil exploitation, the more magical its effects appear: from places that seem to be "no place at all" (Ghosh, 142) emerges a substance that swiftly transforms everything on its path.

To an extent, Álvaro's vision, as well as Sormujo's twelve years earlier, reflect the uninformed perspective of the Caracas bourgeoisie, as they could not be further from the concrete experience at the sites of the oil encounter. The gas flares' midnight suns, the fences protected by *guachimanes*, sick and injured workers are, after all, little more than an afterthought—an internal alien of sorts—in the Venezuelan imaginary. It should not be surprising then, that experiences at the oil fields hardly concerns the guests at the dinner party—a

reminder of how easily one can forget oil settlements in an oil nation. Consequently, the young intellectuals attending the party have no concrete way to talk about oil, and thus, they do so through myth, nominating the Minotaur and Midas, along with Aladdin, as possible figures that can embody Venezuela's "sterilizing myth" (153).

These discussions about mythical figures that best describe oil are mirrored in *Estación de máscaras'* previous chapter, taking place on the same evening. Men associated with the looming coup celebrate their impending victory. They are particularly enthusiastic about seizing the limitless power made possible by the state's vast oil wealth. Juan Milvo makes a toast to the magic of the state:

> Los ciegos miran, los paralíticos caminan, los muertos resucitan […] ¡Solamente en este país puede ocurrir esto! […] Vamos a brindar por nuestros patronos y arquetipos […] Brindo por Aladino y su lámpara; por Fortunato y su bolsa; por Fausto y su socio; por Cipriano el mágico; por la Cenicienta y su zapato de cristal, por nuestra dríada María La Onza; por el ánima de la Yaguara, por todos los maravillosos intercesores que nos pueden dar lo que nadie se atreve a pedir. (142)

On the cusp of Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship (lauded for its focus on modernization through rationally-planned infrastructural developments), the conspirators envision modern Venezuela through a hodgepodge of foreign and national mythical figures. This scene ultimately enacts the basic premise expressed through Álvaro's unwritten narrative, which (like the two novels comprising *El laberinto de la fortuna*) confine oil's "magical" qualities to beliefs and attitudes that are antithetical to progress and modern reason.

More specifically, Álvaro's phantom narrative relegates oil's magic to a specifically Venezuelan mindset, whose best form of expression may be a *primitive epic*—one that must be

overcome on the road to development. His word-choice is telling: *mentality*, *conceptions, delirium*. His deployment of an old and prevalent critique of the Venezuelan people as lacking seriousness and work ethic relies on a vision of national development where territory and populations must be incorporated into the utilitarian logic of the state and capital. Practices and beliefs that are deemed inefficient are disregarded as little more than the persistent remains of premodern ways of life.

This vision of a population unwilling to work confuses structural problems with individual decisions, faulting a vast surplus population for their inability to succeed within a disastrous national capitalism. Furthermore, while Venezuela has certainly suffered a wide range of crises relating to labor and poverty, the tendency to boil down the country's labor and social issues to the population's unwillingness to work overlooks and devalues the real labor that goes into the country's large informal sector, as well as the domestic labor necessary for social reproduction. Not having the means to enter into, stay within, or even to value capitalist forms of labor, is not equivalent to a lack work ethic. Furthermore, although the issue is not made explicit in *El Laberinto de la Fortuna*, it is difficult not to read a racial component into the passage, as it echoes a 1937 statement made by Arturo Uslar Pietri about Venezuela's ethnic makeup: "si no modificamos grandemente la composición étnica de nuestra población será casi imposible variar el curso de nuestra historia y hacer de este país un Estado moderno" ("Venezuela necesita inmigración," 6943). He specifically blamed the Indigenous and African aspects of the culture for this state of affairs: "El indio nunca tuvo ni capacidad ni resignación para el trabajo sistemático. Al hablar del indio las palabras pereza y vicio surgen constantemente de la pluma de los cronistas españoles. […] El negro, por su parte, tampoco constituye un aporte que pueda

beneficiar a la raza" (6943). [78] Although Uslar Pietri tempered his racist rhetoric over the course of his life, the implicit racism in these types of caricatures of the Venezuelan people can be gauged through the fact that complaints about "magical thinking" are rarely leveled on the enterprise of oil extraction, and the waves of U.S. Americans and Europeans that rushed into the country after *Barroso II*.[79] It would require a more historically extensive, and thematically focused project to delve into the long-history of depicting the Venezuelan popular masses as superstitious, and in need of seriousness and integrity (especially as these depictions rely on colonial visions of whose work is valued, and whose leisure is deemed appropriate). However, at stake in this discussion is the way in which the belief that Venezuelans are trapped by their magical thinking, ultimately overlooks a more crucial question: what are the forms of magical thinking rooted in oil exploitation and consumption? To answer this question we would first have to further clarify the meaning of *magical thinking.* For the sake of this discussion, I will restrict my use of the term to Álvaro's largely derogatory description. As outlined above, Álvaro chief concern is that of believing that wealth can be acquired without work, planning, or effort: the sensation that oil makes prosperity emerge ex nihilo. I do not dispute that this is a form of magical thinking tied to oil. I disagree, however, with his assertion that "la noción mágica de la

[78] Despite the commonly-held belief that Venezuela established a peaceful racial society, consisting of a mestizo or *café con leche* populace, the belief in a harmonious mestizaje has been used to deny the existence of the very racism expressed by Uslar Pietri and other intellectual figures. In fact, prominent figures such as Mariano Picón Salas and Rufino Blanco Fombona made similar statements (Tinker Salas, 133). Anti-black racism has been flagrant enough, that immigration from the Antilles was banned in 1929. The myth of a racially harmonious Venezuela further cracks if we keep in mind that the order of expulsion issued in 1929, targeted immigrants already residing in the country who were "not of the European race or an insular Yellow race of the Northern Hemisphere" (Tinker Salas, 108).

[79] A notable exception is the character of Jason Patrick in Milagros Mata Gil's *Memorias de una antigua primavera,* who describes his knowledge as a hodgepodge of so-called modern and premodern practices: "tengo por oficios (conocidos y desconocidos), las prácticas de la alquimia, la metalurgia, la geología, la astrología, la química y las artes de curar con yerba" (63). The fact that *Memorias* argues that the very enterprise of oil extraction is also filled with magical thinking is yet another reason the text proves to be one of the most compelling depictions of the oil encounter, making it a shame that it has remained largely unexamined outside feminist literary circles in Venezuela.

realidad que el petróleo ha despertado en nosotros" is either an exclusively Venezuelan phenomenon, or one best told through a primitive epic. Far from primitive, the epic Álvaro describes is not only thoroughly *modern*, but it also has direct ties to industrial capitalism. The sensation that one could stumble upon Aladdin's lamp, or alternatively, that oil can both bring prosperity and liberate people from work, are ideas explicitly tied to the deployment of fossil fuels in the twentieth century. *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* unambiguously conveys this. For instance, the documentary's opening text on the one hand proclaims oil's miraculous qualities, while on the other hand, it reminds us that science has abolished miracles: "One of the famed tales from the fabulous Arabian Nights is the story of Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp. But since Aladdin's time, science has set us straight about miracles… We know today that the true Genie of the Lamp was the OIL that provided its light." The film, interested in showcasing the miraculous, yet scientific nature of oil, continually returns to the myth of Aladdin, marveling at the ways in which "petroleum scientists challeng[e] Aladdin at every turn […] the fruits of their labor […] more wonderful, more practical than anything Aladdin ever produced with his fabulous lamp." Oil thus allows modern life to be more fantastical than myth, as it grants humans the ability to master *all things*: machines, houses, crops, and bodies.

By claiming that oil is magical, while at the same time reiterating that, "science has set us straight about miracles" *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* impeccably exemplifies Bruno Latour's thesis on "the moderns" in their continual creation of culture-nature hybrids, while insisting that the cultural and the natural are distinct, purified realms:

> the world 'modern' designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective. […] The first set of practices, by 'translation', creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The

> second, by 'purification' creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. (10-11)

Those who mix the world of nature and culture, humans and things are deemed premodern, stuck in their myths and magical thinking. The entrance into modernity requires purification, that is, forsaking hybrids and mixtures. Yet, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*—a film about science and technology financed by the oil industry, a high point of modernity if there ever was one—continually exemplifies how oil successfully creates mixtures between culture and nature, humans and nonhumans. Even its central analogy is a hybrid of premodern myth and the scientific aspirations of the oil industry. That myth and magic are so central in explaining modern technology in the film, confirms that modernity did not—could not—banish magical thinking.

That modernity deploys myths and magical thinking, however, is not necessarily a problem. The issue lies instead in the purified realms that *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* and Álvaro's phantom narrative—as thoroughly modern myths—sustain: the belief that Nature, passive objects, and anything deemed premodern is inherently distinct from and conquerable by Society, active subjects, and modern reason. Indeed, the belief that modern societies have acquired the technology to conquer the planet, and liberate themselves from nature has turned out to be a dangerous (or unsustainable) form of magical thinking that nonetheless was essential for the growth of capitalism. As Hans Christoph Binswanger argues, modernity was able to dismiss alchemy as antiquated magical thinking and superstition precisely because the modern economy is *alchemy by other means.*[80] One of alchemy's key aims—be it in its traditional or modern

[80] "If alchemy's original task was to induce the "gold seed" in base metals to grow, to transform these ultimately into gold, modern alchemy, or the continuation of alchemy by other means, aims to promote the money value of things to the point where all things are transformed into money values" (Binswanger, 51).

forms—involves the abolition of material and temporal limitations in order to create an autonomous world that, distanced from natural processes, can operate only through human "laws and goals" (Binswanger, 52). Social theorist Barbara Adam further argues that modernity's "pursuit of alchemy" has entailed the attempt to monetize the biosphere: "Embedded in that quest is the desire for control of the earthly conditions of existence, for unboundedness and permanence, for cheating entropy and death […] Neo/classical economic relations strengthen not just the desire but the illusion" (74). Petroleum strengthened the illusions of neo/classical economics in the twentieth century, as it promised to overcome the material limits that had constrained past economic growth. Consequently, oil became a narrative lubricant for "the economy" as an autonomous realm unburdened by material and geographical constraints. Political theorist Timothy Mitchell describes the invention of the economy as an altogether purified realm, as being intimately tied to oil production:

> the economy came into being as an object of calculation and a means of governing populations not with the political economy of the late eighteenth century or the new academic economics of the late nineteenth century, but only in the mid-twentieth century. Its appearance was made possible by oil, for the availability of the abundant, low-cost energy allowed economists to abandon earlier concerns with the exhaustion of natural resources and represent material life instead as a system of monetary circulation—a circulation that could expand indefinitely without any problem of physical limits. (Mitchell, 234)

Mitchell further documents early twentieth-century debates about whether policy makers and economists should primarily focus on natural resources and energy, or alternatively, on the circulation of money. The latter position ultimately won, at times with the support of scientists.

For instance, in a meeting about resource depletion in the Institute of Politics in Williamstown, Massachusetts in 1926, mining engineers warned about the possibility of depletion of key minerals. Chemists, however, disregarded these concerns, arguing that, "new synthetic materials developed during the First World War would make it possible to create any resources that ran short by artificial means" (141).[81] Petroleum, thus, was treated as the philosopher's stone of alchemy, turning underground, fossilized plankton into any needed material. We need only recall the "set of sparklers that have never been closer to a diamond mine than the Shell development laboratories" in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* to see the alchemical aspirations of the industry. When functioning as a narrative lubricant for political and economic thought, oil creates a type of magical thinking consisting of a widespread belief that societies could organize themselves without heeding to the material or natural world.

[81] A key limit seemingly abolished by petrochemicals was that of land and agricultural yields: "To earlier economic thought, land appeared as a primary source of wealth and as a limited resource, unable to increase at the rate of population growth and liable to degeneration and exhaustion" (Mitchell, 141). The development of synthetic ammonia by chemist Fritz Harber in 1909, "effectively unlock[ed] nature's restraint on plant growth. […] Petroleum had allowed Haber to capture the Holy Grail of inorganic chemistry, something that had eluded chemists for more than a hundred years" (Shah, 18). Vaclav Smil argues that synthetic ammonia is the most important technical invention of the twentieth century, given that without it, the expansion of the human population from 1.6 billion to 6 billion would not have been possible (xiii). From 1947 to 1979 agricultural yields as well as the human population doubled. Fredric Jameson argues that this "revolution" in agricultural production in the late 1950s and 1960s (sometimes deemed the "Green Revolution") led to the systematic destruction of precapitalist forms of food production throughout the world, and to their replacement with industrial agriculture, "whose effects are fully as disastrous as, and analogous to, the moment of enclosure in the emergence of capital in what was to become the first world." Much like the initial moment of enclosure, "an enormous landless preproletariat [is] "produced," which migrates to the urban areas (as the tremendous growth of Mexico City can testify), while new, more proletarian, wage-working forms of agricultural labor replace the older collective or traditional kinds" (185).

Interestingly, *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* depicts the deployment of petrochemicals for agriculture as one of oil's greatest miracles: "The experts take oil, which originally comes from the earth, transform it into a brand new substance, and put it back into the earth again. Could the Genie of the Lamp do more? […] The result: fruit of a quality that even the Genie couldn't surpass. I'll bet Aladdin never dreamed of this one…"

We can think of the comfortable home in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* as a microcosm for the oil economy (tantamount to late capitalism): a realm where material limits—and, in turn, unintended, long-term material consequences—are banished. A pseudo-magical realm where oil functions as the Genie in the lamp (even as one must repeat, as the documentary does, that Genies do not exist), precisely because material processes and effects are wished away, either to the past, or to the forgotten sites of the oil encounter. From this vantage point, we can shed a different light on Álvaro's argument, which ultimately describes the cultural milieu of Fernando Coronil's *magical state*. The magical state is ultimately an outgrowth—a logical consequence—of the belief that oil granted human beings the power to overcome, transform, and master the world's material conditions. In the Venezuelan magical state, the Genie of Aladdin's Lamp gains a human face: the president, who acts as a magician who has the power to "pull social reality, from public institutions, to cosmogonies, out of a hat" (Coronil, 2).

Thus, as we return to Álvaro's phantom narrative, we can see that his notion of magical thinking rooted in a nation's use of its oil wealth, misses a crucial piece of the puzzle. To imagine, as he does, a narrative entirely confined to the magical psyche of Venezuelan culture suggests that despite the ethical implications of its actions, the oil industry acted rationally in its ventures into faraway lands in search of a much-needed fuel. The oil industry may have indifferently allowed numerous atrocities against native populations, cheated poor peoples and entire countries out of needed income, enabled planetary-scale pollution to the point that its activities now poses an existential threat to humans and non-humans. However, one would be pressed to find a depiction—be it in Álvaro's Collado conversations throughout the two volumes of *El laberinto de la fortuna*, Arturo Uslar Pietri's oeuvre, or in most of Venezuela's oil literature—of the enterprise of looking for a precious, toxic substance that promised to liberate

humanity from geography and nature, as a reckless delusion, dependent on its own forms of magical thinking.

That Álvaro, as a fictional stand-in for Venezuelan literary producers, fails to note the irrationality at the heart of exploiting and consuming oil is in itself symptomatic of modernity's attempt to uphold distinctions between nature and society, objects and subjects. This type of purification has often manifested in modern literary production and criticism in their disregard for, "what is happening in the world of science and commerce, and thus, for all practical purposes, […] the entire domain of understanding and engineering *things*, a pervasive activity that constantly reconfigures the human, cultural, and social world by refitting its points of contact with the material stuff around it" (Paulson, 42). Within this frame there is little room to delve into oil's ubiquity, since the autonomy of the cultural is simultaneously a given and a goal. Yet, rather than preserving the purity of the cultural realm, this stance ultimately strengthens the economic logic of the oil industry and the petrostate, as few bother to question the belief that science, technology, and capital could remake the Earth to limitlessly satiate human need and desire. In short, while Venezuela's history of critique against oil companies (as exemplified in the novels of the oil encounter) was centered in the neo-colonial plunder of a national resource, and later against the mismanagement of the state, the oil industry's fantasies of controlling space and matter—and the Venezuelan state's complicity in this enterprise—have gone largely ignored.

The extent to which these issues have not been part of the cultural critique of oil is further exemplified in Álvaro Collado's conversation with poet Arimán Vela about contemporary Venezuelan literature. As a response to the conversation about unwritten oil narratives at Isotta Gavio's party, the two men have the following exchange:

—Tenemos que salir de la selva. […] De la descripción de la naturaleza que ha sido el tema de nuestra literatura. […] Naturaleza hay en todas partes y se parece. Lo que no se parece es el hombre. La selva del Congo y la nuestra se parecen, pero, en cambio, los hombres de allá y los de aquí somos distintos.

—Tiene razón—dijo Álvaro. ¿Dónde está aquí la selva? No la hemos sabido ver. Hay una selva para turistas, pero lo que importa conocer es *la selva que está aquí en nosotros, que vive en nosotros, que nos hace ser como somos*. […] Es lo mismo que pasa con el petróleo. ¿Dónde está aquí el petróleo entre nosotros? Pozos, cabrias, y tubos negros de oleoductos hay en muchas partes: en Texas, en Kuwait, en Rumania, en Irán; lo que es nuestro no es eso, sino el eco, el reflejo, la emoción del petróleo en nosotros. *El petróleo que nos habita, el que está aquí en este cuarto, entre nosotros, en estas palabras, en estas incomprensiones*. El que aparece en la manera de pensar de Sormujo, o en los planes políticos de Centalla o en la pintura de Rafael Lamas […]

—Lo que ha faltado es nombrarnos—decía Arimán. Hasta que se nos nombre no sabremos quiénes somos, y mientras no sepamos quiénes somos nada podremos hacer. (156, my italics)

At first glance the desire to *leave the jungle* would appear to counter the longing for telluric anchors characteristic of *novelas de la tierra* and *novelas del petróleo* examined in chapters I and II. Nonetheless, Álvaro and Arimán are still searching for concrete definitions and solid ground: they simply take land and oil out of the equation, aiming instead to explain the transformations of twentieth-century Venezuela by "naming" the national character. In other words, Álvaro and Arimán ultimately posit that the singularity of Venezuela's petromodernity is rooted in the subjective realm. Of course, one could understand their attempt to isolate the contours of a

cultural zeitgeist as a much-needed heuristic device meant to make a series of phenomena legible against what could easily become undifferentiated background, obscured by its very complexity. The problem emerges, however, when this zooming-in is treated as a real ontological break turning objects and subjects, bodies and minds, nature and civilization into distinct, categorizable identities.

Álvaro thus argues that the role of the cultural producer (be it Sormujo's poems, Lama's paintings, or his own unwritten petronarrative) is to internalize, or perhaps to exorcise, the excesses of the material world. Consequently, no significance is granted to anything lying outside the echoes and reflections haunting the conscious, knowing ego ("*el eco, el reflejo, la emoción"* […] "*entre los dioses y los fantasmas malvados*"). As Álvaro expresses, insofar as they are not part of anyone's subjectivity, jungle and oil threaten to pose an internal limit to the nameable nation. As sites at the limit (and often as the excess) of the national community, their complex existence must be reduced to simple, appropriable background. Consequently, the ghastly assertion that two of the most biodiverse, but also fast-disappearing regions in the world—Congolese and Amazonian jungles—could be interchangeable already suggests that the conversation between Álvaro and Arimán's has little to do with real places, be it jungles or oil fields. Nonetheless, this statement opens an important point about the disjuncture between the environment and the nation-state (and why the ecology of the state is always suspect). Indeed, within the scale of the modern nation-state—a network of human and capital-centered institutions—the Earth's jungles and subsoil are interchangeable, as the biosphere's significance can be reduced to its role as static symbol, or alternatively as qualitative abstraction as exploitable resource to be turned into capital. In other words, in Álvaro's view, the cultural producer must grant meaning to a natural world after it passes through "the state's narrowing

abstracting, utilitarian logic" (Scott, 13). This is a quixotic enterprise akin to granting human identity onto nonhumans—for instance, acting as if the only meaningful feature of a jungle is its location within certain territorial bounds—another form of magical thinking indeed, confused for centuries with progress. Nonetheless, this viewpoint is meant to turn nature into a set of legible objects that aid the national subject's quest for self-recognition, thus, creating a certain nationalist solipsism: inside the territorial borders of the nation, nothing exists except that which has already been materially and symbolically captured by the nation-state. Within this purview, the microscopic and vast scales crucial to the so-called natural world cannot be recognized, and are thus deemed irrelevant, interchangeable, and even non-existent. In other words, the materials on which Venezuela's modern existence depends are ultimately incommensurable to that national *nosotros* of which Álvaro's speaks. Only humans and their institutions have enough complexity to change, surprise, and vary in time and space. Yet, far from granting humans greater complexity, holding subjects above a passive background of nature and objects, these distinctions reduce subjectivity's complex embeddedness in several human and non-human contexts. In this neatly categorizable world—one which could theoretically fit in five acts—there is no room for how humans changed the planet through their deployment of oil, or conversely, how oil changed the very contours of human societies.

Realist Magic

Not surprisingly, given that *El laberinto de la fortuna* does not depict extraction sites, scholars have ignored its unconventional engagement with the question of oil, nation, and literature. This fact underscores the importance of including the circulation and consumption of oil products (that is to say, oil's presence in society outside extraction sites) into discussions of

Venezuelan oil and literature. Overlooked, along with the novels, is the fact that *Un retrato en la geografía* provides an early account of *the magical state*:

> Más que una magistratura era como una investidura religiosa o mágica. Como si alguien de pronto fuera sacado de su vida ordinaria para convertirlo en Papa de la Edad Media o en Buda viviente. *El Presidente de Venezuela no podía ser sino un ser mágico, revestido de poderes y atributos casi sobrenaturales*. Poderes de vida o muerte, riqueza o miseria, de felicidad o de desdicha. *De su favor dependía todo*. (Uslar Pietri, 34, my italics)

In this passage we see that the analysis of the Venezuelan presidential figures as magical, the source of every change and event, precedes Cabrujas and Coronil's analyses by several decades.

On some level, however, the narrative structure of *El laberinto de la fortuna* makes it particularly easy to dismiss its phantom petronarratives, and their engagement with oil. The fact that the novels venture into oil's contradictions through conversations about unwritten novels ultimately leaves the rest of the diagetic world undisturbed (as well as that national reality it attempts to represent). Questions about oil's magic and ubiquity are displaced onto a doubly fictional realm, easily dismissed (as indeed happens in both texts), as flights of fancy with no connection to reality. In terms of content, *Un retrato en la geografía* dismisses its intranarrative through the mere fact that Sormujo can eloquently criticize oil in front of men with enough power to make or ruin people's fortunes. To them, Sormujo's statements are little more than an amusing confabulation. Indeed, one of them, Saúl Verrón simply responds, "Déjame tomarme este whisky antes de que me empiece a saber a petróleo. […] Qué imaginación tan fantástica" (49). In *Estación de máscaras* the disavowal of the unwritten petronarrative is achieved through the fact that Álvaro describes his ideas after Isotta Gavio bans political conversations, thus implying that his narrative bears no relation to the current political situation.

Presenting these complex musings on oil's place in Venezuela as novels that will never be written poses a disjunction between the content of these phantom novels—in their concerns with magic, surrealist visions, uncanny objects—and the main diegesis of *El laberinto de la fortuna*. These fragments function as small (in size and effect) disruptions to a diegetic world meant to be representative and comprehensive of a moment in time in Venezuela. In other words, while the novels are chiefly making sense of a changing nation, these phantom narratives present the inevitable material excesses not containable within the national community. In this sense, these passages ultimately serve a dual structural purpose. On the one hand, the intranarratives keep the question of oil properly contained, as it never spills into the main narrative. The text gestures to the magical and the invisible, without allowing it to pose a threat to the novels' own realist aesthetic. In this sense, the intranarratives are akin to the genie in *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp*: a way to contend with seemingly magical scales and transformations, while at the same time reiterating that one must forsake magical thinking.

On the other hand, the very presence of the intranarratives opens a space to consider oil's complex ties to "phenomena and processes marked by in/visibility, im/materiality, futurity, and un/certainty" (Adam, 7). From this vantage point, the intranarratives point towards the representational limits of *El laberinto de la fortuna* as a text, and of its reliance on modern forms of subjectivity and belonging as a way of understanding Venezuelan society.

One could be tempted to argue, however, that Sormujo and Álvaro's intranarratives are short irruptions of magical realism within two realist novels. This is an especially tempting interpretation, considering that Arturo Uslar Pietri was the first person known to use the term "magical realism" in the Latin American context (Reeds, 181).[82] The time of publication further

[82] "Realismo mágico" is a Spanish translation of the German term used by Franz Roh's to characterize the artistic tendencies in 1920s European paining, in particular *Neue Sachlichkeit.* Arturo

support this idea, as these novels from 1962 and 1964 are well situated as precursors to the Latin American literary boom. Indeed, Uslar Pietri argued that both magical realism and Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* are ultimately concerned with "la noción de una condición del mundo Americano que no era posible reducir a ningún modelo europeo," (182) a sentiment expressed in both narrative fragments, which additionally preoccupied the author through his career. However, I would argue against this reading (even if it is the one intended by Uslar Pietri), for the same reasons I am unconvinced by Álvaro Collado's attempt to capture a specifically Venezuelan "noción mágica de la realidad": these intranarratives do not simply display the idiosyncrasies of Latin American reality, but are instead (if inadvertently) lay bare the magical thinking at the heart of twentieth century capitalism. Thus, instead of precursors to Macondo, the setting of *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* these unwritten petronarratives might be more closely tied to the urban, consumerist, technological McOndo of the late twentieth and early twenty fist centuries (as conceptualized by Alberto Fuguet). While in Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo alchemy was the concern of José Arcadio Buendía and his laboratory, the very existence of McOndo requires *alchemy by other means*: petromodernity. Indeed, oil made possible a globalized McOndo with its highways, subways, screens, and fast food chains. Consequently, in the same way that it has become difficult to distinguish between oil industry and Venezuelan society, the material dispersal of oil also makes it difficult to claim that only certain nations are oil societies.

Conclusion

Fossil fuels not only operate on microscopic, local, national, planetary scales, but further blur these types of distinctions as they enable a proliferation of *things* that cannot be properly

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Uslar Pietri first used the words in 1949 in *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (1949): "La consideración del hombre como misterio en medio de los datos realistas. Una adivinación poética o una negación poética de la realidad. Lo que a falta de otra palabra, podría llamarse un realismo mágico" (Reeds, 177, 181).

placed within these categories: oranges fertilized with ammonia, "that set of sparklers that have never been near a diamond mine", an economy that grows without physically doing so. As we will examine in our following chapter, there is also a temporal dimension to these blurrings, as events such as oil spills, or the release of gas into the atmosphere, *do not stop happening* once contained. Their effects on rivers, soil, and thus the cells of current and future organisms continue for generations; as such, the spills from the past rarely become past within a generation. Thus, rather than looking for oil's trace in punctual occurrences or in the expected places (oil fields, refineries), we need to find different ways of understanding and determining presence. Consequently, while the traditional Venezuelan petronarrative about workers in the oil-field provides provide an invaluable and often forgotten account of the human labor and material waste involved in creating oil's infrastructure of comfort and mobility, these texts ultimately contend with some of the myriad possible scales under which oil operates. While essential points of departure, the tangible experiences of sites of extraction, and even the *magic* that envelops the formidable petrostate, are only several salient nodes in a vast network sustaining oil's centrality to modern life.

Chapter IV

Pollution: Screening Invisible Ecological Damage in *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (2005)

¡Debo irme lejos—pienso—lejos de todo esto tan feo,
tan desolador, tan insultante!

—Gabriel Bracho Montiel, *Guachimanes*

In *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* Barbara Adam thoroughly explores the weaknesses of modern thought and industrial practices in relation to temporality: "we learn about and relate knowledgeably to a multidimensional space, but our understanding of the temporal dimension of socio-environmental life is pretty much exhausted with knowledge about the time of calendars and clocks" (9). This limited understanding of time, she argues, has environmental consequences, as changes in nature—which include environmental hazards—do not exist in the time of calendars and clocks. In other words, modern temporality is ill equipped to contend with environmental catastrophes. This means, of course, that temporality is continually at stake in ecological thought. Thus, it should come as no surprise that narratives of the oil encounter in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are particularly concerned, in form and content, with time. This preoccupation with oil extraction and time is not exhausted with literary fiction, as it is also a central concern in the documentary *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (2005). Directed by a team of Italian filmmakers comprised of Elisabetta Andreoli, Gabriele Muzio, Sara Muzio and Max Pugh, the documentary aimed to shed light on the living conditions in Venezuela's oil producing regions. In this sense, *Nuestro petróleo* is a twenty-first century attempt to grant visibility to the "no place" of the oil encounter.

As the stories or *cuentos* of the title suggests, most of the documentary is structured around people's accounts of how life near extraction sites or petrochemical plants have impacted their health and livelihood. The documentary also provides the perspectives of PDVSA management, many of whom highlight the company's concern with Venezuela's economic and ecological well-being. *Nuestro petróleo* thus highlights a fundamental disconnect between the industry and individuals living near its premises. One of the documentary's central arguments is that, despite the seemingly abrupt political and institutional changes brought about by Hugo Chávez's rise to power, twenty-first oil enclaves have remained largely unchanged. By emphasizing the systemic continuities underpinning a self-proclaimed revolution, *Nuestro petróleo* generated a vociferous controversy among supporters of the Chávez regime, some of who saw the documentary's critique as a necessary call to rethink Venezuela's dependence on oil. Others declared the film to be counter-revolutionary propaganda.

This chapter first examines the film's reception among *Chavista* circles in order to show how, in claiming that a revolution has at last transformed Venezuela, the film's detractors unwittingly enacted another continuity: the belief that an oil-fueled change in governmental practices could in itself abolish the past behind it.[83] Indeed, the attacks leveled against *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* springs from the same impulse that has led more traditional cultural critics to dismiss the novel of the oil encounter: the compulsion to erase the ugliness inherent in the world of oil extraction—in other words, the desire to not see the comforts of home and belonging polluted by their fiscal origins and material ramifications. The chapter then proceeds

[83] Given that the initial debate over the film predominately involved intellectuals sympathetic to Hugo Chávez's projects of revolutionary change, the pro-government website *Aporrea* (short for *Asamblea Popular Revolucionaria Americana)* served as the central platform for much of the discussion. The site opened in 2002 as a reaction against the media support of the coup d'état against Hugo Chávez in April 11 of that year. The site aimed to be an accessible source of news for sympathizers of the *chavista* regime.

to examine the film itself in order to show the dangers of a political project that, like the Bolivarian Revolution, turns a blind eye to continuities.

Controversy

The first official screenings of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* took place at the Cinemateca Nacional in March 4th, 2005, unleashing a hostile controversy within intellectual circles in support of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution.[84] Although partially financed by the now-defunct CONAC, its chair, then-Minister of Culture Farruco Sesto claimed the documentary was little more than "yellow journalism" and "a clear manipulation of reality" (Furiati, my translation).[85] Sesto, and other CONAC representatives, demanded that the institution's logo be removed from the documentary's credits and ensured that the film would receive no institutional support in terms of distribution and advertisement (Furiati).

Outside governmental institutions, the controversy surrounding *Nuestro petróleo* was sparked by an opinion piece published in March 7th, 2005 by Donatella Iacobelli, Raúl Grioni, and Miguel Posani, the chief editors of the cultural magazine *ENcontrARTE*.[86] The piece opens

[84] A prior limited premiere took place on February 23 in Caracas' *Teatro Municipal.*

[85] Founded in 1975, in the midst of an oil boom, the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura (CONAC) began to be replaced by the new *Ministerio de Cultura* in 2005—also founded during a major oil boom, as is the case with much of Venezuela's cultural institutions. CONAC was ultimately closed in 2008 under the guidance of Former Minister of Culture Farruco Sesto. According to Sesto, the institution's continual challenge to the Bolivarian Revolution's transformative agenda led to its closure: "habían una resistencia interna en la propia estructura organizativa del Conac, que no facilitaba su autotransformación" (Carpio Olivo). Sesto hailed the replacement of one cultural institution with a more-ideologically sound replica, a great victory in Venezuela's "refundación institucional." Notably, CONAC's closure exemplifies illustrates Gisela Kozak Rovero's thesis that Venezuela is "el país que siempre nace," as institutional continuity is continually eschewed in favor of (repeated) transformative rebirths.

[86] The online publication *ENcontrARTE* opened in 2004 as a cultural magazine aiming to foment cultural production and critique, as part of a "cultural battle" against elite cultural formations. Although claiming to not take a political position in national or global politics, the site's manifesto also states that the magazine is direct confrontation with right-wing intellectuals (ENcontrARTE). There have been no updates on the site since March, 2014.

by explaining that as an editorial stance, *ENcontrARTE* refrains from publishing explicitly political material. However, given the editors' prior collaborations with the filmmakers involved in *Nuestro petróleo*, they felt compelled to publicly distance themselves from the documentary.[87] *ENcontrARTE*'s piece further points out that as the recipient of funds from CONAC, a state agency, *Nuestro petróleo* is itself a product and beneficiary of PDVSA's generous redistribution of Venezuela's oil wealth. In other words, the editorial points to *Nuestro petróleo* itself as proof of the transformation of the Venezuelan oil industry from a perennial enemy of the people, to the chief promoter of national culture. Such a position, of course, overlooks the extent to which transnational oil companies promoted Venezuelan folklore in the first half of the twentieth-century—and continue to function as an underwriter of the arts in much of the world.[88] The documentary nonetheless had numerous supporters within the *Chavista* intelligentsia, many of whom saw it as a necessary warning of what must change in Venezuela in order to ensure the long-term success of the revolution.[89] The controversy reached such levels that the editors of

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[87] La línea editorial que hemos pretendido seguir en ENcontrARTE es ocuparnos de todo lo que tenga que ver con la lucha cultural evitando, en la medida de lo posible, inmiscuirnos en las [discusiones] políticas. Entendemos que hay suficientes revolucionarios para enfrentar en el terreno que sea, a los políticos golpistas y fascistas de toda calaña que amenazan al proceso de transformaciones revolucionarias que vive Venezuela. […] Nuestra vinculación a los realizadores de la [película] así como las circunstancias que han involucrado a ENcontrARTE de forma tangencial, nos hace sentir la obligación, de fijar una posición, en primer lugar, en el terreno de las caracterizaciones políticas y [también] hacer algunas consideraciones sobre el tipo y forma de manejo de las imágenes. (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani)

[88] See: "Picture a Crude Past: Primitivism, Public Art, and Corporate Oil Promotion in The United States" and Stephanie Lemenager's "Fossil, Fuel: Manifesto for the Post-Oil Museum." For a recent analysis of Big Oil's controversial support of cultural institutions see Holland Cotter's *New York Times* piece "Making Museums Moral Again."

[89] See: "A propósito de 'Nuestro petróleo...' y otros cuentos artísticos" by Roland Denis, "Ni rechazo ni aceptación" by Leocenis García, "¿Quién censura el documental 'Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos'" by Susana Guerrero, and "Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos" by Rómulo Muñoz.

Aporrea, the site publishing much of the debate, intervened by publishing an editorial of their own asking for civility.[90]

Although CONAC's condemnation limited *Nuestro petróleo*'s distribution, right- and left- wing activist groups have safeguarded its international circulation through public screenings, as well as by uploading it to several online video platforms (still the only surefire to access the film).[91] The film has been embraced by politically distinct groups in part because it compellingly displays one of the greatest failures of Hugo Chávez's regime: the inability to break away from, or even successfully reform the worst traits of oil extractivism.[92] Yet, although the figure of Hugo Chávez looms large in the debate generated by the film I would argue against reducing the controversy surrounding it to the presidential figure. Doing so would be to continue reproducing the magical state's conceptual toolbox: equating social, economic, and political change (or lack thereof) with the presidential figure.

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[90] See: "En torno al documental *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*: Carta pública de Aporrea para el debate entre revolucionarios.

[91] The anarchist publication *Periódico El Libertario* has been central in the film's circulation, by advertising and selling it at their headquarters in Caracas. The difficulty of finding copies of the film is illustrated by the fact that, as of March 2016, no university subscribed to the database *Worldcat* lists it as part of its collection.

[92] Lieutenant Colonolel Hugo Chávez Frías became a prominent figure in Venezuelan politics after helping organize two military coups against Carlos Andres Pérez second government in 1992. After two years in jail following the coup, he was pardoned and released. He was democratically elected president in 1998. Chávez's initial efforts were concentrated in overturning Venezuela's "moribund" political institutions, concentrating at first on constitutional reform. Notably, Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution was at first social democratic in nature—its revolutionary stance being primarily aimed at state institutions and not at its economic structure. However, the unrelenting attacks against his regime by its political foes, culminating in the 2002 coup, contributed to its radicalization. In January 2005—two months before the release of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*—he began proclaiming that the Bolivarian Revolution would bring about the "socialism of the 21st century." Immensely aided by the largest oil windfall in the country's history, the regime was able to support a great number of social programs aiming to eliminate poverty and inequality. Although the regimes and its supporters tended to downplay the oil boom's role in the improvement of Venezuela's living conditions, this position seems untenable now that oil prices have fallen and the country currently undergoing a catastrophic economic crisis.

Repetitions

The perceived strengths or weaknesses of *Nuestro petróleo* largely hinged on whether the film portrayed a believable picture of "la Venezuela real, de carne y huesos" (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani). Those in favor of the film were quick to point out that it provided a much-needed reminder of an easily overlooked aspect of life in Venezuela (Denis, Guerrero, García, Muñoz,). In contrast, the *ENcontrARTE*'s editorial censured *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* first and foremost for its failure to provide an objective vision of contemporary Venezuelan reality. According to the editorial, this lack of objectivity is demonstrated through the documentary's depiction of the "human misery" characteristic oil-extracting regions, without providing the other side of the story: "what PDVSA's oil is enabling in terms of the development of social programs, *misiones*, and cultural diffusion in the real, flesh and blood Venezuela" (Iacobelli, Grioni, Posani).[93] The fact that the question of faithful representation was central to *Nuestro petróleo*'s reception largely hinges on the types of expectations commonly placed on documentaries. Although documentaries do not necessarily aim to be a direct representation of reality, the genre is nonetheless tied to the wish for greater access to a given reality. Yet, as Bill Nichols points out, John Grierson's original definition of *documentary* as the "creative treatment of actuality,"

[93] First implemented in late 2003, the *misiones*, or Missions, are "a series of comprehensive social programs […] that provided new forms of healthcare, remedial education, basic foodstuffs, occupational training, and developmental loans for economic cooperatives, among other benefits" (Hawkins, 22). The *misiones* became one of the central symbols of a new social order, which according to Chávez, was on the path of eliminating poverty by 2020. Although often depicted as representative of a government that, at last, prioritized social spending, Kirk A. Hawkins' study on the *misiones* showed that the program comprised about the same percentage of social spending as prior regimes (approximately 25% of revenues): "While the Missions are extensive, it is important to note that they do not necessarily represent an increasing prioritization of social spending under the Chávez government. Absolute expenditures have gone up in tandem with increasing government revenues overall, but the proportion of the national budget dedicated to health, housing, and education has remained fairly stable" (203)

highlights the fact that genre is "neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction" (6-7).[94] *ENcontrARTE*'s editorial, however, entirely unambiguously expects documentary-filmmaking to stay within the bounds of factual reproduction:

> entendemos que un documental debe documentar objetiva e imparcialmente una realidad dada, a nuestro parecer, todo indica que la película está estructurada para demostrar lo que se des[e]aba demostrar […] [Impone] una visión parcializada de la realidad manipulando imá[e]ges, textos o declaraciones. (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani)

Remarkably, this passage critiques *Nuestro petróleo* for possessing the defining traits of a documentary.[95] In fact, the appearance of an "objective and impartial" representations of reality, be it through documentary filmmaking or different iterations of aesthetic realism, is in itself produced by the formal manipulation of a "given reality." As a ninety-minute introduction to the poverty and pollution near sites of extraction, and to the corruption and institutional inertia that allows such a situation to continue, *Nuestro petróleo* can ultimately do little more than provide a "partial vision of reality by manipulating images, texts or testimonies." Interestingly, critiques about a lack of objectivity were not leveled on *Otro modo es posible en Venezuela* (2002), a documentary made by the same team of filmmakers. Made in the span of five weeks, the earlier documentary was conceptualized by its team of directors as a work of "counter-information" about Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. Whereas the international media had generally been critical of Hugo Chávez's regime, the documentary wanted to show the strides made by the

[94] As mentioned in chapter 3, John Grierson "the father of documentary," believed to have coined the term, also founded the Shell Film Unit.

[95] Conceding some degree of accuracy in the documentary's depiction of ecological crises tied to the oil industry, journalist and cultural critic Néstor Francia, nevertheless critiques *Nuestro petróleo* for its failure to convey PDVSA's work towards institutional change in the early 21st century. Thus, he argues, the documentary only depicts the remains of an old PDVSA.

regime in terms of social justice. In contrast, *Nuestro petróleo* was an attempt to dig deeper into the long-term issues plaguing Venezuela—those unlikely to be resolved by a single presidential regime. According to Gabriele Muzio, after the success of *Otro modo es posible*, the film's production team worried that they had provided an uncritical vision of a complex situation, one that was too trusting of a petro-state and its politicians du jour.[96]

Given the positive reaction to *Otro modo* within Chavistas circles, critics have pointed out that the disparaging responses to *Nuestro petróleo* stem, not from the content of the film itself, but from its ambivalence towards *Chavismo*. The impulse to protect what was perceived to be a revolutionary process and its figurehead from unwarranted attacks was certainly central to the negative reaction to *Nuestro petróleo*. However, I would argue that the film's particular critique of Venezuelan society during the Chávez presidency (one critique among many, after all) struck a chord precisely because it focused on oil extraction—an issue that is crucial to the survival of any political project, but which is customarily meant to remain unseen and unexamined. Indeed the disbelief expressed by the film's detractors attests to how the effects of oil exploitation have been kept hidden for generations. What is particularly notable is that oil extraction tended to remain absent in discussions about the film. For instance, former Vice-

[96] In an interview with human rights activist Rafael Uzcátegui, Muzio explains his changing view of Venezuela's political situation

> [*Otro modo es posible en Venezuela*] se convirtió de cierta forma en una especie de bandera y comenzaron a mirar a Venezuela a través de ella, creyendo que lo que estaba en la película realmente representaba una realidad dinámica, en movimiento. Entonces, que al transcurrir del tiempo había sencillamente que mejorar las cosas; una visión un poco teleológica de la historia. No se preocupaban mucho de investigar qué estaba pasando en la actualidad y comenzaron a ver la situación de Venezuela acríticamente. He pasado por el país muchas veces después. Y en el tiempo, sobre todo en el 2004, he visto cosas que no me han gustado. Me ha parecido que se estaba alejando este proceso de formas de autonomía, de hipótesis de poder popular hacia una situación de la cual la burocracia de los partidos políticos son los que realmente dispensan favores y el poquito de delegación de poder. Todo al revés de lo que uno había pensado en el 2002. Y al mismo tiempo una desarticulación de las organizaciones populares […] Además, el tema petrolero que no estaba nada resuelto, porque se hablaba "PDVSA es del pueblo". Pero al mismo tiempo qué estaba pasando: Había acuerdos internacionales que se estaban firmando sin consulta con la gente. ("Entrevista").

Minister of Development Roland Denis pointed out that the debate over whether the documentary presented a hindrance or a necessary critique of the Bolivarian Revolution eventually became a way to ignore its content:

> ni siquiera [se hace] referencia al decir de la gente, de los entrevistados, de los contenidos de lo que dicen, de las historias que allí se cuentan, de las historias de hoy y de ayer como es el caso del pueblo del Hornito o de la vivencia íntima de las comunidades aledañas a la explotación del gas y petróleo tanto en el lago como en el delta. ("A propósito")

Paradoxically then, these debates over the representation of oil still perpetuated the sense that oil's material imprint cannot, or should not, be discussed.

ENcontrARTE's editorial most notoriously dismissed the need to represent or discuss oil's material imprint: "Se muestra abandono, miseria y pobreza en las zonas visitadas. *¿Alguien dudaba de la inmensa deuda social acumulada? No hacía falta ir tan lejos para filmar largas escenas de basureros, moscas y zamuros*" (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani, my italics). By pointing out an "accumulated, immense social debt," this passage acknowledges the fact that much of the sordidness of human life near the oil industry is a product of its long-term activities. Yet, the editorial nonetheless dismisses the need to represent or consider the lingering effects of unfettered oil extraction. The implication here is, of course, that all of this—misery, poverty, landfills, flies, and vultures—was already too well known, perhaps too visible to make representation necessary. However, the claim that nobody doubted "the immense social debt" left by years of oil exploitation (therefore making its depiction unnecessary) becomes more problematic when we consider that film as a medium has rarely engaged with oil extraction in Venezuela. Films about Venezuelan oil that do not explicitly align with corporate or state interests are exceedingly rare. The industry's usual secrecy—as it still bans recording devices

near its premises—compounded with the difficulty of ensuring funding to undertake such an enterprise, are important factors in this dearth of films about oil. In this regard, it is important to note that Venezuelan cinema (as is the case with much of the world's non-Hollywood cinema) depends on state funding; films about the problems with the oil industry are, of course, unlikely to be plentiful in a petrostate.

The first independent documentary about Venezuelan oil, Carlos Rebolledo's *Pozo muerto* (1967), was filmed after the county's government had stopped providing oil concessions to international firms—that is, after the initial steps towards the industry's nationalization had already been taken. *Pozo muerto*, was followed by *Venezuela tres tiempos* (1973) and *Testimonio de un obrero petrolero* (1978), films which comprise the entirety of independent documentaries about oil in Venezuela in the twentieth-century. The emergence of these films in the late 1960s and 1970s seems to be more closely related to the growth of the Third Cinema movement in Latin American (and eventually in the so-called Third World) than with an interest in oil specifically. This "oppositional" cinema worked towards decrying capitalism and neocolonialism—and Hollywood cinema as their cultural tool.[97] These documentaries primarily circulated through political dissident networks as part of the Third Cinema Movement, and consequently precise information about their reception and impact is not widely available. However, according to Edmundo Aray, co-producer of *Pozo negro*, the documentary was deemed subversive, and banned from commercial venues, which in turn might have exacerbated

[97] With the institutional support of the Film Department at the Universidad de los Andes (ULA) in Mérida, Third Cinema in Venezuela predominately consisted of short documentaries like *Pozo muerto*, which depicted the precarious living conditions of peasants, workers, and the lumpenproletariat. A study is still needed that establishes a conversation between the films produced by ULA and the wider Third Cinema Movement. This project aimed to more closely look at this relationship. However, the difficulty of acquiring the films outside the archive, as well as the country's political and economic instability (leading to the abrupt closures of ULA's archive), have prevented me from accessing enough material to carry out such a project.

the relative lack of information about its circulation and reception (*Nuestro petróleo*). Additionally, copies of these films have remained largely inaccessible outside the reels in official film archives in Venezuela, meaning that wider discussions about the country's cinema rarely include them. Rarer still is to find information about these films in taxonomies of Latin American cinema. Thus, not unlike the status of the novel of the oil encounter, the few extant films about oil in Venezuela have been largely forgotten.

Nuestro petróleo is thus a rather unique documentary, not only because it delves into a rarely acknowledged topic, but also because of the attention and circulation it has received through digital platforms. The film's unique content likely played a role in the response it elicited. In other words, given the relative absence of images depicting the *no place* of the oil encounter, its bleakness was likely a surprise to many spectators, including members of CONAC. We can infer this, in part, because a detailed description of the film's proposed content and intent had been approved by CONAC (Uzcátegui, *Revolución*). According to Gabriele Muzio, one of the film's directors, the final product deviated little from the approved proposal. Thus, the anger and disbelief expressed by members of CONAC and *ENcontrARTE* ultimately points to how little Venezuelan cultural institutions know about and engage with life near sites of extraction. Relatedly, *Nuestro petróleo*'s production team decided to make a film about oil enclaves precisely because of the silence surrounding the topic within Venezuelan borders. In this regard, Muzio notes:

> Realicé mi primer viaje en zona petrolera del estado Zulia, en la costa oriental del lago, y me quedé absolutamente asombrado frente a lo que vi en términos de miseria por un lado, de resignación de la gente, y de problemas de salud pública y de pasivos ambientales. Absolutamente impresionante. Entonces pensé: los venezolanos, en su gran mayoría, no

> saben de esto. Quiero hacer algo para que sea levantado a la luz pública lo que son los costos del petróleo, porque siempre se habla de los beneficios. Porque si todos seguimos pensando que el modelo que siempre rigió en Venezuela, que es un modelo de economía extractiva, debe ser lo que rige hoy, entonces yo no veo el cambio. Entonces fue una película bastante diferente de la primera, inclusive al nivel de su propósito. Mientras que la primera la hicimos para hacer contra-información hacia el mundo, esta ha sido hecha para hacer contra-información adentro de Venezuela. (Uzcátegui, 27)

Muzio's account of what he saw—his astonishment at its sheer dreariness—and his desire to beckon others to see it too, echoes the novels of the oil encounter of earlier generations. That this world has remained out of sight within the country is an additional connection with these earlier texts: oil enclaves continue to function as a *no place* in the Venezuelan imaginary. That this situation remains unchanged could lead us to conclude that the aim of the narratives of the oil encounter has proven futile.[98]After all, this effort to grant greater visibility to oil's material imprint—from *Mene* in 1936 to *Nuestro petróleo* in 2004—continues to be met with the type of contempt expressed in the *ENcontrARTE* editorial. However, it is crucial to keep in mind, on the one hand, that any attempt to grant visibility to sites of extraction must contend with one of the most powerful and forcefully secretive industries in the world. On the other hand, we should wonder if the disdain and disbelief elicited by these texts stems from their ability to successfully disturb, to pose a challenge to readers or viewers. As Elisabeth Cowie asserts in her study on documentary's relationship to reality, the truthfulness of a documentary is often questioned precisely because of the effectiveness of its representations:

[98] As discussed in chapter II, this optic involves the attempt to peer from up-close at the oil industry's material imprint, be it in human bodies or entire localities.

> we may take a stance of skepticism because the nonfiction's showing is both compelling *and* convincing; […] our emotional response presents us with the question of action in relation to the conviction the documentary has given rise to—evidenced by our response—and, not wanting to take responsibility for the ethical demand for action arising, we question the evidence. (36)

Cowie's reference to responsibility and action is particularly pertinent to *Nuestro petróleo*, as a documentary made during (and for) an auto-designated revolution. As an especially intense iteration of the magical state, the Bolivarian Revolution promised to bring forth a national rebirth, and cultural institutions such as CONAC, *ENcontrARTE* and *Aporrea* fashioned themselves as key participants in this transformative process. However, by depicting the profound, long-term problems associated with the industry on which the revolution depends, *Nuestro petróleo* confronted its audience with the revolution's ultimate aporia. After all, what action can be taken in the face of an industry upon which society depends? Hence, it is far easier to question the evidence provided by *Nuestro petróleo*, as it provides images that would not otherwise be seen, by pointing to its incongruence to other images of contemporary Venezuela.

"Flesh and Bone Venezuela" and its Abject Body

Despite their revolutionary posture, the negative reaction to *Nuestro petróleo* in CONAC, *ENcontrARTE* and *Aporrea* are part of an established discursive tradition: the deployment of the idea of a *real Venezuela* as a way to invalidate the optic of the oil encounter. Flesh and blood Venezuela (to use *EncontrARTE*'s language) is the semi-fictional nation that exists—or *would exist*—without oil's material imprint, but which nevertheless suffers the effects of the oil economy. As oil remains sequestered in its *no place*, its impact is displaced to disembodied circulation, or alternatively embodied in messianic or diabolic figures (from the local politician

to the president). It is from this vantage point that Álvaro Collado in Arturo Uslar Pietri's *El laberinto de la fortuna* (examined in chapter 3) could claim that the connective tissue of a global oil infrastructure was not part of Venezuelan reality, "¿Dónde está aquí el petróleo entre nosotros? Pozos, cabrias, y tubos negros de oleoductos hay en muchas partes: en Texas, en Kuwait, en Rumania, en Irán; lo que es nuestro no es eso, sino el eco, el reflejo, la emoción del petróleo en nosotros" (156). In a similar vein, Manuel Caballero deemed the world depicted in the novels of the oil encounter as "a foreign country where the Devil and the Minotaur rule […] *a land that has nothing to do with one's own*" (Caballero, 172, my translation and italics). We should not conclude, however, that the *ENcontrARTE* editors with their "flesh and blood Venezuela", Uslar Pietri and Caballero are envisioning a similar Venezuelan reality. In fact, if we are to believe Venezuelan political thought of the last two decades, a vast abyss separates these three interpretations of the real Venezuela. Uslar Pietri, is very much an embodiment of the intellectual, political centrism of the twentieth century. Caballero, a founder of the leftists party *Movimiento al Socialismo*, was a dissident leftist during *Puntofijjismo* (1958-1998), and a vehement critic of *Chavismo*. As already mentioned, the writers at *ENcontrARTE* and *Aporrea* consider themselves to be leftist revolutionaries, opposed to established ways of doing politics in Venezuela. Consequently, the question of a "real Venezuela" is particularly important to these writers, as much of their support of Hugo Chávez's consisted of his ability to bring to the surface (and hence to the political arena) the poverty and oppression suffered by much of the Venezuelan population. Indeed, *ENcontrARTE*'s conceptualization of a "flesh and blood" nation appears to be fundamentally material, as it clearly refers to the tangible, material conditions of people's lives. However, as we have seen throughout this project, the denial of oil's material impact is not necessarily a gesture to the immaterial or the virtual (as is the case, for instance, with Ávaro

Collado' s reference to "el eco, el reflejo, la emoción del petróleo en nosotros"). Instead, as is often the case with representations of the natural world (chapter I), roads as the connective tissue of the nation (chapter II), or the "home that oil built," and its myriad oil-made commodities (chapter III), the materiality of the familiar is central to oil' s inconspicuousness. The purity of familiar spaces requires that oil remain exiled to its no place. Consequently, I am not exactly interested in the particularities of historically contingent visions of a national reality. I am instead interested in how, despite their substantial differences, these visions of national reality all require turning oil extraction sites into *no places*.

These multiple and often opposing configurations of "real, flesh and blood" Venezuela arise in part from modern thought's purification process (as understood by Bruno Latour, and further explored in chapter I), and its isolation of the social from the natural. So entrenched is this purified vision of the social that even within the intellectual vanguard of an alleged revolution it is unquestionably upheld. It is, nonetheless, important to distinguish the expulsion of oil from "real" Venezuela and onto a *no place* described in this chapter, from chapter 1's analysis of the conceptual separation between the social and natural. Aestheticized and de-temporalized, the idealization of Nature turns it into an eternal symbol of the nation. In contrast, the circumscription of oil from the nation is an attempt to protect the "flesh and blood" from a (politically, economically, and ecologically) toxic underground substance. Both acts of purification, however, have the similar effect of granting modern national subjectivity a sturdy definition, as the center of the nation's fate. The reaction to *Nuestro petróleo* thus shows how the effects of oil extraction are the purified, modern nation's abject: a revolting physicality posing a threat to proper boundaries, distinctions, and therefore to meaning. Deborah Caslav Covino describes the abject as that which "leaks wastes and fluids in violation of the desire and hope for

the 'clean and proper' body, thus making the boundaries and limitations of our selfhood ambiguous, and indicating our physical waste and ultimate death" (78). While the abject poses a threat to the "clean and proper," it is nevertheless crucial for growth and survival: the health of the body "entails the expulsion—the abjection—of its nonnutritive contents" (Covino, 27). Thus, the abject is simultaneously a reminder of death and constitutive to life. While theories on the abject generally focus on the secretions produced by the body, Julia Kristeva points out the wider applicability of the concept: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). As we have seen time and again, oil—a noxious leakage, which became essential to human societies in the twentieth century—must be expelled from visions of a coherent social order. It is "the Devil's Excrement" because to acknowledge the toll paid to create and safeguard oil-fueled social orders, is also to confront their fragility and likely demise. We can thus build on Fernando Coronil's assertion that, "As an oil nation, Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil" (4), by positing that Venezuela's subsoil has functioned as the nation's abject body. Oil's outflow made modern Venezuelan possible, while at the same time polluting the territory, periodically leading to economic and political collapse, and going as far as threatening the well-being of the planet.

Conceptualizing oil as abject helps cast the critical reaction to *Nuestro petróleo* under a different light: an understandable (if misguided) impulse to protect the purity of a political project by repressing the foul leakage that sustains it. In this regard, it is important to remember the extent to which *ENcontrARTE*'s critique of the documentary involved its depiction of poverty in its physical manifestations—the aforementioned landfills, flies, and vultures, as well

as dilapidated hospitals housing the sick. While the world depicted on screen has rarely been seen in Venezuela, the critique leveled against the documentary implied that these images were excessive, needlessly overflowing the screen with things best left unseen. The excessive nature of these images does not comprise the entirety of the documentary's perceived faults. From the vantage point of "real, flesh and blood" Venezuela, *Nuestro petróleo*'s ultimate failure is its unwillingness to conjure an "imaginary 'away' to cling to" (Thill, 27)—an "away" which would leave the separation between the real nation, and its abject body undisturbed. As Timothy Morton explains, *away* is the idea of "a homogenous, nonhuman, non-social space that's outside, over there somewhere. We don't want that fantasy to be disturbed" (Lindquist, 45).[99] Although the notion of an *away* and the *no place* of extraction certainly overlap, I nevertheless want to draw a distinction between them. The *away* comprises the fantasy that the material consequences and excesses of human existence—trash, excrement, exhaust—can disappear, its effects erased. Away is the fantasy of cleanliness and removal—the disappearance of all that is harmful and abject. It is also the illusion that it will not reappear at a future time and place. The *no place* of extraction can certainly be thought of as a historically contingent subset, of the *away*.

The need for an *away*—as the fantasy that effects of oil extraction have nothing to do with *us*—can be glimpsed through CONAC's initial approval of *Nuestro petróleo y otro cuentos.* In order to receive funds from CONAC, the film's directors turned in a detailed plan of the

[99] Morton proceeds to explain the *away* in an interview with artist Greg Lindquist:
> what we find disturbing is this idea that nonhuman beings are on the inside of social space. So, we've designed social space to look extremely binary. […] Here's where you live, and here's this place called "away." "Away" is sort of over there, somewhere in this field or on this mountain, over there somewhere, over yonder. The trouble is we now know that there's no such thing as over yonder. Whenever you flush the toilet, you are flushing whatever is in there to somewhere like the Pacific Ocean, or the Gulf, or the Waste Water Treatment Plant, or the Atlantic. There's no "away." There's something profoundly weird about this kind of built space in which there is this idea of awayness—it's been kind of encoded. Of course it's part of the havoc that human beings have wreaked on the environment for thousands of years, really. (45)

documentary's filming locations, content, and overall message. According to director Gabriele Muzio the final product was nearly identical to the initial proposal, with one key exception: the proposed film intended to show local economic alternatives to oil extraction. Unable to find these alternatives in any concrete form, the documentarists were forced to omit the topic from the documentary. Muzio downplays the importance of this omission, maintaining that the final product was essentially the film CONAC had agreed to fund, that being why the *Nuestro petróleo* team was shocked by Farruco Sesto's public condemnation of their work (Uzcátegui, 29, *Revolución*). Upon further analysis, however, we can surmise why the failure to depict these alternatives to oil extraction were be seen by CONAC representatives as a fundamental change to the film's original intent. The presence of these alternatives could have provided the opening for a much needed *away*, a way to read the film's bleakness as the embers of a past currently being transformed by the Bolivarian Revolution. The editorials against the documentary suggest as much when they either claim that the new PDVSA is fast erasing the world depicted on the film (Francia), or alternatively, that the depicted desolation could not have coexisted with the enthusiasm and hope of the 2004 election cycle (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani).

Nuestro petróleo's absent *away* helps highlight the extent to which the concept is as much temporal, as it is spatial. In short, the past can serve as an away. By positing the passage of time as an "irreversible arrow" (Latour, 69) decisively leaving the past behind (note the spatial simile), the coexistence of temporalities appears to be a contradiction that must be corrected. When it comes to a self-designated revolutionary moment, this need to discipline the times grows in urgency, lest the past pollute the present's revolutionary identity. Therefore, long-term ecological crises—the central focus of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*—are shrouded over by appeals to either a *real* or a *changing* Venezuela. The reactions to *Nuestro petróleo* thus illustrate

a clash in temporal frameworks, as nationalist cultural politics prove unequipped to account for the temporality of ecological issues. Thus, while the documentary in a sense argues that there is no *away* for oil's material imprint, the ensuing debate ultimately creates it through the insistence that the socio-ecological issues depicted by the film can (or will) disappear thanks to a change in political institutions.

Mixed Images, Tangled Temporalities: A Reading of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*

Along with blurry images from inside a moving car, the credits of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* provide up-close images of crude oil and extraction infrastructure: derricks, pumpjacks, gas flares, pipelines, the fences ensuring their protection. Interestingly, the credit's predominant image is that of fire ensuing from the gas flares—unwittingly replicating a common trope in the narratives of the oil encounter from previous generations, which often opened with descriptions of the gas flare's incessant light and smell (see chapter 2). At the end of the opening credits, the film cuts from the sway of the oil-extraction machinery—tellingly seen from the other side of a fence—to the circular motions of a film projector's supply reel. The camera slowly pans to show the different components of the projector until it finally lands on a screen with Shell Oil's logo projected onto it. An excerpt of an old unidentified documentary narrates the beginnings of oil extraction in Venezuela in the nineteenth century, followed by an animation of the explosion of *Barroso II*, which marked the start of exploitation at a massive scale.[100] Other clips from archival material follow. Among these, we have a short scene from *Assignment: Venezuela* (1956) an industrial film made by the Creole Petroleum Corporation, which introduced Venezuelan culture to U.S. American workers. Lastly, a statement by a Creole executive explaining the company's good faith towards Venezuela in 1971 is juxtaposed with Hugo Chávez asserting that oil and

[100] The documentary talks about *La Compañía Minera Petrolia del Táchira* Opened operated from 1878 to 1934. The company extracted crude oil to produce kerosene for regional use.

politics cannot be separated. These juxtaposed images close as we hear the Creole executive say, "y es nuestro deseo seguir en la misma forma," at which point we cut back to the film strip moving through the projector as it slowly stops. *Nuestro petróleo'*s credits and opening sequence lay bare much of the film's sources and methodology. The opening images of oil infrastructure followed by a film projector displays the documentary's interest in the material processes underlying the *cuentos* ("stories") of the title: be it the oil infrastructure that extract "our oil" (or as Reza Negarestani suggests, modernity's *narrative lubricant*), or the projectors that helped cement the United States' cultural dominance in the twentieth-century. Of particular note in the context of this project is the fact that the first clip shown by *Nuestro petróleo* belongs to a film made by Shell Oil's Film Division discussed in chapter 3. As our discussion explored, these films were one out of many products made by oil firms to extend their reach onto every aspect of modern life. Through these initial clips the documentary establishes two chronologies. One chronology focuses on the history of oil extraction in Venezuela. The other gestures to the use of film to spread the oil industry's messages and values. In other words, this—oil infrastructure and film projector—is the machinery of 20th-century capitalist expansion. Lastly, by ending the sequence with the words from the Creole executive ("y es nuestro deseo seguir en la misma forma"), *Nuestro petróleo* establishes one of its central themes: the preservation of the underlying structure that allows oil economies to grow and thrive.

After the opening sequence, *Nuestro petróleo* shows a map of Lake Maracaibo and Zulia State, slowly zooming into Cabimas. Another film reel follows, which after a few seconds reveals a scene from *Pozo muerto*. The fact that *Nuestro petróleo* once again presents the physicality of the film-as-reel, could lead us to see the clip from *Pozo muerto* as a continuation of the previously established chronologies. However, the map separating the sequences already

gestures to a difference: whereas the earlier clips belonged to films financed by the oil industry or the state, *Pozo muerto* is the first independent film made about oil in Venezuela. The former images present a historiography rooted in the industry's own interests, the latter, depict life in Cabimas, as a locality that must endure the effects of oil extraction. Maintaining its dual focus on oil extraction and filmmaking, *Nuestro petróleo* juxtaposes *Pozo muerto*'s depiction of Cabimas with an interview with Edmundo Aray (the documentary's co-director), talking about the reception and circulation of his film: "La película era subversiva en aquel entonces. En consecuencia no tuvo la circulación que debía o podía tener." Thus, Aray explains why and how the images we are about to see —be they from 1967 or 2004—have remained out of sight. From that point forward, *Nuestro petróleo* juxtaposes Cabimas in 1967 with Cabimas in 2004. Aray's words presciently describe the fate of *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*: deemed subversive, its circulation was curtailed. Paradoxically then, by attacking *Nuestro petróleo* CONAC ends up validating one of the documentary's central points: uncanny repetitions continue blurring the distinction between the past and the present in Venezuela's oil enclaves.

On their own, the images from *Pozo muerto* reproduced in *Nuestro petróleo* provide background information about Cabima's history. Juxtaposed with images from 2004, they establish a series of continuities. Relatively little seems to have changed in Cabimas. In *Pozo negro,* Cabimas is still ruled by transnational oil companies, as the nationalization of Venezuela's oil reserves was still nine years in the future. The groundwork for nationalization, however, had already been cemented, not only through the creation of OPEC in 1960, but also as the Rómulo Betancourt regime (1959-1964) had decreed an end to new oil concessions to foreign firms. This policy led foreign firms to withdraw slowly from the country by refusing to invest in repairs to their infrastructure, or in the local initiatives they had been compelled to introduce

after Gómez's death (see chapter 2). *Pozo negro* thus anticipates Cabimas's death: "Cabimas enriqueció a las petroleras y llenó las arcas de la nación. Ahora le están cabando la fosa."[101] *Nuestro petróleo* shows, however, that Cabimas did not die. The town's fate is no less sinister, however, as it finds itself stuck in a chronic, yet untenable state of pollution, misery and inequality.

The two central continuities established in this section of *Nuestro petróleo* involve housing and labor problems. The documentary depicts informal housing settlements along the coast of Lake Maracaibo, which in 2004 had remained largely unchanged from their sordid state in 1967. Along with images of houses made of zinc, dirt roads, and abandoned fishing equipment, we hear stories from some of the settlement's inhabitants. A young man (who remains unnamed in the film) shows us his living-quarters, while another mentions that their ancestors used to be fishermen: "Nuestros antepasados se alimentaban […] de la pesca del lago de Maracaibo, […] y de allí vino el petróleo. Vino la química que dañó un poco a la pez.

[101] Although absent from *Nuestro petróleo, Pozo muerto* further anticipates Cabimas' death by depicting the fate of La Paz, a former prosperous oil enclave now completely abandoned. Only Victor Gómez resides in the town's ruins, along with "la guardia, las culebras y los fantasmas."

Figure 4.1 Cabimas in 1967 (as shown in *Pozo negro*) and 2004 juxtaposed in *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos*.

El camarón se perdió. Se perdió la pesca buena" (*Nuestro* petróleo). The documentary juxtaposes the man's accounts with that of a financially ruined fisherman in *Pozo negro*, "La pesca era un trabajo que daba trabajo y hasta divertía, pero desde hace un año estas aguas se arruinaron […] ahora ni lanchas quedan" (*Pozo negro*). The man in *Pozo negro* further explains his thwarted attempts to organize other fishermen to explain their plight to local authorities and to potentially negotiate with oil companies. These efforts resulted in the group being labeled terrorists. *Nuestro petróleo* does not provide additional information that could help establish a sequential narrative filling in the gaps between the 1960s and the diegetic present (What happened to those earlier fishermen? Did they find other forms of work? Did they leave Cabimas? Are there any fishermen today?). Instead, the documentary presents a series of testimonies from people unable to find

stable work in 1967 and 2004: protestors demanding that PDVSA hire local people, juxtaposed with a group of men explaining that transnational companies no longer hire locals; a 1967 man explaining how, after years of looking for work, he had no alternative but to become a panhandler, is followed by a woman thirty-three years later, expressing her complete hopelessness, as she explains that the only way to find work is through bribery.[102] The film also juxtaposes archival images of Cabimas' opulence in the mid-twentieth century—beautiful houses, automobiles, swimming pools—with its 2004 version. What is particularly notable about these images is that the distinctions between past and present are clear: automobiles, fashion, technology have changed drastically, pointing to the ways in which speed and historical change differ for those left out of the mainstream economy, and those with access to a cyclical consumer culture.

In its explicit use of materials from a film archive (which includes *Pozo negro*, a difficult film to find outside the archive until its digitalization in 2015), *Nuestro petróleo* can be understood as a documentary at least partially about the history of oil exploitation in Venezuela and of its representation on film. However, I would hesitate to call the film's depiction of the past historical. As film scholar Jeffrey Skoller explains, traditional historical narratives rely on clear distinctions between past and present:

> Such divided narrative constructions produce specific boundaries that often close off past from present, limiting the complex ways different moments of time commingle, inscribe, and inflect each other. As de Certeau suggests, the imposed break between past and

[102] "Esperanza ninguna tenemos, porque mire no tenemos ninguna porque mire como está aquí. Ya ni hallamos con quien hablar. Ni que se hable con gobernador, con alcalde, con nadie. Igualito lo mismo, por aquí no hay nada, nada. Esto es horrible. Así como usted lo ve […] Si no tenemos 500.000 [bolívares] o tenemos 1.000.000 en la mano no nos dan ni siquiera un trabajo de limpiar en PDVSA." (*Nuestro petróleo*)

present, the hallmark of traditional historical forms, hides the process of its own production. (xv)[103]

Although *Nuestro petróleo* does not reach the level of formal experimentation of a film like Jacobo Penzo's *Cabimas: donde todo comenzó* (2012) (which aligns more closely to Skoller's overall study of avant garde cinema), the documentary nonetheless opens a space to think about oil's role in twentieth and twenty-first century Venezuela, without relying on discrete periods.[104] As we discussed in chapter 2, traditional periodization in Venezuela relies almost entirely on the presidential figure. This form of periodization inevitably has a profound impact on how time and *change* are imagined.[105] In this regard, we should remember the purpose served by these types of periodization: they establish a conceptual, sequential order, where changes in culture and society can be imagined, and pinned down to a logical source. In the context of an oil-soaked magical state, this source is more often than not, a presidential regime. Such a form of periodization

[103] Skoller is specifically referring to the following passage from Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies*: "Even though [traditional] historiography postulates a continuity (a genealogy), a solidarity (an affliction), and a complicity (a sympathy) between its agents and its objects, it nevertheless distinguishes a *difference* between them, a difference established out of a will to objectivity. The space it organizes is divided and hierarchical" (4, q. in Skoller, xv).

[104] In the extended version of this chapter, I look more closely at *Cabimas: donde todo comenzó,* as another reflection on the temporality of oil extraction.

[105] My own struggles writing this chapter attest to this fact: I found myself continually typing and deleting "the Chávez years," as a way to talk about the first decade of the 21st century in Venezuela. This particular temporal label would likely be understood by my implied readers, and in more than one way would more concisely convey what I mean than the alternatives I do use—"the Bolivarian Revolution," "during the Chávez regime," "the 2000s," "the first decade of the twenty-first century." Yet, I purged "the Chávez years" from my writing precisely because it enacts the conceptual convergence of the presidential figure with time and change—thereby veiling the underground "narrative lubricant" that propels most political and economic narratives forward (see chapter 3). On some level then, much of the dissertation could be understood as a meditation on why there was no such thing as "the Chávez years," just as there is no "real, flesh and blood Venezuela." These are oil-fueled entities as real as "the house that oil built" Shell sold in the 1930s and 1940s.

inhibits any consideration of continuity, trans-temporal connections, or processes of becoming outside or tangential to the nation-state (or most of existence).[106]

As a documentary made with the intent of acting as a source of "counter-information" within Venezuela (Uzcátegui, 27), it makes sense that *Nuestro petróleo* challenges the very temporal framework that underpins the spectacularity of the magical state on the one hand, and the inconspicuousness of the oil enclave on the other. The documentary depicts how traditional periodization falters in the *no place* of extraction by intentionally pointing to uncanny continuities through visual juxtapositions. Yet, the temporality of the magical state also falters through unintentional echoes: not only does *Nuestro petróleo* resemble the novels of the oil encounter of earlier generations, but as we have already discussed, the film's dismissal by sanctioned cultural institutions enacted another repetition. In fact, I personally like to think of *Nuestro petróleo* as an unwitting recreation of Gabriel Bracho Montiel's unfinished novel *Guachimanes*. Like the earlier text, *Nuestro petróleo*'s creators initially wished to document the social renewal made possible by a new regime. Yet, upon seeing life in Cabimas from up-close, revulsion sets in, "¡Debo irme lejos—pienso—lejos de todo esto tan feo, tan desolador, tan insultante!" (199) said *Guachimanes'* unnamed narrator in the 1930s. "Me quedé absolutamente asombrado frente a lo que vi en términos de miseria […] Absolutamente impresionante" (Uzcátegui 27), explained Gabriele Muzio in 2005. These initial reactions to the *no place* of extraction led to the creation of the two texts, both of which conclude that little will change so

[106] Speaking of the conceptual limitations of traditional periodization, Rita Felski asserts: "Period, in other words, serves much the same function as nation; we assign texts and objects to a simple moment of origin in much the same way as we tether them to a single place of birth. Both authority, and last court of appeals" (579). Such a conceptual move often fails to take into account the ways in which texts resonate and exist in time.

long the pumpjacks "at the foot of the derricks [continue] sinking their levers indifferently" (Bracho Montiel, 86).[107]

Given this project's concern with unconventional temporalities, it is particularly interesting to remember that although written seventy-years before the filming of *Nuestro petróleo*, *Guachimanes* was first published in Venezuela *after* the film, in 2010. At first glance, the book's publication by the state publishing house *El perro y la rana* contradicts my analysis, as a state-sanctioned cultural institution actively salvages a previously repressed narrative of the oil encounter. However, we must keep in mind that most of *Guachimanes* takes place while Juan Vicente Gómez's was in power—arguably the most reviled dictator in contemporary Venezuelans. Consequently, *Guachimanes* is continually read as a text *about* its own historical period, which in the Venezuelan context translates to "the Gómez years." My own analysis of the text's complex temporality is, to the best of my knowledge, the only published instance of such a reading. The temporal distance separating *Guachimanes* from 21st century Venezuela creates the much needed *away* of historical closure: we, living today, need not concern ourselves with the world depicted in the text, because it has been safely buried. [108] Never mind that through oil extraction we are continually seeing the exhumation of the long dead (*the buried corpse of the sun,* says Negarestani) and their mechanical reanimation. Thus, although *Guachimanes* and *Nuestro petróleo* are exceedingly similar texts, the former can be accepted by state institutions, while the later is attacked for reasons that are, in essence, temporal. Consequently, it is only a

[107] Gabriele Muzio similarly argues that he does not see a possibility for change so long Venezuela continues depending on an extractive economy: "Si todos seguimos pensando que el modelo que siempre rigió en Venezuela, que es un modelo de economía extractiva debe ser lo que rige hoy, entonces yo no veo el cambio" (Uzcátegui, "Entrevista").

[108] Such a reading is, of course, inattentive to the text's own concern with *unburying* the dead—and with the fact that oil extractions is itself an act of exhumation.

matter of time for *Nuestro petróleo* to become a safe relic, a depiction of a long-gone past. This point should remind us that the problem with the narratives of the oil encounter might have less to do with what the texts try to do, than with a method of reading and historicizing texts. From this vantage point, we can better understand why the story of the *no place* of extraction keeps being retold. Its effectiveness is only momentarily: when we are unable to appeal to the *away* of historical distance.

Delayed Symptoms and Silent Catastrophes

Moving away from Cabimas, *Nuestro petróleo* presents stories from smaller localities devastated by the side effects of living near petrochemical plants.[109] A gas compression plant was built in the 1990s next to an informal housing settlement in Lagunillas—the inland section of the long-gone Lagunillas del Agua, now a suburb of Cabimas. Local authorities at first warned residents of the dangers of living near the plant, but were reassured that they would be relocated at the plant's expense. At the time of the documentary, this promised relocation seemed unlikely, as local authorities had stopped paying attention to the neighborhood's complaints. Standing in front of their zinc houses, many of the settlement's residents described how the plant had affected their lives. The constant smell of gas was their main concern, as many began suffering from persistent headaches and light-headedness. A man explains how, for those who cannot leave, sealing themselves inside their house is the only way to lessen the effects of the smell. Yet, as Erika Chirino's story reveals, not all the effects of living near the plant are immediately perceived, or alleviated by a house's protective walls. Her grievances against the plan started when her crops died off, and never grew again. She additionally complains about spills, which are visible from her property, "approximately every three months" (my translation). She is most

[109] The documentary additionally looks into the coal industry in the Perijá Range, but for the sake of time and space I will focus on its depiction of refineries and gas compression plants.

alarmed, however, by the plant's effects on her own body. The first sign of trouble was a lost pregnancy due to anencephaly, which according to her doctor was caused by her constant exposure to pollutants expelled by the plant. The doctor, however, was unwilling to write an accurate report on her case, out of fear of the oil industry: "el informe fue totalmente cambiado. Lo que yo les dije, el doctor no lo escribió por temor […] de afectar a PDVSA, porque ellos dicen que enfrentarse a PDVSA, es como… el monstruo grande de la pantalla gigante, por decirlo así" (*Nuestro petróleo*). Unable to move from her house, Erika opted for sterilization, in order to prevent another aborted pregnancy. Whatever other threats the plant poses to her health in the long-term remain unknown to her.

The proximity of Erika Chirino's house to the plant allows us to establish a reasonable causal connection between her failed pregnancy and the nearby pollutants. So does the fact that she lived there before the plant was built, and therefore was able to see the plant's effects on her now-dead crops. Erika's situation, however, is rare, given that the effects of life near petrochemical plants are exceptionally difficult to determine, let alone "prove." As Lawrence Buell explains, "it is notoriously hard to demonstrate environmental causation of illness, given the limitation of preexisting research bases not to mention the multiplicity of possible causal agents" (660).[110] Indeed, *Nuestro petróleo* does not—and *could not*—provide evidence that would convincing tell an empirically precise story of how the oil and petrochemical industries impact environmental and public health on the eastern coast of Lake Maracaibo. Neither can I fully address the issue in this dissertation because I have no access to such information. The curtailing of research on environmental impact (especially in relation small communities in poor

[110] Chauncey Starr's article "Risk Management, Assessment, and Acceptability" further explains, "*science cannot prove safety, only the degree of existing harm.* Thus, new technologies cannot be proven safe before use" (65).

countries) is not only a common industrial practice, but is particularly vicious and litigious when it comes to oil. Consequently, information about oil's environmental impact in the eastern shores of Lake Maracaibo is remarkably difficult to find. However, as a documentary whose title alludes to oil and stories, *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* collects a wide range of testimonies, which present an alarming if inevitably imprecise picture of a silent, slow-moving catastrophe.

Along with testimonies from those affected, the documentary presents interviews with experts from a wide range of fields (medical doctors, sociologists, social workers, public health researchers) who provide diverse of the effects of pollution on the region. These specialists also speak about the absence of empirical data in their own fields which would help them support their claims. For instance, Erika Chirino's story is corroborated through a series of interviews with obstetricians and gynecologists at hospitals in Cabimas and Ciudad Ojeda. Dr. Jairo García estimates that his hospital sees cases like Erika's approximately three times a month. He states that local doctors strongly believe that pollutants from spills and gas flares are the chief cause for the region's exceedingly high rate of anencephaly among other congenital disorders. There is, however, neither definite proof, nor a way to acquire it. Tania Mesa, chief executive of Cabimas Hospital explains that the oil industry and local government have actively opposed prior attempts to research pollution's effect on public health because "This is an area that lives off oil"—a curious

Figure 4.2 Erika Chirinos describes life near a gas compression plant from her garden. Note the short distance to the plant in the background. Image from *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (2004).

word choice in a conversation about oil's deadly effect on incipient life.[111]

Prior attempts to represent life at oil enclaves delved into oil's effects on human bodies through accounts of specific, often spectacular events. For instance in the novels of the oil encounter explosions burn local citizens or cover them in oil; workers are maimed by machinery, or killed by *guachimanes* if they threatened *La Compañía.* That is to say, the oil industry appeared to harm human bodies in tangible ways. In contrast, *Nuestro petróleo* tells a related but nevertheless distinct story of invisible, delayed ecological damage, or what Rob Nixon calls *slow violence*. As Nixon points out, "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and eruptive into instant sensational visibility " (Nixon, 2)—precisely the kind of violence in the novel of the oil encounter. Slow violence, however, refers to relatively invisible, attritional damage, which cannot be measured by institutional forms of time-keeping—be they the periodization of the nation-state, modernity's "clock-time" (Adam), or a spectacle-driven corporate media (the central concern in Nixon's study). The ecological harm of resource extraction and pollution fall squarely into the realm of slow violence, given that their impact is often displaced in time and space. In other words, time proves to be "such a pertinent focus for environmental issues" because

> We are dealing with phenomena where the impacts of actions work invisibly below the surface until they materialize as symptoms—some time, somewhere. At the point of materialization, however, they are no longer traceable with certainty to original sources […] More often than not, they are recognizable only once they have been identified

[111] "Entiendo que el médico que [hizo estudios] fue… no digamos intimidado, pero sí, no hubo forma que sus estudios prosperaran y se les diera la publicación pertinente, debido a que es una zona [donde] se vive es del petróleo, y no era un interés primordial para la empresa, ni para los factores que aquí llevan vida pública, que eso llevara a mayores consecuencias".

through the mediating loop of science and technology. (Adam 9).[112]

Notably, time is also crucial factor determining why the slow violence of ecological harm emerges in *Nuestro petróleo* and not in earlier texts: not enough delayed symptoms had surfaced during the first decades of oil exploitation for them to become a perceivable trait in oil enclaves.[113] We thus run into the limitations of trying to grant visibility to the *no place* of extraction: the most devastating effects of life near the oil industry might not be perceived by the senses.[114]

The established origin story of Venezuelan oil exemplifies how the symbolic markings that would traditionally determine the beginning and end of an event fall short in the face of ecological damage. The explosion of *Barroso II* in 1922 is generally used as a narrative tool signaling the birth of *la Venezuela petrolera*. Case and point: this dissertation, and the texts under analysis in this chapter (from *Guachimanes* and *Pozo muerto* to *Nuestro petróleo*) all refer to *Barroso II* as a massive explosion in Cabimas, which thrust a gigantic jet of oil into the air. After the nine days it took to contain the jet, Cabimas was covered in crude oil. While he event is used to signal the beginning of oil exploitation at a large scale in the region, no attention is ever paid to *Barroso II* as an ecological disaster—or as the harbinger of northwest Venezuela's silent ecological catastrophe. To put the event in perspective, the environmental group *Red Alerta*

[112] Adam further clarifies, "While space is associate with visible matter and sense data, time is the invisible 'other', that which works outside and beyond the reach of our senses" (9).

[113] This is not to say that these symptoms had remained unnoticed. Concerns over oil's ecological impact had been voiced as early as the late 1920s. For instance the newspaper *Mundial* published an editorial titled "Our Lake is Being Lost," decrying pollution in Lake Maracaibo in 1927 (Kozloff, 283). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the communist publication *Aquí está* also reported on oil's impact on farming and livestock, as reported by farmers in Zulia State. However, as Nikolas Kolzoff points out, accounts of ecological damage tended to remain secondary to accounts of corruption and labor issues.

[114] Naturally, the difficulty of narrating slow violence is not a unique trait or failure of the narratives of the oil encounter. Indeed, Rob Nixon points out that one of the key features of slow violence and its delayed effects is the difficulty of their narrativization

Petrolera/*Orinoco Oil Watch* pointed out that the approximate 900,000 barrels dumped into the air, land, and nearby waterways during those nine days, exceeds the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska by four times, and the Prestige spill in Spain by three times (Red Alerta). *Barroso II* as a narrative tool for historicizing Venezuelan oil has been thoroughly divested from ecological implications. Thus, *Barroso II* is compared to spills that have been narrativized as *ecological disasters*, as a way of borrowing the two other spills' ecological associations However, if we establish two histories for which *Barroso II* could serve as a heuristic origin—the history of the oil industry in Venezuela, and the related history of industrial pollution—we find that the latter is severely lacking in narratives and visible evidence. Indeed, in the history of Venezuelan oil, pictures and accounts of *Barroso II* abound, and they all agree that the particular event ended on December 23, 1922. However, when did the ecological impact of the explosion end? What area did it cover? How were human and non-human bodies affected by direct contact with crude oil or by crude oil's presence in soil and waterways? What happened to the bodies consuming foodstuffs whose soil or water had been polluted by the remains of the explosion? We will never have answers to these questions, in part because, at the time, there was no reason to observe, to probe, or to narrate any of this. The reasons might be there now, but the habitual ways of thinking about oil, ecology, society, and time curtail the emergence of robust ecological movements in Venezuela.

Oblivion: What Remains of El Hornito

Ecological crises emerging as a series of symptoms over time are seldom acknowledged as real by their potential culprits. Little weight is given to personal and even collective accounts of ecological injury, due in part to their inevitable imprecision. Yet, as *Nuestro petróleo* highlights, imprecise stories of personal injury are at times the only sign that something is wrong, in

particular in situations where scientific data and physical evidence are actively sabotaged. One buried story of ecological disaster is that of the former town of El Hornito. An unidentified cameraperson and scholar Jorge Hinestroza tour the remains of the town—an empty field with a road running through it. We learn of the town's history through the narration of Hinestroza (who researched the town's socio-ecological issues in the 1990s) and through an interview with Nelly Chiquito, chair of El Hornito's Neighbor's Association.[115] A former fishing town, El Hornito was polluted into oblivion by the complex of petrochemical plants Ana María Campos de El Tablazo (commonly referred to as "El Tablazo"), owned by the state company Pequiven (Petroquímicas de Venezuela).[116] Construction of the complex took place between 1968 and 1974, requiring the expropriation and clearing of over one thousand acres from the town. Included in the expropriated lands was El Hornito's access to Lake Maracaibo, severely crippling the town's economic activity. The remainder of the town, however, was left intact, which means that its inhabitants co-existed with a petrochemical plant in their midst. [117] Over a matter of a few years, cases of skin and respiratory disorders, congenital malformations, and lung and liver

[115] Along with these two accounts, *Nuestro petróleo* shows footage from a 1991 video, showing glaring smoke emanating from the *El Tablazo* plant, townspeople walking around with their noses covered, as well as images of children with visible disfigurements (unlike the documentary's prior use of archival images, this particular footage remains unidentified).

[116] Pequiven acquired its current name after nationalization in 1977 (named Instituto Venezolano de Petroquímica beforehand). The company was a PDVSA affiliate from 1977 until 2006, at which point it became an independent corporation attached to the *Ministerio del Poder Popular de la Energía y Petróleo*, or the Popular Power Ministry of Energy and Oil. Although under the Chávez regime, all ministries acquired the moniker of "Poder Popular," there is something sinister about the ministry in charge of energy and oil—secretive, toxic, inherently undemocratic enterprises—bearing such a name. Given this mentioned secrecy, there is little available information about any change in concrete environmental policies and practices since this change in Pequiven's structure. If the history of the oil industry (and Venezuela's current economic crisis) can tell us anything, however, is that little has changed on this front.

[117] According to the Human Rights Organization PROVEA, the plant released ammonia, chlorine, and ammonia gases into the atmosphere, as well as dumping mercury into the waterways (Bolívar & Herrero).

cancer sky-rocketed, ultimately reducing the town's life expectancy to approximately fifty years (*Nuestro petróleo,* Bolívar & Herrero). Within a decade of the plant's construction, species of plants and animals had disappeared from the area, a loss that further hurt the town's economic subsistence.[118] In 1985 El Hornito's Neighbor's Association began to organize a campaign demanding that Pequiven and the local government address El Hornito's acute health and environmental crises. Their demands ranged from relocation and compensation, to the allocation of resources for thorough medical and toxicological research on the region's lands and people.[119] Since they had no evidence to conclusively prove a local crisis, other than a cluster of medical diagnoses and several personal testimonies, their demands were not simply disregarded, but actively mocked. Nelly Ciquito explains Pequiven's tactical use of research to delegitimize the townspeople, "En todo momento la Universidad del Zulia preparaba las investigaciones [y] los argumentos científicos para que Pequiven dijera que nosotros no teníamos nada, que nosotros éramos una cuerda de sucios, que no nos bañábamos y por eso estábamos enfermos" (*Nuestro petróleo*). Hinestroza further explains that Pequiven continually claimed that El Hornito's problems stemmed from their own poor hygiene: "[decían] que a ellos les gustaba quemar la basura en los patios de las casas y que la petroquímica no causaba mayor problema" (*Nuestro petróleo*). By positing that El Hornito's ecological crisis arose from the habits of a group of people—a group understood to be poor, provincial, and uneducated—Pequiven keeps the issue

[118] Among the animals cited by the PROVEA report, were several species of birds and iguanas, as well as crops of chirimoyas, yucca, and lemons (Bolívar & Herrero).

[119] Over the years, the community agreed on the following set of demands:

1. A dignified relocation process, abiding to a project designed through the town's communal participation.
2. Providing medical and toxicological studies to the entire town.
3. Medical treatment to all the sick and injured.
4. Compensation for all injuries caused by pollution, and for the loss of land, and a way of life that goes as far back as 200 years in El Hornito (Bolívar & Herrero).

confined to a set of conceptual and political boundaries: instead of dealing with industrial pollution, which poses a potential danger to anyone, the issue is depicted as the premodern beliefs and practices of a group of people unwilling to cohabitate with a crucial piece of Venezuelan modernity.

Apart from a strategy to veil pollution, Pequiven's concern with cleanliness makes particular sense when we take into account the products manufactured in El Tablazo, as they relate to the oil industry's long-standing concern with an aesthetics of purity. El Tablazo specializes in the production of fertilizers, chemicals for industrial use, and plastic resins. Thus, in El Tablazo crude petroleum is turned a wide range of objects populating everyday life. In other words, El Tablazo is one of sites that make possible the "miracles of petroleum" depicted in the documentary *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp,* analyzed in chapter three. In the documentary the mid-century suburban house epitomizes oil's miracles: impeccable and comfortable, every item in the house—from its insulation, to the items consumed during a family breakfast, or adorning a beautiful woman—emerged from an oil scientist's laboratory. Although the documentary aims to educate the viewer about oil's role in the modern the world, it fails to address extraction, processing, transportation, and disposal of oil and its byproducts. Thus, the documentary presents oil as the alchemist's philosopher's stone, allowing the final human conquest over temporal and material limits: nature's unpredictable rhythms or the planet's finitude no longer pose a challenge to production, allowing oil scientists to create a new world of wholesome comfort.

Despite (although truly, because of) its proximity to a place whence "the miracles of oil" emerge, El Hornito is what is left out in the world of *Oil for Aladin's Lamp*: an unseen site slowly absorbing the material impact of someone else's comforts. We can further think of Pequiven's characterization of El Hornito, as the foil—the sinister *other*—to "the home that oil

built" advertised by Shell Oil in previous generations: an inconsequential set of homes whose inhabitants fail to partake in petromodernity's comforts, as they allegedly fail to keep the necessary distance between the home and its waste. Unsurprisingly, El Hornito's crisis received no official acknowledgement until an explosion in February 1990 exposed El Tablazo's failure to comply with safety and environmental standards (Bolívar & Herrero). Within a month of the explosion, Pequiven was forced by local authorities to agree to El Hornito's relocation.

Thus far the history of El Hornito highlights how state and corporate institutions more easily respond to punctual occurrences—a single explosion—than to threats to life emerging over time. After all, a single explosion seemed to swiftly accomplish what a five-year local campaign had been unable to do. Nevertheless, Pequiven continued to stall El Hornito's relocation for five additional years by reiterating that no scientific study had conclusively proven El Tablazo as the culprit of the town's public health crisis. Nevertheless, the company's appeal to a need for greater knowledge was short-lived. Although Pequiven eventually acquiesced to the town's relocation, it refused to carry out court-ordered medical and toxicological exams. Once again, the townspeople found themselves in the same quandary: unable to prove that anything happened in El Hornito. Even the evidence of El Hornito's existence was removed, as Pequiven demolished the town after its relocation. Walking around the empty field while filming *Nuestro petróleo*, Hinestroza explains, "Después de que la gente terminó de reubicarse, Pequiven se aseguró de que aquí no quedara ningún vestigio de la vieja población de El Hornito y arrasaron *totalmente* con todo el vestigio de las casas. No dejaron piedra sobre piedra, ni rastros de las edificaciones" (emphasis in original). Notably, while filming Hinestroza's declarations, a security guard (a *guachimán*) yells from across a wire fence to tell them that they are not allowed film in the area. Sometime later more *guachimanes* arrive in a truck to ask the filming crew to

leave the premises, as they are encroaching on Pequiven's property.

By relocating the town, destroying its remains, and refusing to carry out research that could prove otherwise, Pequiven, and the Venezuelan government, can officially state that El Hornito's crisis was solved in 1995. Yet, as a documentary concerned with continuities and reverberations—in other words, with slow violence—*Nuestro petróleo's* strategy for eschewing closure is a simple one: allowing Nelly Chiquito to describe life in the new El Hornito, the death of the chronically ill, and people's continuous attempts to receive compensation from Pequiven. "Los horniteros mueren ahorita en la puerta de Pequiven. Se la pasan en la puerta de Pequiven buscando un reporte. Viven en la alcaldía buscando un reporte." These individuals continue seeking recognition as sufferers from an event for which there no longer is evidence other than people's testimonies and medical diagnoses—the very evidence that was rejected as illegitimate from the beginning.

Conclusion

At first glance, Erika Chirino's health problems or El Hornito's demise are stories that fit well within the narratives that legitimized the rise of Hugo Chávez's political career and regime. These are stories of a petrostate and its oil company reaching such levels of corruption and inertia that they allowed the slow poisoning of entire communities. Both stories could easily be turned into narratives of why a political revolution was needed. Indeed, the documentary as a whole primarily depicts processes and events that began before Chávez was elected president. Why, then, does *ENcontrARTE* claim that the documentary presents, "unas conclusiones que señalan al gobierno en general y al Presidente Chávez en particular, como responsables de una serie de calamidades"? (Iacobelli, Grioni & Posani). Given that the documentary says relatively little about Chávez and *Chavismo,* it may seem strange for *ENcontrARTE*'s editors to read

Nuestro petróleo's critique of long-term, socio-environmental crises as an attack against a single presidential regime. Yet, this reaction to *Nuestro petróleo* exemplifies the long-standing tendency to reduce change (or its absence) to the presidential figure, as well the tendency's continuation through *Chavismo.* Put differently, *ENcontrARTE*'s reductive reading of *Nuestro petróleo* highlights how the magical state—now reborn as the Bolivarian Revolution—is expected to be antithetical to continuities. Venezuela, as Gisela Kozak Rovero reminds us, is "el país que siempre nace;" to imply otherwise is to attack a central tenant of Venezuelan nationalism. In this regard, it is important to remember that the Venezuelan magical state and the transnational oil network operate under similar assumptions: oil—deployed by industrial scientists creating new objects, or by the state as it conjures a new society—miraculously abolishes material and temporal limits. *Nuestro petróleo*, however, challenges the very notion of rebirth, not only through its exploration of life in Cabimas and its uncanny continuities, but also by depicting a country of chronic and terminal illnesses. Instead of the timeless *Tierra de Gracia* of Venezuelan nationalism, *Nuestro petróleo* shows a country of smoke stacks, dead fish and crops, undrinkable water, sick mothers and children. As we explored earlier in the project, transcendental visions of Nature, a common feature of nationalism, function as temporal anchors that allows the nation to be understood as grounded on a timeless essence: Nature is what must stay constant while the nation undergoes its rebirths. *Nuestro petróleo* flips this vision, as an inert petrostate is unable to break away from the very thing damaging that idealized natural beauty.

From a certain vantage point, *Nuestro petróleo* provided information that should have been neither new nor surprising in 2005: oil wealth tends to exist near abject poverty; refineries and gas compression plants pollute; oil companies and the state care little for the poor and their

environmental concerns. These things are known (as the *ENcontrARTE* piece points out), but like our mortality, they must be partially forgotten in order for life to go on as usual. As this project has explored, the integrity of the Venezuelan nation—be it as natural paradise, modern society, or nation working towards socialism—require exiling oil and its effects.

A nation that *lives off oil* must forget oil's origin in death and decomposition, its threat to the health and well-being of specific localities, and of course, its existential threat to the life we have known—life as it existed in the Holocene. However, it is also important to point out that today, while Venezuela feels the ruinous effects of a diminished oil income, there are multiple reasons to put off any consideration of ecology, be it within a local, national or planetary context. The rhythm of everyday life has been disrupted for most Venezuelans, many of whom spend much of their time in lines waiting and often failing to purchase food. Such disruptions to daily rhythms generate a sense of tangible, immediate emergency, which reasonably trumps concerns over slow threats to human and non-human bodies, let alone to water, soil, and the climate. Thus, while Venezuela's economic disaster tangibly poses a disruption to society, ecological disaster has yet to become part of "flesh and blood Venezuela." It is, nonetheless, *there*, bracketed, for a future generation to address—when it is no longer possible to believe that

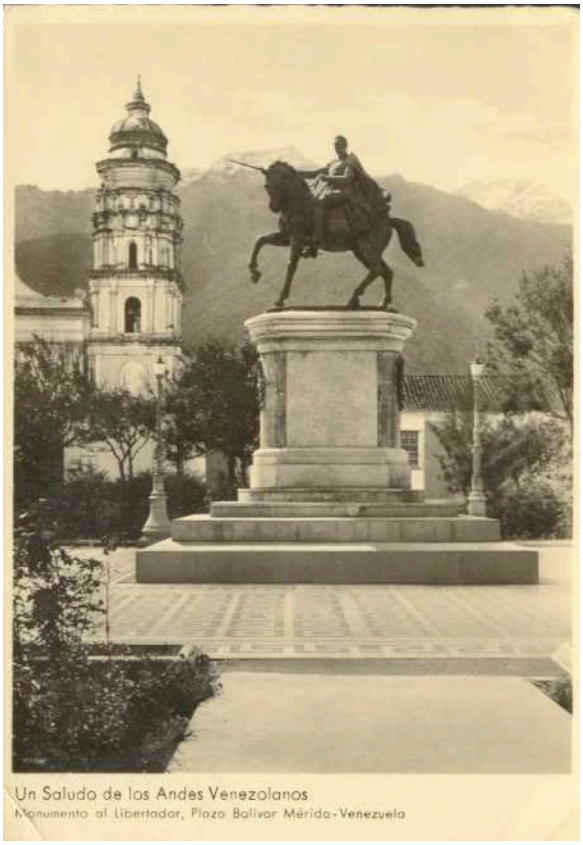

Figure 4.3 Postcard depicting a statue of Simón Bolívar, the Mérida cathedral, and the *Sierra Nevada* mountains covered in snow. Notice the mixture of symbols and temporalities: a preserved national symbol, the Catholic Church, and the seemingly eternal mountains (date unknown).

there ever was a "flesh and blood Venezuela" that existed outside, protected from, or in control of "Nature." However, the longer oil continues to be treated as the nation's abject body, and the longer its effects continue to be deposed to a spatial or temporal *away*, the more Venezuela's crises of the *oikos* threaten to become irreparable.

Lacking the proper economic and ecological expertise, I cannot propose a way to solve these crises of the *oikos*. Yet, my aim in this chapter and throughout the project is, like *Guachimanes'* sketches, to begin outlining an ecological critique of Venezuelan culture, a culture drowning in oil. At the heart of my critique thus far is the attempt to parse the conceptual habits that have allowed a vision of the social—be it in the form of the nation, the region, or even the home—to pretend that Venezuela and the Planet are not sinking in the Devil's Excrement. One simple and insufficient point of departure would be to begin telling and listening to the petronarratives that—like the repressed—keep returning: to allow these stories to unmake usual forms of periodization and contextualization.

Figure 4.4 The remains of Venezuela's eternal snow as of August, 2011. Only *Pico Bolívar* retains a sliver of permafrost.

The crucial issue at stake is thus not to find better texts about oil, but how to better perceive and articulate the intersection between daily, historical, and millennial processes at the heart of petromodernity. This means looking into unconventional places. In fact one of the most visible traces of oil's material footprint in Venezuela can be found in its tallest mountains, visible

from the city of Mérida. Few would think to look for a manifestation of oil in Mérida, as it is not oil-rich. The city's current location (moved from where it was first founded twenty kilometers away) was determined by the view: downtown was to have a full view of the tallest mountains in the region. From the city center five snow-covered peaks are visible, traditionally deemed as "las nieves eternas" or *the eternal snow*. From a human vantage point, the millennia needed for the peaks to take their current shape—and the millennia to come that will make them noticeably other—are essentially eternal. The mountains are a national and regional symbol that nevertheless cannot be reduced to the nation, as they exist at scales that precedes and exceeds it. Similarly, the disappearance of their snow is not an issue entirely caused by nor reducible to the tragedies of a single nation. In this disappearing permafrost we see the intersection of scales spanning millions of years and that of recorded history, spanning a few centuries. This intersection of temporalities and scales at the heart of oil's footprint can further be tangled in the much smaller scale of personal memories. Having grown up in Mérida, these mountains were a daily part of my childhood. I returned to the city in my early twenties after a long absence. The permafrost had noticeably receded. A symbol of eternity melted in less than a generation. What remains of it melts now.[120] This is a petronarrative about a place far removed from the subsoil—a place of that allegedly eternal, unchanging Nature constituting the nation. Yet, from a different (and horizontal) vantage point, the peaks show how one need not look too far from Cabimas's black wells (the *eternal snow of Venezuela* are only 203 kilometers away) to witness the melting of glaciers, one of the key events of the Anthropocene.

[120] The permafrost in the Venezuelan Sierra Nevada has decreased by 136.89 hectares in forty years, a loss of 76% of its prior area. Bolívar's Peak (Pico Bolívar), the highest mountain in Venezuela is expected to lose its permafrost by the 2020s (García, Romero, Toro, 90).

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