Black Waters. Spectrality and Pollution in Postdictatorial Fiction

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> Black water is opaque water, toxic or not. Black water is always violent, even when slow moving. Black water dominates, bewitches, subdues. Black water is alluring because it is disturbing and irreconcilable. Black water is violent because it is alluring, and because it is water.
> *Roni Horn, Saying Water*

1. Black Water

The colour blue in the denomination 'blue humanities' refers to the water that we see when we observe our planet from a certain distance. Blue is also the colour in which rivers, lakes, seas and oceans are usually depicted on maps, in clear contrast with the green or brown colour that indicates land. Aquatic environments, in which the human species not only interacts with water, but also with rocks, sand, mud, other animals, plants and all kinds of remnants of its own activities, are, however, rarely just blue. The art installation *Oír-Río* (2023–2024) by Máximo Corvalán-Pincheira reminds us of this fact. The reconstruction of a part of the Mapocho River in the National Art Museum of Santiago does not only call attention to the sound of the river that crosses the capital, as

the title of the work indicates, but also to its smell and, most of all, its dark brown colour speckled with lighter brown foam, which cannot be described in any other way than 'fecal'. In Spanish, the term *aguas negras*, blackwater, is used to refer to a kind of wastewater that contains human excrements.

2023–24, "Oír-Río", Installation Máximo Corvalán-Pincheira, 21m x 2m x 2m, Museo de Bellas Artes Santiago.

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This article focuses on murky, dark, non-transparent waters in the novel *Mapocho* (2002) by Nona Fernandez and the short story "Under the Black Water" ("Bajo el agua negra", 2015) by Mariana Enriquez, two texts which, like Corvalán's art installation, offer a critique of the Chilean and Argentinean postdictatorial society by connecting the eschatological dimension of the *aguas negras* not only to contemporary environmental problems but also to the violent history of both countries. The overall affect working through both texts is fear, which emerges from the darkness of the rivers in and around which the narratives are constructed.

The U.S. American artist Roni Horn begins her monologue *Saying Water*, a text she wrote about the River Thames in London, with the association between the black water of the river and the fear it provokes:

> In the waiting room of a doctor's office some years ago, I overheard a mother talking about how her kids were afraid of it. If they couldn't see into it, they wouldn't go into it. It's like being dismembered. When you wade into this dark fluid, a kind of milk without nurture, you disappear. (Horn n.p.)

The children that Horn talks about are afraid of losing themselves, or at least a part of their own body, in the darkness of the river. Everything inside it remains invisible, cut off from the rest of the world, and appears to be dead or non-existent. What Horn does not mention, however, is that the opposite can happen, too, and that it might be as frightening as the possibility of disappearance: (parts of) human bodies may resurface from the black water and blur the boundaries between absence and presence, between the dead and the living.

This blurring of the boundaries between the dead and the living is particularly relevant in the context of the violence of the last dictatorships in the Southern Cone, where thousands of bodies were thrown in the Río de la Plata, the Río Mapocho, the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, as part of the politics of disappearance.[1] Because of this connection with

1 Concerning the so-called death flights ('vuelos de la muerte') in Argentina, see, for instance: CLACSO and Crenzel. For Chile, see, for instance: Bonnefoy and the

the recent dictatorial past, water is for Fernando Reati (294) an iconic image that visualizes the memory of state terror: "[su] superficie aparentemente mansa oculta lo monstruoso, verdadera síntesis de lo siniestro en un país que mantuvo la apariencia de normalidad."[2] Regarding the Río de la Plata in particular, Estela Schindel summarizes the difficulty of connecting memory to the smooth but moving surface of the water as follows:

> As a space without place—a mass of water that never stays the same—the river challenges attempts to attach memories to it. The liquid territory of the Río de la Plata cannot provide the stability that the earth offers to the deceased who are buried. Its silent presence by the city, however, is itself a reminder of the crime; at once a limitless, unmarked grave and a device to hide the evidence. (Schindel 189)

The tension between absence and presence that Schindel connects here with the characteristics of the river itself determines the ghostly character of the river and defines as well the state of being of the *desaparecido*, whose absence is always almost physically present.[3] The mural by Claudio Pérez and Rodrigo Gómez next to the Bulnes bridge, where victims of the Chilean dictatorship were executed and thrown into the Mapocho, emphasizes this ghostliness, which is captured in the photographic portraits of those who disappeared on the mural. As Nelly Richard comments: "El dispositivo técnico de la imagen fotográfica habla de una ausencia de cuerpo (sustracción) a través de un efecto-de-presencia (resti-

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1991' Rettig Report (The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report).

2 Reati's study concerns specifically Argentinean state terror. Patricio Guzman's documentary *El botón de nácar* (2014), the collection of poems *INRI* (2004) by Raúl Zurita, and the site-specific art installation *Oír-Río* (2024) by Máximo Corvalán Pincheira, which treat the topic of the death flights in an artistic way, confirm that water also serves as an icon of state terror in Chile.

3 In this volume, Jörg Dünne eloquently connects the phenomenon of the absence of water in the Río de la Plata – the low water level that occasionally occurs due to the influence of certain winds – to the possibility of memory and, quoting Cristina Rivera Garza, to a form of 'desedimenting' writing and reading.

tución) que vibra temporalmente bajo el registro escindido de lo muerto-vivo" (*Crítica de la memoria* 263).

Following Silvana Mandolessi, the figure of the *desaparecido* can be understood as 'spectral' because it challenges "en primer lugar, la oposición ser/no ser, y, por extensión, las categorías de presencia/ausencia, pasado/presente, adentro/afuera" (194). An important part of postdictatorial literature, she argues, consists of 'spectral narratives', which focus on "la desaparición como técnica represiva paradigmática, como símbolo o emblema de la dictadura" (194).

Mandolessi's ideas illustrate the "spectral turn" (Weinstock; Blanco and Peeren 33–34) that the studies in cultural memory have taken, with the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* in 1993 as main catalyst. In the field of Latin American cultural studies, *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) by Avery Gordon has played an important role in situating within this framework of spectral criticism the phenomenon of those who disappeared during the dictatorships in the Southern Cone. In Gordon's words,

> A disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us. The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening. (63)

Mapocho by Fernández and "Under the Black Water" by Enriquez both foreground a "special way of knowing what has happened or is happening", or, what Derrida has called 'hauntology', through the fantastic figure of the revenant, the undead body that emerges from the dark water of, respectively, the Mapocho River in Santiago de Chile and the Riachuelo in Buenos Aires. The setting in these aquatic environments couples the haunting recognition that Gordon writes about with another form of knowing, which geographers Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg have called 'wet ontology'. According to Peters and Steinberg, the

material qualities of the sea, as something dynamic, deep, and composed of different materials, force us to recognize mobility, change, and interconnectedness as inherent features of the world we live in. Their idea of a 'wet ontology' destabilizes the static and limited categories that often characterize traditional geographical studies of place, landscape and territory, and forces us instead to pay more attention to "a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings" (248).

Although the flow of the Mapocho and the Riachuelo does not resemble the volume of the sea, especially in times of drought, the texts by Enriquez and Fernández do incorporate in some way the aquatic characteristics mentioned by Peters and Steinberg and adhere to their vision of a porous, interconnected world in constant movement. In what follows, I will explore how spectrality and water pollution are intertwined in both texts. I will argue that Fernández' and Enriquez' account of the black water responds to the ethical call Derrida launches in his *Specters of Marx*, namely, "to learn to live *with* ghosts" (Derrida 13).[4]

2. Mapocho

Central to the connection between both the spectral and the aquatic nature of the 'special way of knowing' that the texts by Enriquez and Fernández put to the fore is the concept of 'hauntological time consciousness' that Ian Baucom uses in his study on the literary history of the Black Atlantic (see Baucom 31, quoted by DeLoughrey 42; Ganguly 439). In the afterword of the 2018 edition of *Mapocho*, sixteen years after its first publication, Nona Fernández explicitly connects this idea of a traumatic living past with the water cycle. She explains that, while she was doing re-

4 As Derrida explains: "No justice […] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism" (xix).

search for the novel in the archives of the National Library in Santiago de Chile, she discovered that the Río Mapocho carried with it the violence that characterized the nation since immemorial times:

> […] descubrí un río que por vocación mostraba desde el origen un retrato doloroso, lo peor de nosotros mismos y lo peor de un tiempo sin tiempo, que circula enmarañado, reciclándose en sí mismo como lo hace el agua en su camino vital. Escurriéndose de la cordillera al mar, solidificándose como nieve, derritiéndose y fluyendo en el río, que se evapora, que se vuelve nube, lluvia, nieve, y otra vez río, y otra vez mar. (Fernández 234)
> […] I discovered a river whose calling it was to show from its origin a painful portrait, the worst of ourselves and the worst of a timeless time, which circulates entangled, recycling itself as water does in its vital path. Draining from the mountain range to the sea, solidifying as snow, melting and flowing into the river, which evaporates, which becomes cloud, rain, snow, and again river, and again sea.[5]

The circular temporality of water to which Fernández refers indicates that the change and mobility, which characterize Peters and Steinberg's understanding of a wet ontology, cannot at all be confused with the idea of progress but rather implies, paradoxically, a constant return of the similar—as Roni Horn puts it in *Saying water*: "The blackness and the water pass by, but they never go away."[6] By adopting this aquatic logic, Fernández' novel incorporates an important characteristic of the literature of the 'hijos', the literature written by the generation of Chileans who ex-

5 All translations of *Mapocho* are my own.

6 The relation between Derrida's definition of the specter and his idea of 'différance' can be useful to understand that what is at stake here is not a return of the same, but of the similar. The specter is to be thought in terms of deconstruction's thinking "as a non-present remainder at work in every text, entity, being or 'presence' which is "neither spiritually transcendent nor fully embodied, but which is instead, like the ghost, a sort of non-present being-there" (Wortham 197).

perienced childhood under the dictatorship, which can be defined as a narrative of return.[7]

Published in 2002, only a couple of years after the first Chilean novels of the 'hijos'—*En voz baja* (1996) by Alejandra Costamagna and *Memorias prematuras* (1999) by Rafael Gumucio—the polyphonic novel *Mapocho* follows the same narrative structure of a return home, which coincides with a quest for filling in the gaps in the stories that have been told by the generation of the parents. The novel's main narrators and protagonists, La Rucia and her brother El Indio, return to Chile after spending their childhood in exile. They seek to understand why they had to leave for Europe as children and what happened to their father, Fausto. It turns out that their father is not dead, as their mother had always told them, and that he, in his function as the official historian of the regime, was an accomplice of the dictatorship.

What distinguishes *Mapocho* the most from the other first narratives of the 'hijos' is that it takes a fantastic stance from the first page on. The novel opens with a first-person narrator who sees and feels her own corpse floating while she stands on a bridge that crosses the dirty river of the capital:

> Ahora mi cuerpo flota sobre el oleaje del Mapocho, mi ataúd navega entre aguas sucias haciéndoles el quite a los neumáticos, a las ramas, avanza lentamente cruzando la ciudad completa.
> […] Es mentira que los muertos no sienten. Yo podría enumerar lo que esta carne en descomposición sigue percibiendo. La humedad de esta madera, el olor nauseabundo de las aguas, el ruido de las micros, de los autos, el gusto dulce de la sangre que llega hasta mis labios. Desde aquí puedo verme allá arriba, en uno de los puentes que atraviesan el río. Soy yo. (Fernández 13)

7 In the literature of the 'hijos', the events during the dictatorship are told from the perspective of a child, or an adult narrator revisits his or her childhood, which is often accompanied by a return to the family home. See, for instance, the title of Alejandro Zambra's paradigmatic novel *Formas de volver a casa* (2011).

> Now my body floats on the waves of the Mapocho, my coffin navigates through dirty waters, passing the tires, the branches, it advances slowly, crossing the entire city.
> [...] It is a lie that the dead do not feel. I could enumerate what this decomposing flesh continues to perceive. The humidity of this wood, the nauseating smell of the water, the noise of the buses, of the cars, the sweet taste of the blood that reaches my lips. From here I can see myself up there, on one of the bridges that cross the river. It is me.

With these opening lines, *Mapocho* not only joins the tradition of Latin American narratives told from the perspective of a dying or dead person (María Luisa Bombal's *La amortajada*, quoted in the epigraph of the novel, is an important reference). It also offers a spectral narrative that stands in sharp contrast with the culture of amnesia that characterized Chile in the 1990s and early 2000s. In this context, it is worth noting that the iceberg, extracted from the Antarctic seas and displayed prominently in the Chilean pavilion at the Expo '92 in Seville, has been interpreted, despite its 1000 years of existence, as a symbol of "whitewashing" of a country without memory (Richard, *Residuos y metáforas* 175).[8] In *Mapocho*, the skyscraper where Fausto lives and works on his history books, with its clean, slippery glass surface, serves as a double of this iceberg and as a counterpart to the moving river. Resha Cardone (9) writes: "While the skyscraper symbolizes the deliberate and violent truncation of Chilean memory, the Mapocho River, as depicted in the novel, works to expose the city's dirty reality."

The Mapocho River, in Fernández novel, provides a contact zone between the past and the present, the dead and the living. Historically, however, the river has had more the function of separating the dead from the living than that of connecting them. Since Colonial times,

8 In the light of our current environmental crisis, the act of violently capturing or extracting what has become a symbol of global warming (the melting iceberg) cannot only be read in terms of making tabula rasa of the dictatorial past. As Cardone (9) puts it, it is "an act of profound environmental violence that symbolically represented the role of the Global South in the free market model tested in Chile."

cemeteries have been constructed on the northern side of the river, to protect the "official city", on the southern side, the "enlightened Santiago" (Lizama 20) against possible health problems and the idea of death itself[9]. The General Cemetery of Santiago, one of the largest urban cemeteries in Latin America, was established there in 1821, shortly after Chile's independence, and illustrates Michel Foucault's idea of a "heterotopia" (1571–1578), "another place" that is outside of or separated from society, and that, at the same time, contains typical, essential features of the same society that excludes it. Fernández' black water brings death back to the city. The Mapocho River is a liminal space, where the living can die and where the dead can also come to life in a circular process, an eternal return.

Fernández' appeal to the connecting power of the Mapocho (the name comes from the Mapudungun *mapuchunco*, which means 'water that is lost in the earth') seems to contain a reference to religious beliefs of the Mapuche-Williche, rather than offering a Chilean version of the Styx. In Mapuche eschatology, rivers are considered as one of the routes through which the spirits travel to the afterlife (Moulian and Espinoza 212). They are reflected in the night sky, where the Milky Way—*Wenuleufu*, in Mapudungun, or 'the river from above'—welcomes temporarily these ancestral spirits before their return to the earth, where they are reincarnated in human or non-human life (Terra and di Girolano 16). The pollution of the river, to which I will return at the end of this subchapter, might block the mirroring effect of the water, prevent the convergence of topology and cosmology, and disturb this cyclical process. In other words, in this polluted environment, the spirits of the dead are condemned to keep haunting the living.

The siblings La Rucia and El Indio appear in the city as ghosts, together with all the other dead persons that their father, the historian Fausto, has excluded from his official History. These ghosts impersonate values and (ways of) life that were discarded during the dictatorship of

9 See Darrigrandi (449), also for a detailed account of the Mapocho River as a division between two kinds of city, the 'civilized' part in the south and the 'barbaric' part in the north.

Augusto Pinochet because they did not fit within the ideal of a white, homogeneous nation of which the heterosexual family was the cornerstone: the Mapuches who were beheaded during the conquest and founding of Santiago, the bodies of blacks, indigenous and 'mulattoes' who died during the construction of the Cal y Canto bridge over the Mapocho in the eighteenth century, the gays who disappeared under the dictatorial regime of Carlos Ibáñez at the beginning of the twentieth century and, finally, also the bodies that were floating in the Mapocho or found on the river banks during the dictatorship.

All these dead people, as well as different objects, such as a locomotive, a bridge, the family home of the narrators and an entire neighborhood, make their ghostly appearance in the novel. As Cardone (4–5) rightly observes, the haunting in Fernández' novel links the shared with the individual experience of "Chileans living during the transition and demonstrate[s] the repressed emotional need to confront past traumas festering in the collective consciousness." The ghosts in *Mapocho* show that the past traumas Cardone writes about are not limited to the seventeen years of dictatorship. The novel goes beyond the spectral narratives analyzed by Mandolessi, which focus primarily on the figure of the disappeared during the dictatorships in the Southern Cone, by situating this figure within an alternative, non-heroic and dark national history, from the colonial founding of Santiago to the post-dictatorial present.[10]

The darkness of the national history that Fernández constructs in her novel is reflected in the colour of the river. From the first page of the novel on, which describes how the undead body of the narrator emerges from the "dirty", "brown", "filthy", "fecal" water with its "nauseating smell" (Fernández 13), Fernández associates spectrality with the problem of water pollution. At the time she was writing her novel, the river crossing the capital was nothing more than an open sewer and a

10 See Vázquez and Rodríguez Valentín for a detailed analysis of the social imageries included in this alternative history.

dumpsite and the water quality was indeed deplorable.[11] Throughout *Mapocho*, she emphasizes the connection between spiritual and material waste, i.e. between the ghosts of the story and the garbage they engage with in the urban space, and implicitly points towards a common origin: the neoliberal regime that, following the advice of the so-called 'Chicago Boys', a group of Chilean economists educated in the United States, was installed in Chile during the dictatorship. It promoted consumerism and, as a consequence, the production of more waste.

As we have seen, Fernández frames this economic context, which keeps having a profound impact on the contemporary Chilean society, in a broader history of capitalism by retracing it firstly to the colonialism of the seventeenth century, and secondly to the ideals of progress of the young Latin American republic. By encompassing this rather large temporal and spatial scale, the novel transcends the focus on individual and national traumas related to the dictatorship in Chile. It provides a more general reflection on the global phenomenon of waste, without losing its anchorage in the Chilean reality.[12]

Like ghosts, waste always returns; it is impossible to get completely rid of the plastics, chemicals and heavy metals that pollute the water and reappear in sinister, ghostly ways in our food, in our clothes, in the air we breathe and eventually in our bodies as well. As Fernández writes at the end of *Mapocho*: "[…] la basura es rebelde y se cuela hacia afuera en forma de gas tóxico. Los vestigios de la mugre son tan peligrosos como

11 Since 2010, the Mapocho River stopped receiving wastewater and "está más limpio que nunca" (Guendelman n.p.). It is still among the 30 % of most contaminated rivers in the world. Moreover, a recent study showed that the Mapocho is one of the most drug-polluted rivers in the world, which might say something about the general health condition of the inhabitants of the capital and the way (mental) health problems are dealt with (Equipo Radio Pauta n.p.).

12 In this sense, *Mapocho* can be read as Anthropocene fiction. Surprisingly, despite Fernández´ emphasis on the phenomenon of waste in her novel, few studies have paid special attention to the ecological aspects of the novel. A recent article by Valerdi and Cid compares *Mapocho* and "Bajo el agua negra" as fluvial narratives that need to be read within the context of the Anthropocene. Their analysis, however, focuses again mostly on the topic of national memory.

ella. Pueden aparecer en cualquier momento, irrumpir cuando ya se les creía olvidados" (207–208) ("[…] garbage is rebellious and seeps out in the form of toxic gas. The remnants of dirt are as dangerous as the dirt itself. They can appear at any moment, erupt when they were thought to have been forgotten").

3. Riachuelo

The menacing power of garbage, its capacity to change forms and reappear unexpectedly, and, most of all, its "rebellious" (Fernández 207) nature, which reminds us of a human quality, are also the source of the fear around which Mariana Enriquez' short story "Under the Black Water" (2016) is constructed. The story focuses on Marina Pinat, a district attorney who investigates the disappearance of two teenagers who were forced by the police to 'swim' in the Riachuelo[13]. By locating the plot around this river in the southern part of Buenos Aires, Enriquez immediately draws attention to the connection between ecological and socioeconomic problems. The Riachuelo-Matanza is "el río más contaminado de Latinoamérica" (Arias n.p.) and according to Pure Earth's 2013 report, one of the 10 most polluted places in the world[14]. The protagonist of Enriquez's story attributes the river's toxicity to deliberate irresponsibility,

13 The story is based on a real case of police abuse: Ezequiel Demonty died in 2002 because he was forced by police officers to jump into the Riachuelo. In commemoration of the teenager, the Alsina Bridge was renamed to Ezequiel Demonty Bridge in 2014.

14 In 2007, the Integral Environmental Sanitation Plan for the Matanza Riachuelo Basin was approved, which includes, among other actions, the construction and expansion of the sewage system, the eviction and relocation of hundreds of families from villas 26 and 21–24, the conversion of land into parks and nature reserves, the inspection of polluting industrial establishments, and the implementation of an environmental monitoring and control system. Surface water quality in the Riachuelo remains 'stable' and showed a slight improvement around the Ezequiel Demonty bridge between 2020 and 2022 (from 'poor' to 'average') (see ACUMAR).

not only of the local authorities, but of the entire Argentine society: "Argentina había contaminado ese río que rodeaba la capital, que hubiese podido ser un paseo hermoso, casi sin necesidad, casi por gusto" (164–165) ("Argentina had taken the river winding around its capital, which could have made for a beautiful day trip, and polluted it almost arbitrarily, practically for the fun of it" (83)). This ecological cruelty is related to social negligence because there are several *villas* located on the riverbanks, amongst them Villa Moreno, where the story is set. As Marina observes, "[s]olo gente muy desesperada se iba a vivir ahí, al lado de esa fetidez peligrosa y deliberada" (165) ("Only truly desperate people went to live there, beside that dangerous and deliberate putrescence" (83)).

In the story, the body of one of the teenagers, who tried in vain to swim "entre la grasa negra" (157) ("through the black grease" (80)), appears near the Moreno Bridge, floating like another residue between the oil, pieces of plastic and heavy metals (Enriquez 157). Like the bodies that appear in the Mapocho in Fernández' novel, this boy emerges as a 'trashman' ('hombre-basura'), "desprovisto[s] de todo derecho o representación soberana, como así también, categorizado[s] como residuo[s], y, en consecuencia, 'desechado[s]' política, social, y económicamente" (Heffes 133–134), according to the terminology proposed by Gisela Heffes in *Políticas de la destrucción/Poéticas de la preservación. Apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en Latinoamérica*.[15]

As is the case for Fernández, Enriquez focuses on the feelings of repulsion and fear these beings are supposed to provoke in the higher classes. Both authors use a traditional figure of gothic literature, that of the revenant, to represent these "negative affects [that] 'stick' […]

15 Drawing on the theories of Giorgio Agamben and Zygmunt Bauman about human beings that are considered 'discarded' from a socio- and biopolitical point of view, Heffes analyzes the presence of the inhabitants of garbage dumps in Latin American novels and films. She sees the villa miseria as a contemporary reconfiguration of the dumpsite, where new forms of 'exception' are manifested. The description of the Riachuelo as a "gran tacho de basura" (Enriquez 157) ("great garbage can" (80)) allows us to follow the same logic and consider the Riachuelo as a double or mirror of Villa Moreno.

around unresolved collective issues, haunting presences and haunting absences", as Olivia Vázquez-Medina (293) affirms, referring to Sara Ahmed's formulation of sticky emotions. There is no explicit reference to the death flights in "Under the Black Water", but the political significance of disappearance is present as a ghost when rumors are spreading that the second teenager, who's body went missing, emerged from the water. His appearance causes fear and repulsion: "Emanuel López había emergido del Riachuelo, decía, la gente lo había visto caminar por los pasillos laberínticos de la villa, y algunos habían corrido muertos de miedo cuando se lo cruzaron. Decían que caminaba lento y que apestaba" (162) ("Emanuel López had come out of the Riachuelo, she said. People had seen him walking through the slum's labyrinthine alleys, and some of them had run away, scared to deat when their paths crossed his. They said he walked slowly, and he stank" (82)).

Besides evoking the sticky emotions of fear and repulsion for which the equally sticky water of the Riachuelo offers the ideal environment, Emanuel's return confronts Marina Pinat with an impossibility, that of swimming in or under the black water[16]. The attorney decides to go to the *villa* to see for herself what happened with the teenager's body. Before she enters the *villa*, she climbs the stairs of the Moreno bridge to look at the stagnant black river. This action seems to have no other function than that of highlighting the transition between the city proper and the slum, which, the moment Marina sets foot in it, reveals itself as a fantastic territory in which a terrible, impossible silence (166) reigns. As in *Mapocho*, the protagonist needs to step onto this bridge to reach the city of the death: "La villa del Puente Moreno […] ahora estaba tan muerta como el agua del Riachuelo" (167) ("The Moreno Bridge slum, however, was now as dead and silent as the water in the Riachuelo" (84)). In this moment, the story, which began as a crime story, turns into a horror tale. The aquatic environment of the Riachuelo functions in this way as a liminal space,

16 „[…] empezaron a hacer lo impensable: nadar bajo el agua negra" (Enriquez 171) ("[…] people started to do the unthinkable: they swam under the black water" (86)) points at the clash between possibility and impossibility that, according to David Roas (66), lies at the core of fantastic literature.

not only between neighborhoods, social classes and ontologies, but also between two literary modes. In the first mode, dry facts, logic reasoning, and order matter. In the second mode, these features are entirely useless.[17] Marina Pinat becomes gradually horrified when she realizes this, and, in accordance with the workings of the horror story, draws the reader with her into this feeling.[18]

Marina's last look at the black water is one amongst many announcements of the occult in the story. Viewed from a bridge, black water can provoke the sensation that something does exist there, beyond the limits

17 For an insight into the importance of liminal spaces in the work of Enriquez, see, for instance, Oltramonti and Díez Cobo, who interprets the presence of haunted houses in the light of the anthropological and ethnographic theories on rites of passage of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner (to which the author herself refers in her novel *Nuestra parte de noche*). Enriquez confirms in an interview: "[…] el Riachuelo, a polluted, ugly place that marks the border of city and suburbia and is also a symbol of corruption and greed because irresponsible industries contaminated it. Many of them are industries related to meat, and meat is a very Argentinian 'thing'. So the river is a metaphor but also a geographical border. And when I take that into literature, that border appears in the frontier between realism and the fantastic, that not-so-comfortable place where you recognize the setting and the words but reality dissolves into something sinister" (Rice n.p.).

18 Vázquez-Medina analyzes in detail how the conjunction of the character's and reader's feelings works in "Under the Black Water". Summarized, she explains that "our access to Marina's consciousness, thoughts, feelings and sensory experiences facilitates the phenomenon of empathetic perspective-taking that is central to the aesthetics of horror" (294–295). In *Mapocho*, horror does not affect the reader despite the use of typical characters and motifs of the tradition of horror literature. Fear is an essential affect that drives Fausto, who feels haunted by the ghosts of the past he left out of his official history, but since the main narrators and focalizers of the novel are the ghosts themselves, La Rucia and El Indio, the affect is not transmitted to the reader. As Contreras-Contreras (371) argues, the eschatological and monstrous dimension of Fernández' novel promotes an affective economy that goes against the "circuito afectivo del miedo en la historia capitalista ilustrada [y que] es representado a partir del discurso higienista, mediante la inclusión de la limpieza social como política pública de descarte de los cuerpos pero también como proceso de purificación de un lenguaje censurado."

of human perception and experience. Its darkness provokes the combination of fear and wonder that propels horror tales and to which the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" alludes in the following famous lines: "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before" (2). In her story, Enriquez pays homage to another icon of North-American gothic literature and admirer of Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, who frequently sought this mixture of terror and fascination, or in his own words, a "profound sense of dread" together with a "subtle attitude of awed listening" (*Supernatural Horror* n.p.) in aquatic environments.[19]

In "Dagon" (1917), for instance, Lovecraft imagines the existence of monstrous creatures, "damnably human in general outline despite webbed hands and feet, shockingly wide and flabby lips, glass, bulging eyes" (*The Whisperer* 6), who live in the depths of the ocean. In "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), the god Cthulu, who is represented in a bas-relief as a hybrid "of an octopus, a dragon and a human caricature" (*The Whisperer* 36), raises out of the sea. Enriquez echoes Lovecraft's description of these sea monsters, when she describes the "ugly" and "horrible" (see 168) physical appearance of the children who were born with deformities due to the pollution in Villa Moreno—their mouths without teeth (168/85), their extra arms (159/81), "los ojos ciegos y cerca de las sienes (159) ("eyes blind and set close to their temples" (81)), "los dedos tenían ventosas y eran delgados como colas de calamar" (168) ("the fingers had suckers and were thin like squid tails" (85)).

One of these children leads Marina to a church, the walls of which are covered with an incomprehensible inscription, an invocation of the aquatic deity Yog Sothoth, borrowed from Lovecraft's "The Case of Charles Dester Ward". Once they are inside the church, the child pronounces the enigmatic sentence "En su casa el muerto espera soñando" (169) ("In his house, the dead man waits dreaming" (86)), an adaptation of a phrase from an oral ritual in "The Call of Cthulhu" that worshippers

19 In an interview, Enriquez explains that "Under the Black Water" combines the denunciation of police violence in Argentina with "un homenaje a Lovecraft y sus mitos" (Navarro n.p.).

from the titular god repeat to invoke him: "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming" (*The Whisperer* 43). In Lovecraft's story, great Cthulhu finally wakes up, "slid[es] greasily" from his monolith grave "into the water and begins pursuing the sailors who woke him up with vast wave-raising strokes of cosmic potency" (59). Enriquez' story ending, in which a supernatural force seems to have resuscitated the dead water and turned the small river into a sea, might contain a reference to this maddening episode:

> [Marina] corrió, con el arma entre las manos, corrió rezando en voz baja como no hacía desde la infancia, corrió entre las casas precarias, por los pasillos laberínticos, buscando el terraplén, la orilla, tratando de ignorar que el agua negra parecía agitada, porque no podía estar agitada, porque esa agua no respiraba, el agua estaba muerta, no podía besar las orillas con olas, no podía agitarse con el viento, no podía tener esos remolinos ni la corriente ni la crecida, cómo era posible una crecida si el agua estaba estancada. Marina corrió hacia el puente y no miró atrás y se tapó los oídos con las manos ensangrentadas para bloquear el ruido de los tambores. (Enriquez 174)

> […] and only then did she start running away with her gun drawn. While she ran she prayed in a low voice like she hadn't done since she was a child. She ran between the precarious houses through labyrinthine alleys, searching for the embankment, the shore, trying to ignore the fact that the black water seemed agitated, because it couldn't be, because that water didn't breathe, the water was dead, it couldn't kiss the banks with waves, it couldn't have those eddies or the current or that swelling, how could there be a swelling when the water was stagnant? Marina ran toward the bridge and didn't look back and she covered her ears with her bloody hands to block the noise of the drums. (Enriquez 88)

As Vázquez-Medina (300) argues, the formal elements of these last lines "convey the quale of Marina's fear as well as soliciting it from the reader" and as such, meet the genre expectations Lovecraft set for the "weirdly horrible tale". Moreover, Marina's fear is the fear that permeates classic

gothic literature, namely, the fear provoked by the transgression of the boundaries between the dualities that structure modern Western thought. In this case, something that ought to be dead comes to life, something that is considered an inanimate 'thing' suddenly starts to have agency. Allison Mackey (281), who reads the story as an example of ecogothic fiction along Jane Bennett's vital materialism and Donna Haraway's ideas on interspecies relations, sees in this more-than-human agency a slight, ambiguous gesture of hope: "[…] la vida, de alguna forma, encuentra formas de seguir. […] El río muerto, pero (imposiblemente) vivo —y las entidades que de alguna manera aun sobreviven dentro de él— nos recuerdan la relación ontológica del animal humano con la tierra [y] los otros seres materiales".

4. From 'Oceanic Feeling' to Polluted-River Feeling

What all the explicit and implicit references to Lovecraft in "Under the Black Water", including its final sentences, have in common, is not only that they support the affective structure of the horror tale or that they contain a reflection on our relationship with 'nature', but, most of all, that they link the (polluted) aquatic environment with religion. It is no coincidence that Marina meets the exhausted priest of the *villa* for the first time when she investigates the cases of children born with malformations, or, as one of the doctors involved in her investigation calls it: "mutaciones" (159) ("mutations" (82)). Just as the children become mutants with amphibic features because they live near that extremely polluted river, the official Catholic religion in the *villa* mutates:

> Nadie iba a la iglesia […]. Quedaban pocos fieles, algunas mujeres viejas. La mayoría de los habitantes de la villa eran devotas de cultos afrobrasileños o tenían sus propias devociones, santos personales, San Jorge o San Expedito, y les levantaban pequeños altares en las esquinas. (159)

> No one came to church […]. There weren't many faithful left, just a few old women. Most of the slum's inhabitants were devotees of Afro-Brazilian cults, or they had adopted their own doctrines, worshipping personal saints like George or Expeditus, setting up shirnes to them on corners. (81)

When Marina returns to the *villa* to investigate the case of police abuse, the grotesque appearance of the priest, in a church profaned by pagan Lovecraftian inscriptions and a cow's head instead of an altar, confirms the sense of total religious decay: "El cura estaba demacrado y sucio, con la barba demasiado crecida y el pelo tan grasoso que parecía mojado, pero lo más impactante era que estaba borracho y el olor a alcohol le salía por los poros" (169) ("The priest was emaciated and dirty, his beard was overgrown and his hair was so greasy it looked wet. But the most startling thing was that he was drunk, and the stench of alcohol oozed from his pores" (85)). The intoxicated priest is another metaphor for the toxicity of this aquatic environment, which, like the water it carries, infiltrates everything, including the body of its inhabitants, who become dirty, wet, greasy and toxic beings themselves.[20]

The priest commits suicide in front of Marina's eyes in a scene worthy of a splatter movie. She leaves the church with blood-stained hands—the urge to wash them in "clean water" (87) adds to the absurdity—and on the street, she encounters a procession that seems to carry the undead body of Emanuel as an idol. The narrative of religious institutional decline and mutation in an aquatic environment resembles that of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1931) by Lovecraft. The story's narrator goes to the seaside town of Innsmouth where he discovers that the local community and their protestant churches have become "engulfed" by a "debased, quasi-pagan" cult, the "Esoteric Order of Dagon", dedicated to worship

20 The addicted pregnant girl with "los dedos manchados por la pipa tóxica" (161) ("her fingers, stained from the toxic pipe" (82)) who tells Marina about the reappearance of Emanuel serves as another example of the omnipresence of the toxicity in this aquatic environment. Many thanks to Rebecca Seewald for this remark.

of an ancient sea god. As he learns from his drunk informant, the townspeople themselves have all slowly transformed into fish-amphibian creatures who "*wouldn't never die*" ("The Shadow", n.p., italics in the original).

Lovecraft's insistence in religious decline in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" has been interpreted as a sign of "an intense feeling of contemporary and impending social collapse" (Zeller 12) that characterizes many of his writings and in which his well-known social conservatism, racism, misogyny, nativism and antisemitism can be framed. In connection with the aquatic environment, especially with the ocean, Deckard and Oloff (2) situate these sentiments, expressed in the so-called "Old Oceanic Weird", within a broader context of the decline of European colonialism and the oil-fuelled emergence of US naval imperialism. In the "New Oceanic Weird", they argue, "the reactionary politics of the Oceanic Weird are refashioned for contemporary critique" (6). In this sense, "Under the Black Water" can be read as a mutation of the Oceanic Weird—the Riachuelo being the small, degenerate offspring of the ocean. Enriquez' weirdly horrific depiction of the economic, social and ecological problems related to this aquatic environment goes beyond a critique of the urban and national society in decay to mediate "the epochal exhaustion of the neoliberal ecological regime" (Deckard and Oloff 6).

As we have seen, Fernández' novel contains such a critique as well, and popular religiosity plays a similar role in it. On the San Cristobal hill in Santiago de Chile there is a huge white stone virgin whose gaze is directed towards the center of the city. Her back is turned to the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods north of the Mapocho, where La Rucia used to live. Her grandmother, who is considered 'the saint of the neighborhood', spends her days on the roof of their house, praying to the virgin's butt. This residual religiosity[21] runs through the entire novel and is often mixed with indigenous religious beliefs, as the idea of the Mapocho as a liminal space between the dead and the living has shown. This syncretism is present, for example, in the protagonist's devotion to a

21 I borrow the term "residual" here from a study on popular religiosity by Alida Carloni Franca.

"minor virgin", the virgin of La Tirana, whose origins can be found in the desert in the North of Chile and whose cult has a strong Andean indigenous influence (Uribe 12). During her childhood, La Rucia had a plastic virgin of La Tirana that she played with as if it were a Barbie doll. In a ritual of farewell to their father, La Rucia and her brother El Indio bury the absent father in a plain near the sea and leave the virgin doll on the improvised grave to watch over him:

> El mar. Qué grande es el mar. […] Mientras navegaban sintieron la presencia de la virgen allá arriba en la explanada. Toda desteñida y medio chamuscada por el calor del sol. Con la corona de flores volándose por el viento y con el padre a los pies, bien enterrado. (Fernández 38)
>
> The sea. How great is the sea. […] As they sailed, they felt the presence of the virgin up there on the esplanade. All faded and half scorched by the heat of the sun. With the flower crown blown away by the wind and the father at her feet, safely buried.

The residual religiosity practiced by La Rucia fits within the ethics of recycling that characterizes Fernández' novel, and which is present, among other things, in the gesture, which I have already discussed, of incorporating the debris of national history into literature. As the quote above made clear, this residual religiosity not only goes against the neoliberal logic of constant replacement, but also offers solace to the characters in the novel, which is expressed by a reference to the vastness of the sea.

In Enriquez' story, the (ghostly) presence of the sea is suggested in the waves that suddenly appear in the water of the Riachuelo, and whose deafening sound echoes the drums that accompany the procession. The combination of a vast body of water with religiosity in both texts reminds us of the idea of the "oceanic feeling" to which Freud refers at the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Freud's reflection (and critique) is a response to a letter from Romain Rolland, who coined the expression to talk about a "feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something 'oceanic'". According to Rolland, it is a "purely subjective ex-

perience […], the source of the religious spirit and it is taken hold of by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into definite channels and also, no doubt, used up in them" (8).

If there is, as Rolland argued, an "oceanic feeling" at the base of religiosity at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mutated religiosity of Enriquez and the residual religiosity of Fernández are based, rather, on a polluted-river-feeling. In both cases, their depiction of popular religiosity shows us (weird) ways to "live *with* the ghosts" (Derrida 13, my emphasis). They illustrate the possibility of what philosopher Lisa Doeland (5) considers "an ecological approach to waste." In light of Timothy Morton's understanding of "ecology without nature", as living in a haunted world, this implies learning to cohabit with waste instead of pretending that it is possible to make it disappear. Enriquez' mutated religiosity shows us a form of cohabitation in which the unhomely prevails; in Fernandez' text, living *with* the ghosts of the past and the discarded objects can result in comfort and companionship. Either way, their literary depiction of popular religiosity in dark aquatic environments can be considered as a hydropolitical practice which does not only deliver a critique of the Chilean and Argentinean postdictatorial society, but also offers ways of living in an era of global environmental collapse.

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