Aquatic Memories and Mutilated Bodies in Vanessa Londoño's *El asedio animal*

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What is a body if (it is) not an entity? This question emerges when engaging with Vanessa Londoño's *El asedio animal* (2021), a novel that explores themes of vulnerability, dissolution, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human bodies. Narratively, the novel addresses the Colombian armed conflict and its devastating impact on landscape and people. A nation both mentally and physically harmed is portrayed, in which neither justice nor a stable social structure are given, and where healing can only be imagined in a total dissolution of the self in the environment. The text delves into Colombia's conflict-ridden present, simultaneously revealing historical and prospective layers of violence and offering a profound structural reflection on concepts such as memory, time, and spatiality.

In this context, water occupies a central position as a primordial, non-linear element. Through aquatic imagery, the text constructs a temporally fluid tableau of interwoven narratives, emphasising the interconnectedness of individual bodily experiences and their integration into a collective experience. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the imagery that is used, Astrida Neimanis' posthuman feminist theory, articulated in *Bodies of Water* (2017), will serve as a reference. The author integrates neomaterialist theory with feminist phenomenology, aiming to "develop[] imaginaries that might allow us to relate differently" (11). While previous categories and ontologies positioned the human being as a central agent in the world, determining the planet (and hence its survival) as an object at their disposal, neomaterialism in-

troduces a shift in perspective and positions humans as an "integral part of the natural world, rather than as owners who can use its resources at will" (López-Calvo and López Chavolla 96). This foregrounds the 'agency of things'—an understanding prevalent in indigenous cultures—which asserts that humans are not the only agency-holders within the world's ecosystem. Rather, all material elements, from the smallest particle to the largest natural formations, actively shape and participate in the world (see Bennett). The centre, therefore, is no longer understood as occupied by Man (as implied by the term 'anthropocene'), but as relational and jointly constructed, as reflected in the concept of 'chthulucene' (see Haraway 71). Neomaterialism represents the first relevant theoretical approach in Neimanis' framework.

Feminist phenomenology, the second relevant scholarly approach, builds upon the phenomenological frameworks established by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945). It concerns the situatedness of knowledge, investigating how consciousness and reason are constructed through lived experiences. By understanding the concept of 'being in the world' as a physical and sensory condition fundamental to all cognitive experience, the rigid separation of body and mind is challenged. Rather, knowledge appears to be fundamentally shaped by the bodily parameters that condition thinking. The body itself turns into a sensual producer and repository of knowledge—consequently, knowledge itself is intrinsically connected to a specific human body. While Merleau-Ponty focused on the 'universal' human body experience, contemporary feminist approaches aim to uncover how bodily observations are shaped by different parameters that strongly influence our moving in the world. Here, "the subject 'woman' is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, determined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference" (Braidotti, *Nomadic subjects* 25). Consequently, this theoretical approach advocates for a focus on underrepresented perspectives, particularly those of non-male and non-Western voices, emphasising their distinct contexts and challenges (see Gómez-Barris). Posthuman feminist theory takes things one step further, including non-human experiences. It asks for the interconnectedness of

all lived experiences and highlights the spatial relationships that exist between human and non-human embodiments.

Due to their profound structural reversals, both neomaterialism and (posthuman) feminist phenomenology can be regarded as significant theoretical shifts. In accordance with the "liquid turn" (see Blackmore and Gómez), Neimanis unifies these approaches by examining them through the prism of water, demonstrating a paradigm shift from a centralist, phallogocentric view of the human body to one that emphasises bodily fluids within their environmental context. She provides what I consider a *macrofocus*, which underscores the significance of these fluids due to their intrinsic connexion to the world's waters, and a *microfocus*: their placement within the human body. Thus, humans are perceived as an integral part of their biological environment and are studied in relation to their interaction—or interdependence—with the element of water, while simultaneously recognising water as an agent in its own right.

By applying Neimanis' theory, I will investigate how aquatic dynamics influence and shape literary sources according to their own principles. It seems to me that, in the given text, water is not merely a major plot component but emerges as an independent agent that fundamentally moulds the text's structure and storyline. Also, my hypothesis is that the characters partly render agency, being carried along by literal and structural 'currents of water'. They are, so to say, liquid embodiments in interaction which "seek confluence. They flow into one another in life-giving ways, but also in unwelcome, or unstoppable, incursions" (Neimanis 29).

Mutilations of body and mind: the Colombian conflict

Written by Colombian lawyer and journalist Vanessa Londoño and published by Almadía in 2021, *El asedio animal* is a debut novel which consists of four chapters that do not follow a chronological order. They are untitled, marked only with numbers. In line with current literary ten-

dencies,[1] the author takes us to a poor, marginalised community in a rural setting, where she constructs a fictional village called Hukuméiji. In the well-known tradition of Macondo, the town is positioned in the department of Magdalena, in-between three (rather) liquid areas: the Amazonian jungle, the Caribbean Sea, and the Don Diego River. Depicting a town that has been violated, ravaged by crime, and ultimately devastated by a natural disaster, it evokes an oneiric atmosphere reminiscent of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, set in a liminal space between life and death, where the inhabitants endure horrific acts, such as child abuse, rape, and the abduction of women and girls. Although the protagonists barely get close to each other, they are connected by suffering mutilations, as their bodies and minds are marked by violence. First, the story of Fernanda Huanci, an indigenous woman, is told, who has her legs cut off with a chainsaw as a punishment for wearing boots. She does not survive the torture; her story is passed on through her son Alain, a child that is sexually abused by the paedophile artist Lásides. Another protagonist is the midwife Yarima who, in response to the absence of medical care in the village, has started to assist giving birth to the girls of the village, all of them bearing children of the same father, a patriarch and criminal who rapes the adolescents as soon as they start menstruating. As Yarima herself had managed to temporarily escape the perpetrator and to have her first sexual experiences with a boyfriend her age, his henchmen have her beloved killed. Simultaneously, they cut her tongue out, and she remains mute. Two other—unnamed—characters suffer mutilations due to acts of violence that are inflicted upon them: one, who is chosen by mere chance, loses their eyesight, the other their hands as punishment for stealing groceries. During all these horrific events, not only the living are present. Also the dead inhabit the river and the houses, unable to escape their agony. They exude an uncanny presence, remaining totally mute and immaterial, as if suspended in time and space. Thus, they draw

1 See, for example, Suzette Celaya Aguilar (2023): *La tierra sobre tus huesos*; Sara Jaramillo Klinkert (2021): *Donde cantan las ballenas*; Pilar Quintana (2017): *La perra*; Lorena Salazar Masso (2021): *Esta herida llena de peces*, partly discussed in the articles by Homann and Brede.

a (ghostly) bodily line to previous acts of violence, which, like the dead in the river, do not cease to accumulate.

The narrative is firmly rooted in the political context of the *conflicto armado* within Colombia. The complexity of this conflict comes both from its lengthy duration, spanning over five decades since its beginning, and the multitude of actors and groups involved. These include members of the military, the paramilitary, guerrilla groups, armed collectives, *narcos* and civilians, all of whom pursue different, often oppositional objectives. The fighting has resulted in approximately 250,000 human deaths, numerous displaced persons, and significant social and economic disruption. However, the current official discourse, established by right and far-right political parties, emphasises that the FARC and other guerrilla groups are primarily responsible for the violence in Colombia and the country's present difficulties. This narrative has deeply permeated the collective consciousness, as Villa Gómez et al. report in their study on "Memoria colectiva y relatos hegemónicos. Barreras psicosociales para la paz y la reconciliación. Colombia" (see 150), which examines the processes of constructing hegemonic memories in society and their negative impact on peace-building. The hegemonic discourse portrays the FARC's goals and actions as profoundly malicious and suggests that, even if they were to reintegrate into society, they would remain a constant social threat. This established narrative represents an extremely reductive and polemical view of a complex issue and contributes to hindering an internal peace process. According to the study, the conflict has now extended from the rural areas into the realm of discourse and memory construction: "La disputa por el relato de realidad hoy, es un frente de lucha incansable" (147). The power-oriented manipulation of memory construction hereby neglects the plurality of the population's memories in favour of maintaining established power blocs. This obstruction of an inclusive and equitable process of joint memory formation results in an enduring social division (see 147).

In this context, it clearly is a key poetic concern of the novel to explore alternative modes of verbalising the nation's conflictive history and present. The author primarily attempts to do so by letting (textual) bodies 'speak for themselves.' As Capote Díaz and Homann note, Londoño

"logra expresividad vinculando la crueldad y el horror de [l]a historia [colombiana] con cuerpos concretos" (326). These concrete bodies and body parts tell the story on their own, bearing witness to the historical reality. Thus, they collectively form a panorama of past and present memories, composed of mainly "submerged perspectives" (Gómez-Barris 11). As the author states in a preface to the novel,

> [t]he loss of bodily symmetry suggests another form of harmony when one understands that the amputated parts are living matter, capable of generating their own trajectories and tendencies. Literature, I believe, is in the act of restoring vitality to the severed limbs, and in telling the stories of the bodies that continue to remember the mutilated parts and their ghosts.[2]

Londoño proposes that literature can, in part, serve as a medium to revitalize the mutilated body parts and restore them to the entity to which they belong. Narratively, these parts become reconnected to the original body, while the complete story of their (dis)connexion is told. In other words, her literature aims to create a form of metaphoric completeness, a narratively reconstructed bodily symmetry and 'going back in time' while, simultaneously, 'going on' with the history of the bodies' presence (and future), narrating an absence. An alternative interpretation of the conflict is sought, one that takes the body and its parts as the foundation and places a strong emphasis on materialities. This approach also engages in the work of memory construction, reflecting on how physical elements and embodied experiences contribute to the ways in which the past is remembered and understood. The effort to grasp the concept of memory, perceived as intangible or 'immaterial', through material means is far from being a new approach. In fact, it has been a key aspect

2 "La pérdida de la simetría del cuerpo propone otra forma de armonía cuando se comprende que las partes amputadas son materia viva, capaz de generar sus propias trayectorias y propensiones. La literatura, pienso, está en el acto de restituirles vitalidad a los miembros cortados, y en contar las historias de los cuerpos que persisten en recordar las partes mutiladas y sus fantasmas" (Londoño 11). All translations are my own.

of literary memory work since ancient times (see Erll 64). In the following, I will explore the aquatic's influence on this discourse and analyse whether the history of a physical body can be represented through the imagery of water. What lessons and conclusions can be drawn from this for future work in the field of literary memorial practices?

Watery embodiments and interconnexions

Water serves as a vital element across multiple dimensions of the text: it shapes the spatial environment, functions as a medium for characters' reflections on memory, initiates key interactions between characters and non-human embodiments, and forms the aesthetic framework of the text. As both a life-generating and destructive force, it shapes the protagonists' interpersonal relationships in ambiguous ways. This becomes evident in the case of the characters Yarima and Aníbal, who first meet on an exceptionally rainy day that precedes the village's inundation. Initially, the masses of water, which will soon evolve into a life-destroying force, serve as a unifying element:

> The day I met him, Aníbal was wearing a hat that had lost its shape in the rain and was sagging over his eyes. His pants clung to the silhouette of his legs, and he walked under the weight of clothes swollen with water, moving even more slowly than the stray dogs […]. The blood on his hands, illuminated by the flickering flashlight, began to move, blinking towards us; and then we heard his weary feet dragging sorrowfully through the crusts of mud.[3]

3 "El día que lo conocí a Aníbal traía precisamente un sombrero que había perdido la horma en la lluvia y se le escurría deshecho sobre los ojos. Los pantalones se le ceñían a la silueta de las piernas y caminaba bajo el peso de la ropa hinchada por el agua, todavía más despacio que los perros callejeros […]. La sangre de sus manos alumbrada por la linterna que fallaba empezó a moverse parpadeando hacia nosotros; y luego escuchamos sus pies cansados arrastrarse con tristeza entre las costras del barro" (Londoño 55).

Both the water originating in the environment (*macrofocus*) and the water present within the human body (*microfocus*) are narratively emphasised and constitute the character's first appearance. Aníbal is strongly affected in his movements, essentially reduced to a primal or even subanimalistic state by the force of water, with his motions categorised as subordinated to the stray dogs'. His car is stuck in the flooded ground, preventing his sister from being taken to a nearby hospital, as she is giving birth. Simultaneously, his internal physical processes are indicated and allude to the watery element he embodies: his blood directs him towards the midwife, unaffected by the technical failures of his flashlight. As Neimanis emphasises, "the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves" (2). While the boundary between the human and the non-human blurs, the element's primordial dominance over Aníbal is evoked, directing his body through the dark toward another, even as the electronic tool fails. Speaking with Neimanis, water comes to act both as a sustaining as well as a connecting force, seeking to link the human body with others while primarily constituting it.[4]

At the same time, the destructive power of the element is strikingly apparent, not only through the massive impact it has on the mobility of the protagonists. Categories such as inside/outside and self/other become blurred in the rain, as the pulsating blood evokes the metaphorical blood on Anibal's hands, alluding to his involvement in the conflict. Accordingly, his first gesture towards Yarima is a physical, wordless threat: he lifts his poncho to show her the pistol attached to his belt. This display of patriarchal superiority aims to coerce her, without the necessity of verbal communication, into following him:

> At that moment, Aníbal didn't have a name, let alone a story. At first, he was a stranger who, when he finally got close, lifted his poncho to reveal the pistol hanging from the worn-out belt of his pants. […] First,

4 It is worth noting that the process of birth and the associated maternal liquids hold a particularly significant position in Neimanis' work (see, for example, 39–41).

> he grabbed me by the arm and then told me that the hospital was cut off due to the debris the avalanche had swept onto that part of the road [...].[5]

Although he initially appears as a character without history or identity, Aníbal physically marks himself as a fighter involved in the conflict even before any verbal interaction occurs. This connects him to the conflicting groups, linking him to the synchronic events of androcentric violence that significantly shape the Colombian present. When later combined with the historical events of androcentric violence—especially colonial and ecclesiastical—a comprehensive panorama of violence in Colombia appears, envisioned through female and marginalised perspectives.

In the sense that the protagonists' stories are narratives of mutilation and recovery, the beginning of the story of Aníbal and Yarima simultaneously marks the beginning of the narrative of loss. As is recounted achronologically throughout the text, not only does the midwife lose her language, but also her beloved, with whom she shares an intercellular bond. The text clearly highlights the physical interconnectedness of the lovers by emphasising the imagined micro-organic processes of falling in love:

> [I]t made me feel that electricity moving down to my navel, spreading between the cells, because it was a symptom that your bacteria were settling inside me, making me incapable of repelling you. The virus

5 "En ese momento Aníbal no tenía nombre ni mucho menos historia, fue primero un desconocido que cuando por fin estuvo cerca se levantó el poncho para que se le viera la pistola que le colgaba del cinto escurridizo del pantalón. [...] Primero me tomó del brazo y luego me dijo que el hospital estaba incomunicado por los escombros que la avalancha había arrastrado hacia ese lado de la carretera [...]" (Londoño 55–56).

> seemed to take advantage of this compulsive tachycardia to spread your presence through my veins.[6]

The inter-bodily connexion is crucial in my analysis, as it underscores the 'floating together' of two bodies, anticipating that Yarima's loss of her beloved signifies the loss of a physical part of herself. The narrative thus emphasises the profound intertwining of two individuals on a cellular level, highlighting the deep physical and emotional impact of one body's presence/absence on another: "Our own embodiment, as already noted, is never really autonomous. Nor is it autochthonous, nor autopoietic: we require other bodies of other waters (that in turn require other bodies and other waters) to bathe us into being" (Neimanis 3). A complex cellular network is articulated, linking the lovers, but Aníbal's sister and child as well, with Torero, who embodies both the father of the child and Aníbal's murderer. This permeable relationship network underscores the interdependency of existence, challenging the apparent boundaries between life and death by illustrating a cycle of fluid, ever-changing forms. The body is never simply an entity, in a single place, nor simply 'itself' (see Neimanis 29). Rather, it is a space "where past and future bodies swim through our own" (4). From this, it follows that our understanding of the body should become multi-scalar and multi-generational, conceptualised as a permeable being in the world.

Memorial waters: flooded archives

Also in a spatiotemporal sense, there is a connexion between the transforming geological space and the presence of multiple temporalities that converge in the undifferentiated situatedness of water. In this context, the text reveals various archives that in part float over each other, with

6 "[M]e hacía recorrer hasta el ombligo esa electricidad que progresa entre las células, porque era un síntoma de que tus bacterias se instalaban en mí haciéndome incapaz de repelerte. El virus parecía aprovecharse de ese gesto compulsivo de la taquicardia para difundir tu presencia entre mis venas" (Londoño 79).

aquatic imagery used to interlink memorial layers. As Yarima searches for Aníbal's mortal remains, she descends to the riverbanks. Due to heavy rains, she relives the experience of the village's inundation and becomes immersed in sensory impressions that transport her back to the day she first met him. The memories evoke the smell of blood—likely from Aníbal's sister's newborn—the humidity in the yard, and the radio warnings of the recent flood she heard when being together with Aníbal. In particular, the haptic, auditory, and olfactory stimuli, which are deeply linked to memory, evoke the sensations she preserved from their encounters. Temporal and narrative layers begin to overlap in an interplay of sensations, echoes, and scents. This represents the first archive discussed: the archive of her body, accessed through aquatic sensory impressions, which allows her to immerse herself in her memories and explore the varying intensities of past experiences.

But also "the landscape [is envisioned] as historically layered, haunted, [and] marked by material ruins" (Welge and Tauchnitz 2), as becomes evident when the protagonist sifts through water and mud in search of her beloved's dead body, uncovering various objects along the way. In the liminal space between water and land, she navigates through multiple layers of the history of collective violence,[7] reading the traces left from colonisation to the present day:

> It was said that beneath that river were not only the bodies from the avalanche but also those that had been abandoned times ago. On either side of the riverbed, one could see the fallen walls of houses and overturned cars […]. The damp, clayey earth preserved buttons and identity cards; teeth, T-shirts, and hats, all floating towards the shifting surface of the barely hardened mud under the sun. […] By that time, the riverbanks had already given way, and the slopes on which those shantytowns were built were unaware of what had once

7 A process reminiscent of the 'desedimentation' concept articulated by Rivera Garza who proposes a geological lecture, "[. . .] en la que el tiempo profundo y los puntos de personajes no humanos ayudan a desedimentar las heridas de la violencia colonial y de género que se extienden hasta el México de hoy" (55). See also Jörg Dünne's contribution in this volume.

> been the great river basin, which was now beginning to reclaim its former territory.[8]

Through juxtaposition, the enumeration evokes the equivalence of the listed items,[9] of objects of varying materialities. Therefore, it suggests a form of co-worlding of animate and inanimate things as studied by Bennett, who is not afraid to connect neomaterialism with political studies and to ask for a "political capacity of actants" (94). In coming together in a horizontal, democratic space, I suggest that the objects form some kind of archive of mutilated entities, a repository that displays all elements and voices of the river with equal importance and respect. Again, emphasis is placed on the agency of water, especially on its movement and the concealment/revelation of objects. As Yarima walks on, she soon comes across the severed limbs:

> The first thing I saw when I bent down was a head with its eyes blindfolded, and then a pile of parts with which I had to assemble four-

8 "Se decía que bajo ese río estaban no solo los cuerpos de la avalancha sino los que habían abandonado hacía tiempo. A lado y lado del cauce se veían los muros caídos de las casas y los carros volteados […]. La tierra húmeda y gredosa guardaba botones y cédulas; dientes, camisetas y sombreros que iban flotando camino a la superficie movediza del lodo apenas endurecido bajo el sol. […] Por esa época ya las márgenes del río habían cedido y las laderas sobre las que se levantaron esos tugurios ignoraban lo que había sido la gran cuenca del río que ahora empezaba a reclamar su antiguo terreno" (Londoño 60–61).

9 Despite the distinctiveness of the objects, which marks them as individual, they are brought together within the context of (firstly) the narrative and (secondly) the enumeration, thus forming a multiplicity within unity. See Mainberger for a comprehensive discussion on the art of enumeration, for example: "Each single event must be narrated, no matter how much it resembles the others; or conversely, to its narrator, each event is so distinctive from the others that a synthesis is impossible", originally: "Jeder einzelne Vorgang muß erzählt werden, auch wenn er den anderen noch so sehr gleicht; oder anders herum: Jeder einzelne Vorgang ist für ihren Erzähler so verschieden von den anderen, daß eine Synthese ausgeschlossen ist" (234). This quote refers to events but is also applicable to objects, I suggest.

> teen bodies, not knowing if their limbs were from the avalanche or had been wandering for a long time.[10]

The materialities appear to float in a liminal space and state, seemingly untouched by the passage of time and immune to decay, as evidenced by Yarima's ability to recollect long-decomposed body parts and assemble them into a whole. Yet, strong olfactory stimuli evoke biochemical processes that hint at the ephemeral nature of these bodies. The mutilated objects seem to exist in a state of both extratemporality and intratemporality, a duality that mirrors the characteristics of water itself. Water, which can never be anchored to a specific location yet is always present in a particular place and time, offers us a complex and multifaceted perspective on spatial and temporal understanding, suggesting a simultaneity of temporalities. As Neimanis puts it, "the waters we embody are both intensely local and wildly global: I am here, and now, and at least three billion years old, and already becoming something else" (39). In the spatiality of water, affiliations become blurred and materialities are perceived as ephemeral. The dissolution of entities signifies a dispersion into separate parts that can no longer be assigned to a specific owner. Similarly, Yarima assembles the bodies, but does not recognise or identify them as specific individuals. In the novel, (non-)human bodies transcend boundaries and expand; they are momentarily observable in one single form, but soon transform and evolve into something new. This way, "water calls on us to give an account of our own (very human) politics of location […]" (Neimanis 4). Rejecting a binary logic of either/or, a posthuman aquatic perspective profoundly emphasises that as bodies of water, we embody both difference and commonality at the same time. This concept is far more boundaryless than the practices of collecting and organising that underly a (chronologically maintained) archive—and, notably, the archive of the village is swept away by

10 "Lo primero que vi cuando me agaché fue una cabeza con los ojos vendados y luego un montón de partes con las que tuve que armar catorce cuerpos sin saber si sus miembros eran de la avalancha o venían ya de hace tiempo deambulando" (Londoño 61).

the first rain-induced landslide: "The water invaded the offices, carrying away desks and some filing cabinets."[11] Here, the destructive yet generative force of water becomes evident, especially in its connexion to memory. Written archives are obliterated, while water inscribes itself as an archive into the landscape, both obscuring and revealing objects within its depths.[12] It forms an archive accessible only under the specific local and temporal conditions set by the element, which applies both to the archive of lost entities and to the body as an archive itself. Although the bodily archive in the text is represented with considerable complexity, this principle can nonetheless be regarded as one of the generally valid parameters.

Watery dreams of healing

The complex plurality of the aquatic is present throughout the whole imagery, and it brings together elements from seemingly opposite conceptual realms: indigenous objects are combined with paramilitary actions, natural phenomena with Old Testament violence. Indeed, the convergence of different cultural elements resemble the sociocultural reality in the Colombian Amazon region, where diverse social groups from different cultural and religious backgrounds intersect. On a textual level, they become interconnected within the aquatic imagery, and consequently linked to the natural environment they inhabit:

11 "El agua entró hasta las oficinas y se llevó los escritorios y algunos archivadores […]" (Londoño 59).

12 Carolina Caycedo pursues a comparable approach of the river as 'energy archive' in her art installation *Serpent River Book* (2017), which critically examines energy production (including hydropolitical aspects) through Latin America's rivers and searches for energy flows beyond capitalist logics of utilisation. From indigenous perceptions in pre-Colombian times to current dam construction projects, the importance of the river as a donor and store of energy(s) is emphasised. See the illuminating analysis by Hollman and Castro.

> [It] was the day when the paramilitaries arrived on those water vehicles *[planchones*] that navigated across the reflection of the sun, now faded in the water, and which they ran aground, then moved from house to house, killing all men of each family. This same group had […] left a canoe covered in green algae, which they used at night to carry the bodies from the houses to the riverbank. As a result […], among the neighbours, it came to be known by the name "way to heaven"; a name that still survives today as a game in which children shoot imaginary bullets at each other and pile up dead and pale on top of one another.[13]

In this context, it is essential to explain the term *planchones*, used in the original version. A *planchón* is an artisanal vehicle traditionally used for commercial and agricultural traffic, especially for the transport of goods and livestock through the river branches of the Amazon region. Later, it became an economic way for individuals to travel alongside the transported cattle, which slowly decreased in number. Today, the boats primarily serve human passengers, either residing in the region or visiting for tourism. Since the 1970s, *planchones* have become so actively involved in the armed conflict that the *Comisión de la Verdad*, a governmental peace-making institution, has dedicated an entire webpage to explaining their recent history (see Comisión, *Los planchones del río Sinú* n.p.). Here, the vehicles are described as "embarcaciones mecánicas que funcionan sin motor ya que obtienen su movimiento de las corrientes del río" (*Los planchones del río Sinú* n.p.), which allows them to move through the water causing very little sound. This makes them a preferred means of transport for drug trafficking and, in general, for

13 "[Fue] el día en que los paramilitares llegaron en esos planchones que navegaron el reflejo del sol dilapidado en el agua, y que encallaron para luego pasar de casa en casa matando a todos los varones de cada familia. Ese mismo ejército había dejado […] una canoa forrada de algas verdosas que usaban para sacar en la noche y hasta la orilla los cuerpos de las casas, de modo que […] entre los vecinos fue cogiendo el apodo de rumbo al cielo; el mismo nombre que sobrevive hasta hoy como un juego en que los niños se disparan balas imaginarias y se apilan muertos y pálidos los unos sobre los otros" (Londoño 86).

use by criminal groups. The website, which focuses on the waterways around the city of Montería (and presents historical events that could easily form part of *El asedio animal*), also claims that "[c]ada planchón tiene un nombre y un diseño que lo hace único" (*Los planchones del río Sinú* n.p.). The *Comisión* attributes to them an individuality characteristic of living beings, assigning names and visual features, and emphasises their slow, deliberate movement through the waters.

This perspective aligns with the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman beings that is suggested throughout the novel. Here, the element of water, while initially facilitating the covert movement of paramilitaries and the execution of their brutal attacks, becomes an accomplice in the violence. It is notable that the *planchón*—a symbol of early capitalist transport—interacts with the indigenous canoa that carries the individual corpses. While the transition from body to corpse occurs within the canoe, which transports the dead bodies separately from the site of the murder to the riverbank and thus provides a ritual passage from life to death, the deceased are piled up without individual identity in the capitalist means of transport, as re-enacted in the children's game. Despite the intense cruelty depicted in the scene, the portrayal also conveys a sense of tranquillity, which grounds on the poetic tone that is inherent to the novel and becomes expressed in watery terms like "reflejo del sol," "algas verdosas," and "rumbo al cielo" (Londoño 86), as well as through the gentle, rippling rhythm of the language. The interplay of these contrasting spectrums is characteristic of the novel, whose poetry consistently accompanies the gruesome acts of violence, thereby offering a form of mildness and solace that is seldom found in the narrative itself. The solace absent to the actions and lives of the protagonists is thus contributed to the text by its language, a language that survives, like the title of the children's game survives the dead.

In other chapters, interhuman violence and fluidity converge as well, encompassing not only water as a natural resource but extending to bodily fluids. This is particularly evident in a scene where a human mother drowns her newborn in a water basin, in which the tears of the female

perpetrator mix up with the water that slowly ends the life of the very young being:

> Your mother gave birth to a child whom she drowned with my help in the house's water basin. I was struck by his healthy and modest organs and the rosy flush of his cheeks, which faded in the slow movement of his head submerged in the water. […] Sometimes I think he didn't drown in the soapy water of the water basin but in the round, helpless tears rolling down your mother's cheeks.[14]

The scene is reminiscent of a postnatal return to the amniotic sac and a perverted de-birth: the baby is pressed back from the world into a body of water in a reversed act of strength that the mother has to endure. The motivations behind this act, possibly driven by poverty and the urge to protect the newborn from society, thus executing lethal violence on it, remain unclear, though the text alludes to the diminishing memory of the child's father as a contributing factor. In the act of de-birth, the fluids of mother and child merge, with the child appearing to drown in the mother's waters. The portrayal of the organs suggests a revisitation of the individual life cycle (*microfocus*), reminiscent of the foetus's initial being in the amniotic sac. This imagery also invokes broader reflections on the process of life and development, emphasising the primordial association with water, to the extent that early-stage mammalian embryos are scarcely distinguishable from one another (*macrofocus*). Here, water does not function particularly as a healing or destructive medium, but rather as the primordial matter to which the protagonists ultimately return to a state of pre-existence.

This dissolution into a primordial aquatic space, which precedes both the boundaries of individual existence and human life on Earth, is

14 "Tu madre parió a un niño que ahogó con mi ayuda en la alberca de la casa. Me habían impresionado sus órganos saludables y modestos, y el rubor colorado de sus cachetes que se fueron apagando en el lento movimiento de cabeza sumergida en el agua. […] A veces pienso que no se ahogó en el agua jabonosa de la alberca sino en los lagrimones redondos y desamparados que rodaban por las mejillas de tu madre" (Londoño 72).

vividly portrayed in the final chapter of the novel. Here, the unnamed protagonist—a displaced and mutilated individual—reflects on the severed limbs and organs of other villagers. She not only recalls these lost parts but also experiences a dreamlike re-evolution, where the lost limbs reappear in a sea she envisions on the floor of the house where she has taken refuge. This moment effectively marks the conclusion of the narrative, reaching its climax in the final pages of the novel. The impending catastrophe—the flooding of the village—is alluded to but never told. Consequently, the narrative ends with the culmination of an inverted evolution, a motif that has been subtly foreshadowed throughout the text:

> I wish you could hear the rain falling with its big drops as it alters everything, patiently. You will agree with me that it resembles the one that falls over there, that it is the same as the one that falls everywhere. If I let myself go enough, I can hear the earth slipping softly in its contact with the downpour and recycling itself in its nutrients. I, too, inhabit it.[15]

This passage initiates the vision of regenerated limbs and a total dissolution into the rainwater, wherein the protagonist achieves a harmonious co-worlding with her surrounding materials and perceives herself as an integral part of her natural environment. This ephemeral state of unity is soon disrupted by her awakening and the horrific realisation that her arms still end in stumps. Thus, the watery dreams of healing remain precisely that: imagined dissolutions, unattainable in the physics of the narrative.

15 "Ojalá pudieras oír la lluvia caer con sus grandes gotas mientras altera todo, con paciencia. Coincidirás conmigo en que se parece a la que cae allá, que es la misma que cae en todas partes. Si me dejo ir lo suficiente puedo escuchar a la tierra escurrirse blandamente en su contacto con el aguacero y reciclarse en sus nutrientes. Yo también habito en ella" (Londoño 97).

Conclusion

Understanding the Colombian armed conflict and relating to the suffering of those living on the margins of Colombia's rural areas presents significant challenges. The concept of a nearly boundless violence seems both overwhelming and distant, even to Colombian citizens, due to its complex historical origins and multifaceted character. Since concepts are not merely external, rigid constructs, but deeply intertwined with physical realities and collective experiences, it can be helpful to make use of Neimanis' suggestion of approaching such an issue through tangible, embodied experiences:

> Concepts only make sense to us because we can experience them, bodily, even when these experiences are too distant, too small, too large, or too intensive to readily grasp at the surface, where we take up what phenomenologists would call 'the natural attitude'. Our bodies as sensory apparatuses must sometimes stretch and contract in order to access the lived materiality that a concept or a theory proposes […]. (31)

Through the portrayal of recent events by various protagonists, whose voices are hard to distinguish from one another and primarily set in the first person singular, Londoño's novel forms a pluriverse chorus rather than presenting alternating stories with clearly marked shifts in perspective. This creates a complex and ambiguous network of memories, making it difficult to clearly assign each statement to a specific character. Rather than engaging in direct interaction, the protagonists brush past each other, catching glimpses and tangling momentarily before continuing on their separate paths, each burdened with their own sufferings and desires. Looking at the novel through the lens of Neimanis' posthuman feminist phenomenology, the movement of the protagonists can be compared to fluvial currents in which different time lapses are present simultaneously.

The concept of Colombia's pervasive and unbounded violence is thus distilled into aquatic imagery and conveyed through the depiction of concrete bodies, their histories, and their losses. This approach renders

the suffering almost physically tangible for the reader. By empathising with the wounded bodies and internalising those losses, readers gain insight into the sensually transmissible experiences inherent to Colombia's armed conflict. "Concepts are shot through with materiality" (183), Neimanis asserts, and through the fictional materialities embodied by the protagonists, the effects of the conflict become relatable. While Neimanis' theoretical approach as such could run the risk of unifying states of affairs by dissolving boundaries and materialities to an extend hard to follow, by applying it on the novel, it contributes precisely to transcending binary frameworks in favour of a pluralistic perspective. Therefore, it may offer a view that more accurately reflects the complex and simultaneous nature of seemingly contradictory states and entities, potentially providing insights beyond those suggested by political discourses with vested interests.

The advantage lies, then, in "destabilising that oppressive record that memory holds"[16] of pleasure and pain, and to remind us that life exists beyond both—it is a state of being in the world, "a process of becoming" (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 211), shared by human and non-human beings. By "encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages" (Bennett 107), we may gain a holistic view of pressing issues, of which the Colombian conflict is only one, and free ourselves, to some extent, from the subjectivity of one single reality. This approach has already been adopted by the Colombian *Comisión de la Verdad* in recent publications (see Comisión, *Hay futuro si hay verdad* n.p.), with the aim of expanding the scope of understanding and, ultimately, fostering a pathway to peaceful *convivencia* in the future, as the concept holds not only an "opportunity for a more materialist theory of democracy", as suggested by Bennett (106), but also points out the democratic value of recognising the multiplicity of memories and integrating them equally into the collective memory: "De esta manera podrán circular otros relatos, otras versiones, otras experiencias, otras narrativas que permitan comprender que todos los tipos de vida sean

16 Originally: "desestabilizar ese registro tan opresivo que tiene la memoria" (Londoño 89).

visibles y cognoscibles", and to understand that "todos y todas, los que han caído en esta guerra, puedan ser objeto de duelo" (Villa Gómez et al. 156). Monolithic memory concepts are deconstructed, recognising the complexity of collective memory-building, which facilitates social rapprochement between different parties. Literature contributes to this process by serving as a medium through which sociopolitical issues are examined from multiple perspectives, thereby making collective memory formation more inclusive and democratic. By acknowledging the agency of other (aquatic) beings, a comprehensive approach is generated that incorporates a pluriversality of perspectives. Given its changeability, primordial nature, and complex force, water is particularly suited to represent ambiguous scenarios that challenge and transform our understanding of ongoing—as well as emerging—issues.

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