STATES OF NATURE
CATASTROPHE, HISTORY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SPANISH AMERICA

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Abstract

*States of Nature: Catastrophe, History, and the Reconstruction of Latin America* explores the implications that a catastrophic paradigm of history had upon the transatlantic historiography of the so-called Age of Revolutions that brought the collapse of empires throughout the Americas. Through a study of the philosophical, literary as well as artistic representations of three catastrophic figures – chapters that focus on earthquakes, volcanoes and plagues – the dissertation aims to provide a critical model through which to understand the ways in which history and nature overlapped in the ideological, epistemological, as well as practical “reconstruction” of Spanish America that took place amidst the emergence of Latin America’s modern nation states. Through the success of studies such as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions*, the historiography of the Latin American “long nineteenth century” – starting at the Haitian Revolution and going up to the Mexican Revolution – has been dominated by the study of national narratives as the place where ideological tensions were resolved against the figure of the emerging modern state. Despite their undeniable insights, these studies – by providing a harmonious, enlightened, progressive narrative of the emerging revolutions – fail to account for the violent character of Latin America’s sudden, as well as singular, entrance into the modern landscape. I believe that it is time to explore what lies beyond the historiography of the “happy” national fictions. By analyzing how the figure of catastrophe disrupts the basic figures of enlightened historiography – representation, progress and rationality – each of the chapters explores the ways in which nature came to be seen, within the long nineteenth century, as the locus of disruptive historical events rather than organic unity.
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Introduction:
The Advent of Nature

"Psychology knows that he who imagines disasters in some way desires them. But why do they come so eagerly to greet him?"
- Adorno, Minima Moralia

“Tardeski dice que la naturaleza ya no existe sino en los sueños. Solo se hace notar, dice, la naturaleza, bajo la forma de la catástrofe o se manifiesta en la lírica…”
- Ricardo Piglia, Respiración Artificial

It might be one of the symptomatic signs of our times that it can only conceive its beginning under the sign of catastrophe. As a sign of its epoch, the theory of the Big-Bang condenses the uneasiness of a society whose access to history is warded off by the threshold of catastrophic thinking. To begin nowadays, one could then say, increasingly means to dare to begin catastrophically. However, whereas in the old days, it was social catastrophes – civil wars, economic depressions, the collapse of empires – that traditionally functioned as the point of departure for historical accounts, it nowadays seems as if our ongoing crisis was staged against the background of an untameable nature. Just when liberal democracy seemed ready to declare the end of history and the advent of the last man, nature seems to have violently emerged from its silent slumber, exposing the shaky grounds that hold the apparent status quo. As Tardeski, the character of Ricardo Piglia’s Respiración Artificial insightfully notes, this advent of nature is not, however, a return to the uneventfulness of the natural, ahistorical garden, but rather its subversive inflection. Today we witness nature return with the force of the repressed, as the catastrophic event that interrupts the passage of empty time,
crushing the continuity of homogenous chronology, imposing upon it the time of
eventuality. Today nature has paradoxically become the paradigmatic locus of historical
events. Our nature, if such a thing still exists, is not the Greek *ousía* but rather – as
Timothy Morton has recently explored under the rubric of dark ecology – the Lacanian
*thing*: the dark substrata puncturing our social reality, forcing us to recognize that
fundamental otherness which, nonetheless, renders possible our historicity amidst the
proclaimed end of history. Earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes, tsunamis and epidemics,
all seem to conspire daily against the hegemony of the new world order. It should not
surprise us, then, that this avalanche by which nature floods history usually takes the
so-called third world as its point of departure. Latin America, South-East Asia, Africa:
the eruption of nature takes as its preferred points of expression those points at the
periphery of late-capitalism, the precise places that have long provided the “materia
prima” used for mounting the progressive rails of enlightened historicity. After
centuries of being exploited, it would seem that nature had finally sprung forth into
visibility, fuelled by the discontents of the enlightened project, forcing us to reconsider
the ways modernity has negotiated the always mined relationship between history and
nature. What then emerges from this reconsideration is the story of a subterraneous
trend within the Enlightenment itself, a constitutive tension inherent to the modernist
project, which tells of shaky grounds and rhizomatic futures, of imminent eruptions and
spectral pasts, of viral outbreaks and saturated presents. The origins of the
contemporary returns of nature – of what could be called the chronotope of natural
catastrophe – are then shown to lay, not within the twentieth century, but as far back as
the late eighteenth century. That is to say, the advent of nature as catastrophe proves to
run alongside the Enlightenment, as its spectral double and as the entropic force
marking its limits and its excesses. In this dissertation, entitled *States of Nature: Catastrophe, History, and the Reconstruction of Spanish America*, I have attempted to narrate this elusive history from the perspective of the sudden collapse, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, of the Spanish Empire and the emergence of what would be the modern Latin American nation-states. This account, which aims to sketch the profound changes that the concept of history endured within the anarchic aftermath that followed the independence movements, is by definition an unsettling story, given that it aims to debunk the happy narratives that the emerging nation-states used as ways of naturalizing their foundations. Rather than naturalizing history, as enlightened positivism would have it, I attempt, throughout what follows, to sketch the contours of an opposite tendency that seemed to accompany the national projects as their dark shadow: the irruption, within the concept of the natural itself, of new chronotopes of historical time. The emergence of this catastrophic temporality, which I claim has come to characterize Latin American modernity up to today, bursts out the status quo of the naturalized state, exposing its primordial substrata. More than a hundred and fifty years ago, amidst his exile in Chilean grounds, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento began his now famous *Facundo* by conjuring, out of the grounds of la pampa, the subversive figure of El Léon, Facundo: “Sombra terrible de Facundo, voy a evocarte, para que, sacudiendo el ensangrentado polvo que cubre tus cenizas, te levantes a explicarnos la vida secreta y las convulsiones internas que desgarran las entrañas de un noble pueblo! Tú posees el secreto: ¡revélanoslo!” (4) The time has perhaps come for us to shake the ground once more, to unsettle nature itself, to conjure the unhappy spectre of that central distinction which the modern State has so willingly reified: that which opposes nature to history, nature to culture. In such spirit, this dissertation aims to sketch the catastrophic
beginnings of the modern Latin American Nation-States, their eventual naturalization, and the aftershocks which as of today threaten to unmask their forgetful existence.

Beyond the Fictional State

Political history is eager to conceal the elusiveness of its object of inquiry behind the happy image of a coherent narrative. For the past twenty years, the problematic question regarding the nature of the state has been accordingly sidelined in favour of the more graspable question regarding the constitution of the nation. Taking as its basis the figure of the nation-state, political history has provided us with one of those histories of foundation, resolution and crisis to which have grown accustomed. Accordingly, the history of the nation-state, runs as follows: the foundational moment of the nineteenth century reaches a resolution in the twentieth century nationalisms, which in turn enters into crisis by the end of the century. Guided by the innovative works of Benedict Anderson and Doris Sommer, this narratological account made its way through to the political historiography of Latin America, informing – during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first years of the present one – most of the works regarding the Latin American nineteenth century. As Doris Sommer explains in her seminal book *Foundational Fictions*, the idea, which she shares with Anderson, is that both the intellectual as well as public unity of the nation-state is achieved at the imaginary level, through the stories we tell ourselves. Accordingly, confronted with the anarchic chaos of the rising republics, novels gave their readers a narrative model through which to channel their fears of chaos into dreams of stability. As Sommer brilliantly exposes, the nineteenth century romances, in proposing the heterosexual family as the resolution of the erotic dilemma, provided them with the foundational fiction upon which the Latin
American nation-states could later build their plans of modernity. This narratological history, with its image of happy endings and happy families, easily forgets, however, about the anarchic origins that gave rise to it. The fictional nation-state forgets, as Phillip Abrams had already stated in his 1977 essay *Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State*, that despite the coherent narrative that gives rise to the nation, the state remains an enigma:

The state is, then, in every sense of the term a triumph of concealment. It conceals the real history and relations of subjection behind an a-historical mask of legitimating illusion; contrives to deny the existence of connections and conflicts which would if recognised be incompatible with the claimed autonomy and integration of the state. The real official secret, however, is the secret of the non-existence of the state. (77)

Paradoxically, the danger is that the fictional contract might end up naturalizing the history of the state. Perhaps, then, the task at hand is that of suspending the fictional contract, in order to better be able to revise the nineteenth century once more, this time not from a narratological perspective, but rather from a perspective that remains faithful to the singular eventuality of the revolutionary period. As Jeremy Adelman has stated in his essay “The Age of Imperial Revolutions,” the bracketing of the nation as immediate post-cursor of the empire might lead to a new, more complex picture regarding the history of the revolutionary period: “If the nation-state is not considered the automatic post-cursor to empire, the variety of routes, including a host of “migh-have-beens,” needs to be restored to the narrative about the age of revolutions [...] In the age of imperial revolutions, events and their meanings were not so easily compressed into a
notion of historical time that yielded to the emergence, if not triumph, of nations” (320).

As such, the irruption of the modern Latin American states at the beginning of the nineteenth century must be studied as the violent act it was: as the sudden, arbitrary, violent emergence of new modes of sovereignty that disrupted the very basis of what we believed political history to be. Any political history of the Latin American nineteenth century must remain faithful to that which, following Giorgio Agamben’s reflections in *Homo Sacer*, one could call its inaugural state of exception: the arbitrary violence which paradoxically founds the modern state, and alongside it, its history. In *States of Nature: Catastrophe, History, and the Reconstruction of Spanish America*, I have attempted to suspend the fictional contract, and with it the happy image of the nation, in an attempt at a critique of the exceptionality of the event. Through an analysis of the trope of the natural catastrophe – volcanoes, earthquakes, epidemics – I have attempted to see how the sudden emergence of the modern state was accompanied by the simultaneous emergence of a radical, not to say violent, temporality which could no longer be explained by the classical rubric of natural history. “A great volcano lies at our feet” wrote Simón Bolívar in 1824 to General José Antonio Páez, amidst the anarchy of the revolutionary aftermath. His words suggest the way catastrophic imagery interwined with revolutionary rhetoric during the Age of Revolutions. Bolívar’s words also underline the shaky foundations upon which our modern historiography is based, as well as the ways in which the revolutionary period betrayed, restructured, and reframed many of the central ideas of the Enlightenment. Throughout this dissertation, I explore how this catastrophic rhetoric could be understood as being symptomatic of a crisis within the European Enlightenment itself, a crisis which in turn gave rise, not only to new modes of temporality, but also to new modes of radical subjectivity. What emerges
from this archaeology of the inaugural state of exception is never a coherent narrative like the ones Doris Sommer explores in her *Foundational Fictions*, but rather the disjointed picture of a world in which everything seems to be at stake, a world in crisis which however seems terribly contemporary. A world ready to burst out the limits of time.

Tearing the National Landscape

“What happened next bypassed his senses and went straight into his nervous system. In other words, it was over very quickly; it was pure action, a wild concatenation of events. The storm broke suddenly with a spectacular lightning bolt that traced a zig-zag arc clear across the sky.”

- Cesar Aira, An Episode in the Life of a Travelling Painter

If, narratively, the attempt at naturalizing the Latin American nation-state occurred, as Sommer suggests, through the dissemination of romances, it could be said that visually the nation-state found in landscape the dispositif capable of taming its violent periphery. As critics like W.J.T Mitchell, Jens Anderman and Gabriela Nouzeilles have noted, the conceptual figure of the landscape emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as an assemblage of nature and culture, through which the gaze of the nation-state naturalized its political existence. In landscape the nation-state found a way of harmoniously incorporating peripheral nature into its symbolic regime, projecting a natural order beyond its urban frontiers. As Jean-Luc Nancy has noted in his essay “Uncanny Landscape,” etymologically the connection between landscape, countryman and country/nation is clearly suggestive: *paisaje*, *paisano* and *país*. Constructing a landscape was accordingly a double gesture: through it, the state was
naturalized, while nature was rendered cultural. The exclusion is obvious: nature and culture teamed together at the expense and exclusion of history. It should then be no surprise that the question regarding landscape and its limits – the question regarding the explosion of the frame – runs throughout this dissertation as a constant motif. Following Cesar Aira’s fictionalized Rugendas who, as we shall see at the end of the first chapter, frustratingly attempts to paint an earthquake only to realize that an earthquake is precisely that which escapes the landscape frame, I have attempted to explore, throughout the three chapters, the ways in which natural catastrophes provided an image of nature beyond the national order of the landscape. Catastrophe signaled the moment in which “the landscape contract” collapsed, forcing nature and culture to expose their historicity. This task of rethinking nature beyond the landscape must take, however, the idea of the landscape as its point of departure. Here I wish to follow the project for a coming theory of landscape as it is sketched by Jens Andermann in his essay “Paisaje: Image, entorno, ensamble”. There, after tracing the emergence in the late eighteenth century of landscape as political apparatus, Anderman suggests that despite its exterior harmony, landscape holds an internal fissure, a tension that threatens to dissolve its initial conservatism, hinting in turn at the possibility of another politics of landscape:

El impacto cataclísmico de esta mutación fundamental en la relación entre sociedad y ambiente todavía resuena entre nosotros, como bien se sabe, tanto en las aporías con que se enfrenta hoy la racionalidad técnica de Occidente como en sus críticas ecologistas de cuño “conservacionista”, ya que ambas presuponen a su modo la separación ergonómica en su construcción del mundo natural como
exterior a la relación social. Desde luego, no hay “retorno a la naturaleza” en estos términos; por el contrario, lo que habría que recuperar es una noción del paisaje que supiera dar cuenta de su posición intersticial y oscilante entre imagen y entorno, como aquello que ensambla la construcción perceptiva con los efectos que ésta produce en la materialidad de lo que abarca, siendo ella misma efecto de la luminiscencia móvil del mundo material. Paisaje-ensamble, o imagen-movimiento: es hacia esa cinemática natural pos-kantiana, creo, que habría que avanzar a fin de construir la historicidad del paisaje y, así, dotarlo nuevamente de futuridad. (14)

Andermann suggests that the task of a future theory of landscape remains that of disclosing its historicity, of opening itself to a future-to-come. Interestingly, for him this future theory responds to an initial “cataclysmic impact” whose resonance can still be felt today, and to which we owe the intersticial position of landscape as something halfway between image and environment, between culture and nature. Namely, what is disclosed here is the catastrophic rhetoric that surrounds the opening of landscape to the historical event. If what emerged in the eighteenth century as landscape was initially characterized by its lack of action, by its pure representativeness, perhaps what will come to light in the future theory of landscape is the possibility of a catastrophic landscape where things do happen, a theory of landscape where there exists the possibility of novelty. Perhaps what Andermann imagines above as a “cinematographic” theory of landscape, as a historiography of the “moving-image” is, borrowing Deleuze’s concept, the advent of nature as locus of eventuality. It remains my hope that this dissertation reads somehow like the cinematographic script of the moving-image that
Andermann foreshadows. Through the catastrophic landscapes that the chapters sketch – quaking grounds, erupting mountains, plagued bodies – it is my aim to sketch a history of Latin American landscape that escapes the panoptical regime of state representation, and instead points towards that space of eventuality which Jean-Luc Nancy has liken to the uncanny. This uncanny history is then a subterraneous genealogy of the ways nature dismantled, once and again, the frame by which the state aimed to incorporate it into its teleological project of enlightened modernization.

Nature, A Space Of Eventuality

“What first comes to light in the nineteenth century is a simple form of human historicity – the fact that man as such is exposed to the event.”  
- Michel Foucault

Historians tend to explain the collapse, in the nineteenth century, of transatlantic empires as a consequence of a series of economic and political conditions: the spread of abolitionist ideas and their effect upon slave trade, the crisis of mercantilism that ensued from inter-imperial conflict and, in the particular case of the Spanish Empire, the rise of Napoleon and the abdication, in 1808, of the Spanish King. Although these reasons are inevitably linked to the demise of imperial modes of sovereignty, I would like to venture another hypothesis, one which links the historiographical possibility of revolutionary events to the epistemological framework of the late Enlightenment. Until the late eighteenth century, the notion of history – governed by the discourse of natural history – was governed by the image of the catalogue, the tableau of knowledge capable of representing the whole realm of nature in a synchronic table of differences. In the image
of the Linnaean “chain of being” one found the hierarchical, not to say monarchic, image of a society that had been able to erase change and time from the historical picture. Until the collapse of the paradigm of natural history in the late eighteen century, history and nature coincided in such a way as to render true historicity impossible. As Michel Foucault has pointed out in *The Order of Things*, it was this classical configuration, the absolute mediation between nature and history, what collapsed in the nineteenth century, giving birth to historicity as we now know it:

> It is this configuration that from the nineteenth century onward changes entirely; the theory of representation disappears as the universal foundation of all possible orders; language as the spontaneous tabula, the primary grid of things, as an indispensable link between representations and things, is eclipsed in turn; a profound historicity penetrates into the heart of things, isolates and defines them in their own coherence, imposes upon them the forms of order implied by the continuity of time. (xxiii)

As Foucault suggests, with the collapse of natural history a crisis of representation ensued. The origins of modern historiography, of our modern concept of history as the written inscription of events within the teleological timeline, date from such a crisis. As a result of the failure of the tableau to account for historical change, a gap emerged between nature and history which in turn opened a space of eventuality: between nature and history, in that crack that had opened between them as if the result of an earthquake, the historical event became a possibility. But how could this event be imagined? Throughout this dissertation I attempt to delve into the complexities regarding this question, exploring its relationship to the contemporaneous collapse of
the Spanish American Empire. How did the participants of the revolutionary movements, European, Creole or African, imagine the political events they themselves were witnessing? This dissertation suggests that the trope of the natural catastrophe emerged within such political landscape as a way of figuring the historical event. While, back in Europe, Enlightened historiographers – represented by figures such as Kant, Hegel, Ranke and Michelet – were busy founding the discipline of modern historicism, of teleological history, back in the Americas social protagonists were busy “blasting open the continuum of history,” to use Walter Benjamin’s words. From Alexander Von Humboldt to Simón Bolívar, from José María de Heredia to Dr. Atl, from François Mackandal to an army of diligent mosquitoes, this dissertations aims to sketch the ways in which the political actors and artistic witnesses of nineteenth century Latin American politics saw in nature a mirror image of the historical violence which surrounded them, a violence which coincided with the state of exception that marked the foundational period of the modern states. What interests me in this spectral history is the ways in which the political event figured another possible historiography, one which targeted three of the main tenets of Enlightened historicism: the idea of progress, the idea of representation and the idea of the sovereign body. Each of the three chapters of the dissertation reads as a critique of these Enlightened ideals. The first chapter, which tackles the figure of the earthquake, attempts a critique of the notion of representation, in its relationship to the shaky political grounds of Spanish American Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It relates this crisis of representation to the epistemological changes that marked the collapse of natural history, and the emergence of another, catastrophic temporality. The second chapter, which deals with the figure of the volcano, attempts a critique of the notion of progress, through a study of the
emergence of a deep, vertical temporality, which saw in the birth of archaeology its main epistemological proponent. The third and last chapter, which tackles the elusive figure of the epidemic, attempts a critique of the notion of the sovereign body through a study of the biopolitical logic of virality that marked the Haitian Revolution as well as its eventual political aftermath. In what follows I delve further into the specifics of each of this three chapter as well as their roles within the dissertation. Before, however, I wish to risk a brief comment on contemporaneous philosophical debates here targeted.

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Despite its initial nineteenth century focus, this dissertation aims to be deeply rooted in the present. Like the earthquake whose expansive waves propagate into the future through the power of the aftershock, the historical event – as Alain Badiou has mathematically elucidated – finds confirmation in its future repetition. Perhaps, one could say, it is only today that we are able to witness and comprehend the implications of that which Mary Louise Pratt, in her book Imperial Eyes, has called the nineteenth century “reinvention of América as nature” (118). States of Nature: Catastrophe, History, and the Reconstruction of Spanish America takes this consideration seriously, structuring each chapter dually as both a shock and an aftershock. The first part of each chapter, the shock, explores the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of a particular historical discourse regarding catastrophe, while the aftershock provides a theoretical close-reading of a particular twentieth century novel which explores the present day ramifications of this catastrophic discourse. These “aftershock readings” pay particular attention to the ways the Latin American nature was reread, in the twentieth century, through the lens of modern technologies such as telegraphy, photography, and
cybernetics. I would claim that what appears in those technological readings of nature are precisely the discontents of Latin America’s project of modernization, as it was conceived throughout the nineteenth century.

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It shouldn’t be a surprise then that this dissertation, despite taking the nineteenth century as its object of study, revolves around a series of contemporary theoretical debates. To some extent, my bet throughout has been that we might get a different image of the nineteenth century if we read it through the theoretical lens of the twentieth century. More specifically, the reader will find that the dissertation stands, not only in dialogue with present day debates regarding environmental catastrophism, but more importantly, with the current philosophical debate regarding that which has come to be known as the theory of the event. What, then, is an event? It is this question, or the multiple paths opened up by this question, that the present dissertation humbly attempts to answer. Let’s take however, as a point of departure, the definition given to us by Slavoj Zizek in his essay on the topic:

This is an event at its purest and most minimal: something socking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation […] At first approach, an event is thus the effect that seems to exceed its causes – and the space of an event is that
which opens up by the gap that separates an effect from its causes.

(2-3)

The event is then a hiatus within causality, a gap that violently opens within the narrative. It is easy to see how natural catastrophes fit this definition. One can also see, how, to some extent, they have become the paradigmatic modern event in contemporary society. However, what interests me throughout this dissertation is something more subtle: the fact that each type of natural catastrophe allowed me to approximate a different sort of historical discourse. This typology of catastrophe has led me to differentiate, throughout the three chapter of the thesis, between three modes of eventuality. The first, represented by the earthquake, embodies a tradition that perhaps starts with Marx and today finds in Badiou its main contemporary proponent. It suggests that the event is the coming to light of the unpresentable, of that which until now had been invisible. The event, one could say, opens the present to the possibility of an unforeseen future. The second type of event, represented by the volcanic eruption, sketches a psychoanalytical tradition that could be said to start with Freud and to have found in Jacques Lacan its twentieth century equivalent. It suggests that the event is the coming to light of a repressed past, the emergence of a vertical time that discloses the lost origin of the present. As such, it remains an archaeological endeavour. And lastly, the third type of event would be that which is represented by the viral outbreak, and is embodied in a biopolitical tradition that perhaps starts with French sociologist Gabriel Tarde and which finds in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari its twentieth century culmination. It suggests that the event is the emergence of a multiplicity capable of spreading virally over the body politic. As such, it gives us an imagine of a rhizomatic present. Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Biopolitics are then the three main
discursive paradigms that this dissertation proposes as capable of sustaining a reading of the revolutionary event as it emerges at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Latin America. Each of these discourses not only gives a distinct image of history. They each provide us with a different answer to the fundamental question: Who is the subject of history?

The Return of the Subject

Alongside the proclaimed death of the subject, the second half of the twentieth century saw the disappearance of history as the ultimate ground of possible change. Roland Barthes’ now famous dictum in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” could very well be read as a pronouncement upon the question regarding the subject as agent of history. However, it is perhaps in the work of Michel Foucault where we see with greater clarity the sudden disappearance of the historical subject as well as its return eventual return. This intuition is reaffirmed everywhere today. From the Badiou’s Theory of the Subject to Zizek’s The Ticklish Subject, the subject seems to have returned and with it, history as the ultimate foundation for change. This subject that returns is not, however, the autonomous subject of the Enlightenment, but rather a saturated subject, a catastrophic subject who exceeds the limits that enlightened reason had imposed upon it. The subject that returns is, to paraphrase Badiou, the result of the shattering power of the event. Accordingly, this dissertation is interested in tracking the ways in which, amidst the anarchic chaos that characterized the aftermath of the wars of independence, new ways of radical subjectivity emerged in relationship to the figure of the natural catastrophe. If, as Alain Badiou has suggested throughout his works and
with particular emphasis in Being and Event, the subject constitutes himself through his fidelity towards an eventual truth, what has interested me throughout the thesis are the modes of subjectivity that arose from the different truths disclosed throughout the revolutionary process. Amidst the ruins left by the earthquake, alongside the volcano ashes and the desolate landscape left by the epidemic, subjects were being formed. As elsewhere, the dissertation provides three models of subjectivity, which correspond to each of the natural catastrophes explored. In the first chapter, the earthquake comes to figure the shattering event against which the subject arises as militant by remaining faithful to that within it which remains unrepresentable. The chapter takes the figure of Simón Bolívar as its exemplary figure. In the second chapter, the volcano comes to figure the explosive event against which the subject emerges as mournful witness of an archaic knowledge. The political fear is that he might cross the line separating mourning and melancholia. José María Heredia becomes the figure of the exemplary mournful, not to say melancholic, historical subject. Lastly, throughout the third chapter, the epidemic comes to figure the sprawling event against which the subject arises as a multitude capable of destabilizing the social contract. François Mackandal becomes the exemplary figure of this sort of viral subjectivity. These three figures – Simón Bolívar, José María Heredia and François Mackandal – are not, however, alone. They are the conceptual personae that make visible three distinct modalities of history against which a multitude of other historical subjects emerge. Always excessive, always exceptional, these subjects trace a history that always remains in tension with the history of the State. In States of Nature: Nature, History and the Reconstruction of Spanish America, this political history of the State against the State, takes the form of the following three chapters:
Earthquakes

The first part of *Earthquakes: The Shaky Grounds of an American History* attempts to sketch the emergence, in the late-eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, of an epistemic crisis regarding historical representation that in turn gave rise to what we today conceive as modern history. Taking the Lisbon Earthquake as its point of departure, and Voltaire’s phrase “If this is the best of possible worlds, what are the others?” as its motto, it attempts to better illuminate the ways in which, after the collapse of the paradigm natural history, nature came to be seen as a locus for historical events. It takes as its archival object of study one of the most illuminating friendships in the history of the Spanish American Wars of Independence: that between Simón Bolívar and Alexander Von Humboldt. Through an alternating analysis of texts by Humboldt, the thinker, and Bolívar, the politician, the chapter attempts to sketch the emergence of a new paradigm of historical experience as well as of political praxis which, breaking loose of the stronghold of theology, was finally able to envision the future as an open realm of contingency. The chapter takes as its founding figure the rhetorical image of the earthquake as it appears in Simón Bolívar’s “Cartagena Manifesto,” the manifesto that saw him emerge into the public scenario as a political subject amidst the ruins of the First Venezuelan Republic left by the Maundy Thursday Earthquake of 1812. Departing from this image of revolution as necessary catastrophe, and placing Bolívar’s rhetoric in dialogue with Humboldt’s diaries of his trips to South America, the chapter attempts to understand how natural catastrophes came to figure, within the turbulent political and philosophical atmosphere of the late Enlightenment, the possibility of another mode of historicity, one which I here call the historical sublime in allusion to the aesthetic sensibilities in vogue at the time. These reflections regarding new modes
of temporality and historicity are then woven into broader reflections regarding the violent foundation of the modern nation states, their founding state of exception and their subsequent naturalization.

In *Photographing the Earthquake: On Cesar Aira’s Rugendas*, the aftershock for this first chapter, I move to the twentieth century to see how the catastrophic figure of the earthquake was reimagined by twentieth century technological imagination. Through a close reading of Cesar Aira’s novel *Episodio en la Vida de un Pintor Viajero*, I attempt to see how the modern political event found in photography its adequate medium of expression. Aira’s novel narrates the journey of the famous German landscape painter Johann Moritz Rugendas through the pampas of Argentina and Chile. Like in many of his other novels, however, the historic setting of Aira’s novel quickly shows itself to be a mere pretext for the author’s whimsical imagination. Aira’s Rugendas, no longer merely a landscape painter, becomes obsessed with the idea of painting the impossible: an earthquake. Departing from the image of such impossibility, I attempt to read the novel in dialogue with the modern debates concerning landscape, barbarism and the archival foundation of the modern state. Halfway through the novel, a frustrated Rugendas is struck by a thunder. Disfigured, ashamed, he finds refuge in a black mantilla he places over his face. Only then, by turning into a *camera obscura*, by turning his eye into a photographic eye, is he able to begin to paint, not only the earthquake which had until then eluded him, but an even more elusive subject: the indigenous *malón*, the indigenous raid which, from time to time, violently crosses the frontier, barbarically disrupting the limits of State representation. This aftershock then reads as an exploration of the ways in which photography, as the preferred medium for representing the modern political
event, both served as the foundation for the modern archival State, as well as pointed towards that catastrophic threshold beyond which the archival State ceased to exist.

Volcanoes

The first part of Volcanoes: Emergencies of an Archaeological Modernity explores the instauration, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, of a Mesoamerican archaeological imaginary. Taking as its point of departure a close reading of José María Heredia’s poem “En el Teocalli de Cholula” the chapter establishes the dual figure of the volcanic pyramid as the archaeological symbol standing for Mexico’s conflictive modernist project: a project which, despite looking towards the future as its goal, is constantly forced to bear witness to its spectral past. The idea of a public secret, of a secret origin that now walks spectrally amidst the living, is discussed in its relationship to a politics of mourning and melancholia, as it has recently been thought of in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis. Once the central figure of the volcanic pyramid is established, the rest of the chapter unfolds as a genealogy of how this symbol traversed that which could be call Mexico’s long nineteenth century: the time spanning from Mexico’s wars of Independence (1810-1821) up to the Mexican Revolution of and its aftermath (1910-1929). After the founding moment of the archaeological symbol in José María Heredia’s poem is discussed, the chapter proceeds to trace the symbol’s reappearance in the works of Augustu’s Le Plongeon and Alice Dixion, two British antiquarians who, from 1873 to 1885, explored the Yucatán Peninsula as part of the archaeological works regarding that which, following the catastrophic myth of Atlantis, they took to be the lost origin of civilization. Through works such as Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx or Sacred Mysteries Among the Mayas and the Quichéş, they were able to expound the idea that
Mayan Civilization was in fact the lost civilization of Mú, the original civilization whose inhabitants had, after the original catastrophe, spread over the corners of the globe. In this second moment, what interests me is the way Le Plongeon and Dixon were able to weave the archaeological symbol of the volcanic pyramid into a series of allegories regarding the origins of universal history. This question concerning civilization, universality and history is then woven into the third moment of the chapter, which deals with the life and works of the infamous muralist, painter and traveller Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Atl. What interests me there is how the idea of catastrophe is woven into the political life of a man at once absolutely modern and terribly archaic: a modern man in battle with progress. Through this third moment, I track how the volcano comes to figure, within Murillo’s catastrophic iconography, both the imminent collapse of civilization as well as its glorious rebirth. In Dr. Atl’s megalomania, I would claim, one can read the impasses of Mexico’s modernist project.

In On Clouds, Telegraphs and Volcanoes, the aftershock of this second chapter, I move to the twentieth century to see how the catastrophic figure of the volcano was reimagined by twentieth century technological imagination. Through a close reading of Malcolm Lowry’s 1947 novel Under the Volcano, I attempt to sketch the ways in which a sense of imminent catastrophe, of derailment, seemed to assault, throughout the post-revolutionary aftermath, Mexico’s rectilinear modern history. The novel, which takes place during the Día de los Muertos of 1938 and has a drunken British consul as its protagonist, is accordingly a novel about international relations: about a European who drunkenly mistakes himself for a Mexican, about letters that never reach their addressee, about telegraph wires that suggest rectilinear paths that end up thwarting
into unexpected places. Under the Volcano is a novel about broken relations in the midst of war. Telegraphy, modernity’s sense of instantaneous communication, fundamental for a universal history, is here placed in question. Communication, not to say progress, is always somehow interrupted. My reading of the novel is then an analysis of the ways in which modernity gets interrupted by small catastrophes that thwart its linear progress. Throughout the novel this latent violence gets symbolized by the omnipresent figure of the two volcanoes whose presence the novel’s title invokes: Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. Their presence punctuates the landscape, always pointing towards a spectral past, an archaic origin that floods the present, forcing us to think of what that has been left behind. It then comes as no surprise that the protagonist is said to have been at work, throughout the years of his drunken stupor, in a book about the catastrophic origins of Atlantis. For Under the Volcano is precisely that book, a novel about the impossibility of rectilinear progress in a country condemned to remember its founding violence.

Epidemics

The first part of Epidemics: Virality and the Outbreaks of Modern Sovereignty explores the instauration, at the end of the eighteenth century, of a biopolitical discourse regarding virality and contagion. It analyzes the ways in which the figure of the epidemic altered the enlightened image of the body as the basis of sovereignty. The viral body, contagious and prolific, came to be seen, within the politicized atmosphere of the French Revolution, as the basis for radical political action. As such, the chapter begins by studying the biopolitical discourse regarding virality which surrounded the outbreak of yellow fever that assaulted Napoleon’s forces as they attempted to regain hold of the
island of Haiti. It then goes on to sketch its common discursive grounds with other scientific phenomena in vogue at the time, giving particular emphasis to mesmerism, or animal magnetism, as it became know both in France as well as Saint Domingue. In this first instance, I attempt to see how this biopolitical discourse sketched the emergence of what I go on to call, following the works of Roberto Esposito, a politics of immunity: namely, the ways in which the modern State, rather than an uniform sovereign body, emerged as a territory in constant negotiation with its internal latent virus, a territory traverse by zones of intensity. I then go on to discuss the naturalist novel as one of the many immunological apparausates through which the naturalist State was able to positively regulate the viral flows of desire that traversed it, threatening its existence. Through a close reading of two of Manuel Zeno Gandía’s novels pertaining to the quartet *Crónicas para un Mundo Enfermo*, I attempt to see how the naturalist novel served as an apparatus for upholding the law once the classical model of imperial sovereignty collapsed. In these two novels, *La Charca* and *Garduña*, the question regarding the productive predisposition of the working classes’ bodies seems to be linked with immunological concerns regarding what the author calls “social cancers,” internal multiplicities which, according the naturalist vision of those in power, threatened to lead the social body into a state of degeneration, laziness and stupidity. Against such views, a politics of desire and contagion are sketched, which takes the modern multitude or crowd as its viral subject. The viral body becomes a figure for a new mode of politics which in turn provides us with a new temporality: that of the rhizomatic present.
In *Viral Allegories: AIDS, and the Ends of the Immunological State*, the aftershock of this third chapter I move to the twentieth century to see how the catastrophic figure of the epidemic was reimagined by twentieth century technological imagination. Through a close reading of Reinaldo Arenas’ posthumous novel *El Color del Verano*, published in 1991, one year after the author’s death, I attempt to read how the figure of AIDS – Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome – restructured the way we think about the body, its relationship to State power, as well as its place within the realm of writing. *El Color del Verano*, a novel written by Arenas while suffering from the disease, is in itself – I claim – a novel which stages writing as a desiring machine which breaks down the regulative apparatus of the nineteenth century naturalist novel. Through an analysis of the figure of contagion as it appears throughout the novel, I explored how virality came to be seen, within our computerized society, as mode of political agency which counteracted the hegemonic powers of the modern State. The novel, in fact, stages the dissolution of Fidel Castro’s government amidst a multitudinous carnival. It envisions a politics of the multitude capable of reframing, not only our concept of the body, but our idea of what writing might be.
Chapter 1: Earthquakes
The Shaky Grounds of a Latin American History

"Terrible earthquakes have transformed the shape of the ground; the city I described has disappeared."
- Alexander Von Humboldt

"If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?"
- Voltaire, Candide

Westphalia, Holland, Lisbon, Buenos Aires, Paraguay, El Dorado, Surinam, England, Venice, Paris, Transylvania, Turkey—the errant cartography traced by Voltaire’s Candide, ou L’Optimisme (1759) shows a contingent world shaken by the power of the first global catastrophe. Two worlds—the Old and the New, the necessary and the contingent—are brought together by a central event: the earthquake that shook Lisbon on the first of November, 1755, in an unprecedented manner, leaving the city in ruins and the world out of joint. Although the intellectual debate—which famously brought together enlightened minds such as the young Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire—has been rightly studied in books like Susan Neiman’s Evil in Modern Thought as a convulsion within the European intelligentsia, one fact must be underlined: the earthquake that struck Lisbon the Saturday morning of All Saint’s Day had its epicenter in the Atlantic. Rather than merely as a continental event, the Lisbon Earthquake must be understood as the paradigm of those transatlantic events that in the coming century would shake the imperial foundations of the transatlantic world.
Lisbon, November 1, 1755: from the tip of the Old World and the courts of its empire a seismic wave arises that shatters the static optimism of Leibnizian theodicy. As critics have duly noted, Voltaire’s picaresque—in its attack on Leibnizian optimism, in asking, “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?”—represents an attempt by enlightened thinkers to break into the closed world of enlightened theodicy. A world where evil is let loose is a world where contingency reigns. When the best of all possible worlds collapses, what appears is the historicity of other possible worlds. As Pangloss’s errant itinerary suggests, a reconfiguration of the relation between ground and representation, symptomatic of a crisis within the empire of letters, is set in motion by the advent of catastrophe. Voltaire’s question regarding the possibility and nature of other worlds, implicitly a question about the possibility of a universal history, calls for an American reading. It demands a study of the historical as well as the discursive repercussions that the emergence of America as an independent region during the Spanish American wars of independence had within European Enlightenment philosophy. In this chapter I wish to explore the role that the earthquake—both in its literal as well as its figurative aspect—came to have within the emergence of a cartography of contingent worlds that shook the continent at the turn of the century: from Humboldt’s paradoxical fascination with the natural disruption of his beloved chain of being to Simón Bolívar’s rhetoric concerning the 1812 Earthquake of Caracas in his Cartagena Manifesto, I shall try to sketch how, in the nineteenth century, nature and politics came to be interlinked in such a way that natural catastrophes, understood as political events, came to figure the opening of the world to unforeseen possibilities. The world is out of joint: the play upon Hamlet’s worlds describe both the situation of the transatlantic empire at the turn of the nineteenth century as well as the historicity
brought on by the earthquake. Rewriting Reinhart Koselleck’s well-known definition of modernity as ongoing crisis, one could perhaps dare say that the nineteenth century sees the emergence of a new mode of transatlantic modernity as the dialectics between catastrophe and restitution, between shock and aftershock. In the advent of catastrophe nature ceases to be natural in order to become historic. Today, when ecological concerns seem to gain preeminence and an apocalyptic sense rules the popular imaginary, from videos games to blockbuster movies, it seems apt to return to the nineteenth century in order to see how this knot between nature and politics, mediated by the figure of the natural catastrophe, expressed a new paradigm of historical experience.

Tabula Rasa: The Quaking of Representation

In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western Culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.

—Foucault, The Order of Things

The young Alexander von Humboldt who in 1799 prepares to depart from Europe—the land of his early studies—is still a naturalist. Like many of his contemporaries, he sits at a threshold between the taxonomical science of Linnaeus and an extensive, uncharted land of knowledge yet to be deciphered. He dreams, however, not unlike Linnaeus, of sketching the “chain of being,” that impossible map of a world in which harmony presides, in which reality is interwoven by the swift movement of a tender hand.
America, the new continent, remains the blank page upon which he can project such illusions of continuity. As a naturalist, he travels to America with the intention of naturalizing history. He is unable to imagine that to some extent it will be nature that will turn historical. Aboard the *Pizarro*, awaiting his departure, he writes:

> In a few hours we sail around Cape Finisterre. I shall collect plants and fossils and make astronomic observations. But that’s not the main purpose of my expedition—I shall try to find out how the forces of nature interact upon one another and how the geographic environment influences plant and animal life. In other words, I must find out about the unity of nature. (ix)

History, however, seems to conspire against this vision of unity and harmony. It is the turn of the century: soon, a revolutionary wave that has already begun at Saint-Domingue will extend throughout the whole continent with the same expansive force to which Humboldt refers in his letters as the forces of nature. For the young Humboldt the question remains: can this wave be contained within the limits of unity? Can the forces of nature be organized within the stability of a tableau of knowledge? It is a question of order and stability; a question of politics. Natural history, as the science of observation and measurement, as the science of classification and cataloguing, constitutes a political archive in itself. Humboldt, however, does not know this yet. Prepared with his notebooks, chronometers, telescopes, sextants, pendulums, and other scientific instruments, the young naturalist leaves for the tropics with the hope of measuring and classifying the excesses of their exuberant nature. Soon, he would find the volatile reality of a continent whose latent political turmoil would translate into a compulsive recording of natural catastrophes. As he himself states in his diary:
When shocks from an earthquake are felt, and the earth we think of as stable shakes on its foundations, one second is long enough to destroy long-held illusions. It is like waking painfully from a dream. We think we have been tricked by nature’s seeming stability; we listen out for the smallest noise; for the first time we mistrust the very ground we walk on. (131)

Humboldt encounters a convulsive continent. The figure of the earthquake designates the physical phenomenon that so clearly interested a naturalist like Humboldt, while providing a philosophical metaphor for the political events that would end up shattering the historical ground and, with it, the tabula that had theretofore organized the cosmos of naturalists like Linnaeus. In the abyss created between the event and its figure, between the earthquake and the extent of its metaphorical force, lies the true revolutionary potential of the natural catastrophe: a whole system of historical semiotics is set in motion.

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“It is like waking painfully from a dream.” The comparison Humboldt makes in his diary between the earthquake and the illusion-breaking moment of awakening evokes the complex metaphorical power of the figure of the earthquake.¹ Catastrophe breaks the

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¹ Susan Buck-Morss’s treatment of the topic in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* is illuminating in this sense: “When an era crumbles, ‘History breaks down into images, not into stories.’ Without the narration of continuous progress, the images of the past resemble night dreams, the ‘first mark’ of which, Freud tells us, is their emancipation from the ‘spatial and temporal order of events.’ Such images, as dream images, are complex webs of memory and desire wherein past experience is rescued and, perhaps, redeemed” (68). What is at stake in the birth of sublime historiography is precisely the emergence of a non-narrative moment within historiography.
illusion of a stable ground of representation, bringing forth the possibility of those “other worlds” mentioned in Voltaire’s *Candide*. By unmasking the illusory nature of the stable tableau of knowledge, it exposes the contingency of that ground of representation under which naturalists had so far archived reality. The emergence of the earthquake metaphor can then be understood as a symptom of the crisis that had assaulted the paradigm of knowledge that until then had determined Europe’s understanding of Latin America—*natural history*. As Foucault states in *The Order of Things*, the emergence in the seventeenth century of the classical episteme through the works of Aldrovandi, Buffon, and Linnaeus, among others, had been determined by the naturalization of history:

> For natural history to appear, it was not necessary for nature to become denser and more obscure, to multiply its mechanisms to the point of acquiring the opaque weight of a history that can only be retraced and described, without any possibility of measuring it, calculating it, or explaining it; it was necessary—and this is entirely the opposite—for History to become Natural. (128)

In natural history, nature and history had converged within the representative grounds of the tableau: “The natural history room and the garden, as created in the Classical period, replace the circular procession of the ‘show’ with the arrangement of things in a table” (131). This naturalization of history, as Foucault goes on to argue, was only able to subsist within a semiotic system that had guaranteed the stability of representation. This stability began to falter at the turn of the century. The tableau could no longer be taken for granted: “It is in this classified time, in this squared and spatialized
development, that the historians of the nineteenth century were to undertake the
creation of a history that could at last be ‘true’—in other words, liberated from Classical
erationality, from its ordering and theodicy: history restored to the irruptive violence of
time” (132). Rather than the naturalization of history, the nineteenth century sees the
opening of nature to the “irruptive violence of time.” Nature itself, behaving erratically,
called for a tabula rasa, a putting into question of the act of representation.²

As Martin Rudwick has shown in *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of
Geohistory in the Age of Revolution*, the sudden irruption of time within the catalogue of
natural history is an event in the history of ideas that coincides with the period
historians have called the “Age of Revolutions.” At the same time that the imperial
cartography begins to crumble, the atemporal tableau of natural history begins to totter.
As Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, if the Classical period had naturalized
history, modernity responds by introducing time into the atemporal tableau. History
regains its place by rendering nature historical:

> It is this configuration that from the nineteenth century onward
> changes entirely; the theory of representation disappears as the
> universal foundation of all possible orders; language as the
> spontaneous tabula, the primary grid of things, as an indispensable

² Tracing its origin all the way back to Aristotle’s treatise *On the Soul*, passing through
Avicenna’s writings, the figure of the tabula rasa had reentered modern discussions
mainly through John Locke’s 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where it
was used to illustrate what would later become the “nature versus nurture” debate: if the
mind was like a tabula rasa, then existence had to be explained in relation to
circumstance rather than essence, in relation to accidents rather than substances. With
this argument Locke was, in a way, foreshadowing the empiricist critique of creationist
theodicies that would eventually lead to a historiography of nature. For a condensed
history of the concept, see Steven Pinker.
link between representations and things, is eclipsed in turn; a profound historicity penetrates into the heart of things, isolates and defines them in their own coherence, imposes upon them the forms of order implied by the continuity of time. (xxiii)

The nineteenth century sees the emergence of a new mode of historicity, of a new relationship between nature and history. Time has violently interrupted the catalogue of knowledge. As Jason Wilson has noted, Humboldt’s voyage to the New World must then be understood in its paradoxical complexity: his project sketches the aporias of a naturalist who suddenly finds himself immersed in the trembling grounds of history. His prose, with its frequent allusions to catastrophes and its hyperbolic style, is symptomatic of an era for which the unity of nature, the great chain of being of Linnean taxonomy, has become an object of nostalgic desire rather than an object of study. Awoken from the dream of representation, Humboldt witnesses in the constant catastrophes that assault the New World the struggle of forces that battle at the surface of that tabula rasa called history. But he will only realize this in 1834—as he writes his Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America, he remembers with nostalgia the friends that he has lost in the wars of independence. Only then will the figure of the earthquake come to signify for him the natural power of the historical event. The earthquake will signify not only the personal awakening of the naturalist, but also the political awakening of a whole continent.

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Waking up from a dream, however, is never easy. As the practice of psychoanalysis shows, waking up is primordially a hermeneutical labour: the subject is given the task of interpreting what his dreams have ciphered. As Hayden White has noted in Metahistory,
historical experience, as it is transfigured in the nineteenth century, seems to work similarly: it is within this abyss between the event and its interpretation, between the shock and the aftershock, that the semiotic machine of history is put in motion. Humboldt would personally experience the force of this aftershock effect within his own writing. When Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative of the Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, the three-volume memoirs of his travels to the New World, was published in 1834, more than three decades had elapsed since his voyage. The initial impressions of the eager disciple of Linnaeus had traversed the dense web of history. If, as John Lynch claims in *The Spanish American Revolutions*, the revolutions of independence span from 1808 to 1826, Humboldt left America before the revolutions and wrote about his trip after their conclusion. The atmosphere of latent political turmoil that the young Humboldt had experienced as a mere disturbance of his purely scientific pursuit had since become a continental revolutionary wave that led to the wars of independence that would turn many of his former friends, among them Simón Bolívar, into continental heroes. The seemingly abstract nature of the debate regarding the nature of the New World—the famous *Querelle d’Amerique* that brought together thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, the Comte de Buffon, Antonio de Ulloa, and even Hegel—had acquired a political dimension. Recounting his departure from Caracas, his memory links revolution and catastrophe, nature and ruins:

> The memory of this period is today more painful than it was years ago. In those remote countries our friends have lost their lives in

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3 For the paradigmatic historical reading of the *Querelle d’Amerique* and its main protagonists, see Gerbi and Cañizares-Esguerra’s *How to Write the History of the New World*, a fascinating account that traces the precursors of the historical period I study. For Humboldt’s precursors, see Cañizares-Esguerra’s “How Derivative was Humboldt?”
the bloody revolutions that gave them freedom and then alternatively deprived them of it. The house we used to live in is now a heap of rubble. Terrible earthquakes have transformed the shape of the ground; the city I described has disappeared. (142)

Humboldt’s use of the trope of the earthquake is illuminating: political catastrophe turns history into a heap of rubble. From the earthquake that destroyed Cumaná to the volcanic eruptions on the island of Guadalupe, Humboldt’s retrospective account seems at times to be more of an encyclopedia of catastrophes than a catalogue of nature. Humboldt’s archive had felt the first tremors: the \textit{chain of being} had been disrupted by a series of political events that deserved to be called natural catastrophes. Nature had retrospectively turned revolutionary. The earthquake becomes a metaphor for the tottering paradigm of natural history itself: it comes to signify the moment of erasure of the tableau, the instant in which the stability of the picture becomes the pure potentiality of the tabula rasa. What is registered here under the name of \textit{catastrophe} is a new relationship between temporality and meaning, a new relationship between nature, history, and the archive. Following recent discussions—from Hayden White to Alain Badiou—this retrospective view of history under the trope of natural catastrophe discloses the new structure of the revolutionary event. Discussing the metaphor of the earthquake in Heinrich Von Kleist’s 1807 “The Earthquake in Chile,” Werner Hamacher argues that “[w]hat first comes to light in the nineteenth century is a simple form of human historicity—the fact that man as such is exposed to the event” (370). Catastrophe presents itself as the event that disrupts the continuity of the catalogue, the harmony of its taxonomy, leaving in its place a pure multiplicity. This notion of the revolutionary event as pure multiplicity, as interruption, demands a new reading of the canonical texts
of the independence movements. One could, however, object: is not a natural catastrophe, and in this case the figure of the earthquake, merely a metaphor, a trope for an event? This objection ignores the power of metaphor: in the absence of the tableau that until then had secured the knot between nature and history, the trope of the natural catastrophe came to work as their mediating force. As Hans Blumenberg has shown, a metaphor is always more than a mere embellishment: it determines a paradigm.⁴

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“When shocks from an earthquake are felt, and the earth we think of as stable shakes on its foundations, one second is long enough to destroy long-held illusions”: the earthquake metaphor is not, like others, merely a metaphor, merely a rhetorical strategy that leaves the semantic table untouched, but rather the instant in which the whole system of representation – the tableaux itself – as such enters into crisis. Werner Hamacher, in his essay *The Quaking of Presentation*, which delves into the philosophical implications of Heinrich Von Kleist’s 1807 *The Earthquake in Chile*, has explored the complexity of the philosophical metaphor of the earthquake as well as its implications for thought. Kleist’s story takes place amidst the earthquake that stroke Santiago de Chile the 13th of May, 1647. It concerns the fortune of two lovers, Jerónimo Rugera and Donna Josephe, who have been sentenced to death by beheading as a result of their illicit affair. As Josephe proceeds to her execution and as Jerónimo plans to hang himself, an earthquake shakes the foundation of the city, reducing everything to ruins. However, not everything is

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⁴ In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Hans Blumenberg explores the connection between the discursive layer of metaphor and the material practices of the underlying culture, as well as the processes through which a metaphor comes to establish a paradigm of knowledge. This notion of a paradigm of knowledge, similar to that of Thomas Kuhn, suggest that what is at stake here is something like Michel Foucault’s notion of a discursive formation: the relationship between the language field and political actions.
tragedy within the city. The catastrophe has saved the lovers: by a fortuitous coincidence, the collision of two buildings produces the accidental archway upon which Jerónimo can escape in search of Josephe who has escaped her execution amidst the chaos produced by the earthquake. The story continues to explore the ways in which accidents produce and thwart destinies, opening a place where catastrophes take the place of miracle. Departing from Kleist’s story, and placing it in dialogue with the debates concerning the Lisbon Earthquake, Hamacher explores the semantic web unleashed by the conceptual power of the metaphor of the earthquake: from the figure of the happy accident to Kleist’s obsession with the act of falling, from the dialectics of contingency to the discussion regarding divine necessity, his essay acts out the ways in which a metaphor comes to produce a change of paradigm. Exploring the relationship between the metaphor of the earthquake in its relationship to Kant’s discourse on the dynamical sublime, Hamacher comes to see the earthquake as a presentation inadequate to all representations, as the pure negativity of a phenomena that defies the representative power of language. The earthquake becomes the paradigm of the modern event: like Descartes doubt it produces the emergence of the modern subject by making its sensual foundation tremble. It forces history to stage its emergency as sublime history.

One question haunts Kleist’s story: why stage the story in Chile, when the immediate referent for the story was the Lisbon Earthquake whose shock, according to many, had been primordially a continental event? Kleist’s decision to place his story in Chile shouldn’t be read as a mere coincidence with romantic undertones, but rather as a

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5 It has been Hent De Vries who has more recently studied this philosophical relationship between miracles, events and effects.

6 For a historiographical analysis of the figure of the historical sublime please refer to Amy Elias’ Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction or to Hayden White’s The Content of Form.
significant interpretation of the role that Latin America was having within the reconfiguration of the knot between history and nature. As Mary Louis Pratt has suggested in her essay *The Reinvention of America*, Humboldt’s main achievement was to reinvent Latin America as sublime nature, as a landscape that plays with its limits. His *tableaux de la nature*, as he would latter call one of his books, was one which constantly played with its frame, an attempt to describe a nature that behaved unnaturally as power and force, as nature capable of making history tremble. The earthquake *razes* history. The etymology here is clear. *Raze, erasure, tabula rasa*: the semantic web brings forth the force of negativity within thought. Erasing the *status-quo* of nature, rendering nature unnatural, the earthquake metaphor is able to raze over a territory of knowledge, imposing a certain historicity over nature. Following the intuition opened by our reading of *Candide*, one might say that catastrophe opens history to its own contingency, to the power of its potentiality. Like the subterranean interplay of the tectonic plates, whose potentiality is actualized in the event of the earthquake, history is first understood as something that holds within itself many potential futures, whose face it is the task of the subject to record. Like in Kleist’s story, nature might bring down the temple of *Natural History*, but it remains the task of the historical subject to cross the accidental archway left by its ruins, walk among the rubble and gather the fragments of sense. Humboldt, who in his trips through America had experienced the latent political discomfort, the atmosphere of a potential revolution, would be latter confronted precisely with this paradox: how to describe and register that moment in which nature becomes eventful, that instant in which nature puts on its political face.
The Political Epicenter: Bolívar’s “Cartagena Manifesto”

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent

Matthew 27:51

Earthquakes are oddly punctual: as the ground begins to shake, space and time gain a singular intensity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rhetorical usage of the figure of the epicenter. The epicenter flags the natural event and inscribes it within the historical archive: here and now something happened.7 The nineteenth century was to

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7 The political epicenter is that point which, following the recent works of Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, one could call a point of exception. Locating the points of exception within the otherwise deceptive continuity of history is the role of the true historian understood here as militant. Badiou's theory of the event – developed in both Being and the Event and Logic of Worlds – provides a formal model from which to understand this conception of catastrophe as event. There the structure of the event is explained in terms that could very well describe the earthquake. The event is the irruption of a exceptional point within the coordinates of the symbolic world, a torsion within the structure of the status quo – which for Badiou takes several names, including the state of the situation, the world, nature – that forces the subject to make a decision:

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\text{A point in the world is that which makes appear the infinity of the nuances of a world – the variety of the degrees of intensity of appearing [...] a point is the crystallization of the infinite in the figure – which Kierkegaard called “the alternative” – of the ‘either/or’, what can also be called a choice or a decision. (LW, 400)}
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The political epicenter forces, under the intensity of a decision, the opening of the world into its own possibilities. What emerges from this decision, as Badiou is quick to announce and as the Cartagena Manifesto enacts, is the political subject as the citizen who – claiming Althusser’s concept – gets interpellated by the contingency of the utopic horizon.7 We could then claim that what emerges from the Earthquake of Maundy Thursday is Bolívar as political subject, as public figure. Bolívar understood that what had been brought to light by the earthquake was something that was already present as potentiality within the structure of the First Republic. The metaphor of the landscape in ruins presented him with the symbol from which to question the federal system that had been imposed after the first revolutionary triumph. Against the “dreary anarchy” he so much feared, his urgent call for a central government must be seen as an attempt to locate the event, to restabilize the semantic web by reducing everything to the power of a decision.
see, under the rubric of geohistory, the consolidation of this discourse interlinking history and nature under the figure of natural catastrophe. As Martin J.S. Rudwick has documented throughout his works, the decline of a natural theodicy marks not only the decline of natural history, but also the emergence of the historicity of nature. Freed from the creationist imaginary of biblical exegesis, challenging their links to the mythical Deluge, natural catastrophes were finally able to establish themselves in a semantic as well as syntactic connection to history. In the wake of the storming of the Bastille, savants across the Republic of Letters such as Blumenbach, Montlosier, Pini, and de Luc began to discuss what it would mean to view nature as an archive of revolutions. From Blumenbach’s “total revolution” to Montlosier’s “continuous revolution,” revolution, along with its semantic web, would slowly begin to claim its place within the realm of nature. Despite its early ties to biblical catastrophism, a growing positivism would eventually lead this discourse to break loose from biblical exegesis and to construct nature as an eventful space inscribed with traces of revolutions. With the emergence and authorization of the figure of the fossil, the geologist came to be seen as a figure for the historian. As Dolomieu writes in Discours sur l’étude de la géologie (1797), nature had burst the limits of time:

Only the study of nature itself, lifting the imagination to the level of geology’s high conceptions, can discover in the combination of circumstances the history of times long before the existence of the

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8 Blumenbach on the archive, fossils and nature’s coins: “If one regards fossils from the great standpoint that they are the most infallible documents in nature’s archive, from which the various revolutions that our planet has undergone can be determined” (298). And Montlosier: “one finds coins struck by nature at every age, bearing witness to all the stages of its work and its progress” (303).
peoples who have figured on the world’s great stage, long before
even the existence of the human race and of all organisms. . . .
Bursting the limits [durée] of all historical times, and scorning as it
were the brevity of epochs relative to the human species, the
geologist walks in the immense space that preceded the
organization of matter in order to find there the epochs of those
great events of which he observes the monuments. (256)

For the savants of the decaying and death-stricken Republic of Letters, fossils were the
traces of past revolutions. Their attitude betrayed their conservatism this focus on the
past amidst the trembling landscape opened by the French Revolution was a symptom
of the ideological implications that readings of nature would take in the coming century.
As members of the old regime, their discourse referred to the past rather than to the
future, to fossils rather than to ruins, to origins rather than to contingencies. As Jorge
Cañizares-Esguerra has stated in How to Write the History of the New World, across the
Atlantic, enlightened by many of the same readings, a new generation of creole
intellectuals would take this debate in an opposite direction. Rather than seeing in this
new connection between catastrophe and revolution a discourse about the past, they
found prophecies about the future, possibility, and contingency. Alexander von
Humboldt, an intellectual divided between two worlds, knew the abysms that could
open between a natural catastrophe and its political repercussions. It would be amidst
the political ruins left by an earthquake that his friend Simón Bolívar would produce his
first major public document, the “Cartagena Manifesto,” a document in which the
politics of catastrophe and witnessing, of fidelity and reconstruction, become a
prognosis of the state of the patriot revolution.
On March 26, 1812, during the celebrations of Maundy Thursday, Caracas felt the initial shock of an earthquake that would not only pause the services of Holy Week, but also bring down the recently established First Republic of Venezuela. The shock would mark the end of the political structure that had been established two years earlier, precisely on another Maundy Thursday, that of April 19, 1810. As John Lynch has noted in his recent biography of Simón Bolívar, between the revolution of Maundy Thursday and the earthquake of Maundy Thursday, the movement of independence grew into a confederation amid the civil war that flared up after the congress declared independence. At the moment of the great tremor, the patriots—guided by the intrepid Francisco de Miranda—were celebrating the second anniversary of the Republic and planned to recuperate the region of Guyana from the royalists. The earthquake would bring all of this to an end, with superstitious clergy, partisans of the royalist cause—proclaiming that the coincidence and holiness of the date heralded an ominous truth: god was angry at the triumphs of the independence movements and had brought this catastrophe upon the Republic. The earthquake had, in fact, tilted the tower of the Caracas Cathedral.$^9$ Working within the frame of biblical exegesis, within the closed world of theodicy, the clergy still belonged to an epoch that viewed natural catastrophes as necessities rather than contingencies. It would take another patriot, the then relatively unknown Colonel Bolívar, to step in and, amidst the ruins, offer a new interpretation. As José Domingo Díaz, a famous doctor and royalist, was to state years

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$^9$ There is another coincidence crucial to my transatlantic argument: in an essay by Diego Torres de Villaroel, the tower of Salamanca is now reclined due to the earthquake of Lisbon. Furthermore, following Jesus’s death, on Maundy Thursday, there was an earthquake: “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent” (Matthew 27:51).
later in his 1829 Memoirs of the Caracas Rebellion, Simón Bolívar’s reaction to the catastrophe was memorable:

En aquel momento me hallaba solo en el medio de la plaza y de las ruinas; oí los alaridos de los que morían dentro del templo; subí por ellas y entré al reciento. . . . En lo más elevado encontré a don Simón Bolívar que en mangas de camisa trepaba por ellas para hacer el mismo examen. En su semblante estaba pintado el sumo terror, o la suma desesperación. Me vio y me dirigió estas impías y extravagantes palabras: “Si se opone la naturaleza, lucharemos contra ella y haremos que nos obedezca.” (120)

Behind Bolívar’s enlightened words, which removed the catastrophe from the realm of theology, there is a strategy: by claiming that the seism was merely a nonpolitical, natural phenomenon, he performed the first political intervention upon the event. “Si se opone la naturaleza, lucharemos contra ella y haremos que nos obedezca.” Politics is finally forced to face nature. These words do not mean that nature was outside of the political realm—years later, Bolívar himself would use the metaphor of revolution as catastrophe in his “Angostura Manifesto”—but rather that in this first revolutionary moment what was at stake was a freeing of the event from theological necessity. By presenting the earthquake as a purely natural phenomenon, Bolívar was in fact endowing it with that rightful historicity which would later be evident in his interpretation of the event. As John Lynch has noted, the earthquake of Maundy Thursday was to mark the entrance of Simón Bolívar into the public sphere. His “Cartagena Manifesto,” written on December 15 of that same year, amidst the ruins of the First Republic, departs from the earthquake metaphor of a republic in ruins in order
to provide a diagnosis of the disjunction of the political confederation that, according to him, had led to the destruction of the First Republic of Venezuela. As I shall now proceed to expound, it was in this first statement that Bolívar, in a gesture that rendered revolutionary what in the case of his friends from the Republic of Letters had remained conservative, was to first hint at the possible implications that the emerging non-theological discourse of natural catastrophes had upon the revolutionary cartography of the republican movements. An unknown Colonel Bolívar begins his now-famous Admirable Campaign by discussing an earthquake. With this gesture, which would have made his friend Alexander von Humboldt proud, he begins his campaign as *El Libertador*.

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Years later, a moribund Bolívar will write, in a disillusioned letter to his friend Francisco de Paula Santander, “mi época es de catástrofes” (211). His pessimism will spring from his realization that his megalomania would remain frustrated: the former Spanish possessions of the New World could not be unified. However, thirteen years earlier, amidst the ruins left by the earthquake of 1812, what we find is an enlightened humanist—a reader of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Locke—who passionately believes in the capacity of humans to impose order upon the social disorder released by natural catastrophes. Bolívar’s “Cartagena Manifesto,” his first major political statement, attempts to explain what he calls Venezuela’s “physically and politically ruinous state.” In its attempt to read the causes that had led Venezuela to its “destruction,” it reads as a passionate plea for a reformulation of the federalism that, according to him, undermined the achievements of the revolution. After referring to the chaos brought by the clerics reading of the earthquake as damnation, Bolívar proceeds to grant the earthquake a role
within the collapse of the First Republic. However, for the young Bolívar, nature—no longer controlled by theodicy—is not superior to the political power of man:

El terremoto de 26 de marzo trastornó ciertamente, tanto lo físico como lo normal; y puede llamarse propiamente la causa inmediata de la ruina de Venezuela; mas este mismo suceso habría tenido lugar, sin producir tan mortales efectos, si Caracas se hubiera gobernado entonces por una sola autoridad, que obrando con rapidez y vigor hubiese puesto remedio a los daños sin trabas, ni competencias que retardando el efecto de las providencias, dejaban tomar al mal un incremento tan grande que lo hizo incurable. (63)

According to the political scenario sketched out here by Bolívar, the earthquake of Maundy Thursday could only bring the Republic to ruin precisely because the state that the patriot army had won for itself after its first revolutionary wave was already in ruins. Bolívar’s radical dialectic could then be summarized as follows: the revolutions of independence—understood as a necessary catastrophe—had produced a cartography of devastation, of ruins and fragments, which then had to be politically comprehended as a totality. As Leopoldo Zea has noted in his book on Bolívar, this dialectic between fragment and whole, between ruin and totality, would remain central to Bolívar’s political project (68). Seven years later, in 1819, when Bolívar is asked to address the Angostura Congress, amidst the discussions regarding the new constitution for the emerging nation of Gran Colombia, he will return to the image of catastrophe and reconstruction that had characterized his first political stance:

No ha sido la época de la República, que he presidido, una nueva tempestad política, ni una guerra sangrienta, ni una anarquía popular,
ha sido, sí, el desarrollo de todos los elementos desorganizadores: ha sido la inundación de un torrente infernal que ha sumergido la tierra de Venezuela. Un hombre ¿y un hombre como yo! ¿qué diques podría oponer al ímpetu de estas devastaciones? En medio de este piélago de angustias no he sido más que un vil juguete del huracán revolucionario que me arrebataba como una débil paja. Yo no he podido hacer ni bien ni mal; fuerzas irresistibles han dirigido la marcha de nuestros sucesos. (113, italics mine)

This interplay between catastrophe and reconstruction will guide Bolívar’s political project until his death—the territorial reconstruction of America as totality out of the fragments of post-revolutionary anarchy. Once the tabula rasa had been politically proclaimed, the process of political representation had to begin all over again. As such, his speech should be placed in the context of the romantic notion of the sublime. The notion of the sublime also has to do with the relationship between the fragment and the whole, between ruin and totality—with the tension between the destructive power of nature and its teleological unity. Bolívar, once again, meets his friend Humboldt at that enigmatic threshold where political discourse finds its natural counterpart: in both cases what is at stake is the political implication of what could be called, following Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, “the historical sublime.”

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10 Recent studies regarding Latin America have started to focus on the construction of this image of Latin America as the sublime exterior to European modernity: from Sybille Fischer’s Modernity Disavowed to Bruno Bosteel’s Marx and Freud in Latin America, passing on to Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, and Susan Buck-Morris’ Hegel, Haiti critics have begun to speculate into the problems regarding this negative presentation of Latin America as modernity’s sublime counter-history. As Sybille Fischer, borrowing Freud’s term of disavowal, has recently stated in her book on the Haitian Revolution:
The Historical Sublime: Where History Meets Nature

World history is to me a sublime object.
- Schiller, On the Sublime

In their introduction to Humboldt’s *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette emphasize two of Humboldt’s contributions. By portraying the New World as a continent with history, Humboldt, they claim, intervened in the centuries-long “Dispute of the New World” that had until then attempted to portray the New World as a place without history. Alongside this interest in the history of the New World, they underline his second major contribution: an aesthetic vision of history, from the perspective of what they call a “poetics of the fragment” (xxi). Humboldt’s work must be understood in relation to the discursive constellation of historical and aesthetics concepts that had emerged in the late eighteenth century and that would concretize itself in the nineteenth century.

“In the letters and reports of white settlers. The revolution is not a political and diplomatic issue; it’s a matter of body counts, rape, material destruction, and infinite bloodshed. It is barbarism and unspeakable violence, outside the realm of civilization and beyond human language. It is an excessive event, and as such, it remained for the most part confined to the margins of history: to rumors, oral histories, confidential letters and secret trials.” (24)

Fischer goes on to question the archival power of this excessive event which, as she claims, gets both repressed and recognized within the political consciousness of modernity. This critical tendency must, however, be understood within the recent attempts by political philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Salvoj Zizek to revive an interest into a theory of the political event which takes as its point of departure the power of the negative: from Hegel’s *negativity* to Lacan’s *real*, from Badiou’s *event* to Agamben’s *state of exception*, in a chain of books that is perhaps best exemplified by Zizek’s *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* philosophers have taken a liking to construing revolutionary historicity as what, under a lack of a better term, we could call *sublime history*. In what follows, departing from this tradition, I will attempt to see how within the works of Alexander Von Humboldt this sublime historicity takes on its catastrophic face.
“Nature herself is sublimely eloquent”(34): Humboldt’s words, as well as his insistence on the aesthetic nature of his descriptions, make him a precursor of sublime historiography.

The sublime, as a concept, has a long history leading all the way back to Longinus, but it is within the properly continental field of aesthetics—famously initiated in the eighteenth century by Baumgarten—that the sublime acquires its proper theoretical and conceptual density in relation to the excesses of the project of the Enlightenment. As Phillip Shaw shows, the history of the concept in the nineteenth century revolves around two main focal points: British Romanticism, represented by figures such as Burke, Wordsworth, and Lord Byron, and German Idealism, embodied by thinkers such as Kant, Schiller, and Hegel. More importantly, as Shaw also states, the concept has a political dimension and history (9). Critics like Marie-Hélène Huet, Charles Hinnant, and Hayden White have noted that the emergence of an analytic of the sublime at the end of the eighteenth century should be understood in its relation to the political terror unleashed by the French Revolution. The sublime emerges in the late Enlightenment as a concept that stages the paradoxes of the enlightened project. Perhaps the first relevant contribution is Edmund Burke’s 1756 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. One year after the Lisbon earthquake, Burke publishes a book in which catastrophic nature is seen as the prime example of sublime astonishment: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (53). The sublime, causing both horror and pleasure, is opposed to the pleasing touch of the beautiful upon the senses. As Hayden White notes, it is this opposition
between the sublime and the beautiful that would prove so productive for modern politics. To the conservative option of a beautiful historical progression, White juxtaposes the radical gesture of what he calls the historical sublime: “Romanticism represented the last attempt in the West to generate a visionary politics on the basis of a sublime conception of the historical process. . . . The domestication of history effected by the suppression of the historical sublime may well be the sole basis for the proud claim to social responsibility in modern capitalist as well as communist societies” (129).

In his diaries, Humboldt would sketch this distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in cartographic terms. America would be to Europe what the sublime had been to the beautiful: “If men of science who visit the Alps of Switzerland or the coasts of Lapland should broaden our knowledge about glaciers and the aurora borealis, then a traveler who has journeyed through Spanish America should mainly fix his attention on volcanoes and earthquakes” (59). Glaciers and the aurora borealis, examples of the beautiful, find their counterpart in the sublime catastrophic phenomena of the New World—volcanoes and earthquakes. Europe, the land of the known, of the necessary, projects its excessive shadow upon the New World. As Mary Louis Pratt notes, this catastrophic paradigm of history forces Humboldt to adopt new, non-narrative modes of historical representation: “so engulfed and miniaturized was the human in Humboldt’s cosmic conception that narrative ceased to be a viable mode of representation” (118).

What is at stake in the sublime is a crisis of representation as paradigm of knowledge. The sublime, as Kant so aptly describes in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, interrupts representation by presenting the understanding with something excessively great. In fact, Kant’s catalogue of examples of the sublime reads as if it had been taken from Humboldt’s notes:
On the other hand, consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rock, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river and so on. (120)

In Kant, the power of the sublime is associated with nature’s capacity to break boundaries. The sublime—understood here as event and as action—breaks the fabric of reality by introducing a moment of absolute negativity. Rather than dismissing Humboldt’s aesthetics as mere romanticism, we should proceed to read romanticism itself as the excessive shadow of European Enlightenment. Humboldt’s work should then be read against the grain: rather than repeating his comments regarding the unity of nature, we should see how his arrival to America was accompanied by a fascination with the destructive aspects of catastrophe. There are numerous political implications of this romantic gesture: unknowingly, Humboldt was participating in a subterranean discourse on the boundaries of enlightened cartographies that would traverse the twentieth century from Sandino to Che Guevara, up to the masked Subcomandante Marcos in the Lacandon Jungle. The question remains: how can the history of these excesses that refuse to assimilate into the hegemonic symbolic regime be narrated? How can the cartography of those regions that refuse to belong to the imperial landscape be traced?11

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11 “The Third World”: when in August 14, 1952 – amidst the Cold War – the anthropologist and historian Alfred Sauvy coined the term in an article for Le Nouvel Observateur to designate the countries that were aligned neither with the communist block nor with the capitalist block, he was explicitly defining the contingent out of bounds of what, to quote Horkheimer and Adorno, one might call the dialectic of
In his 1801 essay “On the Sublime,” Friedrich Schiller tackles a problem that is of particular interest to us: that of the relationship between world history and the politics of the sublime. Schiller starts by sketching the image of a man in a constant battle between freedom and order: “Freedom, with all of its moral contradictions and physical evils, is for noble souls an infinitely more interesting spectacle than prosperity and order without freedom, where the sheep patiently follow the shepherd and the self-commanding will is degraded to the subservient part of a clockwork” (16). He then proceeds to state what this search for freedom above order would imply for the notion of world history: “Considered from this point of view, and only from this one, world history is to me a sublime object. The world, as historical object, is at bottom nothing other than the conflict of natural forces amongst one another and with the freedom of man, and history reports to us the result of this contest” (17). Like Schiller, Humboldt—as Kutziniski and Ette have shown—was interested in understanding the ways in which enlightenment. Beyond the dialectic between left and right, the third world was the pulsating outside of modernity. As Sauvy himself would state: "Like the third estate, the Third World is nothing, and wants to be something." This recurrence to the figure of the third estate and to the power of its negativity already places us within the historical framework at hand: the aftermath of the French Revolution. Sauvy’s reference was the text Qu’est-ce que le tiers-état? which was published by the clergyman Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes shortly before the 1789 outbreak of the French Revolution. There he had defined the third estate as the commoners whose labour constituted the foundation of France, but whose presence was neglected both by the clergy and the aristocracy. Organized under three questions – What is the Third Estate? What has it been until now in the political order? What does it ask? – the essay proceeds to develop the consequences of a powerful intuition: the third estate is that everything who until now has been nothing within the political order, but who wishes to become something. Everything, nothing, something: the absolute indeterminateness of his language points already towards a politics of contingent other worlds. Namely, the third estate, just like the third world, is what lies beyond representation, that which terrorizes representation by imposing upon it the demand of the negative. The third world is seen as the sublime exterior to the process of the Enlightenment, the contingent face of its progress-ridden historicity, the archaic dream amidst its modernity.
the discovery of the New World had complicated the notion of a world history, of a
Weltbild and Weltanschauung, forcing scientists to think of new figures for universal
unity. As the erratic cartography of Voltaire’s Candide makes evident, sublime history
poses universal history as a problem precisely because it breaks the order of
representation imposed by theodicies and their political embodiment—empires. Once
the imperial cartography is fragmented by the revolutionary power of nature, the
question of how to regain a common ground for historical representation becomes
crucial. Humboldt’s work, like Bolívar’s, must then be read as a monumental attempt to
grasp the sublime dialectic between fragment and totality, between periphery and
center. Namely, as an attempt to narrate history after the destruction of the imperial
cartography that until then had sustained history’s lawfulness. Humboldt’s task, like
Bolívar’s, is one of reconstruction: it enacts the dialectics of fragments and unity, of
ruins and totality, that came to characterize American history after the revolutions of
independence.

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As Mary Louis Pratt has argued in Imperial Eyes, the America that Humboldt so
effusively described was in fact the enormity of nature, a sublime nature:

Alexander von Humboldt reinvented South America first and foremost as nature. Not the accessible, collectible, recognizable,
categorizable nature of the Linneans, however, but a dramatic, extraordinary nature, a spectacle capable of overwhelming human
knowledge and understanding. Not a nature that sits waiting to be known and possessed, but a nature in motion, powered by life forces
many of which are invisible to the human eye; a nature that dwarfs
humans, commands their being, arouses their passions, defies their powers of perception. No wonder portraits so often depict Humboldt engulfed and miniaturized either by nature or by his own library describing it. (120)

Pratt notes that Humboldt’s nature was not the classifiable nature of the tableau but rather a catastrophic nature whose forces conspired against Humboldt’s desire for unity. America’s nature, in Humboldt’s terms, was in constant battle with the frame of its descriptions, always in conflict with the stability of the archive. Although Pratt’s arguments regarding “the miniaturization of men” are correct, what her account seems to ignore is how time and history filter the naturalist’s narrative: Humboldt’s task was to take a new turn when—while writing the memoirs of his trips—his imagination was filtered by the images of the revolutionary wars. Humans had metaphorically entered the picture posing one question—how should they be placed within this landscape that had originally seemed beyond their grasp, a landscape that had seemed too big for humans to assert their agency? Humboldt’s brilliance lies in realizing that the solution lay in nature itself: what he had at first confronted as catastrophic natural phenomena held the metaphorical power to introduce political action within a landscape that now gained the true potentiality of its Janus-faced reality. Under the metaphor of catastrophic history, sublime nature became sublime history. Structurally, the metaphor of natural catastrophe—as his contemporary Schiller understood it—contained all the elements necessary to provide a model for political action: a discourse on power and

12 For a discussion on landscape, the frame and the archive, please refer to Jens Andermann’s essay “Paisaje: imagen, entorno, ensamble”. The discussion here refers, implicitly, back to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of Enlightened aesthetics in his works The Truth in Painting, where he departs from the figure of the frame in order to shake the foundations of Kant’s Critique of Judgment.
forces, on fragmentation and unity, on destruction and reconstruction, on the boundaries of enlightened reason. Moved by his romantic drive, faced with the problem of his historical involvement, Humboldt was participating in the emergence of a new mode of historiography as the shadow of enlightened historicism.\textsuperscript{13} If, as Frank Ankersmit has noted, sublime history would return in the coming century under the figure of trauma, terror, and disaster, it is because the historical sublime, as construed by Humboldt, already signaled towards a critique of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} This link between nature, terror and politics would prove to be crucial within the politics of the third-world: in the camouflaged figure of the guerrilla fighter who hides between the exuberant nature of the tropics the notion of a sublime history coincided with the complex topic of terrorism. The guerrilla fighter, inheritor of the nineteenth century bandido, cagaceiro, gaucho malo, bandolero, is precisely he who terrorizes the state by force of his unrepresentability. Whether in Vietnam or Cuba, the guerrilla fighter uses the exuberance of the tropical jungle in order to terrorize the state by forcing the distinction between nature and culture to collapse. If the nineteenth century produced the dispositive of the landscape as a way of symbolizing the barbaric outside of culture, then the emergence of the guerrilla fighter implies the political response of the third world to this act of representation. His camouflage actualizes the political potential already present within the bandit’s mask:

\begin{quote}
“[T]he bandit trope marks what needs to be excluded, subordinated, or suppressed, it also marks what escape the material and symbolic control of the elite. It is what exceeds its paradigms. This excess denaturalizes the hegemonic identity and its mechanisms of representation, since it shows the fissures that tear it.” (6)
\end{quote}

As Juan Pablo Dabove states in his book the Nightmares of the Lettered City, the bandit is the inassimilable excess of the social body. Without knowing it, Humboldt was participating in a subterranean discourse about the boundaries of enlightened cartographies that would traverse the twentieth century from Sandino to the Che-Guevara, up to the present-day image of the masked Subcomandante Marcos form the Lacadon Jungle. For an interesting book on the topic please refer to Juan Duchesne-Winter’s La guerrilla narrada: acción, acontecimiento, sujeto.

\textsuperscript{14} What is being addressed here is the question regarding the negative sublime as that which exceeds rational representation. This topic has received a lot of attention in Latin American, given its relationship to the social catastrophes of twentieth century totalitarian politics, and in particular regarding discourse of mourning. Paradigmatic among these might be Idelber Avelar’s The Untimely Present.
The Ruins of the Enlightenment: On Bolívar’s Elusive Rome

“A great volcano lies at our feet.
— Simón Bolívar, Letter to General Páez

“If this is the best of all possible worlds, then what are the others like?” In Voltaire’s Candide, the great earthquake of Lisbon had opened the Enlightenment to the possibility of other, erratic, peripheral worlds. The cartography sketched by the protagonist’s voyage is indeed a political one: from the Grand Inquisitor of Portugal to the slave Candide meets in El Dorado, from the Jesuit revolution in Paraguay up to the constant discussion of utopia, Voltaire’s picaresque sketches the cartography of an empire in ruins. Deprived of the theological order imposed by divine necessity, the unity of the world is at stake. In this crisis, one question will gain preeminence: how can we think of the unity of such a world? Voltaire’s political cartography foreshadows the task that Simón Bolívar was to assume in what is perhaps his best known text: the “Jamaica Letter” (1815). The question Bolívar faced also interrogated the politics of territoriality: under what terms could we consider the cartographic and conceptual unity of the revolutionary project that had spread over the whole continent? Once again, the language of catastrophe comes into play: the image repeated once and again is that of an empire in ruins, and more specifically, the image of a heap of rubble that the political subject is meant to reconstitute. As Humboldt had written in his diaries, “[t]he house we used to live in is now a heap of rubble. Terrible earthquakes have transformed the shape of the ground; the city I described has disappeared” (142). The figure of the heap of rubble, of the ruinous multiplicity of the shattered ground, comes to represent the problematic nature of Spanish American modernity after the collapse of its imperial
foundation. Bolívar’s “Jamaica Letter” sketches a politics of territoriality as the constant negotiation between the ruinous multiplicity of the shattered imperial ground and the sublimated image of a single Latin American nation arising from the imperial ruins.

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As John Lynch shows, the ideological life of El Libertador had begun ten years earlier amidst a landscape of ruins. In 1805, as part of his trip to Italy with his mentor, Simón Rodríguez, and his friend Fernando del Toro, Bolívar visits Rome. In Rome, the young Bolívar—who in his early years had, in the neoclassical spirit of the times, filled his mind with images of Augustan grandeur—gazes with admiration at the sublime landscape of imperial ruins. As legend has it, he then hurries to the Aventine, the Monte Sacro where, as part of the First secessio plebis of 494 BC, Sicinius led a plebeian revolt against the patrician rulers.¹⁵ There, according to Bolívar’s disciple Daniel O’Leary, he vows to liberate Spanish America from its colonial status: “On Monte Santo the sufferings of his own country overwhelmed his mind, and he knelt down and made that vow [to] whose faithful fulfillment the emancipation of South America is the glorious witness” (67). Amidst such ruins, as Simón Rodríguez tells Manuel Uribe Ángel, Bolívar reflects upon the past glory of Rome and the status of Spanish America:

La civilización que ha soplado del Oriente, exclama Bolívar, ha mostrado aquí todas sus faces, ha hecho ver todos sus elementos;
mas en cuanto a resolver el gran problema del hombre en libertad,
parece que el asunto ha sido desconocido, y que el despejo de esa

¹⁵ For two interesting readings of the role of neoclassical rhetoric within Bolívar’s speeches and writings, see Cussen and Rojas. Both agree that at the very center of the revolutionary enterprise there existed a tension between a neoclassical conservative discourse and more radical romantic approach.
misteriosa incógnita no ha de verificarse sino en el Nuevo Mundo.

(El Maestro de la Libertad, 85)

Amidst the sublime landscape of the Palatine Hill, the discursive relationship between Rome, ruins, freedom, and the history of independence is first sketched out. Throughout his writings, the image of ruinous Rome will return, once and again, as an allegory for the disjointed state of that necessary catastrophe that was the revolution of independence.

Nowhere is the image of Rome’s ruin and its relationship to the wars of independence articulated with more clarity than in the “Jamaica Letter.” Written in response to Henry Cullen, a British merchant who had settled on the island in an attempt to get the support of the British Empire, Bolívar’s letter returns multiple times to the example of Rome’s decadence in order to explain both the decadence of the Spanish Empire and the present state of the revolution:

Yo considero el estado actual de América, como cuando desplomado el imperio romano cada desmembración formó un sistema político . . . mas nosotros, que apenas conservamos vestigios de lo que en otro tiempo fue, y que por otra parte no somos indios, ni europeos, sino una especie mezcla entre los legítimos propietarios del país y los usurpadores españoles. (91)

In Discurso desde la Marginación y la Barbarie, Leopoldo Zea points out that Bolívar’s image of a ruinous Rome serves a double purpose. It provides him, on the one hand, with a model for the emergence of a national cartography out of a catastrophic landscape—namely, the emergence of an integrated Europe out of the ruins of the
Roman Empire. On the other hand, it offers him a way of explaining the impasses of the revolutionary project—the ruinous state of post-colonial Spanish America as a disjointed cartography without a clear common ground of political representation (50). The figure of imperial ruins allows Bolívar to rephrase his concerns within the dialectic of catastrophe and reconstruction, of fragment and totality, which we have claimed came to represent Spanish American historiography in the years following the wars of independence. The “revolutionary storm,” as he will later call the wars of independence, functions precisely like Humboldt’s earthquake: it shakes the historical tableau of representation, forcing the political subject to reconfigure the relation between fragment and totality. The historical sublime, as conceived by Bolívar, is a search for unity within the ruins left by the collapse of the Spanish Empire.

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At the end of his career, exiled in Pativilca, Peru, after the collapse of another constitution, Bolívar would write, in a letter to Francisco de Paula Santander, some of his most disenchanted yet illuminating words:

Echando la vista por otra parte, observe usted estos trastornos de las cosas humanas: en todo tiempo las obras de los hombres han sido frágiles, más en el día son como los embriones nonatos que perecen antes de desenvolver sus facultades, por todas partes me asaltan los espantosos ruidos de las caídas, mi época es de catástrofes: todo nace y muere a mi vista como si fuese relámpago, todo no hace más que pasar, ¡y necio de mí si me lisonjease quedar de pie firme en medio de
tales convulsiones, en medio de tantas ruinas, en medio del trastorno moral del universo! (211)

Within Bolívar’s letter, catastrophe remains the sign under which history is thought both as contingent potentiality and as tragic reality. Lost within the ruins of Rome, incapable of organizing a coherent narrative for the emerging state, *El Libertador* looks back and sees in history the mere heap of rubble once described by Humboldt. Bolívar’s ruinous cartography, his reduction of history to a Humboldtian heap of rubble, foreshadows Walter Benjamin’s discussion of allegory and ruin in his book on the *Trauerspiel* as well as his definition of catastrophe in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. There history is reduced to a heap of rubble by the storm of progress. The storm of progress marks the threshold where the progressive logic of the Enlightenment, reaching its end, turns against itself with catastrophic violence:

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm. (257)
For Benjamin, revolutionary history—the Angel of History—must work through the
dialectic of catastrophe and reconstruction that ends up reducing history to a heap of
rubble. In his task of sketching out the unity of the cartography in ruins left by the
“revolutionary storm,” Simón Bolívar—the political subject who had emerged as such
amidst the ruins left by the earthquake of Maundy Thursday—was unknowingly
entering into dialogue with a series of future political philosophers who would question
the dialectic between progress and ruin, and history and catastrophe, within the project
of the Enlightenment. As Daniel Castillo-Durante has stated, the heap of rubble comes
to represent the negative excess of the First World:

> In the last resort, the rubbish heap is an abstraction of which the
> hegemonic cultural politics of the techno-scientific world of an
> industrial and post-industrial capitalism are only able to offer a
> negative presentation. Inexpressible and unrepresentable, the
> concept of rubbish heap perhaps makes possible to think of Latin
> American periphery as the sublime expression of the center. The
> “Third World” which terrorizes the centre and sends shivers up its
> spine functions as sublime object. (61)

Pairing Castillo-Durante’s thoughts on the figure of the heap of rubble as the negative
sublime that terrorizes the First World with both Humboldt’s phrase and Bolívar’s
discourse of ruins, we get a refracted version of the discourse on the sublime. More than
a century before the emergence of a post-industrial society, Bolívar conceives his
political journey in terms that foreshadow Castillo-Durante’s analysis. Forced to think
the unity of a territory whose vastness contains multiple natural discrepancies, Bolívar
must account for the impossibility of his task. Bolívar’s achievement was perhaps to
remain faithful to a task he knew to be impossible, that of the utopia of unity disclosed by the figure of the heap of rubble.

Possible Worlds: Catastrophe and Utopia

Every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.

- Walter Benjamin

Alain Badiou has stated – in works such as Theory of the Subject, Being and the Event as well as Logic of Worlds – that the political subject emerges in its twofold relationship to the event: in the first step, the subject constitutes itself as being interpellated by the event; in the second step, he makes the decision to remain faithful to what comes to light through it. The subject then is he who remains faithful to the unpresentable of the times. He is a witness of sublimity. Namely, of that which exists beyond representation and which, to some extent, provokes the crisis of representation. The political subject is then an utopic subject in the double sense of the word: he who is in a non-place, from the Greek outhos, but also he who is in the right place, from the English homophone, eutopia. The militant is nowhere since his place is not representable – he remains the figure of an absolute singularity – but he is also in the right place since he is the one who truly engages with the otherwise unseen present. Simón Bolívar’s trajectory from 1812, when he produces his Cartagena Manifesto to his 1815 Jamaica Letter, mimics in some way the arch proposed by Badiou. Which event constitutes Bolívar as political subject? As I have tried to show, it is the initial revolutionary wave of Miranda, which gains its resonance amidst the Earthquake of Maundy Thursday, that event that Bolívar would latter call, in his Angostura Speech of 1819, the revolutionary hurricane. To some
extent, the Bolívar that emerges in the *Jamaica Letter* marks the moment in which everything is really possible, the moment of pure contingency that would latter be eclipsed by the arrival of state power. As *El Libertador* himself states in the letter:

> Todavía es más difícil presentir la suerte futura del Nuevo Mundo, establecer principios sobre su política, y casi profetizar la naturaleza del gobierno que llegará a adoptar. Toda idea relativa al porvenir de este país me parece aventurada. ¿Se pudo prever, cuando el género humano se hallaba en su infancia rodeado de tanta incertidumbre, ignorancia y error, cuál sería el régimen que abrazaría para su conservación? ¿Quién se habría atrevido a decir tal nación será república o monarquía, esta será pequeña, aquella grande? (90)

The nineteenth century sees the revolutionary catastrophe as the moment in which a mature America returns to its infancy as *New World*: everything is possible within this *tabula rasa* that has been liberated from the codes of theological necessity. The *New World* of Bolívar’s 1815 *Jamaica Letter* is as precarious as it is utopic: always on the verge of collapse, it is also the locus for pure possibility. Freed from the power of the empire, the world of 1815 is still not enclosed within the representational power of the state: it is in this in between world that possibility gets its chance. Following Voltaire’s *Candide*, what the violence of the earthquake brings out is the outside of necessity: the possibility of other worlds beyond the best of worlds. This discussion of catastrophe and utopia is tied to Walter Benjamin’s essay *Critique of Violence* where in relationship to the question of sovereignty and the state, he proceeds to distinguish between two types of violence: divine violence and mythic violence. From his description of both, it remains plausible for us to imagine natural catastrophe as a form of divine violence that
unleashes the potential in history: “If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates” (284). This revolution that Bolívar reads under the trope of the natural catastrophe might then be thought under the concept of divine violence: a violence that was able to unleash the cartography from its colonial representation and finally open it to a historicity of open futures. The figure of the infant continent, of the continent lost as the consequence of an archaic catastrophe, returns in the nineteenth century with a utopic face. Amidst the revolutionary heap of rubble Europe looks for its Atlantis.

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The discourse of ruins, infancy and utopia that emerges within the revolutionary landscape of the nineteenth century in Latin America will soon find across the Atlantic its counterpart: under the image of catastrophe, the heap of rubble will be read under the sign of a transatlantic utopia. From Thomas More’s 1516 Utopia to Francis Bacon’s 1624 New Atlantis, America – a figure of infancy and newness – had already been the locus for a resurgence of utopic thought. Even before, within Spanish historiography – from López de Gómara’s 1551 Historia de las Indias to Agustín de Zárate’s 1556 Historia y Conquista del Perú – the hypothetical location of Atlantis was positioned within the newly “discovered” lands of Columbus. As early as the eighteenth century the concretization of such utopic projects was to be incarnated by the Jesuit reductions, based on ideal cities such as those sketched by More’s Utopia and Sir Phillip Sydney’s Arcadia. In fact, the New World was thought of – until the nineteenth century – in terms of an alliance between nature and pastoral utopias. The noble savage corresponds to the timidity of a nature that had not shown its catastrophic face. In the nineteenth century,
amidst the revolutionary wars and as part of the emerging field of the geohistory, this paradigm of pastoral landscapes would, however, mutate. European explorers would travel to America in search for the castatrophic ruins of Atlantis. Atlantis – a conceptual figure for utopia – had indeed a history of catastrophe. In Plato’s Timaeus, where the mythical island is first mentioned, its story is told amidst a discussion on Athenian state politics, the concept of destruction and the genesis of the modern world. Forced to entertain Socrates with intellectual stories, Timaeus narrates the story of Atlantis and its eventual demise:

There have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by the agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable other causes. There is a story, which even you have preserved, that once upon a time Paethon, the son of Helios, having yoked the steeds in his father's chariot, because he was not able to drive them in the path of his father, burnt up all that was upon the earth, and was himself destroyed by a thunderbolt. (35)

Atlantis is then a story that concerns the multiple origins of the world and its subsequent destructions. Borrowing the title of Alain Badiou's book, The Timaeus concerns the “logic of worlds.” In this story a powerful empire located in the Atlantic Ocean threatens to subdue an archaic Athens who, with the “excellence of her virtue and strength,” responds by defeating them. The logic of barbarian invasions succeeds in explaining the disappearance of the mythical empire of Atlantis:

But afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night of misfortune all your warlike men in a body
sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea. For which reason the sea in those parts is impassable and impenetrable, because there is a shoal of mud in the way; and this was caused by the subsidence of the island. (147)

Atlantis disappears between the shocks of violent earthquakes and floods. What strikes us here is the discursive relationship that is established between catastrophe and the contingency of other worlds, between the violence of earthquakes and a possible transatlantic utopia already inscribed within the very origin of western political imagination, a relationship between catastrophe and the forgotten origins of the world. As Timaeus tells Socrates, this story relates to the “marvelous actions of the Athenian city, which have passed into oblivion through lapse of time and the destruction of mankind” (32). Atlantis, the paradigmatic utopia, is then related to that new logic of the archive, oblivion and mourning that is opened by a catastrophic historiography as it emerges in the nineteenth century: from Derrida’s archive fever to Freud’s unconscious as palimpsest, this New Atlantis that emerged amidst the wave of mayanism that extended throughout the nineteenth century – from Alexander Von Humboldt to Augustus Le Plongeon, from Brasseur de Bourgbourg to Alice Dixon – was a utopia that unleashed the unrealized potential behind catastrophe. Read under the sign of allegory, the reemergence of the myth of Atlantis in the nineteenth century implies the return, under the figure of a shaking continent, of a peripheral territory capable of terrorizing the continental and hegemonic imperial cartography of Western thought.
As the case of the nineteenth search for the *mayan* Atlantis suggests, and as I have tried to show throughout the chapter, the discourse on the politics of catastrophe amidst the ruins of the imperial cartography always plays upon the tip of its dangerous double blade: it oscillates between its radical political potential and its romantic conservatism, between a properly American discourse of revolutionary politics and a romantic European projection of the culture versus barbarism dichotomy. Rather than seeing this as a problem, this should be seen as one of the chapter’s main proposals: the idea that the earthquake as event proposes a dialectic of exception and stability, of irruption and reinscription, of shock and aftershock. Just as the civilian confirms the earthquake through its subsequent aftershocks, just as the traumatic events are only registered in their subsequent reenactments, modern historiography seems to rework the figure of the event through these dialectics of shock and aftershock. It is in this way that we can read Walter Benjamin’s distinction between *divine violence* and *mythic violence*, between the violence that interrupts the law and the violence that preserves the law. In this sense, it should be no surprise that my argument regarding the politics of catastrophe sometimes sounds like an absolute inversion of Naomi Klein’s argument in her 2007 book *Shock Doctrine*, for what is at stake are the ways in which the nineteenth century was able to play with the then emerging triangular relationship between nature, politics and history. What interests Klein are the ways in which disasters legitimate states of exception that in turn serve capitalism’s expansion. Her intuition, in its attempt to explore the complex political implications of disasters, hints at the way the state legitimizes its practices as part of an archive which attempts to neutralize the outside of culture. Viewed from the perspective of the state, nature is an out of bounds that must
be represented, archived, documented, if it is not to fall back upon the chaos of anarchic ruins. As Rafael Rojas has noted in his book *Las Repúblicas de Aire* the history of the nineteenth century wars of independence is that of a constant battle with the initial anarchy unleashed by war. The leaders of the revolution, Rojas documents, were in fact enlightened leaders for whom order was essential. It is then to no surprise that within the Latin American nineteenth century, as part of the war of independence, this role of the state as machine of representations is fundamental. One merely has to think of a text like Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. In fact, one could almost see Bolívar’s trajectory as having three moments each of which corresponds and gets represented by one of his three main writing: *The Manifesto de Cartagena*, *The Jamaica Letter* and the *Speech of Angostura*. The three moments could, hastily, be described as follows: in *The Manifesto de Cartagena*, amidst the ruins of the earthquake, Bolívar emerges as the political subject who feels the interpellation of the event. In the second moment, represented by *The Jamaica Letter*, Bolívar takes the power of the event’s multiplicity as the basis for his impossible continental project. Lastly, in a third move that I shall now explore, the Bolívar that appears in the *Speech of Angostura*, is a more conservative Bolívar who, looking back at the heap of rubble, desires the stability produced by the state’s archival power. Here is perhaps one of the strongest intuitions of my project: the idea that reading the nineteenth century Latin American archive from the perspective of the emerging modern state, produces new perspectives within a field that until recently has been dominated by a concern regarding the foundation of the nation, mainly due to the extent of Doris Summer’s powerful contribution *Foundational Fictions*. Through the optic of the state the metaphor of the natural catastrophe returns, but this time with a different face.
The Returns of the State: Representing the Multiple

“It would be a folly on my behalf to stare at the tempest and not seek shelter.”
- Simón Bolívar, Manifiesto de Angostura

The journey of a metaphor can sometimes be the archway of its own demise. In our attempt to grasp the dialectics behind the earthquake-metaphor, we are then driven to a third text by Simón Bolívar: The Address at Angostura. Pronounced the 15th of February of 1819, as part of the Angostura Congress, where twenty-six congress delegates representing Venezuela and New Granada had been given the task of sketching a new Constitution for the emerging nation of Gran Colombia, the address revisits many of the central images that characterize Bolívar’s speeches: the anarchic power of catastrophe, the analogy of America to a Rome in ruins, the enlightened discourse on liberty and will, the constant appeal for a single centralized government. Something, however, has changed. In a gesture that coincides with the disenchantment sketched by Rafael Rojas, Bolívar now faces what he calls “la tempestad política” with the greatest of fears. Not unlike Benjamin’s Angel of History, but with a tired spirit, El Libertador turns his back to look at history and sees in it an immense catastrophe that awaits political order:

No ha sido la época de la República, que he presidido, una nueva tempestad política, ni una guerra sangrienta, ni una anarquía popular, ha sido, sí, el desarrollo de todos los elementos desorganizadores: ha sido la inundación de un torrente infernal que ha sumergido la tierra de Venezuela. Un hombre ¡y un hombre como
yo! ¿qué diques podría oponer al ímpetu de estas devastaciones? En medio de este piélago de angustias no he sido más que un vil juguete del huracán revolucionario que me arrebataba como una débil paja. Yo no he podido hacer ni bien ni mal; fuerzas irresistibles han dirigido la marcha de nuestros sucesos… (190)

The image of Bolívar that emerges from these lines, that of a man who belittles himself while facing a revolution he himself conceives as a natural catastrophe, is far from that which, according to the memoirs of José Domingo Díaz, had affronted the Earthquake of Maundy Thursday with the dignity of a single phrase: “If nature opposes our designs, then we shall fight against it, and force her to obey us.” The will of the political subject, empowered by the storm itself, has mutated into a resignation upon which one can find the traces of a secret purpose: contrary to what it might seem The Address at Angostura remains the statement of a man who is determined to fight against anarchy, a subject determined to give a foundation to history. It is, after all, a constitutional speech and, as such, the metaphors that abound are foundational. Metaphors of base, ground and territory serve Bolívar to construct a basis upon which to run the representational machinery of the emerging state. Bolívar’s plea is clear: “Gentlemen! Let us review the past to discover the base upon which the Republic of Venezuela is founded”. With the force of a single gesture, that of the state, history regains its representational base. However, as Bolívar goes on to explain, this base must remain faithful to the force of nature it wishes to pacify: “Consider calmly your vote, congressman. Don’t forget that you shall spread the foundations of an emerging country that could one day rise to the greatness that nature has marked for it, if you rightly give it the base that its rank awaits.” And so, in this third moment of the dialectics of shock and aftershock, after
having erased the *imperial tableaux*, Bolívar proceeds to return to the image of the *tabula*
but this time with a difference: his speech performs the transition from empire to state,
from the classifying *tableaux* of natural history to the representational archive of the
state. The archway sketched by the three moments of the earthquake metaphor
describes the way in which one paradigm is displaced by another in a movement that
reconfigures the triangle between nature, history and politics. The state however, as
Bolívar knew well, remains a hostage to the initial madness of its emergence. Its
precarious nature lies in the fact that at any moment the nature of its origin could burst
forward and show the empty face that lies behind the set of rules that marks the
beginning of its sanity.

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At the basis of the state we then find a trembling foundation, a latent multiplicity that
threatens at any moment to shake the whole structure. It is precisely this foundational
precariousness what the history of the national imaginaries has so far accidentally cover
up. From Benedict Anderson’s celebrated *Imagined Communities* to Doris Sommer’s
*Foundational Fictions*, the historiography of the Latin American nineteenth century has
found in the nation, understood as imaginary fiction, that is to say, as narrative, the way
of sketching a “*happy history*” of the transition between the age of empire and the age of
the nation-state. It should be no surprised that, within Sommer’s account, the figure of
the happy ending, of the resolution of desire within the heterosexual couple, remains the
definitive account of the ways nations were able to canalize their internal tensions into
coherent national narratives. Recently, this happy historiography has been questioned
by intellectuals such as Jeremy Adelman, whose article *An Age of Imperial Revolutions*
questions the national paradigm by uncovering the multiple grounds upon which the
transition between from empire to nation-state was produced. Adelman’s approach is different. Starting from the modern discussion of the concept of sovereignty, he attempts to plea for a non-narrative history that takes note of the multiple possibilities inherent in the wave of revolutionary wars:

This is now changing, giving way to a view of sovereignty released from the bounded state, and recasting it as a bundle of claims, images, and assertions of authority that can be aggregated at more than one juridical level. This new view takes some distance from the anachronism of identifying national self-determination as the modern genesis of sovereignty, and restores an appreciation for the premodern roots of our transnational political vocabulary. (323)

Released from the bounded state and its narratives, the emergence of the modern Latin American state appears in its original complexity and violence. Beyond narrative, this moment appears in the full complexity of its eventuality. To study the nineteenth century from the optics of a politics of the event is then to destroy the imaginary continuity to which the twentieth century historiography has condemned it. Adelman’s work, in this sense, forms part of a wider recent interest on the politics of exception. Walter Benjamin’s discussion of violence and its relationship to the state, has been retaken recently by Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the state of exception as the basis for the foundation of the state. Agamben, following Carl Schmitt, sees the state as being founded upon an initial moment that lies outside the law. The state is always a state of exception:

The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the
sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity, then, the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it… (15)

This is the unstable foundation that the state tries to hide behind the masks of its archive. Simón Bolívar’s Address at Angostura, with its initial portrayal of history as catastrophe, lends itself to this type of exceptional reading. The state, as Bolívar seems to argue, is never a mere happy resolution, but the suppression of an original chaos by the founding fathers. Against the stereotypical image of Bolívar that wishes to see in him a mere enlightened politician of unity and continental peace, I would argue that we must force this image of the megalomaniac who knows unity is impossible but whose absolute act of sovereignty is to impose order by force of the letter. This is, by no means, to call Bolívar a despot, as became prevalent during his last years, but rather to see, behind his discourse, a deep knowledge of the dynamics of state formation beyond the optics of narratology. If we are to read Bolívar allegorically, it shall not be as a happy translation of sense, but rather as the catastrophic ruins of sense under which Benjamin understood the baroque.

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The allegories of the state are therefore the broken allegories of catastrophe. In his Address to Angostura Bolívar returns to the image of Rome in ruins in order to illustrate the precarious state of America after its cessation from Spain. America, like Rome, has become a pure multiplicity whose unity, however, unlike that of Rome, is not guaranteed by any ethnic nature. America, Bolívar writes, is a continent neither of Europeans nor of indigenous people, but rather an unnatural mixture, whose unity and
identity is already product of a complex and unnatural catastrophe. In addition, one must not forget the tradition of slavery of which El Libertador also takes notice in the language of catastrophe: “The horrendous slavery covered with its black veil the land of Venezuela and our sky was full of tempestuous clouds that threatened with a deluge of fire. I asked for the protection of God as after the redemption he cleared us of the storms. Slavery broke its chains and Venezuela welcomed its new children.” In the remaining years Bolívar will attempt to think the sublime unity of this continent whose nature exceeds the powers of the archive and its representative machines. Necessarily, he will fail once and again. Failures he will also understand in terms of the precariousness of a state constantly assaulted by the danger of an overwhelming catastrophe. Five years latter, exiled in Pativilca, Perú after the collapse of another constitution, he shall write to Francisco de Paula Santander, some of his most disenchanted yet illuminating words:

Echando la vista por otra parte, observe Vd. esos trastornos de las cosas humanas: en todo tiempo las obras de los hombres han sido frágiles, mas en el día son como los embriones nonatos que perecen antes de desenvolver sus facultades, por todas partes me asaltan los espantosos ruidos de las caídas, mi época es de catástrofes: todo nace y muere a mi vista como si fuese relámpago, todo no hace más que pasar, ¡y necio de mí si me lisonjease quedar de pie firme en medio de tales convulsiones, en medio de tantas ruinas, en medio del trastorno moral del universo! (195)

Bolívar epitomizes the political subject in struggle with the state of exception, both as the sovereign and as the homo sacer, the subject lost amidst his desire for order. Lost
within the ruins of this Rome that was so unlike Rome, incapable of organizing a coherent narrative for the emerging state, *El Libertador* looks back and sees in history the mere heap of rubble once described by Humboldt.
Aftershock
Photographing the Earthquake: Cesar Aira’s Rugendas

What begins to gain form in the nineteenth century under the trope of catastrophe is a new relationship between the event and the archive, a reformulation of consciousness in its relationship to historical knowledge. Years later, this discourse will find in psychoanalysis its empirical subject. As Walter Benjamin, a prodigious reader of both psychoanalysis and history, knew so well, what I have above called *sublime historiography*, this new relationship between the spectral event and the archive as totality, already present within the works of Humboldt and Bolívar, finds in psychoanalysis its psychic equivalent and in photography its technology. Psychoanalysis and photography reframe the event within its original archival violence. As Jacques Derrida has explored in *Archive Fever*, the event is always an interruption of the archive, a wound that blasts open its continuity and forces the archive to redefine itself: “The technical structure of the archiving also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (17). The event always appears in its truth in the act of rewriting, as aftershock and reinscription. It is then to no surprise that perhaps the best reading of Humboldt’s megalomania wasn’t produced during the nineteenth century, but rather by Cesar Aira’s 2001 novella: *Episodio en la Vida de un Pintor Viajero*, a counter-historical novel that rewrites an episode in the life of Johann Moritz Rugendas.
Historical, as well as counter-historical rewritings have always been a constant within Cesar Aira’s overwhelming literary production: from *Ema La Cautiva* to the more recent *Parménides*, Aira’s writing operates over history with the precision of a taxonomist. His operation is usually that of torsion: a historical scene is misinterpreted through the optic of the present conceptual configuration; the past is seen through the lens of the present. By repeating history, his novellas explore the ways in which technology structures our experience of time, space and history. *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painted* is no exception. There Aira decides to delve into the 19th century in order to sketch the figure of he who Simon Bolívar considered the greatest painter of the American landscape: Johann Moritz Rugendas. The novella’s fictionalized account of history concerns a strange *episode* that occurs to Rugendas while he travels through Argentina in search for the “other side of his art”: “Argentina: the mysterious emptiness to be found on the endless plains at a point equidistant from the horizons. Only there, he thought, would he be able to discover the other side of his art” (5). The novella then develops, amidst the significant emptiness of Argentine plains, as an exploration into the mysterious nature of this other side of the art of landscape painting. But, what could this other side exactly be? Two hints are given by way of Rugendas obsessions: the German – originally described as a disciple of Humboldt’s physiognomical approach to nature – is obsessed with painting the *pure eventuality of an action*. Two obsessions have driven him to the postwar landscape of the Southern Cone: that of painting an earthquake and that of painting an Indian raid. Aira’s historical torsion is already at work: Rugendas’ obsession with the other side of his art corresponds to his desire to represent what, by its very nature, remains beyond representation. Within the nineteenth century, the
Indian raid, in its barbaric interruption of the codes of civilizations, corresponds to the punctual and ungraspable irruption of natural catastrophe, as figured by the earthquake. It is then to no surprise that he fails in his attempts once and again, until a strange occurrence changes the rules of the game: struck by a thunder, Rugendas is left almost dead, disfigured and monstrous. It is in this altered state that he comes up with a solution to his artistic ordeal: he shall paint with a black mantilla hanging over his face. He decides to become a camera oscura. Only then, by symbolically entering into the realm of photography, is he able to reach that other side of his art and capture the figure of the Indian raid. By rewriting the nineteenth century from the photographic optic of the twentieth century, Aira is able to illuminate the internal logic of its sublime history. In what follows I shall delve into the consequences of this historical torsion, in an attempt to rethink how photography emerges, within the nineteenth century, as a technology of catastrophe, as short-circuit that reconfigures the event’s violent place within the archive. Rugendas’ other art is then an art of catastrophe.

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An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter: the title already suggests one of the main conceptual knots at stake throughout the novella. The notion of an episode brings forth one of the fundamental problems within romantic aesthetics: that of the fragment’s relationship to totality. In fact, Aira’s oeuvre, with its multiplicity of novelitas, and his poetics of “la huida hacia delante,” sometimes seems to be a fragmentary poetics of

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16 Aira is clearly here intervening within the debate concerning the central distinction at the foundation of the modern state: that which differentiates civilization from barbarism and which takes, in the case of Argentina, the book by Sarmiento Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie, as its point of departure.
episodes forming a wider body of work whose unity is itself under question. Within the
novella, these dialectics between fragment and totality are rendered into a theme.
Rugendas’ mentor, Alexander Von Humboldt, is described by the narrator as “el ultimo
sabio totalizador”. It is under this description that we are first introduced to the figure of
the landscape:

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was an all-embracing scholar, perhaps the last of his kind: his aim was to apprehend the
world in its totality; and the way to do this, he believed, in conformity with a long tradition, was through vision. Yet his
approach was new in that, rather than isolating images and treating them as “emblems” of knowledge, his aim was to accumulate and
coordinate them within a broad framework, for which landscape provided the model. The artistic geographer had to capture the
“physiognomy of the landscape… (17)
The landscape then remains the name for a configuration of nature under the emblem of
totality. It remains the ideal of a wholesome representation, of a catalogue under which
nature is subsumed and archived. Against this desire for representation, one can then
grasp the tension that is at work within the novella between the totalizing notion of a
landscape and the fragmentary notion of an episode. As critics like Jens Andermann and
W.J.T. Mitchell have noted, landscape is to nature what the law is to violence: the
imposition of an external measure, the taming of that which threatens to open a gap
within the space of the archive. From the aesthetics of Humboldt to Sarmiento’s
imaginary description of the Argentinean pampas, landscape painting remains a law-
making cartographic device, the stabilization of nature as the pillar upon which the state
could then begin to represent itself. I am reminded of the parable that Borges recounts at the epilogue of his book *El Hacedor*: a man decides to draw the world, just to find much latter that he has sketched the contours of his own face. Like in this parable, the state measures, paints and draws the limits of its landscape, just to find the physiognomy of its own law written over the now mutilated nature. In this sense, Cesar Aira’s rewriting of the life of Rugendas in his novella *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, with its historical torsions, remains crucial in order to understand the role of nature within the founding moment of the Latin American states. As the novella recounts, Rugendas came from a genealogy of painters whose task was to document war. Talking about the technique of his great-grandfather, the narrator states: “An exquisite contrast between the petrified intricacy of the form and the violent turmoil of the subject matter made him unique” (3). This distinction between the peaceful representation and the violent subject matter remains illuminating, for what is at stake here is the taming of the unlawful outside of knowledge. In Aira’s novella Rugendas is described as a disciple of the physiognomic approach to nature, as a landscape painter. And yet, at the very bottom he remains a painter of war, a painter of movement and violence. The novella attempts to negotiate from within this oscillation between the static and the kinetic, between peace and violence, between law and nature. And so, what drives Rugendas out of the realm of the law is always his desire to reach the outside of representation: his search for the earthquake and the Indian raid are nothing else than his desire to lift the veil out of the state’s mask. In fact, it is this desire that gets fulfilled when nature itself strikes back with the violence of thunder: deformed and in pain, Rugendas is finally capable of painting the outside of the law, the trembling pillars of a shaking state. He who had attempted to sketch the physiognomy of nature
finds his own face deformed to the point of being unrecognizable: like a bandit he is now forced to wear a mask. A survivor of electricity, as the narrator calls him, Rugendas emerges from the dead as pure other. A masked man, a faceless man, he no longer falls within the realm of state representation, he exists at the very limits of citizenship. Only from there can he paint pure violence as the presentation of the outside of the state.

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“For some reason, Rugendas and Krause, in their daily conversations on horseback, hit upon a relation between painting and history.”

- Cesar Aira

Once Rugendas – this great survivor of electricity – crosses the threshold separating painting from photography, representation from action, he enters into a new relationship to the archive that manifests itself in a new temporality. A landscape painter by training, his task had always been that of producing military documents. However, once his vision is blurred, and, with the black mantilla hanging from his face, he becomes symbolically a camera obscura, his relationship to the document changes profoundly. He is finally able to document those events which until then had remained outside of his calendar. We merely have to remember how this elusive calendar had originally been portrayed:

Rugendas would have liked to depict an earthquake, but he was told that it was not a propitious time according to the planetary clock. Nevertheless, throughout his stay in the region, he kept secretly hoping he might witness a quake, though he was too tactful to say so. In this respect and in others, his desires were frustrated. His
other cherished dream was to witness an Indian raid. In that area, they were veritable typhoons, but, by their nature, refractory to calendars and oracles. It was impossible to predict them: there might be one in an hour’s time or none until next year. (25)

The Indian Raid – described here under the catastrophic figure of the typhoon – had until then remained the unfathomable outside of the heterogeneous calendar. Struck by thunder, turned into a camera obscura, Rugendas now belongs to a different calendar: that of photography. His relationship to the document has changed, precisely because his perception has been innervated by the morphine, producing a mental short-circuit that mimics the automatism of the camera’s eye. At the precise moment in which he begins to witness the Indian Raids, we have the following description of his mental self: “From that moment on, like all victims of personalized catastrophes, he saw himself as if from outside, wondering. Why did it have to happen to me? […] Rugendas, who was going through a particularly critical phase, had attacks of vertigo and cerebral short-circuiting all night …” (54) He belongs now to the vertiginous calendar of the short-circuit, of that impossible event of pure instantaneity. It is in this sense that one could claim, following Rugendas example, that photography as technique reconfigures the sense perception machinery in such a way as to render it adequate to the chronotope of modernity: that chronotope which in the past chapter I have called the time of catastrophe. If, in our play with Reinhart Koselleck’s definition of modernity, I had described this modern temporality as that of an ongoing catastrophe, one could then say that the emergence of photography corresponds to a society whose notion of document goes beyond that of conscious perception. No longer merely a viewing subject, a recording eye, the photographer corresponds to an excessive subject who documents
more than he can consciously register. The subject of catastrophe is characterized by that which, following Walter Benjamin, we could call the optical unconscious. A society that takes catastrophe as its paradigmatic happening, is one in which the document registers more than it can represent, a society which is full of exceptional points. Photography enters into this society both as a symptom and as a salvation, as the technique through which the complex affective structure of this new event – in its indexical, spectral, deictical exceptionality – is finally given a body. No wonder at the very beginning of the novella, when describing Rugenda’s task, we are told: “His mission was one that, a hundred years later, would have fallen to a photographer: to keep a graphic record of all the discoveries they would make and the landscapes through which they would pass” (2). Aira is able to understand the true insight behind such statement: with the emergence of photography the structure of the archive changes, and with it the notion of the document. Thunder struck, metamorphosed into a camera oscura, the delirious Rugendas becomes a subject amidst a state of exception.

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One could then speak of catastrophic subjectivities: excessive subjectivities that play with the boundaries of representation. But what is Freudian psychoanalysis if not a discourse on these exceptional subjectivities? In Civilization and its Discontents Freud sketches the psychic consequences of a common desire: that of the intoxicated oneness with the world which he describes as the oceanic feeling offered by religious belief. There is no doubt that Freud is talking here of something quite close to the feeling of the sublime, and that his intention is to reduce the concept to a symptom of neurosis: that is to say, to interpret the phenomenon in psychoanalytical terms instead of religious one.
However, the beginning of the essay is strangely fascinating. Freud is, in fact, responding to a comment a friend of his has made against his attack on religion in his essay *The Future of an Illusion*. The identity of this friend is never unveiled, except by a sketch of his character: the book begins by exploring the idea of greatness, and in particular, of great men:

> There are a few men from whom their contemporaries do not withhold admiration, although their greatness rest on attributes and achievement which are completely foreign to the aims and ideals of the multitude […] One of the exceptional few calls himself my friend in his letters to me… (36)

By introducing his friend, an exceptional subject, Freud positions us already within the problematic site he will latter expound: that of sublimity as neurosis. Moreover, one could easily claim that with his opening paragraph, Freud is hinting at the fact that the feeling of greatness that characterizes religion is nothing else that one of the symptoms of megalomania. The sublime subject, the subject who emerges *amidst* catastrophe, finds in the megalomaniac its type. It is perhaps from this optic that we should read Rugendas’ intoxication: as the sadic reverse of the totalizing desire of Humboldt. Against the all-embracing desires of his mentor, Rugendas loves that instant of catastrophe – the Indian Raid, the earthquake – that presents itself as an absolute. In his sketches, one finds the desire to subvert the *fragment/totality* dichotomy by means of a logic of exception that is also the logic of the out of bounds of the landscape: to capture that moment in which the landscape presents itself as unrepresentable absolute. By focusing on Rugendas’ malady, Aira is able to show the megalomania behind Humboldt’s project: “In any case the concept of truth took on monstrous proportions in
his imagination, and rent his nights in the little rooftop room.” (50) This discourse of monstrosity and magnitude, of drugs and intoxication, of exception and the out of bounds, is itself indirectly a discourse on megalomania: “Reality was becoming immediate [...] the notion of a consciousness aware not only of itself but of everything in the universe” (78). The genius of Cesar Aira’s historical torsion is to show how this all-embracing consciousness is no longer that of a Cartesian subject, not even a consciousness at all, but the optical unconscious produced by the camera. The modern subject is the subject plus his monstrous out of bounds:

However skillful the photographer, however carefully he poses his model, the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it. It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously [...] Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious.… (176)

A reality that is more than itself can only be apprehended by the poignant eye of a subject that is more than merely himself: the subject that perceives the photographic event is a subject then that exist not in the present instant of conscious perception but rather in the delayed temporality of repetition. Only from there can he look back and discover what his eye had registered without him knowing.
“Repetitions: in other words, the history of art.” Reflections upon the relationship between art and history begin to obsess Rugendas after he is hit by thunder. One gains preeminence: the fact that art is lead by a process of incessant repetition. This motif remains one of the most enigmatic of all, guiding Rugendas delirious reformulation of Humboldt’s theory of the physiognomy of nature. However, our photographic reading of the novella helps us propose a sense to this otherwise ambiguous motif: history, having moved from the realm of painting to that of photography, is now characterized by the spectrality of its repetitions: “It [the physiognomic approach] was based on repetition: fragments were reproduced identically, barely changing their location in the picture”(42). Like the earthquake, whose spectral presence is only confirmed by the aftershock, the photographic event is characterized by the internal difference of its repetitions. This is precisely the logic of Benjamin’s dialectical image, as expounded throughout his Arcade Project. As Eduardo Cadava has noted in his book Words of Light, the temporality of the photographic event is that of repetition, of quoting, of the lighting flash that interrupts continuity and imposes a radical dialectics:

The radical temporality of the photographic structure coincides with what Benjamin elsewhere calls “the caesura in the movement of thought”. It announces a point when “the past and the present moment flash into a constellation.” The photographic image –like the image in general- is “dialectics at a standstill”. It interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, one that spaces time and temporalizes space. (61)

The photographic event presents us with the logic of lightning as expounded by the dialectics between potentiality and actuality, the violent logic of interruption and
exception that actualizes what in the past had remained a mere potentiality. And so, we could imagine that everything that happens to Rugendas after his accident – his encounter with the Indian Raids, his decision to adopt the mantilla, his delirious reflections upon the nature of art – is all an aftershock of that impossible instant in which lighting strikes him in the form of thunder. It is a semiotic response to a pure action:

What happened next bypassed his senses and went straight into his nervous system. In other words, it was over very quickly; it was pure action, a wild concatenation of events. The storm broke suddenly with a spectacular lightning bolt that traced a zig-zag arc clear across the sky.

(32)

The logic then behind Rugendas’ method is that practiced by Aira: reinscription, rewriting, repetition. *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter* is a novella about the ends of landscape painting as much as it is about landscape painting: by drawing upon the structural limits of the landscape, by presenting us with that which can’t possibly be mere landscape, by rewriting catastrophe, Aira’s novella questions the technical and archival implications of the modernist event.
Chapter 2: Volcanoes
Emergencies of an Archaeological Modernity

“Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

- Walter Benjamin, Thesis on the Philosophy of History

In one of the decisive scenes of Malcolm Lowry’s 1947 modernist novel Under the Volcano, the three protagonists – Hugh, Yvonne and the alcoholic Consul – decide to drive out of Quauhnahuac into the festivities of Tomalín, near Parián. From the window of the 1918 Chevrolet bus that transports them, the Mexican post-war landscape is drawn as scorched earth, as a wasteland in battle with its modernist pretensions. Parallel to the broken, serpentine road in which they travel, they can spot the American Highway, a sign of a linear progress that seems, however, to elude them. Telegraph poles, the other sign of an incipient modernity, also seem to lag behind the violence of this archaic landscape:

Nothing but pines, fircones, stones, black earth. Yet that earth looked parched, those stones, unmistakably, volcanic. Everywhere, quite as Prescott informed one, were attestations to Popocatépetl’s presence and antiquity. And here the damned thing was again! Why were there volcanic eruptions? People pretended not to know. Because, they might suggest tentatively, under the rocks beneath
the surface of the earth, steam, its pressure constantly rising, was generated; because the rocks and the water, decomposing, formed gases, which combined with the molten material from below; because the watery rocks near the surface were unable to restrain the growing complex of pressures, and the whole ass exploded; the lava flooded out, the gases escaped, and there was your eruption.

But not your explanation. (242)

Framed by the windows of the bus, the volcanic landscape becomes a reflection both of Mexico’s modern history, as well as of the Consul’s alcoholic nightmare. It suggests the subterranean discontents of a culture incapable of forgetting its origins. Like the drunken Consul, like the rocking old Chevrolet bus in which they travel, Mexican modernity seems to stumble its way through history, incapable of walking straight. Against the progressive straight path of the American highway, their paths seems to constantly deviate towards an archaic origin that seems to find in the volcano its symbol: “Popocatepetl loomed, pyramidal, to their right, one side beautifully curved as a woman’s breast, the other precipitous, jagged, ferocious. Cloud drifts were massing again, high-piled, behind it. Itxaccihuatl appeared…” (243) The volcano then hides two sides: a living side and a deadly side, a volcano and a pyramid. The volcanic-pyramid becomes the preferred double symbol for the imminence of historical catastrophe, for the disclosure of a secret path within modernity, an errant path leading to modernity’s archaic secret. The archaeology of such secret is given to art as its paradoxical modernist task.
Paradoxically, the nineteenth century sees both the emergence of evolutionism as well as its impasses. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s famous pronouncement – “myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology” – from their 1944 masterpiece *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* makes clear, the logic of modernity spirals around itself. Progress ends up producing a spectral desire for a return to a forbidden origin. As such, the logic of catastrophe works under the fantasy of a singular original catastrophe but admits of no original deluge: earthquakes and volcanoes, tsunamis and fires, hurricanes and floods, all reproduce each other in a proliferating spiral that unearths a logic adverse to the linear concept of progress. Its logic is not that of lines, but rather that of turns, repetitions and reproductions. Namely, a proliferating topology of emergency that forces us to think of the limits of enlightened progress as a model for history. Malcolm Lowry, a man torn between the modernity of James Joyce and the archaic ruins of Quauhnahuac, knew it well: modernity sketches its linear path in order to better deviate, in order to be able to dream of archaic ruins.

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This chapter attempts to excavate through the 19th century in search for the origins of an archaeological paradigm of history as it emerges in relationship to the concept of Mesoamerican ruins, and in particular, to the notion of an archaeological symbol. It attempts to sketch the emergence of the vertical, not to say deep, temporality of the archaeological symbol as the impasse of enlightened progress. It does so by pursuing how the catastrophic figure of the volcano – a figure of an archaic, buried, emergent knowledge – comes to be articulated, represented, inscribed, throughout what I call the long nineteenth century in Mexico: that period spanning from the Mexican War of
Independence in 1810 up to the consolidation of the Mexican Revolution under the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* in 1929. Three intellectual, as well as artistic figures come forth as standing at each end of this period and determining two opposing modes of tackling the question of the past as it comes to be figured by the volcano: José María Heredia, the famous poet, public intellectual whose *Oda al Niágara*; Augustus Le Plongeon’s, the British antiquarian and photographers, whose work in Yucatán established modern Mayanism; and finally, the infamous muralist, intellectual, philosopher and natural historian Gerardo Murillo, who Leopoldo Lugones baptized as Dr. Atl, for the Nahuatl word for water, and whose obsession with volcanoes drove him to lose a leg as part of his crazy project to paint the birth of the Paricutín volcano. Heredia, Le Plongeon, and Murillo serve as three sites of an archaeological excavation within whose millenarian corridors one sees the image of Mesoamerica repeated in the thousand mirrors of Europe’s archaic fantasies.
The Archeology of a Symbol: Jose María Heredia’s Volcanic Pyramid

Padre de fuego y piedra, yo te pedí ese día
tu secreto de llamas, tu arcano de armonía,
la iniciación que podías dar…

- Rubén Darío, Momotombo

Its 1821: a young José María Heredia, exiled from his native Cuba, enters the Museum of Natural History in Philadelphia, and finds, to his surprise and amazement, the skeleton of a mammoth. The event will be registered in the chronicles of his North American days. Two decades earlier, in 1796, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier had revolutionized the field of natural history with a paper that presented his studies on living and fossil elephants. One of Cuvier’s statements had struck particularly hard against the enlightened theory of the best of possible worlds: “All of these facts, consistent among themselves, and not opposed by any report, seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe” (18). The fossils of elephants evidenced the fact that they were not the same species but rather that we were talking about different species. Under Cuvier’s theory, which was later to gain the name of catastrophism, extinction was a possibility. No longer a homogenous empty space, time appeared under the figure of a discontinuous history divided by catastrophic events – volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods – which Cuvier himself would later call revolutions. The fossil of an elephant was enough to open history to its own discontinuities. The relationship between past and present, between the past and its present restitution, had changed with the emergence of a series of “historical sciences” that were able to read in the present the traces of a past long gone. As Michael Foucault has explored in The Order of Things, from palaeontology to archaeology, there emerged a science of past signs. The fossil, prevalent among them, had reconfigured the semiotic
relationship between past and present in such a way that the young Jose María Heredia who enters the Museum of Natural History doesn’t know what he is confronted with. Who then, was this José María Heredia? Unlike his similarly named cousin Jose María de Heredia, whose European trajectory won him a seat in the Académie Française, the story of Jose María Heredia y Heredia – in whose name we already find a game at repetition and difference – was a truly American story. Born in 1803 in Cuba, the young Heredia is arrested in 1823 under charges of conspiracy against the Spanish monarchy. His sentence: a banishment for life from Cuba that forces him to go into exile. At the end of the same year - 1823 - we find him in Philadelphia, the city of the founding fathers, and two years latter in México, amidst the anarchy of the recently liberated republic. It is this Heredia, not the other one, the French Heredia, who becomes a model in the fight for Cuban independence, leading José Martí, in one of speeches in New York, to compare Heredia’s “volcanic verses” with the political struggles of Bolívar: “Heredia only finds his equivalent in Bolívar [...] The first poet of América is Heredia. Only he has loaded his verses with the sublimity, the pomposity, the fire of its nature. He is volcanic like its entrails and serene likes its heights” (35). Martí’s comparison of Heredia’s verses to the natural dialectic between eruption and serenity, between melancholic contemplation and the urgency to act, makes explicit what we find in the verses that the young Heredia dedicates to the Teocalli de Cholula during a visit to México in 1820.17 The poem, an ode to the greatness of Aztec past, an ode to the teocalli

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17 In a gesture that became characteristic of many romantic poets, Heredia worked on this poem throughout the years, only producing the “final” poem as a sequence of fragments. The original fragments date from his 1820 trip, and were entitled “Fragmentos descriptivos de un poema mexicano.” As Emilio Carilla’s genetic study of the composition has shown, later revisions date from 1825. The final edition, published under the title of “En el teocalli de Cholula” dates from 1832. It is this edition that we presently use.
– *Nahuatl* for the house of god, namely, for a pyramid – works through a constant oscillation between two figures: the pyramid and the volcano. In this oscillation, the *volcanic pyramid* emerges as a symbol that safeguards the past:

Volví los ojos al volcán sublime,
que velado en vapores transparentes,
sus inmensos contornos dibujaba
de occidente en el cielo.
¡Gigante del Anáhuac! ¿Cómo el vuelo
de las edades rápidas no imprime
alguna huella en tu nevada frente?

The logic of the volcano is that of the intransigent giant who refuses to conform to the progressive linearity of time: the pyramid, in its archaic verticality, stands firm against the “quick flight of the ages”. As such, Heredia constructs the founding symbol of the Mesoamerican archaeological imaginary: the Janus, double-face symbol, whose respective faces show a pyramid and a volcano. As I will now attempt to show it is in regards to a constant negotiation with this double symbol that a new mode of historical experience is structured within the thwarted logic of Mexico’s modernity. The young Heredia that arrives to Mexico in 1920, just when the war is over, knows the logic of archaeological knowledge without knowing that he knows it: one always produces knowledge the day after the catastrophe, when the war is over, and what is left for the poet is only the excavation of ruins.¹⁸

¹⁸ As Rafael Rojas has explored in his book *Las Repúblicas del Aire* the Mexico to which Heredia arrives is a post-revolutionary anarchic Mexico. Although the “Grito de Dolores,” Mexico’s cry of Independence dates from 1810, the war would extend up to
“Piramidal, funesta, de la tierra nacida sombra, al Cielo encaminaba de vanos obeliscos punta alta, escalar pretendiendo las Estrellas”: Mexican literature is sometimes said to begin with the pyramidal ascent to heaven by the soul as described in the first lines of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s poem Primer Sueño. The verticality of the pyramid stands for the particular oneric temporal logic of knowledge, a kinship between the pyramid and knowledge that is reinforced by the fact that the pyramid is merely the external architecture of an internal secret. Like Heredia’s teocalli, which houses the secrets of the gods, the hermetic pyramid belongs to a tradition of secrecy and veils, of crypts and mausoleums, a tradition with conforms to the logic of death and mourning. Its figure stands for a knowledge whose origin – whose arche – has been lost but whose external face stands unveiled as a call for desire. Namely, the archaeological nature of the pyramid is precisely that of the symbol as it is explained by Hegel in his Lectures on Aesthetics, that of a cryptic externality: “The pyramids put before our eyes the simple prototype of symbolical art itself; they are the prodigious crystals which conceal in themselves an inner meaning. . . . the shape for an inner meaning remains just an external form and veil” (356). Hegel never visited Mexico. Nor did he – like Walter

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September 27, 1821 when the creoles, led by Agustín de Iturbide, agreed to sign the Treaty of Córdoba. As such, Heredia’s reflections on war, violence and melancholic serenity must be read within the atmosphere of violence and anarchy that prevailed both in his native Cuba as well as in México during the second decade of the twentieth century.

As Reinhart Koselleck has explored in his book Critique and Crisis there is a direct relationship between the rise of modernity, the emergence of the modern State and secrecy. As Koselleck explores in relationship to the rise of free masonry, this triple link lies at the very heart of that strange phenomenon which saw, in the late eighteen century, a rise in critical philosophies of history. It must be highlighted that José María Heredia formed part of the masonic lodge “Los Caballeros Racionales”. A whole theory of history is disclosed by a modern stance regarding the secret.
Benjamin – dreamt of México. Unlike his relationship to Haiti and its revolution, of which much has been recently written under the figure of the master and slave dialectic, his links to México are more remote, if it were not for this passage that continues to explore the site of the pyramid as a semiotic negotiation between meaning, knowledge and death: “But this realm [the pyramid] of death and the invisible, which here constitutes the meaning, possesses only one side, and that a formal one, of the true content of art, namely that of being removed from immediate existence; and so this realm is primarily only Hades, not yet a life which, even if liberated from the sensuous as such, is still nevertheless at the same time self-existent and therefore in itself free and living spirit. The pyramids are such an external environment in which an inner meaning rests concealed” (356). As Jacques Derrida has explored in his essay *The Pit and the Pyramid*, what is disclosed here under the figure of the pyramid is the whole architectonic structure of Hegelian semiology, the logic of this site of knowledge that plays at desire through a game of veils. By positing the pyramid as the paradigmatic figure of the sign, Hegel exposes the logic of desire at work behind the process of signification, the process of signification as a play between desire, archaeology and mourning. We are once again driven back to Heredia’s early poem “En El Teocalli de Cholula”. The young Heredia arrives to a country whose war has barely ended, a country still attempting to settle the anarchic spectres of war, only to realize that instead of recording the epic landscape of battle, he prefers to contemplate the landscape of what was and could be. His poem remains a melancholic ode to a past whose latency resounds through the present as a mere possibility:

Hallábame sentado en la famosa cholulteca pirámide. Tendido
el llano inmenso que ante mí yacía,
los ojos a espaciar se convidaba.
¡Qué silencio! ¡Qué paz! ¡Oh! ¿Quién diría
que en estos bellos campos reina alzada
la bárbara opresión, y que esta tierra
brota mieses tan ricas, abonada
cón sangre de hombres, en que fue inundada
por la superstición y por la guerra...?

Nature, under the double symbol of the volcanic pyramid, stands for the subject’s opening to a particular sort of eventuality: not the mere horizon of an open future, as progress ridden historicity would have it, but rather to the latent presence of a past experienced as the potentiality of a lost origin. The young Heredia, a man of action who had been exiled from his native Cuba out of fear for his actions, seats among the ruins of the Cholula pyramid in order to melancholically contemplate the sublime landscape upon which the indigenous sacrifices where once executed. The dialectics of sublime contemplation, this play between distance and immersion, between the exteriority of the symbol and its spectral interior belong, like in Sor Juana’s “Primer Sueño”, to the strange temporality of dreams: to that vertical time of the dream-image which Benjamin called dialectics at a standstill. It is from there, from that figure of the melancholic impasse of progress that Heredia begins his poetics of emergency. As Walter Benjamin states in his “Thesis on the Philosophy of History”, what is at stake is the realization that the state of emergency is not the exception, but the rule, that the latent possibility of catastrophe is a modality of historical experience. And so, Heredia’s poem melancholically oscillates between the past and the present, between the pyramid and
the volcano, as figures that signal the latent re-emergence of the past. One could claim
the volcanic pyramid stands as the symbol for the possible Freudian “return of the
repressed”. For us, the question would then be: what sort of historicity is here disclosed
by the symbol of the volcanic pyramid? What poetics of desire and history are
established under the figure of mourning and melancholia, under the figure of a return
of the lost origin? How to think this emergency? Moreover, what would happen if,
opening the pyramid’s secret chamber, one fails to find the body, but rather encounters
that the lost object, the object of desire and mourning, is nothing else than the figure of
Mexico itself? Mexico lost in its desire for Mexico.

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Psychoanalysis’ relationship to a topography of emergency, to monumentality, death
and its spectres, is not a mere coincidence. With the introduction of its novel theory of
the symptom, psychoanalysis turned the symbol into a monument for a traumatic past.
As early as 1909, in the first of his Five Lectures in Psychoanalysis, Freud recounts the
relationship between the neurotics’ symptoms, memory traces and monumentality.20
The neurotic’s symptoms are, as Freud states, mnemonic symbols, residues of a
traumatic experience. He then proceeds to draw an analogy: “We may perhaps obtain a
deeper understanding of this kind of symbolism if we compare them with other

20 For a recent study of Freud’s relationship to México, see Rubén Gallo’s Freud’s
México: Intro the Wilds of Psychoanalysis in which the author explores the ways Freud’s
theories influenced the way Mexican modernists conceived of themselves and their
modernizing task. Of particular importance for us are Gallo’s reflections concerning the
similitude and difference between Freud’s concepts of melancholia and malaise on the
one hand, and Octavio Paz’s notion of solitude on the other. It is interesting to think
that José María Heredia’s work, despite having been read as part of the Cuban canon,
could tell us something about México.
mnemonic symbols in other fields. The monuments and memorials with which large cities are adorned are also mnemonic symbol” (12). At this point – in a movement that reminds us of Benjamin’s dream, of the sudden emergence of the Mexican shrine in the middle of Weimar – Freud suggests that the audience should take an imaginary walk through London. First stop: Charing Cross. He then proceeds to recount the story behind the monument: one of the old Plantagenet kings of the thirteen century ordered the body of his beloved Queen to be carried to Westminster. At every stage at which the coffin rested, he ordered to erect a Gothic cross. The gothic cross that lies next to the London rail termini is the last of the monuments that commemorate the funeral cortège. The analogy discloses the relationship between the symptom, the symbol, mourning and monumentality: in it the thwarted logic of the symbol is exposed as that which interrupts modern cartography in order to call memory forth. Freud’s archeology is not over. He then proceeds to discuss The Monument to the Great Fire of London: the impressive Doric column with the flaming gilt-bronze urn atop which today stands near the northern end of the London bridge as a reminder of the terrible fire that in 1666 reduced London to ashes, and brought on the reconstruction of the city’s modern face. Freud’s words are here clear: just like the monument stands as a mnemonic symbols for a past catastrophe, so is the hysterical symptom the symbolic trace of a past personal catastrophe. The analogy, however, closes with one particularly interesting comment. After disclosing the relationship between the symptom and the monument, Freud ends up by underlying the pathological character of hysteria by pathologizing melancholia:

But what should we think of a Londoner who paused today in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queen Eleanor's funeral instead of going about his business in the hurry that modern working
conditions demand or instead of feeling joy over the youthful queen of his own heart? Or again what should we think of a Londoner who shed tears before the Monument that commemorates the reduction of his beloved metropolis to ashes although it has long since risen again in far greater brilliance? Yet every single hysteric and neurotic behaves like these two unpractical Londoners. (13)

Freud’s language, by opposing the unpractical figure of the melancholic spectator to that of the efficient working man, exposes the archaic temporality of the symbol: the symbol belongs to a different time, to that unpractical temporality of the monument which interrupts traffic and demands a time of its own. The archaeological symbol, like the neurotic’s symptom, belongs to a different topology: it draws a handle within the smooth, progressive surface of modernity. With his analogy, Freud unknowingly adds a third pathological figure to those of the hysteric and the neurotic: the melancholic. Although its would take him a decade to concretize the discovery, what remains implicit throughout these lines is something that would become apparent in his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia*: the insight that melancholia is fundamentally an archaeological disease, a psychological torsion at the very origin of the history of the subject. The melancholic, by refusing to believe that his love-object is gone, distances himself from the immediacy of the rushing present, and declares himself in war with progress. Melancholia is, in this particular sense, a disease of the Enlightenment that happens to the enlightenment. As such, Jose María Heredia’s *volcanic pyramid* should be read as a symptom of México’s original loss as much as of a romantic anomie. Like the volcano, whose fundamental contribution to the thought of emergency is that of proposing eruption as a repetition of some repressed original, elementary knowledge –
lava, smoke, ash – the melancholic subject repeats history as a way of putting it under parenthesis: it quotes, once and again, from an original scene whose reality it doubts. Melancholia is the disease of a modernity that feels estranged from itself, the pathology of a society that feels exiled from its origin. It should then not surprise us to find that Heredia, an exile, wrote and translated multiples poems on melancholia, many fragments of longer poems that stand today as pyramids among his work. In fact, what renders Heredia a fascinating figure is precisely his position midway between neoclassicism and romanticism. His process of creation, half way between a revival of the classics and an outburst of inspiration, mimics the volcano’s dual nature, and posits the process of creation as the paradoxical production of a ruin. Heredia’s literary production, which included multiple classical translations from which he took inspiration, could then be best understood not merely as a poetics about ruins, but rather as the construction of the poem as ruin. His desire to build his poems as fragments, this conception that “final” poem was nothing else than the accumulation of fragments, discloses a certain conception of time: that of melancholy and exile. The exiled subject becomes the paradigm of the subject for whom the only exit from the modern highway is the production of a ruin, the interruption of progress through the emergence of the symptom.21

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21 This idea of the political act as the production of a ruin reminds us of Walter Benjamin’s Mexican dreams. In them history also reemerges as ruins, as melancholic impasses. In fact, Benjamin, who throughout his work attempted to define modernity under the schema of a dialectics of dreams and awakenings, twice dreamt of México. In an early work of his, One-Way Street, Benjamin records a dream of seeing an archaic Mexican shrine emerge amidst an excavation in Weimar: “In a dream I saw barren terrain. It was the marketplace at Weimar. Excavations were in progress. I, too, scraped about in the sand. Then the tip of a church steeple came to light. Delighted, I thought to myself: a Mexican shrine from the time of pre-anìsm” (64). How are we to understand this violent irruption of an archaic Mexican past within Benjamin’s cartography of
In 1968, the year of the Tlatelolco Massacre and the worldwide student manifestations, the same year in which Octavio Paz writes his famous Crítica de la Pirámide, two psychoanalysts produce a reading of Freud that revolves around the notion of the archaeological symbol. That year sees the publication of Nicolas Abraham’s L’Ecorce et le Nouyau, and Maria Torok’s Maladie du deuil et fantasme du cadavre exquis, two articles that, departing from an interpretation of Freud’s 1917 Mourning and Melancholia, restructure the notion of the psychoanalytical symptom by reading it from perspective of what they call cryptonymy: a science of the symbol as crypt. This arch-psychoanalysis, as Abraham called their approach in his Introduction to Hermann, departs from a fascinating intuition: what Freud had hinted at in his article on mourning and melancholia was precisely the idea that psychoanalysis, as the hermeneutical science of antisemantic symbols, was an archaeological science: a science revolving around the

modernity? How are we to read this image of a modernity that finds – buried under the barren terrain of the modern city – an archaic past that forces us to cross the Atlantic and reach towards a country that Benjamin himself never visited? The second dream, once again from Benjamin’s One Way Street, clarifies the first as much as it renders it even more enigmatic. In the excerpt, entitled “Mexican Embassy”, Benjamin begins by quoting Baudelaire on the value of fetishes, just in order to go on and describe the logic of captivity that his dream sketches: “I dreamed I was a member of an exploring party in Mexico. After crossing a high, primeval jungle, we came upon a system of above ground caves in the mountains. Here, a religious order had survived from the time of the first missionaries till now, its monks continuing the work of conversion among the natives. In an immense central grotto with a gothically pointed roof, Mass was been celebrated according to the most ancients rites. We joined the ceremony and witnessed its climax: toward a wooden bust of God the Father, fixed high on a wall of the cave, a priest raised a Mexican fetish” (53). Benjamin’s dream enacts the flipside of the colonial project, a sacred desire for captivity which leads the colonizer to imagine himself lost amidst the primeval Mexican landscape: Mexico’s primitive landscape as the search for the cure’s of the maladies of modernity. México appears, in each of the dreams, as the locus of modernity’s desire for an arche, for an origin and a myth that would act as the flip side of progress. No longer a eschatological search for an end, but rather the repetition of an impossible, not to say imaginary beginning. For a philosophical reading of these dreams, please look at John Kraniauskas’ essay “¡Atención: Ruinas Mexicanas!”
traumatic relationship with regards to a lost origin. Abraham and Torok’s theory of the
symbol evolves around this insight, modelling itself around the figure of the crypt: like
the crypt, Torok and Abraham suggest, the psychoanalytical symptom is an exterior shell
that protects a traumatic kernel that refuses to disclose its meaning. The psychoanalytic
symptom, in Torok’s words, is a crypt that hides not a body but a phantom, the figure of
an unresolved past that haunts the present in search for justice. Namely, what the
psychoanalytic symptom resolves at the level of the history of the subject is the moment
of torsion that dislocates the progressive logic of cause and effect, replacing it with a
logic of desire that attempts to repeat an absent origin. What happens then when we
read Heredia’s poetry from the perspective of cryptonymy?

José María Heredia’s melancholic poetry – in a gesture that exposes that which
was already foreshadowed by Sor Juana’s “Primer Sueño” – marks the emergence and
establishment of a symptomatic México. Heredia’s poetic discourse on ruins and
symbols emerges as a symptom of México’s problematic relationship with the
enlightened theory of progress and its archetypal forms of modernity. Heredia erects
the volcanic pyramid as a crypt within which México can play with its spectral past.
And such, México’s tradition is a tradition of death, mourning, crypts and phantoms:
from Heredia’s “En el Teocalli de Cholula” to Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo, from Sor
Juana’s “Primer Sueño” to Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano, from Siquier’s La Gran
Marcha de la Humanidad to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, the Mexican tradition seems to be
guided by the desire to build a monumental crypt in which México can search for its
spectres. This does not, however, amount to merely saying that México’s modern
imaginary is guided by the constant negotiation of the holocaust that marked the
Spanish conquest. The trauma here is not the conquest. Rather, what is at stake is the
more complex logic behind Mesoamerica’s foundational myth: that which states that Mesoamerican civilization had already disappeared, mysteriously, before the Spanish arrival. The Spanish conquistadores, as Arthur Demarest has explored in *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization*, did not arrived to the true splendor of the Mesoamerican civilization but to its ruins. The Mesoamerican foundational myth is not that of the conquest’s holocaust but rather that of the flight of Quetzacóatl. When the Spanish arrive the feathered king has left, leaving nothing behind but a promise: he will return as God. Mexican history, in its relationship to the temporal gap that separates it from Mesomerica, is experienced as the delay of Quetzacoatl’s eternal return.  

And so, Mexico’s modern historical witness, of which Heredia becomes the paradigmatic example, is always a late comer: he arrives one day late, when the event is over, and what is left are merely the catastrophic, spectral and symptomatic ruins of a splendid past. Namely, Mexico’s foundational myth marks the site of its own disappearance, it sketches the contours of a lost origin, in a gesture that belongs to the logic of mourning and melancholia, but also of exile: since the very beginning Mexico appears to be exiled from itself. Heredia, an exile himself, a man of letters and politics who arrived to Mexico precisely when the war was over, knew this well: for him the question of the missing origin, of archaeology, melancholia and poetry were one and the

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22 Historians are still unclear as to the origins of the myth regarding the flight and eventual return of Quetzcoatl. As Susan D Gillespie expounds in her 1989 book *The Aztec Kings*, it is believed that the myth regarding Quetzcoatl’s return as Hernán Cortés, was in fact a Spanish construction made to pacify Carlos V’s anxieties. However, rather than refuting my argument the ambiguity regarding the myth’s origin reaffirms its important. The widespread believe in the myth within the mestizo culture that emerged, within the Mesoamerican imaginary, points to its imaginative potential as a hermeneutic tool. Namely, what interests me is not the veracity of the myth, nor its origin, but rather itself as historical catalyzer within the social imaginary of the creole population that would come to identify with Mexico.
same. If his poetry then turns to nature in look for answers it is not in terms of a pastoral observation of the smooth fabric of the natural, of the uneventful outside of history, but rather of the ways nature itself breaks the so-called natural progressivenes of history. Nature is not peace: it is torsion, violence, eruption. What we then end up with is an analogical structure that states the following: catastrophe stands to nature as the pyramid stands to history, the symbol to language and the symptom to the subject. This structural and ecological paradigm, which I have here called the archaeological paradigm, is best understood if we read at once the two face’s of Mexico’s symptomatic modernity. If we place, Heredia’s *Al Popocatepl* next to his *A la Gran Pirámide de Egipto*:

The archaeological paradigm of Mexico’s archaic modernity should be understood in relationship to this constant oscillation between the pyramid and the volcano, between Egypt and Mesoamerica, which ends up comingling the two imaginary worlds of antiquity and reversing the distinction between the Old World and the New World. Years before Augustus le Plongeon sketches his theories about the Mayan origins of Egypt, Heredia’s poetry performs a similar torsion: in his poetry, Mexico is understood only in relationship to the old world of ruins of empires he never knew: Rome, Egypt, Cartago… Heredia’s position, half-way between a conservative neo-classicism and romantic rebellion, produces a poetics of history as the latent possibility of emergency. As prefigured by the dormant volcano and the cryptic pyramid, México’s modern
history sketches itself as the sublime site of a knowledge that has been forgotten, and for which only a symbol stands as trace, ruin and symptom. Like Torok’s crypt, which hides nothing but a phantasm, one finds the image of a nation that has learn that its true object of desire is nothing but itself. Mexico in search for the other Mexico, the México Imaginario in search for the México Profundo. Mexico as the objet petit a of itself.\textsuperscript{23} What

\textsuperscript{23} The earthquake that stroke México City in the early morning of the 19th of September of 1985, razing through the city’s modern landscape, fracturing the country’s modern spine, would leave the city exposed to the terrible logic of its archaic modernity. What the earthquake exposed was the end of that phenomenon of economic development that, from the 1940’s until the 1980’s, saw the entrance of Mexico into the landscape of the modern world, a socio-economic phenomenon that had been adequately called the Mexican miracle. It would be in the aftermath of such an event, as an aftershock of the catastrophe, that Guillermo Bonfill Batalla, an etnologist and anthropologist whose worked revolved around the question of the indigenous presence, would find the grounds upon which to base the his concept of a México Profundo in opposition to that of the México Imaginario. The book, México Profundo, was released in 1987, amidst the atmosphere of social unrest produced by the horrible earthquake, as a call – in the natural language of archaeology and geology – for a recognition of the deep indigenous strata of México. Bonfill Batalla’s strategy is to bring back the concept of Mesoamerica:

Let us start from a basic fact: one of the few original civilizations that humanity has created throughout all its history arose and developed in what today is México. This is Mesoamerican civilization, from which derives all that is “Indian” in México [...]
Every school knows something about the precolonial world. The great archeological monuments stand as national symbols [...]
That renunciation, that denial of the past – does it really correspond to a total and irremediable historical break? Did Mesoamerica really die, and are the remaining Indian populations simply fossils, condemned five hundred years ago to disappear because they have no place in the present or in the future? (12)

Bonfill Batalla’s argument against the fossilization of Mesoamerica, against its petrification in national museums, spirals around itself, only to end up reifying the concept it wishes to place in question: the “Mesoamerican Mexico” can only be thought of under an archaeological discourse of depth and fossils, of monuments and digging, of origins. As I will soon attempt to show, this is no coincidence but rather accords with the logic of catastrophe and reconstruction, of catastrophe and excavation – namely, the archaeological paradigm of history – that surrounds the nineteenth century discourse of ruins in Mexico. The México Profundo that emerges amidst the ruins of the 1985 earthquake is the México whose archaic modernity must be found in dialogue with the problem of progress. How to envision progress while remaining faithful to the past?
is then left? If Heredia marks the emergence of the symptomatic México he also marks the emergence of that Lacanian imperative which also accompanies neurosis: *Enjoy thy symptom!* For the melancholic to turn into a political subject the ruin must be turned into an object not only of conservative nostalgia, but rather of play and transgression. The subject must learn to play among the ruins, to play with his symptom, to enter into the political game of that which Michael Taussig, following Walter Benjamin’s reflections on secrecy and power, has called the *public secret*: that which is generally known, but can’t be articulated. That latent presence which refuses to become a positive representation and whose entrance into the public sphere is always a negative act: an eruption, an excavation, the breaking into a crypt. The volcanic pyramid is México’s symptom precisely because it hints at the idea of a public secret, at the dialectics of concealment and revelation that hide behind the nation’s claim to modernity. Modern politics always revolves, as Taussig suggests, around a constant negotiation of this public secret between the state and the sovereign individual, a negotiation that, given that what is at stake is the representation of a secret, can only take the form of a defacement. To play with the public secret, to play with the national symbol is to perform that which Hegel once called the “labour of the negative”. As Taussig states in his book *Defacement*:

> Defacement is that face-off with death and dismemberment that tilts towards this second sort of triumph, if triumph indeed it be, beyond recuperation by death work or any other kind of work and beyond both lordship and bondage. Defacement is the confrontation with

Bonfill Batalla’s book brought back the notion of a vertical time, a deep time, which in its repetitive loop, is nothing else than the time of the symbol.
death and dislocation whose meaning is irrecoverable by a more
transcendent system. Why irrecoverable? Because it breaks the
magic circle of understanding to spill out as contagious,
proliferating, voided force … (41)

Moreover, this auratic emergence of negativity into the public sphere stages an
interruption of the linear progression of time as it had been imagined by the
Enlightenment: the time of the symptom, the time of the symbol, posses the verticality
of archaeology, the depth of strata and excavation. As such, the public secret emerges
only as the aftermath of catastrophe: in the aftermath of the 1994 Free Trade Commerce
Agreement, in the aftermath of the 1985 Earthquake, in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco
Massacre, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, in the aftermath of the Mexican
War of Independence. The catalogue of the eternal return of other Mexico’s so proves it:
the Ejército Zapatista’s 1994 Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, Bonfill Batalla’s 1987
México Profundo, Octavio Paz’s 1968 Crítica de la Pirámide, the Mexican Muralism of the
1920’s and Jose María Heredia’s 1820 En El Teocalli de Cholula, all pertain to a tradition
of the elucidation of the public secret that emerges as the aftershock of catastrophe,
enacting an impasse of progress and claiming justice for another sort of temporality:
that which I have previously called the temporal dialectic between shock and aftershock.

Heredia’s poetics of catastrophe – his odes to pyramids, to volcanoes, to waterfalls, to
the ocean, to the tempest – must all be read against this tradition of a symptomatic
México plagued by its public secrets, by what Octavio Paz would call its masks. Heredia,
an exile, arrives to Mexico at the sunset of the war, among the anarchy of its
ruins, and attempts to settle the spectres by representing them: his great achievement is
then, not so much his political engagement per se, but the establishment of a symbol:
Pero en el templo mismo
Los furores del mar les alcanzaban
Que con ellos y su odio sepultaban
Su reconciliación y su memoria.

In fight with the idea of linear progress, Mexico’s archaic modernity follows the thwarted logic of mourning, melancholia, exile and repetition. Against the storm of progress, in dialogue with its spectres, it stages the impasses of its history as the eternal return of its phantasmic feather king, Quetzacoatl.

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“El huracán y yo estamos solos”: in September of 1822, amidst the anarchic ruins of the recently declared Mexican republic, Heredia writes a poem that could be read as an allegory for the impasses of the modern political subject. His poem, “En Una Tempestad”, sketches the image of the poet as a lonely figure amidst the power of a catastrophe that erases the reference points of reality, confounding and burying them into a single pile of debris. It is from there, from this landscape of ruins and sepulchres that the poet emerges as the lonely subject facing the storm: “Y todo es confusión, horror profundo / Cielo, nubes, colinas, caro bosque, / ¿Dó estás...? Os busco en vano: / Desparecisteis... La tormenta umbría / En los aires revuelve un océano / Que todo lo sepulta... / Al fin, mundo fatal, nos separamos: / El huracán y yo solos estamos.” There where everything else – even nature – accepts the logic of the storm, hiding itself from its forces, Heredia posits the figure of the poet as the intransigent subject who confronts the logic of the winds. Confronted with the pure multiplicity of the winds, with its
defiance of common sense, the poet valiantly defies the winds. He tackles the tension between the one and the multiple, between the whole and the fragment. Such is his catastrophic knowledge. We are here drawn back to the work of Walter Benjamin, for in his work, history, in particular the impasses of progressive modernity, are also thought of in terms of catastrophe. In fact, in Benjamin’s *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* we find an image that forces us to think twice before dismissing Heredia’s “En Una Tempestad” as merely a romantic poem about nature. I am speaking of Benjamin’s famous passage on the “angel of history”, which reads like this:

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (249)

Placed side by side, Heredia’s poem and Benjamin’s allegorical image bring forth many crucial issues regarding the historicity of Mexican modernity: the role of melancholia and spectrality, the role of catastrophe and its relationship to progress, the role of the
fragment and the symbol, the place of some sort of divine violence within a self-proclaimed secular modernity. I would like to say that what the collage brings forth is the paradoxically genesis of an archaeological modernity: a modernity whose progressive logic has to simultaneously deal with the constant reference, not to say excavation, of an spectral origin. Like Klee’s angel, Heredia’s poet faces the storm as an act of defiance, as a call to the dead; like the melancholic angel, he too stands alone amidst the ruins, fossilized as the victims of Pompey. This position, however, must not be understood as merely a neoclassic conservatism, but as his proper political stance against progress. The poet becomes a ruin, becomes a pyramid, becomes a symbol, becomes a symptom, becomes a volcano in which history regains its past by delaying its future. I would claim that the exiled Heredia that arrives to Mexico in the catastrophic aftermath of the independence wars, the Heredia that in 1822 foreshadows Benjamin’s thesis on history, is a bit like this melancholic angel: a figure in battle with progress, an archaeologist in search for an origin amidst the anarchic space of a country condemned to live out its history as repetition.
A Dream of Atlantis: The Le Plongeon’s Journey

“Mrs. Le Plongeon and myself, after saving from destruction many important documents and relics, have at last found a key that will unlock the door of that chamber of mysteries. Shall it be allowed to remain closed much longer?”

- Augustus Le Plongeon

In 1873, almost half a century after José María Heredia erects the volcanic pyramid as the archaeological symbol for Mesoamerica’s archaic modernity, two Victorian travellers take a journey to redefine the bridges already established by the Cuban poet: those between the old and the new world, between ruins and history, between the monuments of antiquity and the languages of modernity. On July 28, 1873, Augustus Le Plongeon, a British-American antiquarian with a passion for photography and theosophy, together with his young wife Alice Dixon, whose passion for spiritism had been coincidentally inherited from his father the photographer Henry Dixon, embark on a trip that will take them to the Mayan ruins of Aké, Chichén Itzá, and Utxmal, among others. Freemasonry, photography, spiritism and archaeology: everything amounted to the perfect mix between the modern and the archaic, between technology and history, between belief and science. Indeed, it was a nineteenth century transatlantic cocktail that would produce some of the most beautiful of delirious theories. On July 28, 1873, from the port of New York, Augustus and Alice board the Cuba. One week later they arrive to Heredia’s La Habana only to hear that the city is infested with an epidemic of yellow fever. One month later they hear the same news as the ship anchors near the shore of the Yucatán Península. Carrying with them their photographic equipment, with books about theosophy and Egyptian archaeology, they arrive to a land secretly afflicted by another social epidemic: the Caste War that throughout the second part of the nineteenth century confronted the mayan Yucatecos against the European population.
From the very start, their travel was to have political implications. Their objectives went far beyond the mere contemplation of ruins: following the intuitions of Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, the French archaeologist who had travelled the region during the previous decade, the Le Plongeon couple envision something greater, an archaeological theory that would settle the fundamental question regarding the cradle of civilization. Like Brasseur de Bourbourg before them, they held that the ruins found in Yucatán were signs of an original civilization that had disappeared only to reemerge under a different face in Egypt. As Augustus would later explain in his book *Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and the Quiches* their fieldwork into the inscriptions found in the Mayan monuments led them to believe they had found, in Yucatán, the lost land of Atlantis as it had been described by Plato. In the pyramids of Chicén Itzá, Uxmal and Aké, they found linguistic remnants of the land destroyed by a volcanic and techtonic original catastrophe. Augustus, who in the previous decades had lectured on the topic of earthquakes and the origin of civilization, was not foreign to a catastrophic discourse. As such, the idea of a lost continent devoured by an original catastrophe tempted him into thinking that the original civilizations of East and West – the Mayan and Egyptian civilizations of antiquity – were all founded by the refugees that escaped the catastrophic destruction of the original continent. From the very beginning the founding of civilization is for the Le Plongeons a matter of exile, of catastrophe and reconstruction:

We must not forget that Plato informs us that the priests of Egypt assured Solon, when he visited them 600 years before the Christian era, that all communications between their people and the inhabitants of the “Lands of the West” had been interrupted for
9,000 years, in consequence of the great cataclysms, during which, in one night, the large island of Atlantis disappeared, submerged under the waves of the ocean. Are we not then right if we surmise that the monuments of Mayax existed 11,500 years ago, and that mysteries, similar to those of Egypt, were celebrated in them? To support that belief we have the symbols existing in chambers… (41)

“To support this belief we have symbols existing in chambers”: forced to account for his intuitions regarding the cradle of humanity, Augustus points, not unlike Heredia before him, towards the notion of an archaeological symbol which is best represented by the inscriptions found in the burial chambers of Chichén Itzá. Once again, the pyramid becomes the sign of the symbol, a ruin of language that bears witness to some original catastrophic event: like in the Hebrew story of the Tower of Babel, were linguistic differences are accounted for in terms of a catastrophic origin, the myth of Atlantis comes to explain geographical as well as linguistic multiplicity. More than three centuries after the Lisbon Earthquake, the Le Plongeons provide a new twist regarding the sudden emergence of multiple possible worlds: historical unity can be kept, they seem to say, if one can translate between languages. Like in Babel, we are left, however, with the notion of a symbol that is merely the ruin of an original language, destroyed by catastrophe, and dispersed through the multiplicity of exiled worlds.

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Published in 1886, Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and the Quichés sets itself as a book about the origins of modern Free Masonry. In the opening pages, Augustus Le Plongeon, a freemason himself, attempts to defy the widespread believe that its origin
dates back to the works of Aristotle. The origins of free masonry, he claims, are not to be found in the Greco-Latin texts of the founding fathers of European civilization, but rather in the forgotten lands of the west. His methodology, however, is what interests us: Le Plongeon quickly realizes that his archaeology must be an excavation into the meaning of symbols, of inscriptions, of epitaphs: a study into the power of translation. The book then unfolds as a study of the language of ruins – inscriptions, epitaphs, hieroglyphs – that he had found and visually recorded via photographs in the Mayan monuments. As the title already suggests, *Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and the Quichés* reads as an excavation into the language of secrecy so dear to the societies of free masonry. As such, Le Plongeon’s erects, at the very center of his study, the notion of the archaeological symbol, paradigmatically represented by the pyramid, as the sign whose meaning remains a secret to us. As ruinous meaning, the symbol remains, to use Taussig’s terminology, a *public secret*, an object of desire that calls for the labour of language. This relationship between secrecy and archaeology, between secrecy and modernity, should not come to us as a surprise. In his seminal *Critique and Crisis*, Reinhart Koselleck has exposed the central position that secret societies, and in particular free masonry, had in the construction of the crisis consciousness that became fundamental for the construction of our modern notion of the state. At the very heart of the Enlightenment, as some sort of perverse double of it, the dialectic between secrecy and knowledge, paradigmatically represented by the all seeing pyramid – that same pyramid which years later, in 1968, Octavio Paz was to equate to the history of Mexican power struggles – becomes central for our understanding of the political as well as philosophical implications of crisis as a historical category:
The political significance of the shift was hidden from the bulk of the society as well – this had its roots in the dialectic between ethics and politics that was provoked by the secret. The political secret of the Enlightenment was not to be shrouded just from the outsiders: as a result of its seemingly non-political beginnings it was concealed from most of the Enlighteners themselves. (85)

The politics of this paradoxical notion of an enlightened secret, in its relationship to the formation of modern secret societies, remains a symptom of the formation of a new temporality at the very heart of modernity: the notion that at any moment something veiled could come to light, not necessarily as knowledge, but as veiled knowledge. This is precisely what the archaeological symbols stands for: the ruins of an original language – the lost Babel – that remains veiled until the reconstructive labour of translation is performed. At the very heart of the enlightened project, within its internal struggle, the notion of an archaeological symbol is the symptom of a modernity that struggles to construct the notion of a universal history. The question of a universal foundation for history is at the center of the architectonic quest of Free Masonry. Le Plongeon’s Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and the Quiches must then be read against this background: as an attempt to posit a secret origin upon which to base a universal history. As a free mason, Le Plongeon knew that modernity stands upon a delicate triple architectonic foundation: technology, knowledge and desire. As such, his archaeological journey within the Yucatán peninsula must be understood in regards to the tension

24 On the topic of universality and history, in relationship to New World historiography, the following books are of interest: Susan Buck-Morss’ Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, Jorge Cañizares Esguerra’s How to Write the History of the New World? and Serge Gruzinski’s The Conquest of Mexico: Westernization of Indian Societies from the 16th to the 18th century.
developed within his theory of the symbol. The archaeological symbol instantiates within language the complexity of a crisis that had marked modernity since the Lisbon Earthquake: the critical tension between the possibility of multiple different worlds on the one hand and the necessity, on the other, of a single universal history. This tension between multiplicity and universality, paradigmatically represented by Babel and Atlantis, lies at the heart of any modern narrative as the dormant volcano punctuating the otherwise calm landscape. The possibility, so well known to the Le Plongeon’s, that any mountain could be a pyramid, that any mound could turn into a volcano, points towards something essential within the structure of Latin American modernity: uniform progress is always experienced against the latent presence of a possible catastrophe that would reenact the original state of exception that gave birth to its traumatic historicity. In the diary of their Yucatán trip that Alice Dixon kept, there is a phrase that gets often repeated: “We discovered a mound….” This phrase punctuates their narrative endowing it with a sense of possibility. Mounds always appear as a possibility of discovery, as the sign of a latent new symbol, as a call for archaeological work and for the work of translation, but also under the sign of the latency of the negative. More often than not, within Dixon’s diaries, mounds turn into truncated pyramids that hold within them chambers. Death inhabits the archaeological symbol as that which refuses to be merely translated. And so, in Alice Dixon’s diary entry for the 1st of November of 1875, written while the couple was exploring Chichén Itzá, we can read: “Doctor discovered a mound with sculptured slabs, and a statue of a reclining tiger without head half buried in the ground. The slabs represented tigers, and Macaws eating human heart. This mound is not far from the tiger monument. We took it to be a mausoleum…” (117) Punctuating the landscape of modernity as the archaic secret that can’t be subsumed, death discloses
itself as the catastrophic interior of the archaeological symbol. Opening the mausoleum, the archaeologist encounters the reclining figure of an effigy that refuses to disclose its name.

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The stone sculpture found inside the *Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars* in Chichén Itzá, depicting a reclining man with its head turned to one side while it holds a tray in his chest, was soon to find a name. Augustus Le Plongeon, interpreting the statue to be a totemic representation of the mythical warrior Coh, soon christened it as *Chaacmol*, meaning powerful warrior. Years later, the *American Antiquarian Society* inadvertently changed it to *Chacmool*, the archaic Yucatec Mayan for puma. Given the frequency with which the leopard repeats itself across the walls of the monuments in Chichén Itzá, the name seems suitable. The finding was, however, to prove central to the Le Plongeon’s archaeological cartography of symbolic possible worlds, serving as the central symbol upon which they would later construct the catastrophic allegory of the lost continent of *Mú*. In fact, the discovery of the statue re-enacts the unveiling of the symbol as it was to be imagined by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok: after the supposed mausoleum is open, after the shell-like crypt is uncovered, the statue comes out as the phantasmal kernel of meaning, as the anti-modern residue which refuses to play within the smooth economy of translation and equivalence. It becomes the founding stone for the whole edifice of meaning precisely because it, with the negativity inherent in every public secret, refuses to yield its exact value. As it remains clear from the diary of Alice Dixon, as well as from the writings of Augustus Le Plongeon, the discovery of the statue was to jumpstart their desire towards allegory. One is here tempted to hear the echoes of Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum: “Allegory is to the realm of things what ruins are in
the realm of thought” (178). The dictum, which belongs to Benjamin’s early reflections on the baroque mourning play and his theory of allegory as ruin, hints at the possible connections between the archaeological symbol, allegory and the problem of universal history. Benjamin’s discussion of the baroque, which is in turn a reflection upon modernity as such, removes the allegory from its traditional weak position as direct expression of an idea, and complicates the paradigm by rethinking allegory as ruinous meaning. The power of allegory resides, Benjamin seems to say, not in the transparency of a universal meaning but rather in its capacity to reproduce the desire of the particular for such universality. As such, the allegories that we find throughout the writings of Augustus and Alice, all of those attempts at narrating an archaeological history of the origins of civilization, are to be understood within the modern attempt at producing a universal history. One almost feels tempted to rewrite Benjamin’s dictum from the perspective of the debates concerning universality. Allegory is to language what to catastrophe is to nature: a short circuit that exposes the complex relationship between the fragment and its totality, between the particular and the universal. The archaeological symbol as ruin stands in the middle as the symptomatic condensation of the desire for universality. Throughout their many articles and books, from Le Plongeon’s *Queen Móo and the Egyptian Sphinx* to Alice Dixon’s epic poem *A Dream of Atlantis* to her longer prose poem *Queen Móo’s Talisman*, one finds the many attempts to allegorize the symbol found in Chichén Itzá – the Chacmool – into a compelling narrative. Departing from their belief that Maya hieretic alphabet was easily translated into the Egyptian alphabet, the Le Plongeon’s devised a foundational allegory based upon their readings of the Mayan inscriptions and epitaphs. According to the Le Plongeon’s, the statue of Chaacmol, the powerful warrior, stood for the figure of Prince
Coh, youngest son of the serpent King Can, and brother of the beautiful Móó who became Queen after the death of their father. It was the law among the Mayas that the youngest son should marry the oldest sister, which would have entitled Coh to the throne. However, Prince Aac, the second son of King Can was also in love with Móó. In a feat of jealousy and wrath, it is claimed, Aac killed Coh by stabbing him three times in the back, an event that started a civil war in the original continent and lead to a social catastrophe. So runs the first of allegorical readings that surround the statue, an allegory that attempts to link itself with the biblical stories found in the book Genesis: the fratricide of Cain and Abel, the seduction of women by the serpent, the first great deluge. Egypt, the sign of civilization, is said to have been founded by the refuges escaping the catastrophe that caused the ruin of the western lands of Mú. Exile, translation, allegory and catastrophe, are all linked by the Le Plongeon’s attempt to produce a universal history. In fact, as we read a lecture given by Alice Dixon in 1890, we find her go even further, suggesting that the Greek was also tied to Mayan through a direct translation. As Lawrence Desmond has explained in *Yucatán Through her Eyes*, a book which explored the Le Plonegon’s journey, Dixon even went as far as suggesting that the Greek alphabet, when translated sequentially, narrates the catastrophic disappearance of Mú. In a strange feet of allegorical logic, Alice seems to produce a reverse image of Babel:

The Greek language, according to the Le Plongeon’s, derived from the Mayan, and as proof she explained that Augustus had discovered that each letter of the Greek alphabet had a meaning in

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25 On the topic of translation and universality, several books seem to be of importance: George Steiner’s 1975 classic *After Babel*, Etienne Balibar’s essay “Ambiguous universality” and Alain Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. 

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Mayan. When the letters were translated sequentially, a short poem emerged about the destruction of Mú. Alpha means “heavily break the waters,” bete means extending over the plains,” gamma means “they cover the land,” etc, ending with omega which means “then come forth and volcanic sediments” (269)

“The come forth and volcanic sediments”: the machinery at work in this universal translation is authorized, from the very beginning, by the power of death, exile and dispersal of that first volcanic catastrophe which jumpstarts the desire for allegory under the sign of the impossible return to an origin. Modernity finds itself in direct dialogue with its archaeological counterpart. Its sign is the photograph of a statue.

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One must not forget that the Le Plongeon’s journey was primordially a photographic journey. They kept a physiognomic archive of their trip by photographing members of the cities they visited, they taught the natives the mysteries behind the new art, and most importantly, Augustus’s translation work – central for his theories – departed from photographs of the inscriptions he found on the Mayan ruins. In fact, as Lawrence Desmond points out, it had been the sales of Augustus’ Manual de Fotografía, written specifically for the Latin American market, which had helped finance their trip to Yucatán península. Their lives had, since the very beginning, been touched by the camera: the young Augustus had learned the art from one of its pioneers, the English photographer Henry Fox Talbot, before going on to open personal studios in the western lands of California and Perú. Talbot himself held a very serious interest in Middle Eastern archaeology and had worked to translate the Syrian and Chaldean
cuneiform writings. On the case of Alice Dixon, the connection was immediate: her father, Henry Dixon, held a private studio at 112 Albany Street in London. Working for her father, who had many times been commissioned to photograph the relics of Old London, the young Alice was to learn much of the antiquarian photography that would help her during her days in the peninsula. It is then to no surprise that photography comes to figure, within their work, as the central technology around which the dialectics between archaeology and modernity, translation and originality, repetition and difference, catastrophe and reconstruction, gain their relevance. Photography, as the writings of Walter Benjamin suggest, serves as an allegory for allegory itself: it is a temporal technology that represents the ruin of meaning and time, the catastrophic interruption of the link between the referent and its copy, as well as its multiple dispersal.26 Like the members of Mú, forced to seek refuge and exile throughout the world, the photograph disperses itself beyond the confines of its origin. Furthermore, as Walter Benn Michaels has explored in his essay “Photography and Fossils”, photography instantiates a technology of time which links the debates concerning the archaeological symbol to a debate concerning another type of archaic sign the fossil. Like the fossil, like the crypt, the photograph remains an absent presence, a trace for something which once was and no longer is. Following recent theoretical trends we are tempted to say: like the fossil, photography remains an indexical sign standing for an

26 For a more comprehensive treatment of the topic of dispersal, reproduction and itineracy in its relationship to the photographic archive, please see the essays compiled in Eduardo Cadava’s and Gabriela Nouzeilles’ The Itinerant Languages of Photography. As Nouzeilles’ points out in her essay “The Archival Paradox”: “As Marcel Duchamp so wonderfully expressed in his conceptual work Boîte-en-valise (1935-1941) – the portable authorial museum consisting of scaled-down reproductions of his works, all neatly kept in a suitcase – the content of the archive is always on the move. And because it is itinerant, because it moves, there is always the chance that it will be unsettled, undermined, sabotaged, erased and even smashed” (41).
origin that has been catastrophically removed from our modern experience. And so, it is to no surprise that in the introduction to Le Plongeon’s *Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx* we find a photography of fossil shells that accompanies the following text concerning the history and marvels of the Mayan ruins, all a call for archaeological study:

Walls covered with bas-reliefs, inscriptions and sculptures carved in marble, containing the panegyrics of rulers, the history of the nation, its cosmological traditions, the ancient religious rites and observances of its people, inviting decipherment, attract the attention of the traveller. The geological formation of its stony soil, so full of curious deposits of fossil shells of the Jurassic period its unexplored caves, supposed dwellings of sprites and elves, creatures of the fanciful and superstitious imagination of the natives; its subterraneous streams of cool and limpid water, are yet to be studied by modern geologists. (37)

In Le Plongeon’s text, the archaeological symbol confuses itself with the fossil, in a gesture that forces us to acknowledge the proximity of two contemporary nineteenth century debates concerning the origins of historical time: those concerning both archaeology and paleontology. Just as Le Plongeon had been forced to revise the biblical theory of the original deluge in order to account for his alternative history of civilization, years before, Georges Cuvier, a French geologist born amidst the anarchy of the French Revolution and its posterior terror, had produced an alternative theory of earth history departing from his discoveries regarding elephant fossils. Cuvier’s theory, which was to eventually gain the name of *catastrophism*, ran as follows: the history of the
earth has been punctuated by a series of global catastrophes – which he would latter call, in the spirit of the early nineteenth century, revolutions – that had determined the present conditions of dispersal as well as the variety of fauna and flora. Fossils were the indexical signs of such catastrophes. Namely, what Cuvier developed under the name of catastrophism, was another theory for the internal dialectics of the concept of universal history: an explanation of difference that pointed towards a common ground. And so, the nineteenth century sees the emergence of a science of spectral signs – fossils, ruins, epitaphs of gone cultures – that constructs modernity as the other face of a catastrophic allegory. Photography would rise among such ruins, as a technology that hinted at how within modernity, the concept of evolutionary progress, necessary for the establishment of a concept of universal history, was only able to establish itself against the background noise of a catastrophic discourse that counteracted history and nature. It is in this sense that we should read the Le Plongeon’s constant reference to photography: as an attempt to capture the eternal return of Quetzacoatl.

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Unintentionally, Augustus and Alice were writing an allegory for the tumultuous political times in which they lived. As they travelled throughout the Yucatán Península, taking photographs of the inhabitants and of the ruins, the region was undergoing a civil war: the Caste War, as it grew to be known, consisted of a series of revolts that confronted the indigenous fraction against the population of European descent. The revolts were part of the violent aftermath that followed the Mexican War of Independence, which had inequitably distributed the land among the population, leading to the oppression of the indigenous community, to higher taxation and tougher work
hours amidst the boom in production of agave. The Caste War, spanning from 1847 to 1901, belongs to an alternative history of Mexican modernity which traces the returns of that invisible, untranslatable spectre which refuses to be reduced to the smooth economy of universal history: in the eternal return of Quetzacoatl, the figure of el indígena finds the myth that establishes its repetitive struggle to redefine its place within Mexico’s modernity. This history, which is itself a history of the México’s public secret, of its catastrophic archaeology as well as of its archaic modernity, leads all the way from the arrival of Cortés to the sky masks of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional.

What remains at stake in this history is the negotiation of the non-modern within the enlightened project of a progressive liberal modernity. The Le Plongeons couldn’t know it, but their allegories regarding an initial civil war that marked the birth of civilization – their reading of a catastrophic birth of historicity – hinted at something crucial: universal historicity entails, within its structure, the constant struggle to incorporate, without reduction, the non-modern elements of its archaeology. As Lecia Rosenthal has pointed out in her book *Mourning Modernism*, what the catastrophic imaginary sketches are the boundaries and limits of the capitalist project for a homogenous, systematic modernity:

Catastrophe erupts to render visible the ongoing contradictions within capitalism and its commensurating logics of systematization, homogenization, and exchange. At the margins of such systems, catastrophe designates something other to, something other than, the negative moment of an inevitable dialectic of progress and containment. Like the death drive, catastrophe points to a beyond
that can never be placed either inside or outside a prior logic of integration, meaning, or futurity. (4)

“Catastrophe erupts…” Rosenthal’s vocabulary evokes the volcanic eruption in order to highlight the topography of emergency implicit in modern historicity. It is the same volcanic rhetoric that we find, not surprisingly, in Crack Capitalism, the latest book of he who has been called the philosopher of the Zapatistas, John Holloway:

The revolutionary process is a collective coming-to-eruption of stifled volcanoes. The language and thought of revolution cannot be a prose which sees volcanoes as mountains: it is necessarily a poetry, an imagination which reaches out towards unseen passions. This is not an irrational process, but it implies a different rationality, a negative rationality that starts not from the surface but from the explosive force of the repressed no (225).

The volcanic tropology present both in Rosenthal’s as well as Holloway’s texts soon shows its Freudian face: the volcanic catastrophe stands, not for any sort of interruption, but for the negative death drive which interrupts the forward looking temporality of the pleasure principle by staging history as the eternal return of the repressed. History, seen through the spectacles of catastrophic discourse, is seen as the ongoing dialectics between progress and repetition, between the transparency of universality and the ruins of secrecy. As such, it is to no surprise that we find, within Alice Dixon’s biography, a progressive politization with respects to the claims of the indigenous and the Caste Wars, a politization that culminates with a series of articles on the topic, paradigmatic of which is her 1893 article “Yucatán since the Conquest” published in the Magazine of American History. Departing from Serapio Baqueiro’s 1879
Ensayo histórico sobre las revoluciones de Yucatán desde el año 1840 hasta 1864, Dixon attempts to construct a history of the conquest as a history of the oppression and systematic destruction of the indigenous population. In the tradition of Bartolomé de las Casas, whose Historia de la Destrucción de las Indias jumpstarts the tradition of catastrophic American historiography, Dixon constructs the modern history of the Yucatán Península as the ruinous history of the survival of the indigenous after the catastrophe of conquest. What is at stake, once again, is the concept of a universal history and its discontents, a history of the allegories of conquest and the instauration of an archaeological paradigm of history. Walter Benjamin once dreamt seeing, while walking through the marketplace at Weimar, an excavation: a Mexican shrine of the times of pre-animism was being extracted from the grounds of the city of Goethe, Schiller and Herder. What this re-emergence of the past within the grounds of the Enlightenment signals, is precisely the archaeological modes through which modernity deals with its public secrets. Progress, as Benjamin himself would latter point out, bears catastrophe as its pseudonym and works as a storm that impairs us from putting the breaks on history. Walking amidst the tumultuous landscape of the Yucatán peninsula, Alice Dixon must have seen, in the battles between the indigenous and the criollos, the cryptic sign of an urgent call for an impossible universal history.
With Gerardo Murillo, better known as the mythical and infamous Dr. Atl – name by which the Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones baptized him – the volcanic pyramid of Heredia displaces itself once again, in order to settle amidst the anarchic grounds of the Mexican Revolution. The figure of Dr. Atl, born the 3rd of October of 1875, traverses Mexican modernity with the impetus of the Nietzschean overman, making itself visible at each of its decisive moments with the elusiveness of his larger than life persona: it is hard for us to trace the continuities between the painter and the cultural politician, between the writer and the city planner, between the early anarchist and the later fascist. For Dr. Atl was all of these things and many others, all of which remain clouded by the force of his self-mystification. It was of him, however, of whom José Clemente Orozco – one, alongside Diego Rivera and Álvaro Siqueiros, of the three main Mexican muralists – said the following words in his Autobiografía:

Nos hablaba con mucho fuego de la Capilla Sixtina y de Leonardo.
¡Las grandes pinturas murales! Los inmensos frescos renacentistas, algo increíble y tan misterioso como las pirámides faraónicas [...] En esas veladas de jóvenes aprendices de pintura apareció el primer bote revolucionario en el campo de las artes de México. En aquellos talleres nocturnos donde oíamos la entusiasta voz del Doctor Atl, el agitador, empezamos a sospechar que toda aquella situación colonial era solamente un truco de comerciantes internacionales… (128)
Orozco beautifully wraps up his praise of Atl’s incendiary rhetoric by sketching their diverting paths: “El Doctor Atl se fue a vivir al Popocatépetl, y yo me lancé a explorar los peores barrios de México” (128). With such an ending Orozco provides us with a hint to that which would turn out to be the guiding thread throughout out the life of this prolific and controversial man: his obsession with the symbolic landscape of the volcano which he must have painted, sketched, and even photographed more than a thousand times. In what follows I am aim to read the figure of Gerardo Murillo and his problematic relationship to both the Mexican Revolution and Mexico’s process of modernization, through the lens of his volcanic obsession. What arises from this kaleidoscopic view is the image of a multifaceted character whose erratic vitalism embodied the internal conflicts at the heart of the Mexican Revolution.\textsuperscript{27} Progress at war with itself: in the erratic pilgrimage of Dr. Atl, in that voyage that took him throughout Europe and back, to a Mexico in the midst of a war that would bring him to the bridge of death, to the United States and latter again to Europe, all the way to his final return to Mexico, we find the image of a man at war with that same progressivism which in his early years he help foster. His mystical obsession with the figure of the volcano then becomes a symptom of the impasses of a revolution whose claim to modernity veiled the necessity to come to terms with its spectral past. Like Nietzsche, Murillo – through his ever dislocated and anarchic displacement – becomes symptomatic of an untimely modernity at battle with the ghosts of its founding violence. In his works, the dialectic of the enlightenment becomes explosive and erratic, always at the verge of danger.

\textsuperscript{27} Interestingly it would seem as if it had been Murillo who has been forgotten by art historians. Whereas Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera share the glory of Mexican modernism, Murillo remains an esoteric figure, a singular individual whose eccentricity sometimes seems to overshadow his towering importance.
At the very turn of the century, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June of 1897, a twenty-two year old Gerardo Murillo boarded in Veracruz the steamer \textit{Seguraca} on his way to New York. Seventeen days later, after an impactful visit to the \textit{Metropolitan Museum}, a similar boat would take him from New York to Europe, the continent that would serve to consolidate his sentimental education. Paris, Venice, Rome: the journey would expose the aspiring artist to both the great classical works, as well as to the emerging political and aesthetic tendencies of the European fin-de-siècle. With the help of Latin American poets of the calibre of Rubén Darío and Leopoldo Lugones, Murillo would discover the possibilities of modernism without failing to notice, at the same time, the renaissance frescoes of Raphael and Michelangelo, frescoes in which he would find an inspiration for his so-important later adoption of muralism. He would, however, as Olga Sáenz has explored in her book \textit{El Símbolo y la Acción}, also come in contact with the boiling political atmosphere of the Italian artistic circles at the turn of the century. From this early engagement with Italian socialism, with the works of Enrico Ferri and the group that surrounded the publication of \textit{Avanti}, Murillo would grasp the political tension at the center of the modernist project. One must not forget that it was, as Sáenz points out, from Italian socialism that the two main opposing political tendencies of communism and fascism would later spring. This double tradition would hunt Dr. Atl throughout his career. One must not forget, either, that the Italy of the turn of the century is the Italy of Marinetti and the futurists, with their almost mystical anesthetization of war and technology. Infected with the Janus faced tradition of Italian socialism, fascinated with the tradition of renaissance frescoes, Murillo returns in 1803 to México. At the outset of the Mexican Revolution, Murillo takes a position as professor of arts in the
Escuela Nacional del Bellas Artes. From there he will spread with volcanic fervour the teachings of his Italian masters to his students, among them, three of which would later gain a particular place in Mexican history: José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alvaro Siqueiros. At the very outset of the Mexican Revolution, in the years preceding the events of 1810, Dr. Atl begins to sketch the problem that will hunt him throughout his life: that of founding a civilization that would remain rooted in the spirit. In other words, a civilization that would remain faithful to the initial catastrophe that gave it rise. It is, as we shall soon see, the problem of the volcanic pyramid, as much as it is that of the cryptic kernel at the heart of the modernist project. With the problem of this spirited civilization in mind, Dr. Atl will traverse the anarchic years of the Revolution, becoming in turn one of its most effervescent characters. From his initial alliance to the government of Venustiano Carranza to his latter involvement with the work of “national reconstruction” staged by the government of Álvaro Obregón, Dr. Atl would remain faithful to his initial civilizing concern. The question for him would remain: how to, amidst the ruins of the revolution, produce a civilizing regime of progress that would not remove from the individual that spirit that linked him with the universal soul? It would be this civilizing project – this project of a spirited universalism – that would later gain for him the density of a symbol: that of the volcano. In Sinfonías del Popocatepetl, a beautiful book of poetic prose published in 1921, we can read how Dr. Atl weaves the volcano into what he sees as the epic of universal progress:

Así como surgen entre las obras del Hombre escalonadas a través de la Historia algunas superiors e inconfundibles, así como se yerguen poderosamente entre la acumulación del trabajo humano un pensamiento de Confucio, una concepción religiosa Hindú, una
Confucius, Darwin, Keppler and Michaengelo: amidst the revolution’s program to reconstruct a national identity, Dr. Atl attempts to weave Mexico’s history into the universal history of the artistic spirit. Within this historiographical project, the volcano will come to symbolize both the possibility of the great Mexican historical deed, as well as the memory of its founding catastrophe. In this sense, Murillo’s project would remain close to that other great cultural promoter of the Obregón administration, José Vasconcelos. In fact, both would embrace a mystical spiritism that would lead them to delve into the myth of Atlantis, in which they would both see the possibility of civilization emerging from catastrophe. Murillo, who throughout his live claimed to have been born in Atlantis, would later publish a book called *Un Grito en la Atlántida*. Vasconcelos’s 1925 *La Raza Cósmica*, would delve into the myth of Atlantis in order to project upon it his dreams of a universal history. For Dr. Atl, as it becomes evident from his book *Sinfonías del Popocatépetl*, this myth of a catastrophic original past, would take the symbol of the volcano as its basis. Civilization always in battle with progress:

> Pero las fuerzas del pasado acechaban, y arteramente se arrojaron en avalancha contra la Civilización, paralizando de un golpe la marcha del progreso, destruyendo las vidas, aniquilando las voluntades y

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28 Dr. Atl’s friendship with José Vasconcelos seems to have been problematic one, starting from their joint efforts as part of Alvaro Obregón’s government, leading to Atl’s fight with Obregón and his rough discrepancies with Vasconcelos who, as an insult, he would latter call “Pepito” Vasconcelos.
cubriendo la ruta luminosa con inconmensurables errores y con 
millones de cadáveres. A mi me tocaba luchar en la palestra donde se 
habían librado durante siglos cruentes luchas entre hombres 
bárbaros semidesnudos y hombres más bárbaros aún vestidos de 
hielo y de zayal… (107)

“Una gran piedra luminosa que cayó del cielo, revivió en el hombre civilizado el terror 
ancestral” (93): for Gerardo Murillo, the possibility of universal progress is always 
threatened by the memory of an ancestral catastrophe. This dialectic is, and this is the 
point that must be highlighted, intrinsic to modernity itself. The Mexican Revolution 
was such a catastrophic event, an event that left, in the mind of Murillo, the always 
imminent sense of an upcoming catastrophe, the Nietzschean sense of living at the end 
of times and yet simultaneously forming part of the beginning of a new, post-historical, 
utopian time: “Sobre las ruinas y sobre los sepulcros florecen las plantas y viven los 
animals – sobre la tumba augusta, mausoleo de la energía terrestre, vibran las sinfonías 
de la energía terrestre, vibran las sinfonías vivificantes de la naturaleza” (39). We are, 
once again, reminded of the works of Augustus Le Plongeon and Alice Dixon, as well as 
of that so-repeated and insightful expression of theirs: “We discovered a mound…” Dr. 
Atl’s mountain always bears within itself the possibility of catastrophe, the possibility of 
a volcano:

“La montaña ha revivido. Millones de años durmió en el silencio de 
la muerte, millones de años el viento la azotó, millones de años las 
fuerzas de la naturaleza trataron de destruirla, cerraron su boca, 
carcomieron su vertebras, sacudieron su masa formidable, y 
desgarraron sus labios en otros tiempos vibrantes de elocuencia
fulminantes… Nada es Viejo ni nada ha muerto: en el término de la destrucción está la vida." (116)

“Nada es Viejo ni nada ha muerto: en el término de la destrucción está la vida”: working within the tradition of José María Heredia, Murillo envisions the latency of the volcano as the imminent possibility of what, following Walter Benjamin, one could call divine violence. Moreover, the volcano is portrayed as a literary mouth, whose lips quote a forgotten past: the volcano quotes Mexico’s past history, in an attempt to bring forth a new life. One can imagine then the excitement that Dr. Atl must have felt the day that he heard from a peasant that from the hills of Quitzocho a volcano was been born. As Dr. Atl himself recounts in his idiosyncratic third person autobiographical voice: “En 1942 surgió el Paricutín. Era lógico que el Dr. se lanzase sobre él, mala la comparación, como un gavilán sobre una paloma.” This project would cost Murillo a leg, but in its megalomaniac game of repetition and difference, we find the passion of a man devoted to thinking emergency as a historical category.

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The testimony of Dr. Atl’s residency as a witness of the Paricutín’s birth is narrated, both visually and narratively, in his book Como Nace y Crece un Volcán: El Paricutín. After Dionisio Pulido, a peasant of the region, spotted a column of smoke, he informed the authorities at the Municipality of San Juan Parangaricutiro. Murillo must have heard the news quickly,
for his account begins a couple of hours after, with the volcanic cone already at a height of ten meters already “ostentando una sola boca en su pequeño cráter.” For the next months, Dr. Atl camped near the volcano, spending his hours documenting the growth of that which he came to call the volcano’s “signos fulgurantes”, its fulgurant signs. As he states, he thought himself as a witness to the formation of a new world: “me parecía asistir a la formación de un mundo.” And so, the book abounds in repetitions: repetitive narratives of the volcanos descriptions as well as repetitive sketches of the volcano itself. As if he were some sort of Mexican Zarathustra, Dr. Atl would stay in the proximities of the forming volcano until 1949, when he would loose a leg as a consequence of the dangerous contact with the volcano’s gases. By then he had sketched and drawn the volcano more than a thousand times. The volcano had become the greatest of his obsessions. Murillo had delved into a category that was to be central to modernity: that of emergency.29 The violent emergence of the volcano amidst the Mexican landscape could be read as a fulgurant sign for the Mexican Revolution itself. The revolution had also sprung out of that subterranean

29 Following Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the state of exception and Alain Badiou’s theory of the event as the emergence of the exceptional, it seems that the constellation of our present day political theory calls for a theory of emergency both as a political as well as a historical category. Namely: what does it mean for something to be in a state of emergency, to be emerging? How does emergency as a category work within the framework of representation to which we are accustomed? How to think the violence implicit in the concept of emergency? It seems that every philosophy of history is a philosophy of emergency and exceptionality.
layer of discontent that marked the post-colonial period of Mexican independence. From the skirts of that mountain that had suddenly taken a catastrophic face, Atl would sketch the volcano with the terrible patient of he who understands that the project of modernity runs the risk of falling to the temptation of an easy future. Contrary to his fellow revolutionaries, who merely saw in the revolution an open future, a place of immanence and action, Dr. Atl – always faithful to his fin-de-siècle mysticism – would understand that the dialectics of the enlightenment that runs the motors of modernity is in itself a tension between two main categories: that of action and that of contemplation. It is as a dialogue between these two historical categories, between action and contemplation, between immanence and transcendence, that we should try to read a project like Dr. Atl’s Como Nace y Crece un Volcán: El Paricutín. Repetition, one could then say, is precisely the category that knots together action and contemplation, the historical category from which the modern dialectic can be understood in its Janus faced reality. The act of repeating, perhaps the fundamental political act, lays in a plane that suspends the line of naïve progressivism, puts a break to the run of history, and forces us to put the relationship between future and past in quotes. The image of the volcano’s crater as a mouth takes as a different meaning. The volcano becomes a pyramid, a tombstone for quoting a past that suddenly becomes terribly present: “Como tumba, la enorme montaña derruida, yace silenciosa sobre los valles adormecidos de sol; y entre el aire azul abre su cater carcomido y mudo”(18). However, as Murillo so clearly knew, at the end of destruction is life. For him it was clear that he was accomplishing one of his life long dreams: that of seeing the construction of a new world, of a new universe, out of the ruins of the old one.
Late in his life Dr. Atl would be granted, for one last time, the possibility of sketching such a utopic rebirth of civilization. It was, however, a project that had been fermenting for a long time. Already in 1912, during his stay in Paris, we find in Murillo the will to envision a utopic city where civilization could foster guided, not by a democratic vision, but rather by a will of universality: “Solo hay un medio para crear una nueva civilización: construir una Ciudad hoc-fóce de la cultura universal, para reconcentrar en ella la potencia mental del hombre y dirigirla no hacia el bienestar general, sino hacia conquista del Universo, meta inmediata del progreso humano.” (473)

Born, as he always claimed, in Atlantis, Murillo found himself attracted, from very early on, to the idea of constructing the new Atlantis: the city of universal culture. In him the idea of catastrophe – with the volcanic pyramid as its main symbol and Atlantis as its mythical counterpart – was always linked with the idea of a Nietzschean rebirth. More than forty years after its initial conception, sparked by Murillo’s return to Paris, the idea would revive under the name of Olinka: the utopian city that, like Borges’ aleph, would condense the universe’s intelligence.\(^30\) This time the idea would take off. With the help of Agustín Yáñez, governor of Jalisco, Atl would begin his sketches for Olinka, a city which he first envisioned in the Valle de Pihuamo, amidst his two beloved volcanoes, Popocatépetl and Itzaccihuatl, but which soon had to be moved to the Sierra of Saint Catarina, twenty kilometres away from Mexico City. With this project in mind Dr. Atl established, in 1952, the Centro Internacional de la Cultura, an institute that aimed at

\(^30\) From Fray Bartolomé de las Casas’ *Brevisima Historia de la Destrucción de las Indias* to Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien Años de Soledad*, it would seem that a dialectic between utopia and catastrophe guides Latin American history. For a book on a similar topic, please refer to Susan Buck-Morss’ 2002 book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, where she analyses these dialectic in relationship to the works of Walter Benjamin.
gathering the universal intelligentsia. In his essay “Un Centro Internacional de la Cultura,” the Centre is described as a solution to the problems of modernity’s positivism. Murillo begins by claiming that “la prodigiosa evolución de las ciencias ha desorganizado la estructura ancestral del mundo…” just in order to call for a “centro director, un centro de planificación intelectual resulta necesario para encauzar la evolución hacia una meta nueva. Esa meta nueva es la conquista del Universo” (477). Something very profound is then at stake in that megalomaniac project called Olinka. Something that bridges continents and that points to the very heart of the question regarding the modernity’s conception of historical time. Olinka discloses the insights of a man who, as both actor and thinker, was able to see – like Nietzsche before him – the tensions inherent to the historiographical project of modernity. Dr. Atl remains, to this day, the embodiment of such tensions, the embodiment of a volcanic modernity, with its effervescence and its dangers, with suspension of chronological time in favour of another time, a messianic time that spoke in fulgurant signs.
Aftershock
On Clouds, Telegraphs and Volcanoes

“Popocatepetl loomed, pyramidal, to their right,
one side beautifully curved as a woman’s breast,
the other precipitous, jagged, ferocious.
Cloud drifts were massing again, high-piled, behind it.
Itxaccihuatl appeared…”

- Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano

In 1925, a young Jose María Heredia begins his poetic homage to the Egyptian Pyramid with the following verses: “¡Montaña artificial, resto tremendo, estructura sublime y poderosa, del desierto atalaya misteriosa, de la desolación trono estupendo!” Heredia’s notion of the pyramid as a resto tremendo, as an artificial mountain of sublime yet ruinous stature, traverses Mexican history sketching the paradoxical crossroads of its archaeological modernity: nature and technology, nature and art, intersect under the figure of that double faced symbol which is both mountain and building, volcano and pyramid. In 1920, almost a century after Heredia’s arrival to México, the photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo concretizes Heredia’s words in a photographic piece that plays with the spectator expectations. “Arena y Pinitos” presents us with a pictorial representation of the Popocatepetl amidst the pine trees, a familiar view to any viewer accustomed to the pictorialist landscapes of Hugo Brehme’s photography. In fact, Brehme had, during those years produced a photograph of the Popocatepetl amidst the trees that comes quite close to Álvarez Bravo’s portrayal of the

Figure 1: Arena y Pinitos
Manuel Álvarez Bravo, circa 1920’s

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snowy mountain. A second look at the photograph, combined with a reading of its title, however, discloses the photograph as a perfectly executed trick: Álvarez Bravo’s camera has tricked us into believing that the close-up to an artificial setup of sand and small branches is actually the Popocatepetl. The pictorialist illusion of a natural representation has been broken by a gesture that confounds nature and technology, repeating the image but displacing its content, forcing us to account for the volcano under Heredia’s terms: there is nothing there but a resto tremendo, a reflection upon artificiality and naturality, a mount of sand that looks as if it was a volcano. We must return to Heredia, this time in order to quote his poem to the Popocatepetl: “Tú que de nieve coronado. Alzas sobre Anahuac la enorme frente, Tú de la indiana gente/ Temido en otro tiempo y venerado,/ Gran Popocatepetl, oye benigno/El saludo humildoso/ Que trémulo mi labio te dirige.” Álvarez Bravo’s piece, this orientalist bonsai-like production, quotes nature and in quoting it, inaugurates its status as a symbol in constant transit: between nature and technology, between nature and history, between antiquity and modernity, the volcano is the symbol for a poetics that highlights the latency of the archaic within the modern, and of the modern within the archaic. A certain technology of the archaic is here staged, a technology of the repetitions of the public secret is exposed, only to be immediately displaced and clouded. We are reminded here of another great text, Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano, with its incessant reference to the volcano as the landscape of latency. “The old bandstand stood empty, the equestrian statue of the turbulent Huerta rode under the nutant trees wild-eyed evermore, gazing over the valley beyond which, as if nothing had happened and it was November 1936, and not November 1938, rose, eternally, her volcanoes, hear beautiful, beautiful volcanos”(15). Has something happened? The volcano, like Álvarez Bravo’s photograph, suspends
eventuality by forcing us to think of the temporality of in-betweenness, of clouds and volcanos, of repetition and delay, that characterizes the public secret. Once again, it is a question of an aftershock that neither denies nor reaffirms the original event, but which places it under question, which quotes it and repeats it, suspending it amidst a world of contradicting possibilities. In what follows I will attempt to read Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* against the preceding reflections concerning repetition and progress, secrecy and symbols, modernity and the archaic, clouds and transparency, addiction and repetition. Reading Lowry’s masterpiece against the volcanic background of the works of José María Heredia, Alice Dixon, Augustus Le Plongeon and Dr. Atl, is a bit like placing Álvarez Bravo’s photograph next to Brehme’s: the artificiality of the volcano as symbol comes forth, but it is not clear what has happened, which of the pictures has read which, what secret has been exposed and under which code.

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*Under the Volcano* is, from the very beginning, a novel marked by the deathly logic of return, repetition and addiction. Towards the sunset on the *Día de los Muertos*, November 1939, two men sit on the main terrace of the *Hotel Casino La Selva*, drinking anís, as they reminisce about an event that had taken place exactly one year before: the fateful and inevitable descent of ex-consul Geoffrey Firmin into the depths of his alcoholic self amidst the impotent gaze of his former wife and his younger brother. As Mr. Jacques Laurelle and Dr. Arturo Díaz Vigil remember the Consul’s deathly last pilgrimage, a series of images begin to punctuate the landscape as a prophecy of what is to come. From the desolate terrace of the *Hotel Casino La Selva*, amidst the murals of Dr. Atl and Diego Rivera, the narrative begins to draw the triangle that will punctuate the
landscape of the novel, its catastrophic topology as well as its ruinous logic: the ruins of Maximilian’s summer villa, immersed in their spectral aura, stand as a catastrophic allegory of what had been the fate of the transposition of the glory of Europe to México’s modern landscape. Like the Archduke Maximilian Von Hapsburg before him, offered – as part of Napoleon III’s monarchical conspiracy – the throne of México just to suffer trial and death at the hands of the troops of Benito Juárez, the Consul’s story is one of disappearance amidst México’s archaic modernity. A repetition of Maximilian’s founding disappearance, Under the Volcano is essentially an exercise in the conjuring of ghosts:

The broken pink pillars, in the half-light, might have been waiting to fall down on him: the pool, covered with green scum, its steps torn away and hanging by one rotting clamp, to close over his head. [...] France, even in Austrian guise, should not transfer itself to Mexico, he thought [...] Ghosts. Ghosts, as at the Casino, certainly lived here. And a ghost still said: “It is our destiny to come here Carlota. Look at this rolling glorious country, its valleys, its volcanoes... (14)

This is, however, a novel of ghosts amidst a modern landscape, as the second point in the triangle is quick to highlight: beyond the ruins of Maximilian’s Palace, beyond the ghosts that seem to inhabit the Hotel Casino la Selva, stands the American Highway as another route of escape and disappearance, as the sign of a landscape marked by a possible “return to civilization” which seems, however, to be precluded for the Consul. And so, just like the highway stands for an impossible return, the novel abounds with images of misdirected communications: telegraph wires that lead nowhere, letters that
never reach their addressee, missed trains and misunderstood telegrams. A certain logic
of return, repetition and melancholy – a certain logic of death – stages its battle against
the progressive logic of the highway, its speed and its teleology. It is this battle between
progress and delay, between the logic of return and that of transit, which gets embodied
in the phrase which punctuates the narrative over and over, in a repetition that is itself a
actualization of its meaning: “A corpse will be transported by express.” The novel is, as the
phrase suggests, the story of an incomplete and delayed delivery of a death foretold: the
Consul’s journey towards his deathly fate is, like his strayed letters, like the telegraph
wires that errantly punctuate its narrative, a spiralling path that refuses to sober up.
One must not forget, as Lowry was quick to point out, that the model for the novel was
Dante’s *Inferno*: the figure of the circle, not to say the spiral, is therefore here placed in
battle with the orderly and speedy straight line. And so it is that, against the two first
points – Maximilian’s Palace and the American Highway – a third point comes to
punctuate the landscape as the pulsating background against which not only the events
take place, but as that which determines the logic of their eventuality: the presence of
the two volcanoes, Popocatépetl and Ixtaccíhuatl, distinct as in the paintings of Dr. Atl,
marks the landscape with a sense of latent imminence that refuses, however, to
surrender to the logic of cause and effect. Instead, like the alcoholic Consul, loosing
himself between drinks, never knowing which one was the first and which one the last,
the volcanoes tower above the scenery, underlining the threshold topology of *in-
betweenness* that marks the eventual logic of the narrative: “Ixtacíhuatl had slipped out of
sight but as, descending they circled round and round, Popocatépetl slipped in and out
of view continually, never appearing the same twice, now far away, then vastly near at
hand, incalculably distant at one moment, at the next looming round the corner with its
splendid thickness of sloping fields, valleys, timber, its summit swept by clouds, slashed by hail and snow…” (255) The logic through which the two volcanoes slip in and out of sight, escaping the frame and then re-entering, dancing in between the clouds, delineates the clouded locus of an archaeological temporality that is always in transit but which never fully arrives. “A corpse will be transported by express”: everything in this novel is in transit but never fully arrives, always about to erupt but always in need for something else, like the alcoholic who is never set on being drunk but who searches, in a logic of repetition that is also that of death, for the next drink that will finally settle his shaky hands. And so, within the coordinates of this catastrophic triangle, Under the Volcano grows as a novel about the elucidation of a public secret, as the journey to disclose a painful truth, visible yet clouded, wrapped in the negative dialectics of aftershocks which refuse to unravel the mystery behind the Consul’s sin. It is a novel about the impossibility of reaching a destination. As such, its ending, or lack of ending, is telling: the Consul, completely drunk, is confronted by a group of extreme right wing sinarquistas, who accuse him of being a spy and question him regarding an Indian that has been left to die in mid-road. The Consul answers with the only answer possible: his name is William Blackstone, the man who went to live with the Indians. Death has finally arrived, but under a different name and a different story, clouded by the presence of another secret.

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Like Under the Volcano, Octavio Paz’s 1968 essay Critique of the Pyramid, written amidst the aftermath of the Tlatelolco Massacre, reads as an attempt to decipher Mexico’s public secret. Paz begins the essay by calling forth the tradition whose logic we have tried to deconstruct throughout this chapter: that which assigns a double face, and with it a
double geology, to Mexican history. Alongside the official history, Paz points to that invisible history of the other México, which Guillermo Bonfil Batalla would latter call the México Profundo: the subterranean history of the underdeveloped México which refuses to merge into the modern one, and which returns, instead, as its spectral double.

This figure is, as Paz is quick to admit, as much geological as it is spectral:

    For me the expression ‘the other México’ invokes a reality that is made up of different strata and that alternately folds in on itself and unfolds, hides itself and reveals itself. If man is double or triple, so are civilizations and societies. Each people carries on a dialogue with an invisible colloquist who is, at one and the same time, itself and the other, its double. Its double? Which is the original and which is the phantasm? (288)

Like the ghosts that meander around Maximilian’s Palace, the ghosts of this invisible other México, force time to delay its progress, to repeat itself as a cryptic text regarding history and power. This game of folds, this tension between hiding and revealing, is none other than that of the public secret. Forced to find a figure that embodies Mexico’s double history, Paz then decides to draw Mexico’s history as the dialectic between crypt and exposure, between invisible history and visible history, present in the truncated pyramid: “The geography of México spreads out in a pyramidal form as if there existed a secret but evident relation between natural space and symbolic geometry and between the later and what I have called our invisible history.” (293) The pyramid comes to designate the locus of a struggle to control the public secret that reemerges once and again throughout Mexican history. Founded upon the millenarian pact between knowledge and secrecy, the pyramid sketches the figure of a society whose history
contains, latent within itself, the translation of another possible history that must be worked through. It is in this way that he proceeds to read the national history that is portrayed in the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec. The history of Mesoamerican México is told, Paz argues, in the broken symbols that adorn the Museum’s walls, unfolding a history that hides, however, another history: “If México’s visible history is the symbolic script of its invisible history and if both are the expression, reiteration, and metaphor – on different levels of reality – of certain repressed and submerged monuments, it is evident that in this museum we can find, even though in dispersed fragments, the elements that can serve us to reconstruct the figure we seek.” (322) The archaeological reconstruction that Paz calls forth, this a work of translation that inevitably reminds us of Augustus Le Plongeon’s work with the Troano Codax, brings critique closer than ever to psychoanalysis, and reminds us that the temporality of the archaeological symbol is dual: its Janus-faced reality points both to the future and to the past, in a circle that refuses to close, but that drags forwards with that which, according to Hegel, one could call the labour of the negative. And so, if we are to read Under the Volcano as a text about Mexico’s modernity, about its geology and its topography, we better approach as one would approach the negative of a photograph. This reading of negativity leaves us one image: like the promised eternal return of Quetzacoatl, we find, within the pages of the novel, a horse that appears once and again, three times to be precise, with the stubbornness of that secrecy which structures the otherwise spiralling descent into hell.
Three times a horse. Conrad Aiken, he who was to be perhaps the only lasting friend of Lowry during his drunken days, he who was to write himself a book about México, *A Heart for the Gods of México*, was the first to notice what he called the *horse theme*. Indeed, with the precision of a symbol, the horse appears from the very start as the figure of a man lead astray, overwhelmed by his passions, incapable of walking in a straight line. Walking back to his house from the Hotel Casino la Selva, Jacques Laurelle runs into a drunk horseman: “The rider of the horse was so drunk he was sprawling all over his mount, his stirrups lost, a feat in itself considering their size, and barely managing to hold on by the reins […] this too, he thought suddenly, this maniacal vision of senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled, somehow almost admirable, this too, obscurely, was the Consul…” (28) Even before meeting the Consul, the narrative has already constructed the symbol through which we can understand him: this horse, also a means of transport, incapable of reaching its destination, precisely because the source of agency, the horseman, is incapable of directing it. Like the telegraph poles, or the letters, the horse motif is more an interruption than a delivery. He interrupts Laurelle’s walk, only to produce the *deja-vu* which will send the narrative one year back to the fateful day of November 1937. Next time we meet the horse he is already stained with the color of death: he is calmly chewing on the convolvulus in the hedge, innocently standing next to the body of the dying Indian man of whose death the Consul will be erroneously deemed responsible by the *sinarquistas*. The horse returns with the force of the real, with the force of death, tattooed with a mysterious number, only to remind us that what is here at stake is the economy of *the public secret*, its impossible communication. Like the pariah dogs that follow the Consul, the recurring
presence of the horse grants the novel a certain animal aura. Interestingly, this second appearance of the horse coincides with the crucial event of the novel, the Consul’s incapacity to save the Indian, to bring himself to action.

The horse remains the real core of the novel, the figure for the impossible return of both the missed opportunity and the incapacity of the Consul to fulfil his diplomatic role: the horse remains a figure for the untranslatable otherness of the Indian, a moment outside the narrative which, precisely because of it, drives the story forward with the power of the negative. As such, when the horse reappears for a third time, this time at the very end of the novel, it is with the power of death and repetition, a figure of an untameable passion that is once again linked to the topic of the Indian. The horse comes back, passionately, in order to mark Yvonne’s death with the sign of catastrophe:

She heard the wind and the rain rushing through the forest and saw the tremors of lighting shuddering through the heavens and the horse – great God, the horse – and would this scene repeat itself endlessly and for ever? – the horse, rearing, poised over here, petrified in mid-air, a statue, somebody was sitting in the statue, it was Yvonne Griffin, no, it was the statue of Huerta, the drunkard, the murderer, it was the Consul, or it was a mechanical horse on the merry-go-around… (336)

This delirious passage, in which monumental history confuses itself with a certain technology of death – Huerta’s statue next to the circular motion of the merry-go-around – encrypts the tragedy behind it: the horse, in its violent act of fleeing the thunderstorm, has killed the Consul’s wife. The horse’s path, however, doesn’t stop there. Ignorant of Yvonne’s violent death the Consul runs into the horse by the cantina:
“He could mistake by now neither the number seven branded on the rump nor the leather saddle charactered in that fashion. It was the Indian’s horse, the horse of the man he’d first seen today riding it singing into the sunlit word, the abandoned, left dying by the roadside” (355). The horse returns to put an end to it all, a catastrophic end under a clouded sky, but also to put history under the sign of secrecy and conspiracy: it is only then, as he stands by the horse, guilty of not having acted, of having left the Indian man to die by the roadside, that the sinarquistas arrive. It is the moment of conspiracy, of secrecy. Confronted with the questions regarding his identity, the Consul refers to himself as a writer, only to be accused – in a memorable linguistic twist – of being a spy: “You are no a de wrider, you are de espider, and we shoota de espiders in Mejico” (302). Writers, spiders and spies: the Consul has, without knowing it, immersed himself in the secret life of Mexican politics. He has become a part of the negotiation regarding that public secret which dislocates temporality, which derails communication, imposing a logic of repetition and difference. Asked about his name, the Consul replies with the name of his secret desire: ‘Blackstone,’ he answered gravely, and indeed, he asked himself, accepting another mescal, had he not and with a vengeance come to live among the Indians? William Blackstone” (275). Lost in this forest where modern politics coexists with the image of another, deeper México, the Consul accepts his fate as he approaches the horse. He is then confronted, just as he is shot to death, with the image of the volcanoes towering over the landscape:

The Chief of Rostrums pushed the Consul back out of the light, took two steps forward and fired. Lightning flashed like an inchoworm going down down the sky and the Consul, reeling, saw above him for a moment the shape of Popocatepetl, plumed with emerald snow
and drenched with brilliance. Thunderclaps crashed on the mountains then at hand. Released, the horse reared, tossing its head, it wheeled round and plunged neighing into the forest. (301)

An ending can come, but only under the apocalyptic image of catastrophe, when the subjective world of the Consul gets projected into the landscape of volcanoes as the expression not only of his tragedy, but of a certain passion for the public secret itself. The linguistic displacement that confuses writers, spiders and spies proves not to be fortuitous. The Consul writes his death, he quotes history, with a certain passion for secrecy. By refusing to disclose his identity, by misrepresenting himself as William Blackstone, the Consul gives himself up to the logic of secrecy of which he is accused and, like so many before him, disappears amidst Mexico’s archaic modernity. “Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine”: the novel’s final words mark the end under the sign, not of arrival, but of disappearance.

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“You are no a de wrider, you are de espider, and we shoota de espiders in Mejico”: confronted with death and conspiracy, the Consul declares himself a writer. This movement, however, doesn’t come out of the blue. Throughout the novel, it is hinted that the Consul has been writing a book about the myth of Atlantis, about secret mysteries and occult sciences. Early on in the novel, Jacques Laurelle remembers, as he walks past the bridge, the moment in which the Consul had disclosed to him his secret project: “It was on this bridge that the Consul had once suggested to him to make a film about Atlantis. Yes, leaning over, just like this, drunk but collected, coherent, a little mad, a little impatient – it was one of those occasions when the Consul had drunk himself sober – he
had spoken to him about the spirit of the abyss, the god of the storm, huracán, that “testified so suggestively to intercourse between opposite sides of the Atlantic” (22). Interestingly, and in line with his diplomatic profession, the Consul imagines his movie on the myth of Atlantis as a catastrophic take on transatlantic history: just like the hurricanes that year after year cross the Atlantic, joining the old world and the new world like those ships which Lowry so much loved, this myth of civilization disappearing into the dark abyss brings forth, in the Consul’s film project, the impasses of universal history. Lowry’s letters to Conrad Aiken, suggest even more. As we read, the third draft of the novel had a Henry James epigraph that ran as follows: “The plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness... is too tragic for any words.” In a letter to Whit Burnett, dated the 22nd of June of 1940, Lowry clarifies the epigraphs relationship to the novel: “You will see how it is both a comment on the bridge between the treacherous years and the years themselves, the past and the present, and upon the Atlantis theme, and how it illuminates the book...” For Lowry, *Under the Volcano* was as much about the collapsed bridge joining past and present, as it was about his own work on the Atlantis myth. Like the *deep, esoteric tradition* which we have conjured throughout the chapter – Heredia, Le Plongeon, Dixon and Atl – it becomes clear, from this quote, that Lowry thought of himself as rewriting Mexican history in relationship to the myth of its catastrophic foundation. The secret, one could claim, hidden behind Laurelle’s claim about the Consul’s book on Atlantis is precisely its self-referentiality: that book on Atlantis which the Consul claims to write but nobody sees, is precisely *Under the Volcano*, a book on secrecy, on diplomacy and the impasses of a universal modernity. Nowhere is this relationship between communication, transatlantic history and secrecy more prevalent than in the letter by the Consul that Laurelle finds hidden among the
book of Elizabethan plays. There, among the constant references to telegraphy, amidst the multiples meditations regarding the possibility of communication as such, we find buried a poetics of secrecy as well as an elucidation of Mexico as the land of the public secret. Writing to Yvonne the Consul states: “No, my secrets are of the grave and must be kept. And this how I sometimes think of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world: but the name of this land is hell” (42). Mexico becomes the locus of a strange triangle between secrecy, knowledge and death, one that sees itself as culminating in the writing of the book: “Yes: I can see the reviews now. Mr Firmin’s sensational new data on Atlantis! The most extraordinary thing of its kind since Donelly! Interrupted by his untimely death… Marvelous. And the chapters on the alchemists! Which beat the Bishop of Tasmania to a frazzle […] I might even work in something about Coxcox and Noah” (91). Interestingly, the book that the Consul fancies writing sounds, from the quotes, like a revised version of Le Plongeon’s Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and the Quichés. In some way, like his British compatriot before him, Lowry envisions himself – like the surrealists did before him – as an archaeologist in search for the ruins of the lost garden of Eden, as a man destined to write a universal history of the origins of civilization. One must not forget: Dr. Atl’s Un Grito en la Atlántida dates from 1947, the same year as Under the Volcano is finally published. The figure of the lost Atlantis, in fact, becomes crucial to the question regarding Mexican modernity. One merely has to open José Vasconcelos’s La Raza Cósmica, from 1925, to find a re-emergence of the theme of Atlantis and its importance for the question regarding the impasses of universal history:
Las ruinas arquitectónicas de mayas, quechuas y tolecas legendarios son testimonio de vida civilizada anterior a las más viejas fundaciones de los pueblos de Oriente y de Europa. A medida que las investigaciones progresan, se afirma la hipótesis e la Atlántida, como cuna de una civilización que hace millares de años floreció en el continente desaparecido y en parte de lo que es hoy América […]

La cuestión tiene una importancia enorme para quienes se empeñan en buscar un plan en la Historia. (12)

Lowry’s great achievement then is to write this journey as the tale of a disappearance, a path leading nowhere, like those telegraph wires that punctuate the scenery. The novel is a message sent from America to Europe that never arrives.

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“A corpse will be sent by express”: if the protagonists profession is to be taken seriously, the novel must then be read under the code of diplomacy. Written during the years of the Second World War, Under the Volcano draws the war as its background: in fact, as the novel starts, México has broken its diplomatic relationships with Great Britain as part of President Cárdenas decision to nationalize the country’s oil. This broken relationship is a metonymy for a greater rupture: the Consul lies in hostile territory, forgotten and alone, writing telegraphs and letters that never reach their destination. A catastrophe has broken down the possibility of a progressive, liberal, universal history. Instead, what we are given are telegraphs resembling ruins, a language of rupture writing under the influence of modernity’s nightmares:
Daily Globe intelube londres presse collect following yesterdays head-coming anti-Semitic campaign mexpress propeton see tee emma mex-workers confederation proexpulsion exmexico quote small jewish textile manufacturers unquote learned today perreliable source that Germanic legation mexcity actively behind the campaign etstatement that legation gone length sending … (33)

In the broken language of war, addiction and disaster, we see the Consul in his attempt to tackle the topics of his time as well as its nightmares: the anti-Semitism that soon attracted Dr. Atl, the relationship between México and England, the figure of quoting and unquoting a message that is, in itself, an impossible delivery. The fateful paradox surrounding Under the Volcano is precisely that its messages are always cut short, that the universality of the symbolic landscape is constantly misread and misquoted. “A corpse will be sent by express”: something is always in its way, about to be conveyed, lost half way between culture and nature. One could sketch a brief synopsis of the novel: a drunken Consul errs his way to death amidst a labyrinth of symbols that carry within them the power of death.

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One symbol, however, towers above the rest: the volcano. The Popocatépetl and the Ixtacihuatl alternate, like ghosts, in and out of the picture, in a rhythm that determines the spiral of events narrated. The volcanos appear and reappear with the same frequency as drinks follow one another, sketching the horizon of eventuality against which the fate of the drunken Consul gains its passionate sense. If we then say that the volcano stands
for the symbol of the symbol, for the sign of the possibility of eventuality as such, as the
origin and end of the public secret, under which historical register are we to understand
its temporality? One dialectical figure gives us a hint: the clouds that repeatedly block
the volcanos only to later disclose their presence. This dialectics between clarity and
obscurity, between the clouded volcano and the visible volcano, marks the strange
temporality of in-betweeness of the volcano: “The sun shining brilliantly now on all
the world before him, its rays picking out the timber-line of Popocatepetl as its summit
like a gigantic whale shouldered out of the clouds again, all this could not lift his spirit”
(80). The volcano, always under its elusive dual face – Popocatepetl and Itxacihuatl –
comes to represent a landscape in which events are never either real or fictive, actual or
potential, past or future. No. The deathly logic of the volcano, its clouded presence,
hints towards a conflict at the very heart of enlightened progress: the event is never
equal to itself, never merely itself or its recollection. The event, always between times,
delineates a space of latency and interruption, a space of emergency that is never merely
the production of something new, but rather the disclosure of something that was
always there. This meteorology of history, this history of overcast skies and the
possibility of thunder, hints towards a twisted chronology: what the figure of the
clouded volcano puts in question, once again, is the precedence of the shock above the
aftershock. As a sign of latency, the event belongs rather to the suspended temporality
of the aftershock, of the photograph. In this archaeology of modernity, time is always in
search for its negative, just as in Freud’s archaeology of the modern subject, the
symptom emerges like the negative of subjectivity. One merely has to think of the
shaking hands of the Consul, the symptom of his alcoholism, the hands that shake as a
reminder of the tremors that assault history. History then moves forward, with the
labor of the negative, in search for that moment of divine violence which will put an end to its essential gap: the thunder that will finally bridge the gap between the actual and the potential, between the past and the future. We must return to the ending of Under the Volcano. In that final instant, about to get shot by the sinarquistas, the overcast skies concretize the thunder and the Consul, in a gesture of absolute suspension, looks upward to the volcanos:

The Chief of Rostrums pushed the Consul back out of the light, took two steps forward and fired. Lightning flashed like an inchoworm going down down the sky and the Consul, reeling, saw above him for a moment the shape of Popocatepetl, plumed with emerald snow and drenched with brilliance. Thunderclaps crashed on the mountains then at hand. Released, the horse reared, tossing its head, it wheeled round and plunged neighing into the forest. (302)

It is beautiful to imagine that the snowy volcano which the Consul catches a glance of before his death is in fact, not Brehme’s, but rather Álvarez Bravo’s Popocatepetl, the artificial volcano of sand and pines produce by photography. Only then, if we are able to conjure such image, can we begin to understand the dislocation that lies at the heart of modernity, guiding the drunken steps of its archaeological double face.
At the very outset of the Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbes defined the stakes of modern sovereignty under the domestic rubric of the social contract: the modern State was therein defined as the contractual domestication of society’s natural side. The fear towards the natural that the Hobbesian state of nature instantiates would haunt the State throughout the coming centuries, to the point that its history could be read as the suppression of its so-called barbaric nature. The phantom of nature’s rhizomatic body, its contagious memory and its repressed omnipresence would remain the latent threat against which the State would build its foundations. As Angela Mitropoulos’ recent book *Contract and Contagion* explores, nothing can conjure the natural phantoms of modern sovereignty more swiftly than the event of contagion. By bringing down the contractual mediation between society and nature, between the one and the many, epidemics forced the State to envision new modes of sovereignty once the social enemy proved to be, not outside the walls of the medieval city, but rather amidst the social body itself. For Mitropoulous the history of the State is then the history of its *oikonomia*, of its internal administration:

In any case, that Agamben’s negative theology of *oikonomia* has occasion to turn – by way of a reading of Georges Dumézeil – to the ways in which plagues entail the dissolution of the contractual is not perhaps surprising. Dumézeil had insisted on the structurally
foundational and ancient generality of three powers to Indo-European history: ensuring the sanctity of contracts against their breach, the defence of national borders against foreign invasions, and protection against plague and feminine, each of which are, respectively, cast as problems or catastrophes which befall and recompose sovereignty, force, and re-/production. The encounter with contagion, as I argued in the first chapter, translates generation into re-/production. (67)

Sovereignty, force and reproduction: the logic of contagion sketches the impasses of the productive force of labor under the sign of the law and its viral deviations. In what follows I will attempt to show how this fear of nature’s contagious multiplicities gave way, within the geopolitical region of the Greater Caribbean, to the emergence of that which I here call the Immunological State: the modern state as a territory in constant negotiation with its latent viruses. As we will see, the virus, the modern counterpart of the medieval plague, redefined the notion of the sovereign body in relationship to the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of modern sociology and its concern regarding crowds, territoriality, hygiene, citizenship, and so on.

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The chapter has three moments: in the first moment, I analyze the epidemiological discourse of suggestion that marked the last years of the Haitian Revolution. After discussing the emergence of radical subjectivities in relationship to the epidemic of yellow fever that struck the colony, as well as its connections with the discursive paradigm set by the introduction of mesmerism to the island, I proceed to expound a
first definition of the Immunological State. I then proceed to the second moment of the chapter, in which I explore how the 19th century naturalist novel served as an apparatus that helped establish and control the State’s immunological system, while at the same time homeopathically portraying nature’s dangers. Through a study of the novels of the Puerto Rican novelist and medical doctor Manuel Zeno Gandía, I attempt to show how the 19th century novel functioned as an immune system capable of extricating the cancerous evils of the social body, providing the colony in turn with a productive body. In the last moment, I travel into the last decades of the twentieth century, as an attempt to explore how AIDS – as a disease of the immune system itself – provided writers with a structural metaphor through which to confront the immunological logic of State power. This third moment takes as its point of departure Reinaldo Arenas’ posthumous novel *El Color del Verano*, the polymorphic novel which the Cuban author wrote in his last years while suffering from AIDS. In each case, what interests me is a diagnostic reading of what happens once the unnatural mediation of the natural contract collapses, ensuing the viral decomposition of the social body. Once nature is released from its contractual straightjacket, once it is brought forth in its true multiplicity, what comes forth is the State’s paranoid self-inspection, the State as technological system and as computer, always engaged in the process of self-reading.
Contagious States:
Saint Domingue and the Impasses of Modern Sovereignty

“He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state.”
- Antonin Artaud

Amidst the retreat and defeat of Napoleon’s forces, the chief doctor of the expeditionary army, Nicolas Pierre Gilbert, publishes a history of the ecological and epidemiological reasons behind the defeat of the French forces. The book, entitled *Histoire Médicale de la Armée Française a Saint Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la Fièvre Jaune*, dates from 1803 and shows Paris as its place of publication. Gilbert had been one of the few lucky members to return home out of the more than twenty thousand expeditionary soldiers Napoleon enlisted in 1802 under the command of his brother in law, General Victor-Emmanuel LeClerec, as part of his plan to regain control over the island of Saint Domingue. Guided by Toussant L’Ouverture, the island had been fiercely claimed by slave revolts at the turn of the century. L’Ouverture, allegedly the grandson of a West African king, had one year before – amidst the celebrations of the seventeenth anniversary of the abolition of slavery – declared himself *Governor for Life* under the powers given to him by the 1801 Constitution. He had then proceeded to pronounce himself loyal to France. Napoleon, however, had other plans. Saint Domingue played a crucial role in his dreams for an imperial cartography in the new world: regaining control over the western part of the island was crucial to his plan of extending the French empire throughout the Americas. Interestingly, as Nicolas Pierre Gilbert recounts in his book, suggestively entitled *Memoirs of the Yellow Fever*, the failed expedition was to be marked by the brutality of disease rather than by that of the sword: the battle for sovereignty at the thresholds of the New World was decided, not by the martial powers of the slave army but rather by the pitiless yet judicious presence of a plague. As Gilbert recounts,
LeClerc’s troops arrived to Cap Français the 14 pluviôse an 10 (the date for 2nd of February of 1802 according to the revolutionary calendar) and quickly took control over the island. However, with control, came sickness. Silent, invisible, the plague chose the bodies it would strike with political eloquence: LeClerc’s troops soon fell under the power of a sickness of unknown origin, but of recognizable symptoms. By March, with the arrival of the rains, the situation would worsen, decimating the expeditionary forces and turning a triumphal horizon into a catastrophic defeat. Gilbert’s Mémoire sur la Fièvre Jaune reads as an attempt to illustrate, for the metropolitan public, the invisible powers of the tropical yellow fever. In his account, the fever “takes hold” of the soldiers bodies, producing in them a physiological crisis which can’t be appeased by enlightened medicine:

La prostration des forces, qui, dans les premières instans de la maladie, s’était couverte du voilce d’une irritation tres-vive, se démasque et marche a grands pas […] Les dejections son souvent noires; le visage, qui avait été d’un rouge foncé, se colore d’un jaune plus ou moins saturé : cette suffusion ictérique se répand sur la surface du corps: le malade exhale au loin une odeur cadavéreuse ; il meurt le premier, le troiseme, cinquieme, septieme jour. (85)

The prostration of the physical forces that, during the first instant of the sickness hid behind a veil of latent irritation, is now revealed, reinforced and vertiginously worsened […] The excrement becomes black. The countenance, before of a healthy rose color, now takes on a yellowish tonality. This suffusion of jaundice spreads
over the surface of the body: the patient exhales a fetid, deathly breath and dies the first, the third, the fifth, or the seventh day. (*My Translation*)

Over the next months, LeClerc saw how his troops disappeared into thin air as if by the power of a black magic which, however, left the slave forces untouched. The slaves proved to be immune to the epidemic forces of the disease. As J.R. McNeill has explored, the geopolitics of this differential immunity are merely the first of the many political implications such a seminal event had within the history of Haitian Revolution and, as such, within the history of what Jonathan Israel has called the Radical Enlightenment. In fact, what becomes apparent from Gilbert’s description of the symptoms of plague-ridden soldiers is precisely the metaphorical extent to which the yellow fever condensed the bipolitical implications of the Haitian revolution. His descriptions of the sick bodies as possessed by mysterious forces that lead them to unintentional convulsions, to trance like states, his descriptions of the famous black vomit that overcame soldiers in their last days, as well as his multiple discussions regarding immunity and contagion, allow us to sketch the key concepts for thinking the stakes of the Haitian Revolution. Questions concerning the nature of modern sovereignty, as well as questions concerning the nature of modern radical subjectivities, are all clearly sketched out by the metaphorical as well as terribly physical power of a plague that was able to put an end to a war that had extended for over a decade. The epidemiological paradigm sketches out the field of the game.31

31 Once again, it is a matter of thinking through the emergence of a discursive formation in its relationship with political praxis. If, at points, history seems to confuse itself with historiography throughout this dissertation, it is because – as Foucault taught us – what
The plague and not the slave army, one could then say echoing Nicolas Pierre Gilbert, won the war. The historical account would be settled if it were not for the fact that, from the safety grounds of metropolitan France, one hears the voice of a scientist, or perhaps a charlatan, who also claimed responsibility for the triumphs of the New Republic. In Henri F. Ellenberger’s *The Discovery of the Unconscious* we read: “In Saint Domingue, Magnetism degenerated into a psychic epidemic amongst the Negro slaves, increasing their agitation, and the French domination ended in a bloodbath. Later Mesmer boasted that the new Republic, now called Haiti, owed its independence to him” (73). Ellenberger’s account extends the problem precisely where we thought it was finished: according to his words, the triumph of the new Republic was partly due to the way in which something called mesmerism spread amongst the slaves, radicalizing them “as if touched by the force of an epidemic”. The triumphs of the revolution are then displaced one again farther from the individual political subjectivities of the revolutionary heroes – L’Ouverture, Dessalaines, Mackandall – towards an epidemic logic that gains here the density of a proper name: Franz Anton Mesmer. Later, I shall delve into the history of the introduction of Mesmer’s magnetic science into the revolutionary grounds of Saint Domingue. For now, however, I will be content with underlying a mere sketch of the “medical treatment” in an attempt to highlight the similarities that existed between Mesmer’s magnetic cure and the trance like maladies produced upon the body by the yellow fever. In a letter sent in 1884, Jeanne-Eulailie Millet, a colonist from the southern region of Petit Trou, recounts the effects of Mesmer’s treatment in the catastrophic language of trance:

interests me here is how discursive formations sometimes make possible particular modes of historicity.
A magnetizer has been in the colony for a while now, and, following Mesmer’s enlightened ideas, he causes in us effects that one feels without understanding them. We faint, we suffocate, we enter into truly dangerous frenzies that cause onlookers to worry. At the second trial of the tub a young lady, after having torn off nearly all her clothes, amorously attacked a young man on the scene […] Magnetism produces a conflagration that consumes us, an excess of life that leads us to delirium. (177)

Mme. Millet description of Mesmer’s “enlightened” cure is illuminatingly paradoxical: its hints at a method of curing which induces upon the body of the patient a crisis so strong that it forces the subject to break loose of its societal boundaries. Beyond the erotic connotations of the scene, which have been studied elsewhere, I would like to devote my attention to Mme. Millet’s rhetoric of excess: when she speaks of magnetism as a cure producing an “excess of life,” we are reminded of Nicolas Pierre Gilbert’s descriptions of LeClerc’s plague ridden soldiers. In both cases, under the language of trance and exertion, we are given the image of the sovereign body in crisis, the image of a sick and convulsive subjectivity at battle with the enlightened theories that had produced it.

What follows is an attempt to think the dialectical image that sparks once we place, side by side, these two descriptions: therein, between these two secret poles, I would argue lies the invisible, epidemic and suggestive history of the Haitian Revolution, its triumph and its consequences.
As of late, in the wake of James E. Mclellan’s seminal work *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* and Robert Darnton’s *Mesmerism and the Ends of the Enlightenment*, numerous studies regarding the arrival of mesmerism to Saint Domingue have been published: studies such as François Regourd’s *Mesmerism in Saint Domingue*, Karol M. Weaver’s *Medical Revolutionaries*, and Nathan Gorelick’s *Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti and the Origin of Psychoanalysis*, have all attempted to read, from different perspectives, the revolutionary turn that mesmerism, or animal magnetism as it was also known, took as soon it disembarked within the already tense political grounds of the New World. Their studies have surged within the new wave of interest regarding the political journeys of enlightened sciences across the Atlantic: wether from the perspective of gender, as in Weaver’s case, psychoanalysis, as in Gorelick’s case, or history, as in Regourd’s case, these studies attempt to answer the complex question regarding what happened to science when it traversed that famous route which, following Paul Gilroy, one could call the “Black Atlantic”. On the other hand, following the resurgence of environmental studies within the humanities, scholar’s have started to pay attention to the impact that transatlantic routes determined by the slave trade had upon the “political ecology” of the New World: studies like Stuart McCook’s *The Neo-Columbian Exchange* or Debbie Lee’s *Yellow Fever and the Slave Trade*, from Robert K. D. Petterson’s *Insects, Disease and Military History* to J.R. Mcneill’s *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean*, have all highlighted the repercussions that the ecological mutations introduced by the slave trade as well as by transatlantic mercantilism had upon a political environment that was already ripe for revolution. Some of these studies have further pinpointed the role that the yellow fever, or black
vomit as it was also known, had upon the geopolitical history of the Greater Caribbean, and in particular, within the history of the Haitian Revolution. In this essay I will attempt to see what happens when one reads the history of the Haitian Revolution from both perspectives at once. Namely, what happens to the bipolitical history of the Black Atlantic, once it is read from the discursive as well as material ground which mesmerism shared with the yellow fever: a discourse regarding the limits and heightened states of sovereign bodies, the radicalization of subjectivities and the triple knot between hegemony, subjection and revolution. The biopolitical consequences of such discourse for the history of the late, radical enlightenment take as their basis a series of medical figures at the threshold of positivist science: both the epidemic of yellow fever and mesmerism force us to envision social bonds in terms such as contagion, suggestion, excitement and immunity. When viewed from this discursive lens – rather than through a purely materialist conception – the history of the Haitian revolution, I believe, appears in its true density: as the first clinical case of a revolutionary malady that would soon spread throughout the Americas, exposing the crisis of the imperial modes of sovereignty. The dialectical image joining the plague ridden body of LeClerc’s forces to those of the mesmerized bodies of both slaves and colonists, gives us the vocabulary through which to sketch many of the crucial questions regarding the role of the Haitian Revolution within modern political theory: ¿What modes of political subjectivities arose out of the structural model of contagion and suggestion proposed by the figures of the plague and mesmerism? ¿What happens to the territorial notion of the “political body” when it is forced to account for such heterogeneous spaces of intensities as those produced by the plague or by mesmeric magnetism? ¿What happened to the social concept of slavery and empire, in its full
semantic density, once it was forced to account for the possibility that a similar logic of the “possessed body” such as mesmerism could bring the collapse of the slave empire?

All of these questions point to the Haitian Revolution as a place in which the Enlightenment encounters itself at its limits, as the condition of possibility of its own collapse. Over a century later, the playwright and writer Antonin Artaud, another Frenchman in battle with his own legacy, would pronounce in his essay “The Plague and the Theater”, some illuminating words: “He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state” (15). Artaud’s intuition is precisely right: what the logic of contagion and suggestion produce is a profound disintegration of the state conceived as social contract. However, this doesn’t mean that the plague means the end of the state. Rather, as I will now attempt to sketch through a very brief historical overview of the Haitian Revolution, what emerged out of such an epidemic crisis would be the modern bipolitical state as a plagued body in constant negotiation with its latent political viruses.

Revolutionary Flights: The Invisible Territory of the Mosquito

“Did the mosquito do it?”
- Walter Reed

Alejo Carpentier knew very well the role that a mosquito could have in the history of a revolutionary process. Rather than depicting the main fighting years of 1791 to 1804 that frame the revolution’s acknowledged chronology, his historical account of the Haitian Revolution in his 1949 novel El Reino de este Mundo centers around an earlier political event which highlights the radical political ecology that characterized the emancipatory process of the first slave revolt of the Americas. In his attempt to uncover
the historical logic of the revolutionary process, Carpentier scrutinizes historical records and attempts to find the original source of the revolutionary fever. As the novel’s famous prologue clearly states, he finds the source in the outflow of revolutionary fervor and believe that overtook the slave crowd that witnessed the 1958 execution of famous maroon and vodou leader François Macandal. It is at that moment, Carpentier suggests, that history bifurcated the community into two historical groups: on the one hand, the slaves who believed in Macandal’s flight and on the other, the white colonists who returned to their homes believing that he had died in the bonfire. No longer passive spectators, the slaves’ faith had transformed them into radical subjects with historical agency.\textsuperscript{32} Theirs, however, was not the only transformation. The scene of Macandal’s flight is also a scene of metamorphosis that merges the deterritorializing logic of vodou with the origins of the yellow fever. In the novel’s turning point, Macandal, a houngan knowledgeable of poisons and occult sciences, escapes the consuming power of fire by metamorphosing himself into the most minuscule of animals: a mosquito. As the narrator, taking the perspective of the slave witness, explains:

In his cycle of metamorphoses, Macandal had often entered in the mysterious world of the insects, making up for the lack of his human arm with the possession of several feet, four wings, or long antennae. He had been fly, centipede, month, ant, tarantula, lady-

\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly what is discloses in this scene is the structure of the political event as subjective interpellation. Namely: who sees Macandal survive, and who sees him die? The answer to this question structures the two opposing subjectivities that would latter structure the political scenario. Carpentier seems to understand that the “real maravilloso” is a structure of belief which, not distant from the miracle, also entails a share of belief that turns out to have, as in the scene of Macandal’s execution, multiple political repercussions.
bug, and even a glow-worm with the phosphorescent green lights. When the moment came, the bonds of the Mandigue, no longer possessing a body to bind, would trace the shape of a man in the air for a second before they slipped down the post. And Macandal, transformed into a buzzing mosquito, would light on the very tricorne of the commander of the troops to laugh at the dismay of the whites. This was what their masters did not know; for that reason they had squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrismed by the great Loas (44–45).

According to this logic of metamorphosis and invisibility, at the precise moment in which Macandal is thrown into the bonfire a slave voice is heard that yells Macandal sauvé! producing a commotion within a crowd that suddenly believes it has seen their leader dissolve into thin air as a mosquito. Interestingly, critics – misguided by reflections regarding the real maravilloso – have failed to notice the underlying Deleuzian aura of the above scene. Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual imagery is everywhere present in the imagery of Macandal’s line of flight: from his becoming-animal to the line of flight sketched by his deterritorializing metamorphosis, all the way to Carpentier’s poetics of intensities, the scene gains political density as soon it is placed side by side with the figural concepts proposed by the authors of A Thousand Plateaus. The reader is perhaps reminded of their comments regarding the relationship between becoming-animal and the figure of metamorphosis on their book on Kafka: “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or
figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the world. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape” (22). Macandal’s metamorphosis embodies the agitation and destabilization of the status quo that would soon produce the radical states of intensity and belief that would end up shattering the territorial sovereignty of the French empire. As Carpentier correctly portrays, the germ of the revolutionary atmosphere that would latter spread over the colony with the ferocity of the worst epidemic was already condensed in this scene in which a man becomes a mosquito. His insight is illuminating; the history of the revolution could then very well begin and end with a mosquito.

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More than half a century before Alejo Carpentier wrote a mosquito into the epic of the Haitian Revolution, another Cuban hypothesized the role of the insect within the complex political history of colonial America. In 1881, three years after the yellow fever epidemic that had devastated the Mississippi Valley, a Cuban physician by the name of Carlos J. Finlay presented a daring hypothesis regarding the propagation of the disease to the Academy of Sciences of Havana. According to Finlay the agent of transmission of the disease was none other than a particular species of mosquito that would latter become known as the *Aedes Aegypti*. With his discovery Finlay was uncovering the protagonist of a transatlantic biopolitical history that had determined the political ecology of the Atlantic for more than three centuries: as J. R. McNeill has studied in his book *Mosquito Empires*, the *aedes aegypti* was originally endemic to Africa, but must have

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33 For a complete study of the invention please see “Chapter Four: The Hunt for the Mosquito” in Mariola Espinosa’s *Epidemic Invations*.  

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made the transatlantic trip amidst one of the thousands of ships that, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century and leading all the way to the heart of the eighteenth century, made their way from the coasts of West Africa to the tropical grounds of the Caribbean. The virus must have crossed the Atlantic in its preferred modality: as the latent *stowaway* waiting for the perfect environment in which to proliferate.  

It soon found the appropriate environment in the economically proliferating Caribbean tropics. The virus proliferated alongside the booming Caribbean economy within that process of ecological globalization that Stuart McCook has recently called the “neo-columbian exchange”, as a way of differentiating from the first “columbian exchange” as Alfred Crosby had famously termed the ecological exchange elicited by the first imperial impact in the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century. As McCook and McNeill notice, the logic of differential immunity described by the plague, as well as the history itself of the virus’ relationship to this new environments helped shape the geohistory of the region. The main event in this invisible history was the introduction, in the seventeenth century, of the sugar cane as a valuable commodity and the emergence of the sugar plantation as the main tropical modality of social dwelling:

After 1640 sugar and geopolitics set the table very nicely for the yellow fever virus. Sugar wrought an ecological revolution upon dozens of islands and numerous patches of adjacent continental

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34 For a very interesting take on the figure of the stowaway in historiography please look at Eelco Runia’s essay “Presence” in which the author uses the figure in order to explore the ways the past remains present, latently without our present. The figure is later adopted by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in his book *After 1945* in order to speak of the historical effect of latency.
lowlands. Soon, armies of slaves hacked down and burned off millions of hectares of forest in order to plant cane. Their efforts led to multiple ecological changes. Soil erosion accelerated. Wildlife vanished. More important from the human point of view, as plantation replaced forest, conditions came to favor their transmission of yellow fever. Falling trees brought canopy-dwelling mosquitos down to ground level, where their chances of biting a person improved. (350)

The economic climate was quickly constructing the ecological as well as political conditions for its eventual demise. For the next century and a half, the population of African slaves blossomed in the colony, while the differential immunity made sure, as McCook illuminatingly points out, to keep the geopolitical status quo untouched: expeditionary invasions during the eighteenth century where all dismantled by the epidemic force of mosquito swarms. Little did the French knew that what was truly being built were not the walls of an imperial fortress, but rather the conditions for the revolutionary uprisings that would one century latter mark the end of their colonial rule. Revolution was in the air: the expression fits perfectly within the case of Saint Domingue. The tropical environment of the island, with its rainy seasons, swamped waters and humid climate – an image of oppression and insularity – was building the grounds upon which it would latter show its more radical face. In tune with the pseudo-scientific chitchat that had become fashionable throughout the island in the eighteenth century, we are tempted to say: the air had become electric.35 What this implies is

35 The link between the emerging experimental discourse regarding electricity and politics, starting from Benjamin Franklin’s experiments, is crucial. In Saint Domingue,
something crucial: namely, that the territorial grounds upon which the French empire had until then represented its geopolitical power to itself were becoming progressively differentiated by the ecological force of a flow-like political vector which had suddenly interrupted the homogeneity of the territorial status-quo. Rather than a homogenous cartography, what the mosquito, as an agent of transmission, had performed was to partition the imperial territory into a multiplicity of states of intensity. The sovereign imperial body, alongside its territorial representations, was entering into a crisis of unknown precedents. Mercantilism had infected the imperial cartography from within with a revolutionary germ.

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With its rhizomatic logic of infection, the expansive proliferation of epidemic diseases was slowly contaminating the sovereign imperial territory from within. The political consequences of the not yet proposed germ theory of disease were being incubated and sketched out with the greatest of curiosities.\(^{36}\) Regarding this point, medical doctors and military leaders shared a common passion. They both wanted to decipher the propagative logic of these diseases that reproduced without an apparent order. To put the epidemiological paradox in terms that underline their political implications: the paradox regarding epidemics was that they reproduced without a clear representation.

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as James E. McClellan explains, the interest regarding electrical phenomena was sparked by Professor Milon, a man working in close association to the Cercle des Philadelphes.

\(^{36}\) The Germ theory of disease states that some diseases are caused by microorganisms which can’t be detected by the naked eye. It first emerged in the late 16\(^{th}\) century, but found confirmation in the late 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century. It supplanted the miasma theory of disease, which stated that the transmission of disease was the product of miasma, “bad air”. For a history of the evolution of disease theories in their relationship to maps, see Koch’s Disease Maps: Epidemics on the Ground.
Like the slaves, the epidemic logic proliferated in an invisible manner, putting into question the representative realm that had, since the Enlightenment, guided reason. The struggle was then, in all realms, a struggle for representation and visibility. For the slaves, whose population had blossomed to become a distinct majority, it was a struggle for political representation and subjectivity, while for the medical doctors the question was how to represent the invisible, unpredictable and exponential will of the epidemic. It was both a politics of representation and a politics of scale: it was a struggle to comprehend the political cartography of the newly emerging political ecology. As such, the links between epidemiology, territoriality and empire would become evident in the wave of medical cartography that would keep nineteenth century medical doctors busy.

A prime example of such cartographic enterprises would be that of the French physician and natural historian Jean Baptiste Le Blond, the descendant of the eponymous architect who acted as chief designer of Saint Petersburg under the Tsarist rule of Peter the Great. In works like *Observations sur la Fièvre Jaune*, published in Paris in 1805, Le Blond would record his observations on the disease within a broader concern regarding the ecological cartography of the region. Coming from an important family we can be sure that his observations latter made it to the ruling political classes in France. Le Blond’s endeavours were not isolated. In fact, they foreshadowed one of the crucial events in nineteenth century medicine: John Snow’s founding works in the field of modern epidemiology. Convinced that the *miasma theory of disease*, the theory that epidemics were spread by bad air, was wrong, Snow set out in the mid-nineteenth century to discover the true source of epidemic diseases. His insight remains an outstanding event in the history of medicine as well as in the history of sociology: confronted with the cholera epidemic that had afflicted London in 1854, he decided to
map the clusters of cases. Statistically, he came to an outstanding conclusion: the source of the outbreak was the water pump on Broad Street. Snow’s discovery soon proved to be foundational for modern epidemiology and its emerging germs theory of disease: the theory that diseases are caused by microorganisms which remain invisible to the naked eye without magnification. More importantly for us what Snow’s discovery, with its use of cartography and statistics, proved was that the epidemiological discourse was in fact a political paradigm that linked the microcosm of germs with the macrocosms of visible reality. With its politics of scales, modern epidemiology was inducing a crisis upon the old notions of territoriality: as Snow’s map of the Soho cholera outbreak showed, the modern political map was no longer a heterogeneous space but rather a territory infected with dots. Within the walls of the imperial map, there laid latent viruses awaiting a vulnerable body through which to actualize themselves. Nowhere was this new territorial paradigm more evident than in the case of the Greater Caribbean, where the bothersome and miniscule *aedes aegypti* had set the trap for Napoleon’s expeditionary army. The revolutionary germ was already there, ready to gain hold of a territory it knew his but had no right to. As such, it metaphorical shared a common struggle with the slaves: a struggle for representation, sovereignty and free subjectivity.

Bodies in Crisis: Mesmerism and Radical Subjectivity

“If by chance animal magnetism really existed…
I ask you, sir, what revolution should we not expect?”
- Nicolas Bergasse

The territorial body of the empire was not the only body whose sovereignty entered into a state of crisis during the second part of the eighteenth century. At the same time
that the *fièvre jeune* was setting the ecological stage for the Haitian Revolution, another social epidemic was transforming the way French subjects related to their own bodies. As Robert Darnton has explored, the arrival of *mesmerism* in Paris quickly evolved into a major social event that threatened to radicalize the subjectivities of imperial citizens. In February 1778, a German physician by the name of Franz Anton Mesmer arrived to Paris proclaiming the discovery of “a superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies” (3). This fluid, Mesmer theorized, was part of a magnetic field of energy transfers that mediated between the realm of animate manner and that of inanimate matter. Rewriting natural history’s concept of a *chain of being*, Mesmer saw nature as a universal flow of energy. The Parisian public, fascinated as it was with the possibility of invisible forces such as electricity and magnetism, quickly become intrigued by the possibility of such animal magnetism, as Mesmer called the fluid. A physician himself, he found in medicine the most direct applications: the body, he claimed, was a magnetic field and sickness was the result of an obstacle in the flow of the fluid within this field. His next step was to assemble a cure according to this theory. He found such “cure” in an alluring performance: by massaging the body’s “magnetic poles,” Mesmer claimed to be able to induce a crisis upon the body which, by the way of convulsions and epileptic-like trances, broke loose the obstacles in the magnetic field and restored the health of the patient. Mesmer’s cure, acting out a crisis that mimicked the symptoms of an epidemic, was unknowingly producing a new affective concept of the body: the body was no longer the subject of sovereign consciousness but rather a magnetic territory

37 It becomes apparent, as Darnton points out, that mesmerism was in fact a reformulation of the humoral theory of disease within the contemporary debates concerning electricity. In fact, if one thinks about Mesmer’s reformulation of the figure of the *chain of being*, one begins to intuit that what was at stake was the reformulation of a medieval imaginary within the increasingly political discourse of modern experimental physics.
traversed by flow-like intensities. As Robert Darnton explains, in inducing the subject with temporary crises the cure was in itself an alluring social performance. Within what he called his crisis rooms, the performance would take place as a spectacle of truly social dimensions:

Mesmer’s apparatus, especially his mattress-lined “crisis room,” designed for violent convulsives and his famous tubs. These were usually filled with iron filings and mesmerized water contained in bottle arranged like the spokes of a wheel. They stored the fluid and transmitted it through movable iron rods, which the patients applied to their sick areas. Sitting around the tubs in circles, the patients communicated the fluid to one another by means of a rope looped about them all and by linking thumbs and index fingers in order to form a “mesmeric chain”, something like an electric circuit.

Both structurally and practically, Mesmer’s cure was setting the stage for a radicalized paradigm of social experience that rearranged the relationship between the body, nature and the social medium. The figure of the mesmeric chain gave a radical twist to natural history’s *chain of being*. No longer a mere hierarchical structure, the chain was suddenly traversed by the electrical power of a flow capable of producing a social crisis. Mesmer’s crisis room set the stage for a new modality of historical subjectivity that embraced the excess of life and attempted to go beyond the limits imposed by sovereign consciousness. As Darnton shows, the cure fit perfectly within the atmospheric tension that characterized the dusk of the French Revolution. No wonder Henri F. Ellenberger
in his book *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, called mesmerism one of the first antecedents of psychoanalysis: already at work within Mesmer’s cure is a decentralization of consciousness that paradoxically takes as its point of departure enlightened ideas. However, rather than seeing in mesmerism a mere antecedent of psychoanalysis it would perhaps be more productive to see in it an antecedent of that which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, following the work of the nineteenth century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, once called the desiring-machine: the body as the site of production of a flow of desire that breaks the boundaries of the known and produces reality as a multiplicity beyond representation. Like the desiring machine, Mesmer’s magnetism could travel. Its arrival in Haiti is merely the first example of an epidemic that respected no territory and that could mutate, change hands and betray like the worst of viruses.

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Paradoxically, the story of the arrival of mesmerism to Haiti begins with a cartographic expedition. Already from the start the territory of the empire is at stake. In June 1784, seven years before the Haitian Revolution, the Comte de Chastener, a thirty two year old naval officer by the name of Antonine-Hyacinth de Puységur arrives in Saint Domingue aboard the *Fredric-Guillaume*. His goal: to produce a cartographic survey of the islands north of Saint Domingue. Luckily, the ship had been able to make the trasatlantic trip without any major epidemic infecting its passengers. Or so he thought. Puységur, who had studied in Paris with Mesmer himself, probably had an explanation for this. Amidst the cartographic materials that he had brought for the completion of his naval task, he had also brought a series of *bouquets*: in those tubs filled with mesmerized
water Puységur had, throughout the trip, administered Mesmer’s magnetic cures to his sailors making sure that their health and spirits remained untouched. As he disembarked in the island, he took the tubs with him. Soon, at the Maison de Providence des Hommes, Cap François’ poorhouse, a series of mesmeric treatments were set up. Unconsciously, he had introduced into the already radicalized atmosphere of the colony a desire-machine capable of actualizing the latent political tension already present within the colony. However, at a first sight, the cure seemed to fit perfectly within the mercantile logic of slavery. Structurally, the cure mimicked the logic of possession, energy and production that characterized slave economies: the mesmerizer, like the slaveholder, took hold of the body of the mesmerized subject, forcing him to release an excess of energy. Understanding the master and slave rubric that underlined the cure, colonial slaveholders quickly jumped on the opportunity of maximizing profits. In a 1785 report by plantation owner Jean Trembley we read of the multiple benefits brought by the introduction of mesmerism, among which the author underlines the cure of slaves:

A cripple brought from the plain to Cap Français on a liter walked freely afterward. A female slave paralyzed for fourteen years was entirely cured in a short time without her realizing that she was being treated, etc. A plantation owner on this plain made a big profit in magnetizing a consignment of cast-off slaves he bought at a low price. Restoring them to good health by means of the tub, he was able to lease them at prices paid for the best slaves. The rage for magnetism has taken of everyone here. Mesmeric tubes are everywhere. (178)
Trembley’s report condenses the biopolitics of the mesmeric tubes as desiring-machine: in the economy of expenditure elicited by the cure we find a biopolitical figure that reproduces the discursive paradigm set up by the yellow fever.\textsuperscript{38} Trembley’s rhetoric – his comments regarding the omnipresence of the cure as well as its capacity to take hold of everyone – already suggest the relationship between epidemics and mesmerism: both phenomenon force us to question what happens to the subject when, reaching the limit of his sovereign consciousness, he is forced to venture forward? What type of economy is sketched therein? Who takes hold of whom, and for what purpose? Like the “excess of live” with which Mme. Millet described the mesmeric crises in the passage previously quoted, mesmerism forces us to see what happens to the subject when its unity is shattered by a multiplicity that knows no boundaries. I am here reminded of Deleuze and Guattari’s criticism of Freud’s psychoanalytical reading of the crowd in \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}: “Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd” (27). Perhaps, I would claim following their insight, what has been missing from the numerous works devoted to the arrival of mesmerism in Haiti has been a deeper understanding of the ways in which not only was mesmerism an influential element within the Haitian Revolution, but rather a paradigmatic one. As I have tried to elucidate here, it is this paradigmatic aspect that is exposed once the discursive relationship between the biopolitical significance of mesmerism’s arrival in Saint Domingue is placed alongside the political role of the yellow fever. If, following Ellenberger’s image of mesmerism as a “psychic epidemic,” we conceive of it in the

\textsuperscript{38} Further to prove the epidemiological paradigm establish by mesmerism, one must remember, as François Regourd does in “Mesmerism in Saint Domingue”, that the use of mesmerism as a way of maximizing profits by the slaveholders came after its use for inoculation.
biopolitical terms disclosed by our analysis of the yellow fever, then we realize its true historical significance: rather than being merely an influential factor within the history of the Haitian Revolution, mesmerism’s radicalization of subjectivity proved to be a crucial historiographical mutation. It then appears to no surprise that with the paradoxical logic of Hegel’s master and salve dialectic, with the traitorous multiplicity of a virus, mesmerism suddenly changed hands and became a “property” of the slaves. To some extent it was theirs to begin with, for it was their struggle for a radical subjectivity that the cure mimicked.

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The local authorities were quick to note the dangers behind mesmerism’s mutation. In two rulings from 1786 by the Conseil supérieur du Cap Français, the authorities highlight the existence of nightly meetings in the northern district of La Mermelade, where they claimed slaves gathered, inducing convulsions and producing, as François Regourd quotes, “false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of Bila.” As Regourd notices, the name Bila referred to the vodou practices already shared by some of the slave population. The ruling continues to highlight the “numerous people” that attended nocturnal events as well as the crossbreeding of mesmerism and occult African practices that characterized them:

\[ \text{The miraculous operator has the subjects who ask to submit to his power brought to him into the circle. He does not limit himself to magnetizing them in the modern sense of the world. After magician has caused the stupor or convulsions in them using both the sacred and the profane, holy water is brought to him since he} \]
pretends it is necessary to break the spell that he had previously
cast on the subjects… (322)

The counsel’s description, in its conflation of mesmerism and vodou, provides us with
the bipolitical vocabulary through which to think the consequences of mesmerism’s
mutation at the hands of the slaves: miracles, subjects, power, circles, magnetism, magic,
stupor, convulsion, spells… All of these figures allow us to comprehend the
introduction of mesmerism into the slave circles within the logic of radicalization that
characterized the struggle for subjectivity of the slaves. What comes to light from this
description, as well as from Carpentier’s description of Macandal’s line of flight, is the
fact that in their struggle for political visibility, in their struggle for political
subjectivity, the slaves were in fact forcing the enlightened concept of subjectivity to
explode from within. As we read in Médéric Moreau de Saint-Mery’s 1797 Description
Topographique: “most of the participants asked for the ability to control the mind of
their masters” (274). Unknowingly, they were casting a spell upon the Kantian subject,
one that broke it loose of the chains of its imperial unity, and brought it forth as a true
multiplicity beyond representation. Isn’t this precisely the logic of crowds, multiplicity
and deterritorialization that is sketched by Macandal in Carpentier’s representation of
his final escapee? What Carpentier’s scene – in its description of the miraculous moment
of liberation – suggests is that the true moment of liberation and freedom within the
Haitian Revolution was not limited to that of individual subjectivities but rather
occurred when the imperial logic of sovereignty was confronted with an epidemic logic
capable of decentralizing the subject’s self possession. With the adoption of mesmerism,
the slaves were paradoxically gaining advantage of the logic of possession that
characterized their situation. As Karol Weaver notes, they were also bringing back the
memory of Macandal’s mythic death and with it, the colonial fear of being poisoned: “These fears are made plain by the court’s willingness to apply the 1758 law, which stated, “Prohibited to free men of color and slaves to compose, sell and distribute or buy talismans or macandals” (108). After conjuring the memory of Macandal, the declaration of 1786 ends by explicitly forbidding mesmerism between the slaves, as well as among men and women of color. It also condemned the two main leaders of the mesmeric circles at La Marmelade – Jérôme, Télémaque – to harsh punishments: according to Moreau de Saint-Méry, Jérôme was condemned to the galleys for life while Télémaque was subjected to the iron collar and publicly exposed. However, if we are to believe the records of the counsel, both men escaped. This flight from the territory of the law, despite its historiographic uncertainty, gives an overarching arch to the history here narrated: from Macandal’s flight as a metamorphosed mosquito to the uncertain flight of Jérôme and Télémaque we become witnesses of the logic of deteritorialization produced by a series of material practices that would end up shattering the traditional figure of the historical subject. We are almost tempted, poetically, to think that the mosquitoes that would bit LeClerc’s forces more than a decade latter were the metamorphosed spirits of the two runaways. By forcing upon us a concept of history beyond the sovereign subject, the epidemiological paradigm imposes a question: and now who/what?
And Now Who/ What?: The Plagued Subject of History

“The body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body.”
- Roberto Esposito

By staging the crisis of the political figure of the sovereign body, both in its territorial as well as subjective moments, the epidemiological events that marked the history of the Haitian revolution helped sketch, at the very outset, the stakes of modern history from a biopolitical perspective. Both the ecological history of the yellow fever in the Greater Caribbean as well as the disruptive introduction of mesmerism in Haiti became paradigmatic of the “desire-events” that, in the coming century, would threatened the stability of the Hobessian social contract, forcing the modern state to redefine the nature of its sovereignty. The epidemic, with its complex structure of differential immunity as well as its expansive non-territorial will, would become the paradigm for that new political subject whose nature consisted in a constant negotiation with that within him which exceeded life. The plagued subject emerges, as Félix Guattari explains in The Three Ecologies, as the protagonist of an animist history that admits of no transcendental subject: “Today, it seems interesting to me to go back to what I would call an animist conception of subjectivity, if need be through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena” (74). Animism, with its epidemiological logic of contagion, infects the political from within forcing subjectivity to dissolve its energy in larger scale assemblages. The question becomes, as Guattari continues to ask: “How can it [subjectivity] simultaneously singularize an individual, a group of individuals, and also be assembled to space, architecture and all other cosmic assemblages?” (74) This image of an animist subjectivity, of a subject always at the edge
of its dissolution into cosmic assemblages, sketches the contours of a new mode of historical agency. Perhaps, one would argue, the plagued subject that supersedes the transcendental one is nothing else than that which Negri and Hardt, in their trilogy, have called the multitude. Interestingly, for Negri and Hardt, as sketched in their book *Empire*, the multitude is both the subject that posits the possibility of hegemonic power as well as that which threatens to dissolve it:

This is another fundamental characteristic of the existence of the multitude today, within Empire and against Empire. New figures of struggle and new subjectivities are produced in the conjuncture of events, in the universal nomadism, in the general mixture and miscegenation of individuals and populations, and in the technological metamorphoses of the imperial biopolitical machine.

(61)

According to this logic, the Haitian Revolution would be one of the first irruptions of the modern multitude into the political stage. In the slaves’ struggle for political visibility, in the nightly meetings of the slaves crowds at *La Mermelade*, one finds the paradigmatic example of the sociological logic of multiplicity and contagion which comes to characterize the Spinozian multitude for Hardt and Negri. However, like the plague and like mesmerism, the nature of this plagued subject called the multitude, is a paradoxical one: unknowingly, it sketches the biopolitical double face of modern sovereignty. To state it in epidemiological terms: it sketches that which Roberto Esposito has called the immunological paradigm, the state as a plagued body in constant negotiation with its latent viruses. The modern biopolitical state, one could argue following Esposito, is the immunological state whose sovereignty is always threatened
from within rather than from outside. Confronted with a life that aims to exceed itself—as Mme Millet’s quote regarding colonial mesmerism reminds us—the state must immunize itself:

Life is the event, the situation, which by definition tends to escape its own confines—it tends to break down its own limits and turn itself inside out. The mandate of law is to immunize life from its irresistible impulse to overcome itself, to make itself more than simple life, to exceed the natural horizon of biological life (or as Benjamin expresses it, “bare life,” das blosse Leben) so as to take on a “form of life” such as “right life” or “common life.” (31)

The Haitian Revolution would then mark a threshold in the history of modern biopolitics as the moment in which the imperialist logic of territorial sovereignty is superseded by the modern immunological global state.

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I would like to end by returning to the initial image of the chief doctor of the naval army, Nicolas Pierre Gilbert, writing in 1803 the clinical memoirs of his expedition to Saint Domingue from the safety of his Parisian home. *Histoire Médicale de la Armée Française a Saint Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la Fièvre Jaune* is a book written in an attempt to calm metropolitan fears regarding an elusive malady whose viral logic escaped the grasp of the French public: “Je démontrerai, par les faits, que la fièvre jaune de l’Amérique ne doit pas inspirer plus d’alarmes pour l’avenir que toute autre fièvre de mauvais nature […] on sera force den conclusse que nos Colonies ne seront pas plus déserté par nous, a raison de cette maladies” (6). The colonies would not be deserted by
the imperial army: Gilbert’s words emphasize the connection between imperial presence and territorial sovereignty. Little did he know that at the moment of his writing LeClerc’s troops were retreating, and the General himself had fallen victim to the fatal yellow fever. Here, once again, the intuitions of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* prove crucial. In the novel, Pauline Bonaparte, sister of Napoleon and wife of LeClerc, seeing the moribund state of his plagued husband, seeks as a last resort the help of a black vodou priest, a *houngan* by the name of Solimán. Interestingly, at the last moment LeClerc is forced to resort to the same esoteric practices – creole versions of mesmerism – that, according to the novel, he had made fun of:

“Now she lamented having often made fun of sacred things just to keep up with the trend. The agony of LeClerc, increasing her fear, made her delve deeper into the world of powers that Soliman invoked in his conjures, true master of the island, last possible defender against the lashes of the far shore, only probable doctor against the inadequacy of the traditional chemists…” (76)³⁹

³⁹ Spanish quote: “Ahora se arrepentía de haberse burlado tan a menudo de las cosas santas por seguir las modas del día. La agonía de Leclerc, acreciendo su miedo, la hizo avanzar más aún hacia el mundo de poderes que Solimán invocaba en sus conjuros, en verdadero amo de la isla, único defensor posible contra el azote de la otra isla, único doctor probable ante la inutilidad de los recetarios” (85).

Pauline’s relationship to Solimán is allegorically crucial: her survival is related to her capacity to give in to the new viral logic represented by the *houngan*. As the novel continues, we find that Pauline Bonaparte – who historically had been infected with the plague herself – carries with her, together with the funeral remains of her diseased husband, the wisdom that she had acquired by her “contact” with Solimán’s contagious...
presence. Pauline Bonaparte’s return had brought, within the confines of the metropolis, the disease that so far had remained outside its territorial frontiers. As such it remains symptomatic of the transformations endured by the imperial notion of sovereignty. From now on the emerging global state would have to learn how to negotiate the latent viruses that had suddenly plagued its territory. Little did Nicolas Pierre Gilbert know that the virus he was writing about was to be found, not across the Atlantic, but outside his door.

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40 I am tempted here to use, in regards to the paradigm above sketched, Jean François Lyotard’s notion of a “libinal economy” as it was theorized in his 1974 book of the same name. There Lyotard speaks of a micropolitics of desire in which the subject emerges out of the disbalance produced by his libidinal expenditure, in a transaction without equivalence. Likewise, what virality introduces, the idea of a circulation without equivalence.
A brief analysis of the opening pages of Michael Foucault’s now famous text on *Panopticism* gives us a first insight into the paradoxical double nature of that which, following the conclusions of the preceding section, I would like to call the modern immunological state. Foucault begins the text by discussing the biopolitics of surveillance that were triggered by the event of a plague in the seventeenth century. In his desire to elucidate the cartography of surveillance and discipline that became operative as soon as the fear of an epidemic struck the community, he proceeds to list the measures that took place in case of the breakout of an epidemic. First, space became partitioned by the sudden emergence of authority: the closing of the town and the prohibition of leaving it was followed by its division into different quarters, each of which was governed by an intendant. Each street was placed under the authority of a syndic whose role was to keep surveillance. The city became a hierarchical space traversed by the presence of the seeing eye and the writing hand of power:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living
beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (197)

For Foucault, what the plague discloses is the graphic cartography of power implicit within the city itself: “The plague stricken town, traversed throughout by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city” (198). After this brief introduction, Foucault then goes on trace a further development in the biopolitics of modern surveillance: the emergence of what, following Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, he calls *panopticism*, the dialectics between visibility, discipline and knowledge that structures modern sovereignty. What remains particularly modern about modern surveillance is not so much its presence but rather its “generalized model of functioning”. Whereas the plague remains an exceptional situation, panopticism turns the states of exception into the rule as part of the transformation of monarchic societies into disciplinary societies: “The movement from one project to the other, from a schema of exceptional discipline to one of a generalized surveillance, rests on a historical transformation: the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline throughout the seventeenth century and eighteenth centuries, their spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society ” (201). At first, the whole foundation of my argument regarding the role of virality within modern politics seems to be destroyed by the underlining assumption behind Foucault’s text: plagues where the biopolitical form of the medieval and classical ages, whereas the formation of the Nation-State carries with it the emergence of other, positive, forms of subjection. To some extent, this argument in undeniable: from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, from the *Dance Macabre* to Holbein’s death, the black death imagery
rules the medieval imaginary and only begins to slowly disappear with the emergency of the Nation State. However, what interests me is something that seems implicit in the paradoxical structure of Foucault’s argumentation. Not for any reason does Foucault begin with an account of the biopolitical implications of the plague. His strategy is clear. Discussing the plague first allows him to sketch out the power structure which, when later flipped, gives him the reverse image of that which he wants to portray: the positive, generalized state of surveillance and disciplining which rules over the modern social body. What I wish to underline is the homeopathic gesture through which Foucault produces the positivity of modern disciplinary society out of the negativity of classical sovereignty. In fact, the plague provides him with that discourse on the invisible hand of sovereignty that he later applies to modernity:

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis. (197)

What Foucault attempts to think is the process by which sovereignty as a state of exception became a generalized, invisible, omnipresent, mode of societal functioning: the
way in which its negativity became a positive. *Similia Similibus Curantur*: Hahnemann’s homeopathic law of similars – *the like cures the like* – is here performed to perfection. The negative of the negative becomes the invisible hand of modern sovereignty. To some extent, to use the epidemiological vocabulary, what Foucault is interested is in the way the modern State inoculated itself against the plague, against its logic of contagion and multiplicity by turning into a disciplinary society that structures itself *as if* it was always under the threat of a plague. The immunological politics of this *as if* must be studied thoroughly. One must not forget that Edward Jenner’s smallpox vaccine dates from 1796, and that Louis Pasteur’s bacteriological works on the anthrax and rabies vaccines traverse the second part of the nineteenth century with the force of a discursive revolution: his germ theory of disease – the believe that microscopic organisms are to blame for many of our diseases – changed the way society structured itself in relationship to a politics of scales\(^41\), as well as reinforced what we could call the homeopathic nature of positivism. Regarding the emergence of such homeopathic paradigm, Robert Esposito, in his 2002 book *Immunitas*, has explored the sociological dimensions of this paradigm. Following the etymological dialectic between immunity and community, Esposito highlights the double nature of the homeopathic cure:

\(^{\text{41}}\) Regarding this politics of scale: just as Foucault’s great discovery in Discipline and Punishment seems to be that power is everywhere present, invisible yet functional, one could say that the nineteenth century sees the emergence, with bacteriology and epidemiology, of that political microsphere which Gabriel Tarde, following Leibniz, called the sociology of the infinitesimal. One must read in this sense Tarde’s Monadology and Sociology, where the presence of discoveries such a Pasteur’s are constantly considered: “Like the vital principle, illness, which was treated as a person by the ancient medical writers, has been pulverized into a great number of infinitesimal disorders of the histological elements. Moreover, thanks primarily to the discoveries of Pasteur the parasitic theory of illness, which explains these disorders by means of the internal conflicts of miniscule organisms, finds more general application every day, and indeed excessively so, to the point where it should provoke some reaction. But parasites, too, have their parasites. And so on. The infinitesimal again!” (7)
“Immunity, in short, is the internal limit which cuts across community, folding it back
on itself in a form that is both constitutive and deprivative: immunity constitutes or
reconstitutes community precisely by negating it” (9). Esposito then goes on to explore,
following the work of the father of systems theory, Niklas Luhmann, how the double
nature of immunity is itself a new relationship to the law and sovereignty:

This negative dialectic takes on particular prominence in the sphere of legal
language or, to be more precise, in law as the immune apparatus of the entire
social system. If, as Niklas Luhmann claims, starting in the nineteenth
century, the semantics of immunity have progressively extended to all
sectors of modern society, this means that the immune mechanism is no
longer a function of law, but rather, law is a function of the immune
mechanism […] this crucial transition constitutes the point of precipitation
of an otherwise sharply aporetic path that has its origin in the structural
relation between law and violence. (9)

Law, violence, sovereignty and discipline: the nineteenth century sees the emergence of
the modern state as the fiction that regulates the entropic flows of a territorial immune
system. The modern immunological state regains control of itself by inoculating itself
from its own perils. Foucault, in his essay on *panopticism*, speaks of a “political dream”
established by the plague: a dream in which the discerning gaze of the law regulates
even the smallest details of everyday life through its hierarchical organization.
According to him, as we know, this gaze institutionalized itself in a series of
governmental institutions and material practices: the police, the school, the asylum, the prison. Epistemologically, this homeopathic paradigm gave birth to the social sciences.\(^{42}\)

However, in what follows, I wish to explore another *apparatus* whose internal logic mimicked the State's immunitary logic: the naturalist novel. One merely has to read Emile Zola's programmatic 1980 essay *The Experimental Novel* – where the French author sketches the poetics of the genre – in order to understand its proximity to the logic of immunity and discipline described by both Esposito and Foucault. Taking the physiologist as his model, Zola envisions a mode of writing characterized by observation and analysis:

He (the naturalist writer) should be the photographer of phenomena, his observation should be an exact representation of nature… He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation. But once the fact is ascertained and the phenomenon observed, an idea or hypothesis enters his mind, reason intervenes and the experimentalist comes forward to interpret the phenomenon. (646)

In what follows, I will attempt to show – through the study of the works of the Puerto Rican doctor and writer Manuel Zeno Gandía – how the naturalist novel functioned as an apparatus whose internal dynamics mimicked the homeopathic logic of the State's immune system. The naturalist novel acted as an apparatus whose desire to portray the logic of contagion in all its modalities served a homeopathic function: that of containing

\(^{42}\) This could be said to have been the project of Michel Foucault in books such as *The Order of Things*, but also in books such as *The Birth of the Clinic*. Foucault traces the genealogy of the social sciences as the positive internalization of the distinction central to the human himself.
nature’s rhizomatic multiplicity within the territorial boundaries of the Empire’s sovereign gaze.

A Bacterial Colony: On the Naturalist Novel as Culture Medium

“La novela naturalista extirpa los cánceres sociales, ocultos en su mayor parte tras la pulcra vestimenta de la humanidad”
- Matías González

History has its paradoxes. If by the end of the eighteenth century Haiti was already on the verge of declaring itself a free Republic, by the end of the nineteenth, almost a century later, Puerto Rico was still a colony of Spain. Alongside with Cuba, the island remained the last colony under Spanish rule at the end of a tumultuous century that had erased and redrawn the political cartography of the Americas. By the last decade of the century, however, the prospects of independence must have looked promising amidst the internal collapse of the Spanish Empire that would culminate in the catastrophic lososes of 1898. However, as the atmosphere of the island boiled with desire for autonomy, intellectuals feared that the social body was not ready to assume the task of citizenship. The arrival of the naturalist novel to the island must be understood against this background of fears concerning the health of the social body. As Fernando Feliú Mantilla has sketched in his genealogy of the genre, the naturalist novel arrived to the island mainly thanks to the translations of the works of Emile Zola that, starting from 1885, Manuel Fernández Juncos began including in his newspaper El Buscapié, among them excerpts from Germinal, Eugene Rougon and La Ventre du Paris. By 1887 we have record of a lecture by Alberto Regúlez y Sanz del Río about realism and naturalism, and by 1889 the genre had produced its first intellectual polemic. That year El Boletín
Mercantil published a series of articles entitled “El Naturalismo en el Arte” in which José Arnau Igarávidez highlighted the achievements of the genre while at the same moment condemning some of its excesses. The polemic would reach its culmination some years later when the writer Matías González García, in the prologue to his 1893 novel Cosas, proclaimed the naturalist novel as the only appropriate vehicle capable of both developing a reading public as well as of building up its moral dimension. The words that González García would choose to portray the task of the genre remain illuminating: “la novela naturalista extirpa los cánceres sociales, ocultos en su mayor parte tras la pulcra vestimenta de la humanidad” (4). Social tumours: it would be against this background of medical discourse and social preoccupations that the doctor and writer Manuel Zeno Gandía would conceive his novelistic project Crónicas de un Mundo Enfémoro as an attempt to reform the social body by portraying its sickly state. As I will now attempt to show, Zeno Gandía, a medical doctor trained in Spain and an avid supporter of the independence movement, conceived the naturalist novel under the homeopathic rubric provided by the immunological logic of vaccination: his narrative project attempts to inoculate the body politic from the danger of that which we could call, following González García, social cancers. Namely, if we are to borrow the vocabulary of microbiology, Zeno Gandía uses the form of the naturalist novel in order to conduct a social experiment: the naturalist novel serves as the culture medium through which the writer studies the behaviour and logic of the spread of social disease, its causes and its structure. The insular space of the island mimics the perfect ecological environment of the Petri dish and figurates it as a bacterial colony under observation. Paradoxically, by dissecting the rationality behind the logic of contagion, by illustrating the causality behind the apparent multiplicity, the naturalist novel ends up providing
the social body with an image of itself as a healthy immune system. This didactic paradox, which I here call the immunological paradox, traverses the medical discourse of Zeno Gandía’s *Crónicas de un Pueblo Enfermo* serving as the driving force behind its rehearsal of citizenship. As Juan del Salto, the cultured landowner and representative of the *ciudad letrada* in Zeno Gandía’s 1894 novel *La Charca* suggests, the task is that of giving a form to the masses, that of turning the rhizomatic *gentío* into cultured citizens for the coming State:

Sí, aquello era una tumba de vivos. El glóbulo rojo, combatido por la sangre blanca, había huido para siempre de aquella gran masa de pálidos. Era una muchedumbre de contornos inciertos, borrosos, indecisos… Un haz de retorcidos sarmientos en que vicios y virtudes se enredaban, se enmarañaban de tal suerte, que siguiendo el sarmiento de una noble calidad se llegaba al vicio, y sacudiendo el de un defecto se llegaba a la virtud. ¡Ah! ¿cómo definirlos? (16)

“¡Ah! ¿cómo definirlos?”: the task of the writer is conceived as that of drawing distinctions amidst the swarming multiplicity of the social body. Juan del Salto’s panoptic vision of his plantation, his territorial gaze as well as his reflections concerning the working classes, provide an image of the naturalist writer as a doctor of the social body. This social body is not, however, any social body: as the above image of the battling red and white cells suggests, Zeno Gandía envisions the social body of the colony under the sign of *anemia*. His task: inoculating the anemic body from its own vices, from its tendency towards contagion, mixture and indistinction. Namely, making it a productive body. As Gabriel Nouzeilles has noted in her essay “La Esfinge del Monstruo” this emphasis on a hygienic modernism must be understood within the broader politicization of the body
and its metaphors within the nineteenth century. The clinical discourse that Nouzeilles had already sketched out in her book *Ficciones Somáticas*, belongs to the biopolitics of desire that became central within the foundational projects of nation-State in the nineteenth century. However, if in the foundational romances studied by Doris Sommers what mattered was the harmonious resolution of desire within the image of the heterosexual couple, in the case of the naturalist novel, as Nouzeilles suggests, what matters is portraying the dangers of a viral catastrophe: the degeneration of the political body into a formless infertile monster. Both Sommers and Nouzeilles depart, however, from the same intuition: nineteenth century realism, as Leo Bersani has shown, takes as its main concern the regulation of desire. Whereas foundational romances attempt to solve the problem by narratively resolving desire, the naturalist novel attempts to cure the malady by exposing its dangers. The paradoxical nature of its homeopathic logic is evident from the above quote by Juan del Salto: there one gets an image in which vice tangles itself around virtue with the same rhizomatic logic with which white cells snarl around red cells. The figure of the social body as anemic body sketches the main concerns of the immunological state: the relationship of the body to itself and its capacity to interact with that within itself that seems to exceed it. Moreover, the figure of the *anemic body* remains crucial since it exposes the naturalist novel as the stage where questions regarding labour and productivity in their relationship to the expenditure of energy are negotiated: the writer’s double task is that of invigorating the anemic social body at the same time as detaining the contagious proliferation of unhealthy desire. The naturalist novel negotiates the distribution of energy within the social body. In the agricultural context of nineteenth century Latin America, this task would prove crucial. After the abolition of slavery, the plantation would see the
emergence of the creole worker as the main proletariat force driving the economy: namely, for the first time in history, the body of the colony was also the body of its labor force. Sociological concerns regarding the proletarian class, its health and its productivity would become, as a consequence, a common thread throughout the century. In the case of Puerto Rico, these would lead to a series of sociological studies that would take as its main concern the figure of the creole working man, the jíbaro: from the 1882 novel of customs El Gíbaro by the medical doctor Manuel Alonso to sociological essays like Las Clases Jornaleras by Salvador Brau, the question regarding the health and productivity of the jíbaro quickly became synonymous with the question regarding the future of the colony as well as its possible economic future as an independent state. It then comes to no surprise that both Garduña and La Charca, the two pre-1898 novels in Zeno Gandía’s Crónicas de un Pueblo Enfermo read as novelized versions of the sociological concerns expressed in essays such as Brau’s Las Clases Jornaleras. In them the plantation becomes the ecological locus for a sociological experiment regarding the dangers of an unproductive expenditure of energy. The omnipresent narrator of the naturalist novel – writing from an all-seeing perspective not unlike that of Juan del Salto in La Charca – observes, records and regulates the flow-like dispersion of energy in an attempt to make sure its deployment is optimized. His greatest fear is the logic of contagion that deterritorializes energy in non-productive manners. He fears that which

43 Quote from Salvador Brau’s Las Clases Jornaleras: “Hay en ese carácter, por plumas tan eminentes descrito, un gérmen potente capaz de adquirir productivo desarrollo: si ese desarrollo no se ha adquirido, fuerza es que causas, visibles ú ocultas, lo hayan cohibido ó esterilizado. A semejanza do O’Eeylly y del Padre Iñigo, sigue hoy atribuyendo, por algunos, á las influencias del clima, las condiciones del carácter de nuestro pueblo. Convendremos en que el sol ar doroso de los trópicos enerva y modifica la vida animal; pero si O’Reylly y el padre Iñigo pudieran levantarse de sus tumbas, para comparar esta sociedad puertorriqueña del siglo XIX, con aquella que ellos conocieron y estudia-ron tan á fondo…” (182)
Georges Bataille would latter call expenditure. And yet, nothing fascinates him more than portraying the unproductive expenditure produced by such viral behaviour and vices:

En las gentes de la montaña estudiaba Juan las convulsiones evolutivas de una raza. Su prehistoria, su oscuro origen, sus migraciones, y luego, al contacto de los europeos, sus mezclas y sus transformaciones. Se daba cuenta de la situación que aquellas clases ocupaban en la colonia. Las veía descender por línea recta de mezclas étnicas cuyo producto nacía contaminado de morbosa debilidad, de una debilidad invencible, de una debilidad que, apoderándose de la especie, le había dejado exangüé las arterias, sin fluido nervioso el cerebro… (14)

In Juan del Salto’s vision the anemic body of the country is the product of unhealthy racial miscegenation. As Gabriela Nouzeilles has noted, the racial miscegenation that characterizes the “clases obreras” was feared as being unhygienic and therefore unproductive. The contaminated ontology of the proletariat classes characterized them as an unproductive “gentío” rather than as productive citizens: “¿Cómo! ¿Era aquello un conjunto social? ¿Estaban aquellas clases reguladas por las leyes generales de la moral, de la justicia y del deber? ¿Las gentes que veía agrupadas en las estribaciones del monte, eran piara, eran rebaños? […] No, no era el espíritu… El contaminado, el raquítico, el deformado era el cuerpo” (14). Zeno Gandía’s novelistic project Crónicas para un Mundo Enfermo must then be placed alongside the great treatises of sociology which at the end of the nineteenth century began to think through the characteristics of that new viral subject called the crowd: La Charca was published one year before Gustave Le Bon’s
1895 *La Psychologie des Foules* and five years before J.M. Ramos Mejías’s *Las Multitudes Argentinas*. In fact, the opening reflections by landowner Del Salto forebode many of Le Bon’s reflections regarding the viral psychology that characterize the crowd as subject: its contagious inclination towards suggestions, its vicious spontaneity, its tendency towards crime, among others. Zeno Gandía’s crowd belongs, however, to the tropical plantations rather than to the urban center: his *gentío* is composed, not of urban proletariats, but of agricultural workers. As such the relationship to nature and dirt is more apparent. In fact, throughout the novel moments of contagion appear constantly as the great fear, as the reason behind the social *anemia* that prevents the country from subsisting by itself. Namely, on the eyes of Zeno Gandía, the country’s incapacity to reach independence was largely due to its incapacity to sanitize itself. The author, a medical doctor who had been trained in Spain, would himself write, in the custom of the nineteenth century, a hygienic manual aptly entitled: *Higiene de la Infancia al Alcance de las Madres de Familia*. In the introduction to the manual, the author begins by sketching the naturalist analogy between humans and plants: “El hombre es perfectamente comparable a las plantas: atmósfera que la rodea y nutre, funciones por las que asimila y devuelve lo que no sirve para la nutrición, sustancias que ingiere para vigorizar el organismo y susceptibilidad a las causas nocivas. Tal, como la planta, es el hombre”(15).

However, as he so well knew and as the imagery in *La Charca* makes evident, the problem was precisely in the organ of nourishing: the colony had a sick stomach. In this sense, fears regarding social contagion and blood contamination must be understood with regards to the epidemic of *hookworm* that struck the colony’s working classes throughout the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, as becomes evident in *La Charca*’s ever-present image of the sick stomach, the small worm-looking intestinal
parasite had infected more than ninety percent of the workers, leading to a widespread of anemia. The jíbaros working in the mountains, being mostly of white origin, were not immune to the disease that had been brought two centuries before by the slave trade. As such, the image of the infected stomach leading to an anemic state quickly becomes the leading image for a state whose work force is limited:

El estómago enfermo reparte mal las fuerzas: la irregularidad distributiva desequilibra el cuerpo organizado, el desequilibrio paso incólume del individuo a la prole, de ésta a las generaciones futuras y de estas a la raza. Si, ¡el estómago deviado en su función engendra la enfermedad y la muerte de un pueblo! (14)

One could then claim that, confronted with the atrophy of its operating organ, the body of the nation found in the naturalist novel a transplant. The naturalist novel becomes the technological dispositif that comes to regulate the energy distribution and immunological operations of the social body. Through the construction of a sovereign causality, it acts as an implantable immune system, reterritorializing the energy that had been inadequately dispersed. Its relationship to the law comes then as no surprise: the naturalist novel stages the law as its main concern, and finds in crime fiction its structural model. As the above image of the anemic body suggests, following the thread of vice one might find virtue. The naturalist novel stages the outbreak of disease as the crime it must solve: it unknots the thread of social evils until it finds, at the very end, perhaps not the resolution of desire or the exaltation of virtue, but rather the possibility of the law as such, its subsistence within the otherwise entropic realm of social phenomena. Both La Charca and Garduña stage themselves as juridical novels: in the case of La Charca the novel deals with the aftermath of the killing of Deblás and in the
case of Garduña with the legality of an inheritance. The possibility a law without necessary justice sketches in both cases the possibility of a territorial unity devoid of unhealthy multiplicities.

Unknotting Nature’s Crime: The Lawful Labour of Naturalism

“Así urdida la trama, se aseguraba el secreto. Secreto muy hondo de una intriga muy negra.”
- Manuel Zeno Gandía, Garduña

Garduña, the first novel belonging to Crónicas de un Pueblo Enfermo, begins by staging the production of visibility from the heights. Three horse riders climb the mountains, making their way through the rough vegetation, until they reach a plateau nested between two hills that “opens” for them the view of a valley. Only then are we introduced both to the lawyer Hermógenes Garduña whose name gives the novel its title, as well as to the valley of Paraíso whose legal ownership seems to be at stake. The reader quickly realizes that what lies in front of him – the landscape now drawn from the perspective of the abra – is the object of a legal dispute. This beginning marks the delimitation of the territory of fiction as that which must prove capable of being traversed by the lawful eye of writing: “Por eso, con la sentencia del desahucio, quise venir yo mismo. Temí que cambiara los puntos ¿eh? De esa manera, como ya ustedes han visto, he podido precisar personalmente los límites de la finca de ese, que ahora es mía” (16). In a single gesture the novel begins by knotting together many of the main dichotomies and concerns that traverse the naturalist novel as genre: the relationship between nature and law, between the act of observing and that of living, between transcendence and immanence, between the cultivated land and uncultivated nature.
The territorial limits of naturalism – “los límites de la finca” – are set as the reterritorialized grounds upon which the contractual law of literature must prevail. What is at stake, we hear, is the outcome of a “pleito”. This legal dispute is not, however, any dispute, but one regarding a very special type of legal document: the will of the moribund landowner Tirso Mina. This specificity must not be ignored. What the will, as the mediator between life and death, as the mediator between father and children, between generations as such, highlights, is the contractual sense of naturalism. With the force of nineteenth century Darwinism, the will binds the progeny to the law. Like the social contract before it, it legitimates the possibility of historical unity and continuity by reassuring that after the death of the father the estate does not fall back upon the civil war that marked the Hobessian state of nature. The sovereignty of the father’s testamentary word becomes the fundamental biopolitical oath by reassuring the continuity of the ‘natural’ status-quo: the property of the father should be that of the progeny. The will, as contract between the citizen and history, makes sure that nature behaves within the limits of the law in order to avoid historical degeneration. Unless, and here lies the secret crime at the very core of naturalism, something comes to disturb the stability of the natural law: perhaps, one could say following Zeno Gandía, an illegitimate child. Next thing he knows the reader finds himself far from the initial panoptical perspective of the abra, locked within the close doors of a house in which the landowner Tirso Mina prepares to die from tuberculosis. His close family joins him, not out of a desire to help, but rather out of the fear that in his final moments, the landowner might decide to produce a will. Their fears have a reason. Tirso, who had no legitimate progeny in life, is believed to have had an illegitimate daughter:
¡La herencia! Solo la herencia era allí el objeto de cuidados, sin que se atendiera gran cosa al infeliz enfermo a quién, a veces, olvidábase de darle las medicinas […] Acaso, de rodillas, habían suplicado a Tirso que testara y este sin consciencia, complacía a sus pacientes. Veía algo, pero confuso, indeciso. Sabía que Tirso era padre de una niña abandonada que vivía con Ocampo. (47)

Against such fears, Leonarda, Tirso’s sister and lawful inheritor, has sketched a plan with the help of Garduña: to make sure that he dies without producing a will, in which case she, as closest legally acknowledged family member, will receive the inheritance automatically. However, the plan collapses as they see Ocampo – an old friend of Tirso who is believed to be the father of the woman with whom the landowner had the illegitimate daughter – enter the room and leave. Only then, against the fears that Ocampo might have taken with him a will, Leonarda, with the help of Garduña, storm into the room and force Tirso to produce a last will in which he declares them the legal inheritors of the sugar plantation Mina de Oro. Garduña unfolds against such an initial crime, as an exploration of the biopolitical relationship between the law and life. It stages the fictional writing of a natural law.

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Naturalism, one could then say, posits the natural law as its foundational fiction: like the social contract, it writes, against the multiplicity of the social, the rationality of a natural law. Within this paradigm the emergence of illegitimate others, of the dirty parasite or atrophied cell, is seen as the social evil that must either be written into the representative realm of the law or removed from the picture. What Garduña, through
the triumphs of the eponymous character portrays, is the very paradox at the core of the
genre itself: the fact that there is nothing natural about naturalism. Naturalism deprives
nature of its rhizomatic, not to say violent essence, by imposing upon it the structure of
an overarching rational teleology. It deprives nature of its spirited multiplicity by
rendering everything within it necessary. As Toni Negri has pointed out in his
discussion of Spinoza: “the social contract theory is an explicit sociological fiction that
legitimizes the effectiveness of the transfer of Power and thus founds the juridical
concept of the State” (31). What the naturalist novel, through its adoption of the formal
structure of crime fiction stages is the capacity of the self-organizing modern State to
reform the non-rational multiplicities that arise within its social body. More than
narrating the search for the truth behind the enigma of the illegitimate child Casilda,
Garduña unfolds as the story of the main protagonist’s Machiavellian scheming against
the involved parties in order to gain control of the plantation. At the end, with both
Leonard and Casilda tricked by the protagonist’s false rationale, what we are forced to
acknowledge the triumphs of a formalist ratio written under the sign of the law. The
triumphs of licenciado Garduña, here thought in terms of naturalism determinism,
portray the triumph of the possibility of the law as such. Interestingly, this paradocial
lawful ending – paradoxical since justice is never attained – is visualized in the novel in
geometrical manners, as the territorial correction of the “ángulo del mal” that had so
much bothered Garduña:

Garduña hizo su antojo. Colindante su propiedad con Mina de Oro,
regularizó sus límites, quedándose con buena porción de tierra y
borrando … ¡por fin! Aquel ángulo entrante que era su preocupación
El bien, la justicia, el supremo derecho de los débiles a merecer
el amparo de los fuertes, todo desconocido. (207)

With this ending Garduña actualizes what in the beginning had only been sketched as prophecy: the possibility of a reterritorialization devoid of thwarted paths, of illegitimate others. The possibility of a landscape. No wonder this ending coincides with the expulsion of Casilda, the illegitimate child, from Mina de Oro. Like the bad cell which must be either written into the law or expelled from the social body, the last scene of the novel presents with the image of Casilda’s convoy leaving Paraiso and its infected mud: “pasando sin manchar la gallarda vestidura de ángel adornada de luces y colores, por encima de los infectos lodazales de la tierra” (212). The ending of Garduña, however, is not alone in this respect. In the ending of La Charca, as the fatal conclusion to the crime fiction, we are presented with the death of Silvina as she falls from the height into pure nature:

Era el paroxismo, la fulmínea epilepsia, la terrible neurosis convirtiendo en Fortaleza la debilidad de su organismo enfermo. Cayó al borde de la vertiente. Hubo un momento en que, rodando sobre sí misma, bajo el estímulo convulse, se alejó del borde; pero, tras un instante de quietismo, rodó de Nuevo, retorciéndose, sacudiendo con espasmo voltaico el cuerpo y contrayendo en horrible mueca el semblante volvió a colocarse en la arista del abismo […] Era la vida volviendo a su origen, los alientos prestados reintegrándose a la tierra, la material volviendo sus despojos a la gran cuna común. (144)
The teleological structure of naturalism, not to say its determinism, is perfectly sketched out by the image of Silvina’s final image. As we see Silvina been devoured by nature we are reminded of the etymology of her name: Silvina, Silva, selva, jungle, uncultivated land. The bacterial colony sketches for itself the image of the final degeneration of its parasitic components into a formless mass. But in the meanwhile, and here lies the achievement of the naturalist novel as genre, this same teleological arch sketches the possibility of an “evolutionary ratio” that guarantees the survival of the social body as immune system. We are presented with the very possibility of historical lawfulness.

The Germ of Laziness: Hygiene and Neo-Colonialism after 1898

“What if these people were merely innocent victims of a disease, modern only in name?”
- Bailey Ashford

Eighteen Ninety-eight proved to be a decisive year in Puerto Rico’s history: the Spanish-American War shattered the colony’s dreams of autonomy, as the island saw itself transformed from being a Spanish colony to being an American colony. In accordance with the political ecology of the times, the territorial rigidity of the Spanish empire had finally crumbled against the neo-liberal, self-generating flexibility of North America’s emerging empire. Transatlantic relationships would soon be displaced by relationships between North and South, a political cartography that would frequently be understood in term’s of Northern consumption and Southern production. It would be amidst this geopolitical and ecological reconfiguration of the Americas that many of the concerns expressed by Manuel Zeno Gandía’s La Charca would finally be systematically
tackled. Preeminent among them would be the *Puerto Rico Anemia Commission*, an attempt by the emerging colonial government to tackle the so-called “*germ of laziness*” which had left the colony’s working classes, as Zeno Gandía had pointed out, in a state of anemic misery. The commission was lead by Bailey K. Ashford, a professor at Georgetown University and an Assistant Surgeon at the United States Army. Throughout the first decade of the century, the commission would conduct field research into the causes of the anemia epidemic among the working classes, also known as *jíbaros*. The sociological as well as medical results of the field research would serve as the basis for Ashford’s 1911 report entitled *Unciniariasis (Hookworm Disease) in Porto Rico: A Medical and Economic Problem*. What remains striking about Ashford’s report is that it reads, not only as a scientific document, but rather as a socio-economic history of the island. In fact, from the very start Ashford begins by declaring himself a reader of the tradition of nineteenth century sociological literature that had taken the problem of the *jíbaro* as its topic: he declares himself in debt with the writings of Salvador Brau, Cayetano Coll y Toste, Dr. Francisco del Valle Atiles as well with the writings of poet Manuel Fernández Juncos. Fascinatingly, Ashford begins by declaring himself a reader of the socio-literary medical tradition that, throughout the nineteenth century, had attempted to build a healthy nation out of its collapsing labor force. With a precision characteristic of Zeno Gandía, Ashford quickly locates the problem as a historic problem: “With the threatened extermination of the Indian slave, the Spanish saw the necessity for importing labor, and in the coming of the negro slave we can see the beginning of what later proved to be the greatest curse Puerto Rico has ever suffered, epidemic uncinariasis, or “La Anemia”…” (5) This great curse – “La Anemia” – is not, however, understood to be an intrinsic defect of the working classes – a defect of its
vicious nature as Zeno Gandía would have claimed – but rather as the result of a purely natural disease: hookworm, scientifically known as \textit{uncintarisis}. As he states throughout the report, what must be understood is the man behind the pandemic: “The jíbaro is a type to be well studied before we essay to interest him in bettering his own condition. Many have written of his virtues, many of his defects, but few, even in Puerto Rico, have seen through the mist of a pandemic the realm man beyond.” (12) With such words then begins a new chapter in the history of the colony, a new relationship between medicine, labor and consumption written under the sign of foreign intervention. What the \textit{Puerto Rico Anemia Commission} foreshadows is the complex political ecology that would bind the island to its new metropolis for the next century: an experimental ecology within which the island would function as a perfect bacterial colony for the emerging empire. Two decades latter, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, another doctor, Cornelius Roads, would arrive to the island to study, once again, the anemic nature of the island. His studies would soon turn to oncology, and a scandal would soon erupt regarding a letter in which Roads claims to have injected cancer cells within the body of Puerto Ricans: “The Porto Ricans \textit{[sic]} are the dirtiest, laziest, most degenerate and thievish race of men ever to inhabit this sphere… I have done my best to further the process of extermination by killing off eight and transplanting cancer into several more… All physicians take delight in the abuse and torture of the unfortunate subjects.” Independently of their true nature, Road’s statement perfectly captures the logic of the bacterial colony and with it, all its consequences: the emphasis on laziness and labor, the colonial subject as experimental subject, the island itself as a laboratory within which the metropolis could conduct its experiments in view of paradoxically constructing a healthier immune system.
"Muchos de entre nosotros han muerto de la plaga que no cesa. Nosotros somos los sobrevivientes de una sobrevivencia que hay que pagar al precio de nuestras vidas; vidas que además estamos siempre a punto de perder.”

- Reinaldo Arenas en Carta a Sí Mismo, El Color del Verano

An early draft of Reinaldo Arenas’s posthumous novel El Color del Verano contains an epigraph that reads as follows: “I dedicate this work to AIDS because without that experience I would have never written it.”\(^{44}\) Arenas, who had been diagnosed with the disease in 1987, knew that he was not only writing against the virus, but also through it: the disease had begun inhabiting his work as the invisible spirit driving the proliferation of writing against time. Paradoxically, it had become the invigorating catalyst of proliferation and force within an otherwise weakened body. One could even claim that Arenas was never more prolific than in those final years after the diagnostic, when the problem regarding the end and endings must have become terribly pressing. El Color del Verano reads, in this sense, as the culmination and exaltation of the viral character of his ouvre. Arenas’ works are never self-contained stories, but rather parasitical works that give way to a contagious proliferation of desire, of imagery, of laughter. Like Deleuze’s desiring machines, his novels question the territorial unity of plot, replacing it instead with the agitating force of vital rhythms that traverse the plot’s structure, interrupting the flow of sense and deviating it, perverting the web of

\(^{44}\) I take this quote from Jorge Olivares’ Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution.
meaning in ways that question the authority of the nineteenth century omnipresent narrator. His are transvestite fictions – assemblages of theater, short stories, poetry, tongue twisters, songs – always in the process of mutation, displacing their narrative strategies so as to make it impossible for the reader to establish observational positions from which to regulate them. *El Color del Verano* is then, to no wonder, a novel about endings, a novel about social malaise, a novel about sexual repression, but also a novel about pleasure, about humor, about sex, about all of those elements which end up corroding the immune system of the State. Writing against the imminence of a death that had taken AIDS as its signature, Arenas ends up producing a novel that stages the ends of the immunological state as the modern paradigm of political sovereignty. *El Color del Verano* is a novel about the possibility of a *final flight* towards freedom. Staged ten years into a future he knew had been taken from him, staged against the very end of the millennium, Arenas’ literary assemblage mounts itself around a very particular event: the Carnival that the dictator Fifo – i.e. Fidel Castro – sets up to celebrate his fiftieth year in power. From the very beginning, the question regarding sovereignty, power and censorship is at stake. In fact, Arenas begins the novel by placing himself in front of the law through a prelude entitled *Al Juez*:

¡Un momento, querida! Antes de internarte en estas páginas con el fin de meterme en la cárcel, no olvides que estás leyendo una obra de ficción y que por lo mismo sus personajes son infundios o juegos de la imaginación (figuras literarias parodias o metáforas) y no personaje de la vida real. No olvides además que la novela se desarrolla en 1999. Sería injusto acusarme por un hecho ficticio que cuando se narró ni siquiera había sucedido. - El autor (15)
This false start begins by staging the conditions of possibility of the novel as genre: the legitimization in front of the law, the staging of its hypothetical character as well as of its figural nature, are all part of the strategies by which Arenas as “el autor” puts on the table the problems he wishes to tackle: the relationship between literature and freedom, literature and sovereignty, the complex notion of a literary activism, as well as the generic boundaries of historical fictions. From the very start his targets are set. Next thing we know, the prelude in front of the law gives way to a theater where the main characters of Cuban cultural history witness the flight of literature away from the law: the body of the novel begins by staging the attempt of a resurrected Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda to escape the island amidst the celebrations of Fífo’s fiftieth year in power. In “La Fuga de Avellaneda”, the play that jump starts Arena’s desiring machine, Gertrudis de Avellaneda, the nineteenth century Cuban poet, plunges into the sea in her attempt to escape the oppressive climate of the island. The machine is then set in motion as an attempt to stop her flight. The characters: José Martí, Halisia Jalonzo, Zebro Sardoya, Delfín Proust, Raul Kastro, Cynthio Methier… From the very beginning it becomes clear that El Color del Verano is a delirious literary artifact where Arenas, writing under the sign of AIDS, feverishly hallucinates Cuban modern history. A viral allegory were history goes mad.

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To say that El Color del Verano begins with a flight and the ensuing attempt to recapture the fleeing element is not enough. For what is at stake in Arenas’ novel is something much more perverse: the flight of allegory itself outside the territory of circulation. Traditional allegory, we could claim, is an insular genre. It stages language as the
circulation of signification. In the genre’s conventional sense – in the sense that was debunked by early twentieth century modernism – it imagines language as a healthy body insuring the circulation of meaning through a general system of equivalence. Within a healthy allegory, meaning circulates with the calming knowledge that its stability is guaranteed by the promise of a happy resolution within its closed circuit. Like an island, allegory forbids the flight of meaning by remaining a territory without exits. As such, it is as much hygienic as it is lawful. *El Color del Verano*, we could then say, stages the heterotopia of an allegory gone wild, of a wasteful, open flight of meaning that marks the discontents of an oppressive insularity. As Arenas suggests in the recurring passages entitled “La Historia” which constantly punctuate the novel, the idea is not to merely escape the island but to stage the escape of the island itself: “El sueño de toda aquella gente ya no era que la isla fuera libre, sino poder escaparse de aquella isla que era un prisión perfecta. Pero ¿cómo escaparse de una prisión perfecta? [...] Tanta era la desesperación que la gente determinó que había que escaparse con la isla completa” (136). As such, the novel not only sketches a series of flights outside of the island, but the flight of the island itself. Throughout the novel we hear that a subversive group is working on corroding the island’s foundation in an attempt to allow it to flee from itself. The same could be said of the role of allegory within the novel: Arenas contaminates the genre from within, providing it with a grotesque plasticity that allows it to deviate constantly. To say it differently: once the immunological, not to say insular, logic of allegory is weakened – in a manner that inevitably leads us to AIDS – desire is able to circulate, mutate, grow and eventually produce that final catastrophe which according to Arenas paradoxically leads to historical freedom.\footnote{For an interesting book on AIDS as discourse, its relationship to circulation and} Arenas seems to write
or, if we are to use his words, paint with this catastrophe in sight: “En esa parte se verá un cielo extrañamente iluminado y el que se acerque al cuadro escuchará explosiones y chillidos y sordos derrumbes. Se podrá ver la estampida y el desastre final”(89). El Color del Verano then reads not only as an allegory of historical catastrophe but rather as catastrophic paradigm of allegory that takes, as one can imagine, AIDS as its founding trope. But, how does one write, or even better, “paint” the catastrophe of allegory? Arenas hides an answer behind the novel’s subtitle.

“Pintaré las descarcaradas paredes de mi cuerpo”: if, while reading Arenas’ novel, we are reminded of the grotesque imagery of medieval paintings we are in the right path. The subtitle of the novel, Nuevo Jardín de las Delicias, outlines the tradition within which Arenas envisioned his project. The Garden of Earthly Delights is the title of Hieronymus Bosch’s most famous painting, a triptych that portrays, in the sprawling style of the Dutch master, the history of mankind as the corrosive progression of sin. Central to the piece is the body as the site of both pleasure and sin. The sinuosity of the bodies portrayed, their amorphousness that hints at formlessness without fully embracing it, brings forth the imagery of the plague-ridden body. The memory of the Black Death, still in the air at the end of the 16th century, gets transformed within Bosch’s painting, into the great carnival of history. It then comes as no surprise that Bosch, perhaps the greatest of all plague-painters, decided to paint history itself as a viral procession. Beyond being a mere representation of the sick body or even of the body as sickness, The Garden of Earthly Delights stages itself as a sick body: the triptych, when closed, portrays the globe in the third day of creation, as if it were the external profile of humanity understood as historical body. Later, when opened, one has the globalization, see Lina Meruane’s Viral Voyages.
sense that, like the anatomist, one has been granted access to the entrails of a sick body: the multiplicity and polimorphosness of the bodies that punctuate the painting mimics that of cells struggling for preeminence within a body at battle with itself. One could then say, that *The Garden of Earthly Delights* stages human history under the carnavalesque sign of the viral body. Arenas’ decision to honor Bosch through the subtitle of his last novel then gains a particular density: it foreshadows that what is to come should be read under the sign not only of the body, but of the viral body and its discontents. *El Color del Verano*, like Bosch’s painting, stages history as a sprawling carnival that portrays the unsubsumable multiplicity of the social body. Within it, painting reaches that humorous threshold were figuration itself is conceive as catastrophe.

A Linguistic Carnival: The Neo-Baroque Allegory as Desiring Machine

“Solamente quisiera apuntar que no se trata de una obra lineal, sino circular y por lo mismo ciclónica, con un vértice o centro que es el carnaval, hacia donde parten todas las fechas.”

- *El Color del Verano*

*El Color del Verano* stands within a broader constellation of Caribbean novels that, after the second wave of the avant-garde in the 1960’s, began to envision the novel as an entropic machine rather than as lawful observation. From Luis Rafael Sánchez’s *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* to Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Tres Tristes Tigres*, from Manuel Ramos Otero’s *La Novelabingo* to Severo Sarduy’s *Colibrí*, all of these novels implode the classical novel from within, infecting it with flows of desire that challenge its disciplinary order. Interestingly, many of them stage themselves as allegories of
insularity and its discontents. Following Severo Sarduy, one could then give this tradition a name: the neo-baroque allegory. In this sense, the neo-baroque allegory stands as an inversion of the nineteenth century novel. If, according to Leo Bersani, the 19th century novel stages the suppression of desire, then the twentieth century neo-baroque allegory, of which *El Color del Verano* is a prime example, stages its boundless proliferation. Like in Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the body here becomes the contagious presence that virally disrupts the law, propagating itself like a pure multiplicity, weakening in turn the internal classificatory apparatus of the novel. Namely, with the baroque novel, the body stops acting as a unity of sovereign action and begins to act like a crowd. This is perhaps the great discovery of that which, following Susan Sontag, we could call the discursive realm of modern medicine: in each of its modern variations, the modern “plague” – with cancer and AIDS as its main figures – converts the body into a society itself alongside its misbehaving crowds. The body becomes a multiplicity. It is around this discovery, facilitated by the microbiological discovery of germs, cells, parasites and viruses, that the possibility of thinking the society as sick body is latter constructed. What the baroque allegory then stages is the endless proliferation of bodies, its fractal multiplicity, as well as its grotesque debauchery. One must not forget that *El Color del Verano* stages itself not only as a novel, but rather as a carnival: a carnival that celebrates the 50th anniversary of Fífo, the dictator which allegorical comes to represent Fidel Castro. As such, one should

46 The category of the neo-baroque finds perhaps its best theorization in Severo Sarduy’s writings, and in particular, through his essay “Barroco y NeoBarroco.” There he defines the neobaroque as reflecting “the disharmony, the rupture of homogeneity, the lack that constitutes our epistemic foundation. Neobaroque of disequilibrium, structural reflection of a desire that cannot attain its object” (289). The neo-baroque novelistic tradition which I have here underlined – Sarduy, Sánchez, Cabrera Infante, Arenas, Manuel Ramos Otero – perhaps find in this impossible relationship to desire its common aesthetic ground.
read the novel under the carnivalesque sign of the never-ending masquerade. As Arenas himself suggests:

Nuestros cuerpos húmedos y afilados como cuchillos cruzando un quietud temible, transverberándonos, retando al cielo que se nos viene encima, queriendo encontrar en el resplandor del mar una respuesta. Pero no hay más que cuerpo que se retuerce, se enlaza y engarzan en medio de un carnaval sin sombras, donde cada cual se ajusta la máscara que más le conviene y la traición y el meneo forman parte de la trama oficial y de nuestra tradición fundamental…. (410)

Within this great carnival of masks no name can remain merely itself, just as no body can remain untouched. The neo-baroque allegory provokes the deviation as well as proliferation of the proper name. If *El Color del Verano* shows itself to be, at moments, a highly autobiographical novel, it does so only under the constant displacement of the author’s name: the proper name – Reinaldo Arenas – traverses the novel, in the process mutating, masking and unmasking itself, participating in the erotized atmosphere of cross-dressing that surrounds the carnival and its cloud of anonymity. Throughout the novel Arenas refers to himself, allegorically, as both La Tétrica Mofeta and as Gabriel, in a fight within the self that provides the novel with a multiplicity of authors: “¡No le hagas caso!, le gritaba Reinaldo a la Tétrica Mofeta desde algún sitio de la propia Tétrica Mofeta. ¡Sigue trabajando en tu novela, idiota!” (173) Whereas the realist novel posited the omnipresent narrator as the locus from which the law itself became a possibility, the neo-baroque allegory – understanding that the body itself is a crowd – multiplies the author and his masks in an attempt at subverting this same law. One may
ask: What happens then to the novel as genre when it is forced to confront the
carnavalesque polimorphousness of its author? Following Arenas’ suggestions, one
might answer that the novel that emerges from this viral catastrophe of sense is no
longer a book, but an assemblage, a cyclonic machine that removes the possibility of
transcendence.

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Machines abound in *El Calor del Verano*: from the computer lab at the end of the novel to
the small linguistic fugues that Arenas disperses alphabetically across the novel, the
neo-baroque allegory stages itself as an assemblage composed of small transitors whose
task is to deviate sense, increasing in turn the momentum of pleasure. If, following
Deleuze and Guattari, we think of *El Color del Verano* as a desiring machine, then we
must pay attention to the formal machines through which Arenas the author tricks
himself. One of the “name fugues” – most of which are tongue twisters that take the
name of his friends as basis – seems to me of particular importance. That which the
author dedicates to himself:

Ara, are, IRA, oro, uri…

Con un aro y dos cadenas ara Arenas entre las hienas, horadando los
eriales en aras de más aromas y orando a Ares por más oro porque
todo su tesoro (incluyendo los aretes que usaba en sus aréitos) los
heredó un buga moro luego de hacerle maromas en él área de un
urinario de Roma. Mas no es Arenas sino Hera quien con su ira oye
sus lloros. Y Arenas, arañando lomas, con su aro y sus cadenas, en el
infierno carena teniendo por toda era (¡ella que era la que era!) un
gran orinal de harina oreado con sus orinas.
Small fugues like this one interrupt the plot constantly, guiding sense towards the line of flight of pure sound, wildly multiplying the connections within the allegorical machine itself. The above fugue, however, seems crucial. By taking the name of the author itself as point of departure it discloses many of the themes at play within the novel itself: the dissolution of the author into a rhythmic multiplicity, his entanglement within a broader web of pleasure production, his incapacity to achieve a transcendental position. Everything gets folded back into Arenas’s viral allegory, even himself. Everything flows back into the entropic rhythms of this desire machine that weakens the immunological logic of the social law and allows pleasure to explode in all directions. This establishment of allegorical machine as the absolute place of immanence is fundamental for it prohibits a transcendental position from which the regulation of the machinery might operate. This is perhaps the bet of a novel like El Color del Verano: the believe that language might actually be beyond the panoptical power of the State, even beyond the immunological logic of the novel itself. For Arenas, and this is crucial, the body is not the body of the law, but rather the absolute viral body, the body that is undistinguishable from the viral logic itself. And moreover, as we are lead to understand: this viral logic is precisely the logic of language. As we read in his final linguistic fugue:

Fa, fe, fi, fo, fu

(Final)

Vamos pues marcialmente hacia un mar maciliento, donde una marmórea marmota murmura miríada de maltratos: mas se va, finalmente, al confín
de todas las piñas, al gran prostíbulo sumergido donde aún farfulla un fonógrafo su fofa filantropía y una mefítica sífilítica, afónica y antifotográfica nos ofrece piafando la ofensa de su furiosa fisionomía.

(A todos nosotros)

Confronted with his imminent death, Arenas writes this play upon endings that serves as a condensation of the main motifs of the novel. For El Color del Verano can be read, at the very core, as a voice summoning the multitudes towards that sea that marks the horizon of an unhappy insularity. This flight towards the sea, towards the ever-receding horizon of pleasure and freedom, is however understood under the ever present yet silent sign of AIDS: the corrosion of the body from within, the body weakening its own immune system, the island eating away its own foundation: “Así, con incesantes y clandestinas zambullidas todo el pueblo comenzó a roer la plataforma insular de la isla de Cuba…” (137) It is this final flight, this corrosion of the system itself, that marks Arenas final reflections upon the law under the sign of viral catastrophe in all its modes: humor, sex, disease.

An Endless Summer: Learning to Live Amidst the Crowds

“Esta es la historia de una isla que mientras aparentemente se cubre con los oropeles de la retórica oficial, por dentro se desgarra y confía en la explosión final.”

- El Color del Verano

El Color del Verano is, in many ways, a novel about endings. Arenas’ decision to set the novel in the vertiginous future, at the very turn of the millennium, must then be read
alongside its neo-baroque impulse towards problematizing the figure of the end in all its allegorical modes: the ends of the State, the ends of the body, the ends of the novel, the ends of insularity. Moreover, as Alexander García Duttman has highlighted in his well known essay on the topic, AIDS – as the paradigmatic disease of the end of the millennium – was from the very beginning conceived as a polemic regarding the figure of the end: a inscription of death within life that marked the spiraling descent of sovereignty and identity under the sign of a catastrophic latency.\footnote{Avital Ronell, in her essay “Queens of the Night,” has explored the catastrophic undertones of the discourse surrounding AIDS in its biopolitical relationship to a technology of the internal rumor. Also worth quoting is Susan Sontag’s now famous book on the topic Illness as Metaphor where, exploring the semantic network of disease, she points out: “What make the viral assault [AIDS] so terrifying is that contamination, and therefore vulnerability, is understood as permanent. Even if someone infected were never to develop any symptoms the viral enemy would be forever within” (106).} El Color del Verano is, as such, a novel written against time under the sign of survival: “Muchos de entre nosotros han muerto de la plaga que no cesa. Nosotros somos los sobrevivientes de una sobrevida que hay que pagar al precio de nuestras vidas; vidas que además estamos siempre a punto de perder” (181). The novel carries with it all of the signs of the posthumous: it is a novel written not only from the perspective of the future, but rather as a prophecy for the future. A prophecy that must be written before time expires. We are then tempted to ask: how should we read the final explosion that constitutes the ending of the novel? Like in the last triptych of Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights, the ending of El Color del Verano paints the final convergence and explosion of a carnavalesque historical procession. The final exposure of the reader to Fifo’s Garden of Computers, in which the monitoring power of the State is exposed, the attempt by virgin Tedevoro of finding someone who will take his virginity, a multitude of dwarfs at the
orders of Fifo, the funeral of Virgilio Piñera: all of these possible endings open up the space within which the novel finds its crowded resolution. They set up the stage for the last line of flight. That of the island itself:

Partía, partía. La isla partía [...] Se trataba de que el país en sí mismo partía en estampida geológica y geográfica. Algo sin duda insólito en la historia del éxodo: la isla de Cuba, desasida de su base, abandonaba el golfo y como una inmensa nave (causando un remolino de espuma arrollador) salía al mar abierto, dejando sumergido el gran palacio catacumbal, sobre el cual bramaban las computadoras mientras se hundían en medio de sordas explosiones de furia [...] En medio de aquella estampida, el pueblo, tocado por la euforia de la fuga y por lo tanto de la libertad, comenzó a dar gritos de júbilo mientras con las manos, cual si fueran remos, trataba de conducir la isla hacia puntos diferentes. (449)

The final flight of the island out of its foundation is here staged against the power of the multitude. However, as Arenas seems to suggest, the rise of the power of the multitude, comes at the price of the greatest social confusion: el pueblo battles over the direction the island must take. Catastrophe ensues: the island, incapable of finding a stable direction, begins to sink within the sea. It is at this moment that Arenas’ politics gain their definitive density, forcing us to see his relationship with the popular crowds in its true complexity: although he seems to find in the crowds the element of

48 One could perhaps see how what is being discussed fits within the so-called affective-turn within the humanities and, in particular, with the field of Latin American studies. What is here sketched in terms of multitude, affect and the ends of contractualism approached that which Jon Beasley-Murray has elsewhere called post-hegemony, a new politics of the multitude.
subversion, he also seems to condemn its arbitrariness. What then is left? The novel seems to respond: what is left is the power of writing, the never-ending spiral gesture of a minor literature committed to corroding its own foundation. At the very end, in a chapter called “Botellas al Agua”, Arenas’ stages his final will: amidst the sharks that devour the masses, amidst the sharks that devour the body of the State as well as its territory, Arenas, in all of his masks, is seen finishing this novel which we ourselves are reading: “Aunque pereciera su obra se salvaría, pensaba abriendo el saco y lanzando botellas. Pero a medida que las botellas caían al agua eran devoradas por los tiburones. La última botella ni llegó al agua [...] En el mismo instante en el que el tiburón lo devoraba, la Tétrica Mofeta comprendió no solo que perdía la vida, sino que antes de perderla tenía que recomenzar la historia de su novela” (454). Writing against his imminent death, Arenas sketches this last joyous image in which writing provides an afterlife to pleasure beyond the end of history.
Conclusion
The Catastrophic Archive:
García Márquez, The Ends of History and the Returns of Nature

No tenemos un lenguaje para los finales...

Quizá un lenguaje para los finales
exija la total abolición de los otros lenguajes,
la imperturbable síntesis
de las tierras arrasadas.
O tal vez crear un habla de intersticios,
que reúna los mínimos espacios
entreverados entre el silencio y la palabra
y las ignotas partículas sin codicia.

- Roberto Juarroz

Frank Kermode, in his 1967 classic *The Sense of an Ending*, pinpoints the importance of endings by underlying the discomfort that invades us when someone, having said *tick*, refuses to say *tock*. The importance of the novel, Kermode playfully remarks, is that it projects the possible endings elicited by our beginnings. Fictional endings pacify our modern apocalyptic anxieties by giving eschatological form to that which would otherwise seem an absurd parade of contingencies. This, however, is not merely a problem of fiction, but rather a problem lying at very core of modern historiography. For in opposition to the foundational cosmos of myth, the fateful scenario of tragedy and the heroic world of the epic, it could be said that the novel finds in history its model, in causality its logic and in teleology its form. The novel belongs to an era for whom, as Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out in his 1988 book *Critique and Crisis*, the historical present is nothing but an ongoing crisis.49 As such, it would seem

49 Interestingly, in his essay “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” as part of his attempt to elucidate the specificity of the novel as genre, Bakhtin distinguishes in the novel a peculiar temporality that resembles Koselleck’s *ongoing crisis*. Bakhtin notes that heteroglossia occurs because the novel moves in living contact with the “still evolving contemporary reality”:
that if we wish to speak of the novel as genre we must begin by speaking about its endings, about those final points that determine all that preceded and through which history either gains a total sense or, on the contrary, is left open to a catastrophe of meaning that condemns it to a posthumous wandering. In what follows I will attempt to think this figure – the novelistic ending – in its relationships to contemporary debates concerning the end of history, the returns of nature and the always elusive figure of the archive. ¿What shape do novels take when produced by a society that only seems capable of imagining the end of history under the sign of catastrophe? ¿What is the fate of history when it can only paradoxically seem to find in nature its ultimate expression, as the constant stream of blockbuster films featuring natural catastrophes seems to suggest? In a humble attempt at answering these questions, what follows proposes an interpretation of the tempestuous ending of Gabriel García Márquez’s 1967 classic novel *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel whose prophetic final lines imagine the end of history as a catastrophic hurricane. An uncanny dialectic between utopia and catastrophe, between history and nature is there developed, one which hints at the perils which today threaten the historical archive.

“They [the other genres] become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the “novelistic” layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally–this is the most important thing–the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality” (7).

Namely, Bakhtin suggests that the novel stages its plot as ongoing action upon an indeterminate present. The present of the novel, in its indeterminacy, then comes to resembles Koselleck’s ongoing crisis.
Reading the End

Of all possible endings, it is perhaps death the one that truly sanctions the literary project of an author, turning a series of works into an archive. In that instant his oeuvre becomes readable in a new light and under new conditions: it becomes decipherable under the law of the archive. And so, it is perhaps only now, with his recent death, that we are finally able to reread García Márquez’s novels with different eyes. What happens in this rereading? One of the first surprises to arise out of this mournful task is the intuition that perhaps this writer, the writer of foundational beginnings, the author that came to epitomize the foundational myth of Latin American exceptionality, was also a great writer of endings. For years it was the famous first line of his 1967 classic *A Hundred Years of Solitude* that baffled critics: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (1). Today, it would seem as if it were the last line of the novel – an ending which consciously tackles the problem of finality, destruction and archivization – that merited our attention:

“Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.” (422)
This displacement from beginnings to endings, from the premonitory fatefulness of the first line towards the fatality of Aurealiano’s last vision, is not, however, a mere mournful detail: it suggests a reading of García Márquez’s classic against the grain, a reading that refuses to surrender to the image of mythic origins and foundational beginnings, and instead declares itself to be determined by the always eschatological law of the archive. As Roberto González Echevarría has stated in his book *Myth And Archive*: “The Archive is an image of the end of time. The Archive is apocalyptic, it is like a time capsule launched into infinity, but without hope of reaching eternity” (181). Echevarría’s words prove insightful, for the ending of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is indeed a scene of apocalyptic reading. In that cryptic ending we find the image of Aurealiano, the last of the condemned lineage of the Buendía family, the last reader, deciphering the sense of Melquíades’ scripts within which he finds written the destiny of his family’s demise. This manuscript, written in Sanskrit, and ciphered in the private codes of Augustus, turns out to condense all of history, the hundred-year saga of the Buendía family, into a single, aleph-like, instant. In it, everything is narrated with a hundred years of anticipation, as the catastrophic destiny that must befall a lineage condemned to a century of solitude.

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What interests me, however, is the form that this ending takes, the way ending here becomes possible only as natural catastrophe. As Aureliano begins to decipher the manuscripts he becomes enveloped by cyclonic winds, by a biblical hurricane that begins tear asunder the myth of Macondo.50 In that utopic moment of realization, when

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50 The triad myth, novel and allegory in relationship to Macondo and to *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is extremely complex. Is *A Hundred Years of Solitude* a myth, a novel or
Aureliano finally gain access to the plenitude of historical sense, meaning *saturates* the present in the catastrophic form of biblical winds that retroactively destroy the history being told:

At that point, impatient to know his origin Aureliano skipped ahead. Then the wind began, warm, incipient, full of voices from the past, the murmurs of ancient geraniums, sighs of disenchantment that preceded the most tenacious nostalgia. He did not notice it because at that moment he was discovering the first indications of his own being [...]. He was so absorbed that he did not feel the second surge of wind either as its cyclonic strength tore the doors and windows off their hinges, pulled off the roof of the east wing, and uprooted the foundations. (421)

In Aureliano’s last act of reading, under the figure of the archive represented by Melquiades’ manuscripts, the end of the novel coincides with the end of history. And yet, this end of history is paradoxically enacted under the sign of a catastrophic nature, as if, at the very end, the dichotomy between nature and history, between barbarism and culture, had been broken. In fact, the last chapter of the novel traces the progressive assault of nature under its different disguises: a stranger’s letter being devoured by moths, the clean whistle of the growth of the weeds inside the Buendía’s old house, the

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*an allegory? I here take the stance that it is first and foremost a novel, and should be read under the rules of the novel. However, what is then at stake is which key – be it mythical or allegorical – mediates its relationship to Latin American history. In this respect it must be said that each medium provides a different image of the novel. Throughout what follows, however, I wish to show that the novel opens up to a surprising reading when read, not from its traditional mythic key, but rather as that which Walter Benjamin once called a ruinous allegory. By displacing the focus from myth to allegory, in its relationship to history, I am debating Roberto González Echevarría’s reading of the novel in his classic *Myth and the Archive.*
insects that begin to take over the house. It is, however, perhaps in the image of the ant invasion where we find the clearest symptom of the tenacious assault that nature’s return implies. It would seem as if the end of history was only plausible as the irruption of a devastated garden amidst the coordinates of civilization. Macondo, the cradle of civilization, the city built in mid-jungle, is slowly being devoured by the voracity of nature:

The rest of the house was given over to the tenacious assault of destruction. The silver shop, Melquiades’ room, the primitive and silent real of Santa Sofía de la Piedad remained in the depths of a domestic jungle that no one would have had the courage to penetrate. Surrounded by the voracity of nature, Aurealiano and Amaranta Úrsula continued cultivating the oregano and the begonias and defended their world with demarcations of quicklime, building the last trenches in the age-old war between man and ant.

A great reader of the XIX century naturalist novel, García Márquez imagines the end of history as a monstrous invasion: that of nature upon culture, of barbarism upon civilization. The age-old battle between man and ant – as the narrator calls it – emerges forth as a symptom of modernity’s discontent: nature erupts with the force and anger of the Freudian return of the repressed. Only then does Aurealiano stop reading, realizing that the terrible reality he is begin to decipher in the manuscripts is precisely that which surrounds him. Understanding his predicament, he sees, amidst the rhye grass and the spider webs, the body of his dead son being eaten by a battalion of ants. The great nightmare of the XIX century naturalist novel, the prophesied fear of his great-
grandmother, has become a reality. The social contract has been broken. Incest has produced a pig-tailed kid that is, in that instant, being consumed by nature. Interestingly, it is only then that the keys to the manuscripts are revealed to him: “And then he saw the child. It was a dry and bloated bag of skin that all the ants in the world were dragging toward their holes along the stone path in the garden. Aurealiano could not move. Not because he was paralyzed by horror but because at that prodigious instant Melquiades’ final keys were revealed to him and he saw…” (420) At the sight of his pig-tailed son being devoured by ants, Aurealiano realizes he is a man living at the end of times. However, this end of history is not merely an utopic instant of comprehension, but rather, as in Jorge Luis Borges’s story The Aleph, the catastrophic witnessing of a totality too vast and overwhelming to be experienced synthetically. Overwhelmed, the last member of the Buendía family realizes that he is also a victim of this catastrophe of sense:

Macondo was already a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane when Aureliano skipped eleven pages so as not to lose time with facts he knew only too well, and he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror. (422)

Nowhere in his works does García Márquez come closer to Borges as he does in this ending – nowhere is the notion of an archival history, of a reduction of history to an
aleph-like readable archive, more evident. Nowhere, either, are mirrors and labyrinths, the two Borgesian figures par excellence, as crucial as in this cyclonic ending in which a giant leafstorm comes to figure the end of history. A couple of questions arise from such a tumultuous ending, from this pairing of García Márquez with Borges, questions regarding the relationship between the writing of history and its enactment, the reading of history and its occurrence, questions regarding the nature of history and its relationship with the archive. If, following Frank Kermode, we believe that the fate of sense is played out at the end of the novel, how are we to understand this return of nature by which sense is simultaneously given and destroyed, written and erased? In what follows I wish to explore this enigmatic ending and the questions it elicits in relationship to the contemporary debate concerning the end of history, the crisis of teleology and the progressive naturalization of the figure of the archive. If today, as blockbuster movies seem to suggest, the end is only conceivable in terms of catastrophe, it would seem as if we, like Aureliano, were living amidst a cyclonic crisis, condemned to wander amidst the ruins of a Borgesian archive. History, which the nineteenth century understood as the locus of action, as a means towards an end, today runs the risk of becoming naturalized in the form of a giant natural archive. García Márquez, a reader of...

51 A lot has been written about the literary relationship between Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges. In fact, Roberto González Echevarría, in his Myth and Archive, has gone as far as suggesting that Melquíades is a figure for the Argentine writer: “Old age, blind, entirely devoted to writing. Melquíades stands for Borges, the librarian and keeper of the archive” (23). However, what interests me here is perhaps something that García Márquez borrows from the way Borges finishes his stories, something which Ricardo Piglia, in his essay “Nuevas Tesis sobre el Cuento” has explained thus: “El arte de narrar es el de la percepción errada y de la distorsión. El relato avanza siguiendo un plan férreo e incomprensible y recién al final surge en el horizonte la visión de una realidad desconocida” el final hace ver un sentido que estaba cifrado y como ausente en la sucesión clara de los hechos. Los cuentos de Borges tienen la estructura de un oráculo...” (123) García Márquez borrows this technique of the ending as disclosure of a secret sense which was, however, already written in the archive.
Borges as well as of nineteenth century naturalist novels, understood the dangers assaulting our sense history, the fear of one day discovering that our libraries had come to resemble devastated gardens.

Writing the End

As soon as Aurealiano deciphers the secret key to Melquiades’ manuscripts, the history of Macondo comes to an end with a cyclonic catastrophe. This, however, is not the first catastrophe, nor the first whirlwind in García Márquez’s works. At the very beginning of his career, already in the title of his 1954 first novel *Leaf storm*, we find a reference to another cyclonic catastrophe. A quick look at the novel’s first pages provides us with a surprising discovery. In these first pages, which serve as a sort of foundational prologue to the novel’s plot, the foundation of Macondo is narrated as the by-product of another cyclonic catastrophe, a leaf storm that reminds us of that which brings Macondo to its conclusion. In this first passage, García Márquez weaves, around a highly allegorical and poetic language, the image of Macondo as a world produced out of the rubbish of a perennial civil war. As if Macondo, the foundational city, was in itself a collage of previous cities, a product pieced together out of the scraps resulting from a previous catastrophic history:

Suddenly, as if a whirlwind had set down roots in the center of the town, the banana company arrived, pursued by a leaf storm. A whirling leaf storm, had been stirred up, formed out of the human and material dregs of other towns, the chaff of a civil war that seemed ever more remote and unlikely. The whirlwind was implacable. It contaminated everything with its swirling crowd
smell, the smell of skin secretion and hidden death. In less than a year it sowed over the town the rubble of many catastrophes that had come before it, scattering its mixed cargo of rubbish in the streets. (1)

This poetic image of establishment amidst chaos suggests that if Macondo is finally swept out by the force of cyclonic winds, if it ends up becoming a set of scattered pages amidst the fateful force of a biblical hurricane, it is only because it already was, from the very beginning, nothing but a catastrophic archive itself.52 The reader of this passage can’t help but seeing in the image of the leaf storm a prophetic figure for the scattered pages – or leafs – of Melquiades’ manuscript as it narrates its own destruction. Macondo is then, from its very settlement, a post-historical archive, founded upon the unstable grounds of that which Gabriela Nouzeilles’ has called the archival paradox. Namely, the fact that: “Archives are subjected to conflictive forces: a centripetal force that painstakingly keeps and arranges records and documents, and a centrifugal force that quietly or actively erases, shifts, and expels archival matter. Indeed, the archive is both intensely conservative and potentially revolutionary…” (43) Like the archive, Macondo represents both the foundational arche as well as its catastrophic tendency towards dispersal and destruction. From the very beginning, it remains the figure for a

52 In his 1962 book *La Pensée Sauvage* Claude Levi-Strauss describes the *bricolage* in terms of the manual assemblage of heterogeneous materials: “And in our time the ‘bricoleur’ is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of the craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited…Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’—which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two” (16-17). Many theorists of the avant-garde, like Peter Bürger and Matei Calinescu, have likened the bricolage to the non-organic work of art proposed by the avant-garde collage. The bricolage is then characterized by its capacity to give form to waste. It transforms ruins into art.
catastrophic form of historicity, a precarious temporality that signals towards a naturalized state of exception.\textsuperscript{53} It is at this moment that García Márquez shows himself to be one of the most acute readers of the political history of the Latin American nineteenth century. For he is able to realize that since the collapse of the Spanish American Empire and the establishment of the independent republics, since the civil wars that therefore ensued, Latin American history seems to be nothing but the history of a perpetual crisis, a state of exception hiding behind the false prophecies of teleological progressivism.

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The surprising discovery that then confronts the reader of the 1954 novella \textit{Leaf storm} is that already from the beginning – of García Márquez’s work, of Macondo as a city, of the project that is there disclosed – we are confronted with the catastrophic figure of the end of history. Formally, \textit{A Hundred Years of Solitude} comes to represent the written odyssey by which the reader – both we as implicit readers as well as Aurealiano as explicit reader – comes to face this historiographical crisis. Throughout the novel the failure of teleological history to reach any happy resolution of sense is disclosed as a distinctive symptom of the impasses of Latin American modernity.\textsuperscript{54} The interlocutor is

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\item To speak of Macondo in relationship to a state of exception, and moreover, in its relationship to that founding catastrophe disclosed in \textit{Leaf Storm}, suggests a reading of the ending of the novel in terms of violence. Just Macondo is founded by that which Waletr Benjamin once called mythic violence, so it is destroyed at the end by what could be called, following once again the work of Benjamin, divine violence. As Giorgio Agamben has stated the temporality of the modern State is marked by the violence that founds it. This gap between the law and sovereignty, between the law and itself, establishes history as catastrophe.
\item For an interesting take on the ways the Latin American Boom reversed the foundational fictions of the nineteenth century, parodying them and rewriting them, please take a look at Doris Sommer’s 1991 \textit{Foundational Fictions}, and in particular, the chapter entitled “Irresistible Romance.”
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once again the nineteenth century with its commitment to teleological history as the guardian of sense. If Marx imagined history as an interplay of material forces leading to the achievement of a communist utopia, if Hegel before him imagined history as the coming into terms of the Spirit with itself, if Sarmiento imagined history as the progressive eradication of barbarism, García Márquez imagines the end of history as a catastrophe of sense. At the end A Hundred Years of Solitude portrays the archive as an inherently catastrophic mode of historicity. The reader of Leaf storm, however, knows that what is therein disclosed is not a conjectural future but rather the precise modus operandi of history within Macondo. Macondo is, from the very beginning, a catastrophic archive were history is experienced as an ongoing state of exception. Closer to Kafka’s dictum “the Day of Judgment is the normal condition of history” than to Schiller’s “World history is the last Judgment,” García Márquez envisions a world built around a catastrophic temporality, a world in which time is experienced as a state of exception. This world, Macondo, is then a hypostatization of that which Reinhart Koselleck, in his 1959 classic Critique and Crisis, has called the modern sense of time as ongoing crisis:

That crisis and philosophy of history are mutually dependent and entwined – that ultimately one must indeed go so far as to call them identical – this must, when our inquiry has reached its goal, have become visible at several points in the course of the eighteenth century. It Utopianism arose from an irrelation to politics that was caused by history, it was then solidified by a philosophy of history [...]. The political edifice of the Absolutist State and the unfolding
of Utopianism reveal one complex occurrence around which the political crisis of our time begins. (12)

Koselleck’s great intuition is that our present day sense of historical crisis comes to represent the uncanny flipside of the enlightened philosophies of history that, in the late eighteenth century, inaugurated our teleological projects of modernity. In *Critique and Crisis* the foundational moment of modernity is read as inaugurating that dialectics between utopia and catastrophe, between history and crisis, which would find in the ending of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* its ultimate expression. García Márquez’s contribution to Koselleck’s critique of the enlightenment is then poignant: in the figure of the archive he finds the apparatus for this critical dialectic, and in natural catastrophe its dialectic image. Macondo provides the reader with an image of the dangers assaulting our sense of history: it envisions the end as an archive being assault by the powers of nature. The archive becomes the natural figure for an epoch that no longer sees in history a guarantee of sense.

Archiving the End

“Progress and disaster are two sides, of the same coin.”  
- Hannah Arendt

Ever since its publication in 1992, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* has become the main reference in the debate concerning the end of history. Its argument is well known: in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, amidst the failure of both communism and fascism to provide a practical ideology, the triumph of liberalism would seem to settle, once and for all, the ideological battle and therefore secure historical and political stability. The liberal State would represent, according to
him, the homogenous universalization of Western liberal democracy and the arrival of the final form of human government. Rather than the joyous embrace of the triumph of liberalism, what seems to me interesting in Fukuyama’s first article, which dates from 1989, is the image that he provides of the end of history. In his final remark concerning the dawning of these post-historical times, the author melancholically reflects upon the boredom that will then become the rule. The image that he provides is that of a great museum:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in other around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed.

(17)

Should we not see in this museum of human history a figure for the great archive that today threatens to annihilate the possibility of historical change? In this endnote, Fukuyama interestingly reflects upon the sadness that would prevail in a world without eventuality. He foreshadows the melancholic monotony of a society condemned to experience the end of history as the constant stream of breaking news in television, or as that which the philosopher Paul Virilio has elsewhere called the museum of the accident:
the serialization of endings, of breaking news, of an ongoing crisis which is nothing else but the crisis of progress itself as a historical category. We must not forget that what is at stake in the ending of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is precisely a certain poetics of speed, of cyclonic winds. In fact, in this last act of reading, Aurealiano comes to resemble that angel of history which according to Walter Benjamin’s “Thesis on the Philosophy of History”, confronts the storm of progress, in a last attempt at locating sense within that great serialization of catastrophes which constitutes our present day historical archive. In fact, Benjamin’s scene would seem to conflated Fukuyama’s museum and García Márquez’s tempest, in a single image portraying progress as a giant archive of catastrophes:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (258)

Like the hurricane of sense that baffles Aureliano as he begins to decipher the manuscripts, Benjamin’s storm figures a new modality of post-historical experience: one which, in the name of progress, ends up reducing history to a pile of debris. Just like Macondo turns out to be a bricolage of a catastrophic pre-history, the historical
landscape that the angel of history confronts is here reduced to a ruinous archive. And yet, unlike Fukuyama, the angel of history is not happy to merely meander through this museum of ruins. Rather to the contrary, he finds in such disjointed landscape the elements necessary to produce a new mode of historical sense as allegory. His task is that of learning how to narrate from within the ruins of the archive. Rather than naturalizing the archive, this political angel “blasts open the continuum” of history, in a last attempt at producing a new historical syntax. As Benjamin explores in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* “allegory is to the realm of thought what ruins are to the realm of things” (178). Moreover, as he goes on to explain this ruinous genre differentiates from the symbol in its being absolutely historical: “Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in death’s head” (166). Namely, what comes forth in allegory is history as an inorganic, unnatural object in need of mediation. Perhaps this is what Aureliano begins to comprehend as he reads Melquiades’ scripts: that Macondo does not call merely for a mythical reading but rather for an allegorical reading through which its historicity might be redeemed. Aureliano, like Benjamin’s angel of history, knows history to be allegorical rather than symbolic.

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This is, perhaps, the task left to the future novelists by Gabriel García Márquez. The tempestuous ending of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* exposed the ruinous grounds from which a future sense of history must emerge as allegory. Perhaps the legacy of the Latin
American Boom hides behind this archival explosion, as an injunction to piece together what has been reduced to ruins. Already within the closing remarks of his 1988 classic *Myth and Archive*, a book written from the perspective of the “total novels” of the Latin American Boom, Roberto González Echevarría foreshadowed the possibility of a post-archival, post-total, Latin American novel. His error then might have been to think that there existed an outside of the archive from which to narrate the advent of a new narrative:

Is there narrative beyond the Archive? […] Is a move beyond the Archive the end of narrative, or is it the beginning of another narrative? Could it be seen from within the Archive, or even from the subversions of the Archive? Most probably not, but if one form of discourse appears to be acquiring hegemonic power it is that of communication systems. Perhaps a new masterstory will be determined by them, but is difficult to tell with any degree of certainty from the Archive. (186)

Perhaps it was too early then to realize that, just as the distinction between history and nature had become problematic, also the distinction between the inside and the outside of the archive, had collapsed as a result of the catastrophic nature of the archive itself. It would be Idelber Avelar, a decade later, who in his 1999 book *The Untimely Present* would suggest an answer to the question concerning the future of literature after its so-called end. Not surprisingly, Avelar would retake Benjamin’s notion of allegory in order to account for the ways in which post-dictatorial fictions throughout Latin American, attempted to narrate the possibility of another history from within the ruins of a catastrophic archive. For Avelar, as for Benjamin, this new historical writing was,
fundamentally, a task of mourning: mourning literature, mourning the dead, mourning the archive itself. Literature had been given the task of piecing together sense after the catastrophic spread of dictatorships throughout the Southern Cone during the 1970’s and the 1980’s. It could only do so through the properly ruinous genre of allegory. “If postdictatorial texts, cannot, by definition, obviate their temporal predicament, if their trust is to come to terms with a past catastrophe, it is expectable that they will display that pressing awareness of time proper to allegory” (4). Avelar then goes on to oppose the properly historical time of allegory to the perpetual present of that market logic which the dictatorships had founded: “As opposed to the market’s perpetual present, where the past must incessantly be turned into a tabula rasa to be replaced and discarded with the arrival of new commodities, the allegorical temporality of mourning clings to the past in order to save it” (4). In the allegorical work of mourning of the post-dictatorial novel, Avelar saw the advent of a new group of novelists ready to tear history away from the eternal present of the Fukuyaman museum.55 There was indeed history to be found after the end of history, but its fate rested on a careful exploration of the archive. Rather than the constant production of the new, trivialized nowadays by television’s serialization of breaking news, allegory exposed sense as a grammatical exploration of historical syntax. Writing, at the end, meant punctuation.

55 It would interesting to read Idelber Avelar’s suggestive reading of the post-dictatorial, post-boom novel as mournful allegory in relationship to the contemporary panorama of Latin American Literature. More than fifteen years have elapsed since then, and one begins to wonder if allegory still remains the main modality for tackling the historic. Novels like Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s El Material Humano, and Horacio Castellanos Moya’s Insensatez, force us to ask: what is the relationship between allegory and the event? How do we make space, within the mournful allegory, for the emerging sense of eventuality that pervades nowadays? It would seem that the present conditions call for a rethinking of the relationship between event, archive and writing.
Few writers as punctual as García Márquez, few so chronometric. In his novels sense always coincides with the arrival of the final point, as if it was a matter of punctuality. This directionality of sense was, perhaps, his way of redefining fate in a world where even causality threatened to give way to contingency. His way of putting the *tick* on the *tock*. As the readers of *No One Writes to the Colonel* remember, his last lines are sometimes a hypostatization of the way time might lead either to the plenitude of sense or to its catastrophe.\(^\text{56}\) He was not, however, alone in this task. As critics like Lois Parkinson Zamora have pointed out, *A Hundred Years of Solitude* in many ways works as a rewriting of William Faulkner’s 1936 classic *Absalom, Absalom!* Tales of doomed lineages, these two novels stand next to each other as paradigmatic examples of what it means to mourn history. Both question the figure of the end as a guardian of sense in relationship to a catastrophic archive.\(^\text{57}\) Let’s remember: Faulkner’s novel ends with the

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\(^{56}\) What interests me about the ending of this novella is the punctual, chronometric way in which time and sense coincide upon it:

> “And meanwhile what do we eat?” she asked, and seized the colonel by the collar of his flannel night shirt. She shook him hard.

> It had taken the colonel seventy-five years – the seventy-five years of his life, minute by minute – to reach this moment. He felt pure, explicit, invincible at the moment when he replied:

> “Shit.”

The scene, in its chronometric precision, shares with the ending of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* the logic of realization as catastrophe. In this case, the catastrophe, personal and private, is understood in its more humorous tonalities, but the effect is the same: the end as a catastrophe of sense.

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\(^{57}\) It has been Lois Parkinson Zamora who, in her essay “Apocalypse and Human Time” has best read the proximity of these two endings. Her reading focuses on the dialectics between catastrophe and utopia as they are disclosed in the two catastrophic endings. Interestingly, Parkinson Zamora notes how both Faulkner and García Márquez, in their respective Novel Prize Speeches, restructure this dialectic by hinting at their profound believe in human history.
old Clytie, the guardian of the family’s secret, igniting the house on fire with her condemned brother and her inside, incapable of admitting her guilt, putting a last touch on a history fated to damnation. *Absalom, Absalom!* indeed tells the hundred year saga that ends up reducing Colonel Sutpen’s dreams of glory into a field of ashes left for Jim Bon – the bastard son, the negro – to walk by, howling sentences that nobody can understand. History is there finally reduced to an incomprehensible set of noises and howls, to ashes, to its original sound and fury. The archive reduced to ruins, to a flood-like unpunctuated writing that signals the end of history. García Márquez’s take on this ending is that of a grammarian. Like the medieval grammarians, whose knowledge of punctuation entitled them as guardians of sense, he understood that within a world in which time is experienced as ongoing crisis, within a world in which the present is reduced to a constant stream of undifferentiated breaking news, punctuation is given the task of reconstructing the syntax of history. Like Aurealiano when confronted with Melquiades’ scripts, García Márquez’s punctuation of Faulkner’s flood-like style imagines history as a struggle against the naturalization of the archive. Condemned, like Jim Bond, to meander through the ashes of his master’s archive, García Márquez knew that our humble task consisted of learning once again how to punctuate correctly. History smiled back.
Works Cited


Wilson, Jason. Introduction. Humboldt xxxv-lxv.


