

## Bonding in the Anthropocene

### Climate Change, Collapse, and Conviviality in Claudia Hernández's Speculative Fiction (*De fronteras* and *Causas naturales*)

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In 2000, two eminent natural scientists from the Global North coined a term that by now has become symptomatic of our current affective malaise and a profound shift in our zeitgeist and human self-conception: the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, [2000] 2013). That same year, Claudia Hernández, a young, little-known author from El Salvador published a short story titled “Mediodía en la frontera” (Hernández, 2000; later republished with a slightly modified title as “Mediodía de frontera,” in *Mediodía de frontera* 2002 and *De fronteras* 2007). It takes place at an unidentified border location at three minutes before noon, and in the story a nameless woman commits suicide in a public bathroom. Her unlikely companion is a hungry stray dog, who happens to walk in just after she has cut out her tongue (she plans to hang herself and does not want to look unpretty after death). They exchange looks and a conversation without words ensues. Before her death she feeds the dog pieces of her tongue to calm his growling stomach. In a hostile place and in a moment of

despair and destitution, these two creatures establish a momentary bond of care and recognition. For a moment their lives intersect and become more bearable as they become momentary kin. The dog is less hungry, and the woman is less alone. She proceeds to kill herself nonetheless; the dog, who had no previous relation to the woman, decides to stay by her body until it is removed. Then he, too, moves on and continues his search for food.

Sixteen years later, a prominent philosopher from the Global North would publish a book with Duke University Press, in which she would point to the urgent need of “learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). And while many readers will be familiar with the names of those academics from the Global North —Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, and Donna Haraway— readers might be less familiar with the name of the author who wrote this story as well as many of others that capture, anticipate, and speculate on the violent complexities of living together and dying on a planet in crisis.

Claudia Hernández is one of the most intriguing contemporary literary voices from Central America. Despite her penchant for publishing with small state or independent presses in El Salvador, Guatemala and, more recently Colombia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, and for mostly avoiding the limelight and global literary circuits, her fame, accolades, and scholarly reception have been growing steadily over the last twenty years and she is starting to circulate more widely. So far, she has published five short collections and three novels.<sup>1</sup>

Hernández’s writing is most commonly discussed in relation to recent Salvadoran history, especially as Central American post-war literature (Cortez, 2010; Esch, 2017; Kokotovic, 2014; Ortiz Wallner, 2013; Perkowska, 2019; Rincón Chavarro, 2013; Sarmiento Panez, 2016). Here, though, I put forward a different reading, namely I

<sup>1</sup> The short story collections are *Otras ciudades*, 2001; *Mediodía de frontera*, 2002 (re-published in 2007 as *De fronteras*); *Olvida uno*, 2005; *La canción del mar*, 2007; *Causas naturales*, 2013; and three novels are *Roza, tumba, quema*, 2017; *El verbo J*, 2019; *Tomar tu mano*, 2021.

propose to read her stories as an acute and abstract reflection on the Anthropocene and, as such, on broad questions of conviviality amid crisis and collapse. For this analysis, I focus on the short stories from her most renowned work, *Mediodía de frontera* (2002) / *De fronteras* (2007) as well as her less studied and more recent stories from *Causas naturales* (2013).<sup>2</sup>

Many of Hernández's short stories bear an uncanny resemblance to much later theorizations by Haraway, one of the most important philosophers of the Anthropocene, even though she prefers a different terminology (Haraway, 2016, p. 49). I point to this resemblance not to establish a causality or direct correlation but rather to point out how, from different sites of the Earth and from different loci of enunciation, cultural, intellectual, and scientific forces started to speculate on and theorize a profound global change taking place, a change we have come to call the Anthropocene.

## 1. The Cultural Logics of the Anthropocene – An Approximation

It has been argued that the Anthropocene is a term too scientific for it to seep into common usage (Haraway, 2016, p. 49), yet it has squarely made it into the mainstream (see, for example, Davison, 2019). This, however, does not mean that everyone means the same thing when they talk about the Anthropocene. The term continues to be hotly debated across different academic disciplines.

While other scientists harboured similar ideas as early as the nineteenth century, the term has become most associated with the chemist Paul J. Crutzen and the ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, who proposed it to describe a new geological interval or epoch in which human activity has altered the geology, atmosphere, climate and ecosystem of the planet (Crutzen, 2013, p. 13). And even though the

<sup>2</sup> Since the slightly modified 2007 *De fronteras* edition from Guatemala is the most widely known version, I will refer to and cite from this version in what follows.

term caught on quickly, both the naming and dating remain controversial. From its inception, geologists were particularly wary of the term given the difficulty of global geological proof and timing (in the rocks). After years of debate and work, the Anthropocene Working Group [AWG] of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy [SQS], the chief entity for determining geological epochs, reached a consensus to treat the Anthropocene as “a formal chrono-stratigraphic unit” and to place its starting point around the mid-twentieth century (AWG, 2019). Yet in 2024, SQS voted down the proposal to make the Anthropocene a new official epoch (Voosen 2024). Not all geologists agree, however, nor do other disciplines (Ellis, 2018, p. 49). From the humanities, alternative names have been proposed as better capturing the culprit or necessary action, such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene.<sup>3</sup> And Haraway maintains that the Anthropocene “is more a boundary event than an epoch” (Haraway, 2016, p. 100). From disciplines such as anthropology and history alternative starting points have been proposed: the agricultural revolution about 8000 years ago, or 1492, or with the industrial revolution in the mid-eighteenth century, the first atomic bomb in 1945, or the surge in human activity since 1950, which has been dubbed the Great Acceleration (Ellis, 2018, pp. 52, 101). This means that depending on the start date, perspective, and academic discipline, the Anthropocene started 8000, 550, 250, or 77 years ago. The only thing that is clear is that “the Anthropocene [...] began long before it was named” (Parker Krieg, 2021, p. 186).

In many ways, the Anthropocene as a term has escaped the narrative control of the natural sciences. Within the humanities, the Anthropocene has become a term deeply tied to the current zeitgeist and “structures of feeling” (Williams, [1961] 2019), meaning it no longer describes solely a possible geological interval or epoch, but also a shift in awareness and affect. It is deeply related to our current socio-cultural moment when global environmental change is no longer a

<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive list of the new proposed X-cenes, see Bould (2021, pp. 7-8).

cautionary tale of the future but of the present. As philosopher Timothy Morton puts it, the end of the world has already happened (Morton, 2013, p. 7). As such, when I talk here about the Anthropocene, I am less interested in the deep bureaucracy of geology than in further exploring the cultural logics of our current times, characterized by deepening global ecological change and crisis, resource scarcity, increased human movements across the globe, war, societal collapse, the sixth mass extinction, and an awareness of the deep human culpability for these ongoing and profound changes across the planet.

From a cultural perspective, the Anthropocene has and is creating distinct cultural modes and a proliferation of studies in the humanities are at work attempting to deduce and describe precisely its cultural logics, aesthetics, and narrative aspects. Eva Horn proposes three elements: “(1) *latency*, the withdrawal from perceptibility and representability; (2) *entanglement*, a new awareness of coexistence and immanence; and (3) *scale*, the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude” in terms of space, time, and agency and, with that, a focus not just on topics but “*problems of form*” (Horn, 2020, p. 102; italics in the original). Peter Vermeulen, on the other hand, observes “four affective dispositions... denial..., detachment, indifference, and outright misanthropy” (Vermeulen, 2020, p. 33). All of these are valid observations and compelling proposals, but what I find concerning about the rapidly increasing humanities scholarship on the Anthropocene is that when it comes to its primary texts or artistic works, on which these theorizations are based, they are primarily from the Global North or in English, as if the Anthropocene, or global change, or the climate crisis only happens in English—and yes, the term Anglocene has already been coined, but because of carbon and not literary emissions (Bonnieuil and Fressoz, 2016).

Based on Horn’s compelling abstract framing—latency, entanglement, scale—and my reading of Hernández, I would like to propose here a slightly modified model, one that is a bit more concrete and also distinguishes it from the previous cultural period, namely Jameson’s ideas on late capitalism and postmodernism. Some of the

characteristics of the cultural modes of production of late capitalism according to Jameson were: depthlessness (accompanied by simulacra and pastiche), a waning of affect, a weakening of historicity, and a focus on new technology (Jameson, 1991, pp. 6, 11, 16, 25). Yet as valid as Jameson's argument was in 1984<sup>4</sup> and 1991 respectively, the Great Acceleration is also affecting cultural processes, and the idea of postmodernism clearly no longer holds to describe post-millennial contemporary cultural processes and modes. When it comes to the cultural modes of the Anthropocene, I see them characterized, similar to Horn's and other scholars' focus on scale, not by a crisis of historicity, but by an utter awareness of time and mortality. The cultural modes of the Anthropocene are characterized by a concern for deep time to time scales, a strong focus on mourning, death and extinction, and a concern for an uncertain future and thus resurgence of apocalyptic thought (not in religious but environmental terms). I also find not a waning of affect, but an increase of barely concealed emotions: outrage, despair, guilt, care, and affection. In this context, the affects signalled by Vermeulen often turn out to be a ruse; detachment and indifference are prevalent in cultural representations but the highlighting of these strategies of avoidance in literature are meant precisely to counter them. The cultural modes of the Anthropocene are not those of indifference but are a crisis and panic mode (precisely going against the everyday life of modes of business as usual). Another aspect that I find particularly noticeable in the cultural logic of the Anthropocene as represented by writers and artists from the Global South is that uprootedness and displacement are the norm, accompanied by a sense of loss of *oikos* (home).

Last but not least, the profound shift that characterizes the cultural logic of the Anthropocene presents a vision beyond human exceptionalism and solitude. As Ghosh puts it: "we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity

<sup>4</sup> Jameson first published his ideas on the cultural logic of late capitalism in article in *New Left Review* in 1984.

of nonhuman interlocutors” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 30). And as such, with Ghosh, Haraway, and many others, I see a shift in human consciousness towards entities, communities, and kinship beyond the human, multispecies storytelling, and a deep concern with otherness (beyond the human and beyond celebratory notions of multiculturalism and diversity). Often the cultural modes of the Anthropocene are characterized by frayed human bonds and a recognition of ecologies and entanglements beyond the human.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Reading Claudia Hernández as Speculative Fiction

In this context, and contrary to the most common reading practice and lens for Central American contemporary literature, namely, to read it in relation to the past (the Cold / Civil War period) or the present (post-war violence and neoliberalism in Central America), here I propose to read Hernández’s stories as speculative fiction about the present-future and the Anthropocene.

I hereby use speculative fiction as a term that encompasses “diverse forms of non-mimetic fiction” and a “mode of thought-experimenting” (Oziewicz, 2017, n.p.). I also rely on the classic definition by Judith Merrill from the 1960s of “a special sort of contemporary writing which makes use of fantastic and inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality [a]nd any other topic under the general heading of philosophy” (Merrill, 1967, p. 3). Tracing more recent debates about the term, Oziewicz points out that speculative fiction has become a more inclusive umbrella term that encompasses and goes beyond the genre debates of both science fiction and fantastic literature (Oziewicz, 2017, n.p.). Hernández’s short stories have been discussed as *literatura fantástica*

<sup>5</sup> Latent greenwashing or an ambiguous relation to technology could be mentioned as other elements of the cultural logic of the Anthropocene, but here I want to limit myself to the ones that clearly appear in Hernández’s speculative fiction.

by several scholars (Caamaño Morúa, 2015; Craft, 2013; Leandro Hernández, 2020; Menjívar Ochoa, 2007; Rojas González, 2014). Yet so far, they have not been read more broadly as speculative fiction. Reading her stories in that way, however, provokes a significant shift in their outlook and their temporality: towards the more abstract and towards the future. Carolyn Fornoff rightly points out that “futuraity is not a requisite component” of speculative fiction, but she also acknowledges that speculative is “often oriented toward the future” (Fornoff, 2019, p. 60). In the case of Hernández, this orientation towards the future that rings with the concept of speculative fiction becomes rather potent since it nudges her stories away from the overbearing discourses on memory and the post-war in Central America. It should be noted that the stories of *De fronteras* particularly invite such abstract and deterritorialized readings, since regional or geographical markers are largely absent (Esch, 2017, p. 572). The stories also have no clear temporal markers (no specific dates or events) and the technology featured does not place the stories in the far past or far future (e.g. there are cars and telephones but no mention of the Internet or of unknown future technology). The stories themselves give no indication that they are either about the recent past or the future, so it is up to the reader to decide how to interpret their temporality. Hence it also certainly is not a misreading to examine Hernández’s work in relation to post-war Salvadoran society; but my reading as speculative fiction about the Anthropocene, that is, the present or future, opens her up to more myriad readings and underscores the speculative and philosophical nature of her early works. As Fornoff puts it: “Speculative recastings encourage readers to imagine how things could change for the better, or to confront the eventualities of current trajectories. Non-realist speculation provides distance from what is, so that the status quo might be questioned” (Fornoff, 2019, p. 60).

In *The Anthropocene Unconscious. Climate Catastrophe Culture* (2021), Mark Bould argues against recent scholarly arguments about literature that seem to suggest that climate change can only



be addressed in explicit or realist terms. Bould asks: “Must fiction be immediately about climate change for it to be fiction about climate change? Is there no room for the symbolic? The oblique? The estranged? [...] No room to consider texts that do not say ‘climate change’ aloud?” (Bould, 2021, p. 4) That is why I find reading Claudia Hernández as speculative fiction so suggestive. It clearly underscores that her stories operate in the non-mimetic realm, but that they think (as in, speculate) about the current or future state of the world via the philosophical possibilities of literary imagination.

The picture that Hernández’s stories from 2002 paint of the present or the future is rather bleak, especially as it relates to humankind. Human society is in shambles, violence is ubiquitous, people are deeply distrustful of others and live in gated communities behind tall walls; others are adrift. Curiously, the most extraordinary occurrences and devastating or absurd circumstances and violence are told in the most ordinary, detached tone (Kokotovic, 2014; Ortiz Wallner, 2013). The matter-of-fact tone of the stories sounds like detachment, acceptance, and resignation, but I find that, more often than not, the detachment is a ruse. Indeed, the stories are full of barely-concealed strong emotions: despair, rage, longing, suffering. Certainly, several of the characters commit either suicide—like the woman at the border—or violent acts against themselves or others.

Hernández’s short story “Lluvia en el trópico” paints the future as a literal shitstorm, in which dog feces rain on a city: “Ya para la tarde, cuando el sol había endurecido lo llovido y pudimos caminar con más tranquilidad, observamos que la vista era igual por todas partes de la ciudad. No había paisaje, sino solo una pasta café que lo cubría todo” (Hernández, 2007, p. 70). At the beginning the feces and the stench cause much hand-wringing and consternation, but after a while, people simply get used to it. The authorities try to solve what they call an “enfermedad ambiental” (Hernández, 2007, p. 70) by prohibiting the circulation of cars because as they drive over the dried excrement-pavement, they crack it and new waves of nauseating smell appear. Yet the people in the city by now find the smell

appealing and defy government orders: “a nosotros ya no solo no nos molestaba, sino que nos producía una sensación de comodidad muy cercana a lo agradable” (Hernández, 2007, p. 7). People actually start to try to acquire extra dog poop via different means. There is no outrage, no despair—just acceptance, the story closing on a resigned yet cheerful-sounding: “al final, termina uno acostumbrándose a todo” (Hernández, 2002, p. 70). Hernández’s stories never read like explicitly environmental(ist) literature, and this story clearly operates in the absurd register, but one cannot help but think of a speculative and growing “Anthropocene unconscious” permeating its pages (Bould, 2021). And its non-mimetic register does not mean that a real-life incident might not have inspired it. The prohibition of the circulation of cars makes it possible to read the smell of excrement as an allegory for that of gasoline, nauseating yet slightly addictive, the suffocating, smog-inducing excrement of the age of fossil fuels that people can’t live without. Also the tropical rain of the story might refer to real-life events. In 1998 (four years before “Lluvia en el trópico” appeared in *Mediodía de frontera*), Hurricane Mitch, the second-deadliest Atlantic Hurricane on record (with over 11,000 human fatalities), devastated large parts of the Central American isthmus (Britannica, 2001). Intensive rainfall and ensuing flooding led to land and mud slides that covered stretches of land and human settlements in a thick and deadly brown mud. Central America is highly susceptible and vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and Hurricane Mitch was a violent and devastating manifestation and harbinger of that fact (Climate Reality Project, 2021).

Climate change and the “Anthropocene unconscious” come even more to the forefront in Hernández’s much later and ingenuously titled book *Causas naturales*. Just like “Lluvia en el trópico”, the story “Canícula” explicitly deals with climate, in this case, as the title indicates, a hot spell or the dog days of summer, yet the reaction of people to this event is once again anything but ordinary: “Fue en la época más caliente de un año que, todos recordamos, era abrasador. Un empleado de la oficina postal [...] llegó a convencerse de que la lluvia que

necesitábamos vendría a nosotros solo si el cielo se compadeciera del calor que sentíamos” (Hernández, 2013, p. 67). In order for the sky to have compassion with the humans, the postal worker decides to set women on fire. The women themselves do not cry or scream while they burn and bystanders find themselves unable to intervene, because the burning women look so “enchanted” (Hernández, 2013, p. 67). When a specially equipped unit puts an end to the burnings, they find out that all the women volunteered to be burned because they believed in the postal worker’s project of triggering the sky’s compassion. One woman, whose fire was put out before she died, demands to see the culprit so that he finishes the job. And though he cries for her as she burns, he stops crying when, after she has died, it starts to rain. This story is narrated in Hernández’s narrators’ usual matter-of-fact tone. What absurdities and cults will humans create in the face of inevitable and progressing climate change, what irrational, destructive and misogynistic hopes will they cling to in order to see and taste the relief of rain? This is what the story seems to ask, as it once again tells a tale of a deeply fragmented human society, only brought momentarily together in awe of the sublime elements: fire and water.

Hernández’s short stories, which so clearly speak of a climate (un)conscious, never present the issues as extraordinary or catastrophic but rather as mundane, commonplace (barely noteworthy) occurrences. Also a story about water scarcity in an urban housing complex for low-income populations, “A través de la noche”, basks in (petit) bourgeois platitudes that simultaneously amuse and enrage in their laconic absurdity:

El agua no era problema cuando empezamos a poblar este lugar. A pesar de que los expertos advertían que no era de la mejor calidad, vivíamos tranquilos porque corría abundante agua cuando uno abría el grifo y porque, además, era barata. Se podía vaciar y llenar la piscina del jardín dos veces al día sin que ello incrementara un solo centavo en la factura mensual. Por supuesto, nadie lo hacía, no por falta

de voluntad, sino por falta de piscina y de jardín capaz de albergar una. (Hernández, 2013, p. 77)

This opening line of the story emphasizes an attitude in which the only concern regarding water is its function as “cheap nature” (Moore, 2016), because *had* the narrators had a pool and garden, they *would* have filled and emptied it everyday, since the water gushes so seemingly abundantly and cheaply out of the faucet. The water, however, disappears once the construction company decides to stop supplying it. Since the houses are not connected to any communal water supply, residents thus need to either rely on a water truck or a small dirty stream. A satire on the cheaply constructed subpar tiny housing for the urban poor that has become ubiquitous across Latin America since the 1990s, the people of the story again stoically make do and accept the inevitable. Yet this composure only exalts the untenable nature of their (and all of our) living situations. The capitalist aspiration and promise are a pool to be emptied and filled everyday with a cheap and unlimited resource, yet the reality of the Anthropocene is limited resources, profit-hungry companies, polluted streams, and an ever growing human world population, seemingly incapable of recognizing the finitude, not only of ‘resources’, but of life itself. Surprisingly, Hernández’s stories so far have not been read in environmentalist or speculative terms, but they clearly are. Some more explicitly than others these stories read as a unique reflection on the Anthropocene from a corner of the world rarely heard in these debates yet profoundly affected by the consequences of anthropogenic global change.

### **3. A Loss of Oikos and Interspecies Bonding**

A sense of uprootedness and displacement permeates Hernández’s short stories, as does a desire to bond amidst this loss of oikos. Hernández’s characters usually live marginal and liminal lives. Some

are migrants. In many of the stories, the home has become a hostile place and there is a pervasive sense of unhomeliness (Leandro Hernández, 2020; Zúñiga Bustamante, 2015). Being locked out from one's house, not being able to lock the apartment, or to have (human or nonhuman) intruders in the home is common, from "Un ángel en el baño", "Un demonio de segunda mano", "Fauna de alcantarrilla", "Trampa para cucarachas #17" and "Hechos de un buen ciudadano" in *De fronteras*, to "La mía era una puerta fácil de abrir", and "La han despedido de nuevo" in *Olvida uno*, or "Salteadores", "En casa", "La casa de los lirios", or "Bed and Breakfast" in *Causas naturales*. In these stories, the house / home—or the planet—is no longer a sanctuary. Or as Haraway would frame it later: "Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge" (Haraway, 2016, p. 100).

Yet contrary to the detachment and the violence runs a desire to create community and to suture severed bonds or to create new, less hierarchical ones that extend beyond species barriers. Nanci Buiza argues that in Hernández's stories: "tanto seres humanos como animales [...] experimentan lo que Turner llama 'communitas', que es una especie de camaradería o solidaridad afectiva en la que se suspenden las jerarquías que rigen la vida cotidiana y en la que entran en comunión seres asimétricos" (Buiza, 2017, p. 9).

While underscoring the precariousness and fragility of human and nonhuman beings (especially in the Global South and for migrants), Hernández's texts are characterized by surprising interspecies bonds, alliances, or solutions that appear amid moments of crisis and collapse. They are an example of what Haraway would much later dub the "multispecies storytelling" (Haraway, 2016, p. 10) necessary so we can see all the "mortal critters entwined in unfinished configurations" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) "who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference" (Haraway, 2016, p. 10).

Muddled encounters across difference are the norm in Hernández's stories. In them, human and nonhuman animals and supernatural beings often find themselves in odd relationships of dependency, exploitation, sustenance, mutual aid, or struggle. Already

in her earlier book, *When Species Meet*, Haraway highlights the complex nature of interspecies encounters and bonds, highlighting that “Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories” (Haraway, 2008, p. 42).<sup>6</sup> The interspecies relationships that Hernández presents are messy, at times violent, yet they are relationships nonetheless, in which contact is made, recognition offered, and sometimes a bond is formed. Notably, common pets usually do not fare well in Hernández’s stories (cats and dogs are often violently mistreated or eaten, see “Fauna en la alcantarilla” [2007], or “En casa” and “Habitaciones” [2013]). Rather, the human protagonists tend to establish relationships with unusual companions, such as rhinos, cockroaches, vultures, or an ox.

The dog in the story which opened this chapter, “Mediodía en la frontera”, is, crucially, a stray, an animal without a human caring for or claiming ownership over or love for him. He does not belong to the category of pets, which are usually seen by humans as “living engines for churning out unconditional love —affectional slaves, in short” (Haraway, 2008, p. 206). This stray dog is free to go wherever he pleases, and he does not feel obliged or bonded to the human he encounters in the bathroom. In fact, his first instinct is to run away, thinking that a woman who is capable of cutting out her own tongue “es capaz tambien de acabar con la vida de un perro de frontera” (Hernández, 2000, p. 84). Yet it is the “ojos temblorosos” of the woman begging him to stay that make him change his mind, as already expertly analysed in the close readings of the story by Nanci Buiza (2017) and Emily Vázquez Enríquez (2019). Sharing suffering and offering company in destitution or death is what creates a temporary bond or community in this story (Buiza, 2017; Esch, 2017; Vázquez Enríquez,

<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, John Berger already drew attention to the importance of the gaze between humans and human animals, but that this gaze has often been “extinguished” in modern societies (Berger, 2009, p. 37).

2019).<sup>7</sup> This story is precisely a story of the Anthropocene, in which humans and nonhuman animals live and die “in response-ability” (Haraway, 2016), responding to the other, communicating via the senses (reading facial expressions and responding to bodily sounds and gestures), looking at each other, and thus caring for each other.

Also “Molestias de tener un rinoceronte”, which opens up *De fronteras*, depicts an unexpected interspecies bond. It tells the story of a man who lost an arm and since then has a little rhinoceros following him everywhere. At first, the man tries to get rid of the rhinoceros because he loathes the unwanted attention the animal begets him on the streets, but the rhinoceros always returns to him and over time they start to bond and the man accepts both his companion and his disability. Just as in the encounter between woman and stray dog, it is only in the interspecies bond that life becomes bearable.

The rhinoceros has been interpreted as different iterations of a companion animal by critics, as an apparition of both trauma and hope (Esch, 2017; Kokotovic, 2014; Rodríguez, 2009). Yet here, following my line of interpretation of approaching these stories as speculative fiction, I want to propose reading the rhinoceros as a spectral manifestation and symbol of the ongoing extinction of megafauna throughout the Anthropocene, a phantom limb and a phantom megafauna, a ghost reminding humans of what was before.<sup>8</sup> The Anthropocene has been characterized by a “continuous process of defaunation” (Svenning, 2017, p. 74), as Jens-Christian Svenning explains in “Future Megafaunas: A Historical Perspective on the

<sup>7</sup> Vázquez Enríquez also provides a compelling analysis of how this story references Mesoamerican cosmovisions: “pre-Columbian societies valued the Xoloitzcuintli as a companion species capable of guiding souls during their journey through Mictlán, the underworld, thus perceiving them as nonhuman beings with a powerful connection to death, skilled to tame darkness” (Vázquez Enríquez, 2019, p. 23).

<sup>8</sup> This reading is inspired by Carolyn Fornoff’s reading of the “Miembro fantasma” by Isabel Zapata as an example of contemporary planetary extinction poetics from Mexico (Fornoff, 2021) and by Ignacio Sarmiento Panez’s reading of Hernández’s narrator in the rhinoceros story as a spectre in Derridean terms (Sarmiento Panez, 2016, pp. 130-133).

Potential for a Wilder Anthropocene”. This process, which is highly unusual, without replacement, and “largely or completely anthropogenic” (Svenning, 2017, p. 74) is especially severe and unprecedented with regard to megafauna: “One of the most striking things one sees through a paleoecological approach is the vast abundance and richness of large animals prior to the arrival of *H. sapiens*” (Svenning, 2017, p. 69). The general absence of megafauna today (except in a few holdouts on the African and Asian continents or in the oceans) is “unprecedented in post-Mesozoic ecological history, that is, since large mammals evolved some forty million years ago” (Svenning, 2017, p. 72). As such Svenning claims that the current world is “haunted by ghosts of giant animals” (Svenning, 2017, pp. 67-68).

In 2009, Ana Patricia Rodríguez argued that in Hernández’s story “the appearance of the rhinoceros signifies the magnified spectacle of living trauma in everyday contexts” (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 227). She and others (myself included) have interpreted the rhinoceros in relation to human war or post-war trauma, but what if the story is about the haunting trauma of species loss and extinction? As such, the man’s frequent attempts to lose the rhinoceros and the refusal of others to take care of it can also be seen as an allegory of extinction and failed conservation —not too far-fetched given that the highly endangered rhinoceros, some of whose subspecies have gone extinct in recent years, is a notorious poster child of conservation campaigns. Certainly, rhinos have always caused quite a spectacle in the Anthropocene (think Dürer and the arrival of a rhinoceros in the region we now call Europe in 1515, about 18,000 years after the woolly rhinoceros went extinct in the region), but maybe the man’s little rhino causes such a spectacle because it is the last of its kind, or it no longer exists ‘in the wild’ on Earth? Notably, the erstwhile megafauna is not mega anymore, reduced to being a small rhinoceros, pet-sized it seems, its domestication and pet-ification imminent. The rhino’s highly coveted horn, which so sweetly caresses the lonely man, and the sound of its steps are just phantoms, echoes, and the haunting caresses of a species extinguished by *Homo sapiens*. Read



this way, “Molestias de tener un rinoceronte” becomes an elegy for the genus *rhinoceros*.

Other scholars have already highlighted the significance of death and mourning in Hernández’s stories (Gairaud Ruiz, 2014; Pérez, 2014). Here I argue that mourning in Hernández becomes one of the essential muddled and myriad ways of bonding in the Anthropocene. For example, in “Melissa: Juegos 1–5”, much to the disturbance of her parents, Melissa likes to play dead; she dresses up as human corpse or plays at being a dead cat, struck by a car, or a pigeon killed by the stones of other children. Her father does not like these games but she refuses to stop: “No le gusta verla tirada y con el cuello flexionado como si no tuviera huesos dentro. Le dice que se siente a comer. Ella no le hace caso” (Hernández, 2007, p. 98). There is in the actions of the girl an insistence on embodying and inhabiting death, on becoming different dead creatures, on becoming them in death: “El papá le dice que, por lo menos, cierre los ojos para que parezca menos muerta. Ella sigue sin obedecer: las palomas muertas no cierran los párpados” (Hernández, 2007, p. 98).

The attempt to become the other and to bond with the other after death also appears in “Carretera sin buey”, which tells the story of a man who killed an ox with his car and is inconsolable about the loss he has caused. He accompanies the animal as it dies and mourns and buries the ox: “se había encargado de hacerle compañía y de hablarle mientras estuvo en el trance de la muerte, de acariciarlo cuando parecía necesitarlo, de cerrarle los ojos, de espantarlo a las aves de rapiña que quisieron devorarlo, de darle sepultura, de no dejarlo a la intemperie, y de sembrar flores y lágrimas sobre su tumba” (Hernández, 2007, p. 24). But he finds his acts of company and gestures of mourning insufficient, since he continues to feel “la falta del buey” and looks at “el vacío” left behind by the ox. Hence he decides to replace it by taking its place and trying to become an ox himself: “había decidido tomar su lugar, estar en la curva y contemplar la eternidad desde ahí” (Hernández, 2007, p. 24). Embodying a dead dove or cat, or trying to become an ox after its demise is a way of drawing these

animals closer, connecting with them, becoming them, feeling them, but also feeling the finitude of their life and the eternity of their death.

These stories tell of human guilt and grief about animals who are normally not considered grievable bodies —the dove, the unloved bird of urban spaces, or the ox, the yoked labourer of small-scale agriculture. As Haraway puts it, “Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 39). These humans grieve (with) the animals and even try to cross the species boundary, trying to become them —in or after death. In these attempts of mourning and restorative justice, these stories recall once more Haraway’s much later call to learn “to stay with trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). What would be the appropriate response to the suffering, loss, death, and extinction caused by human activity? What would it mean to make oneself responsible and responsive to the death of a living creature? Trying to replace what was lost? Is that even possible? In any case, grief appears as a key response in this speculative fiction, a form of interspecies bonding and making kin.

#### **4. Tearing Down Those Walls**

In closing, I want to mention one more story from *Causas naturales*, which has all the elements previously discussed yet a different outcome. “En pleno comedor” is also about an intruder in the home, a loss of oikos, frayed human bonds, and an interspecies encounter. In this case, the intruder is a tree. It suddenly starts growing in the living room and the narrator’s wife is furious and anxious. She has an “obsesión por tener todo bajo control” and thus finds the anarchy and irruption of the tree in the living room reportedly unbearable (Hernández, 2013, p. 23).

On the surface level, “En pleno comedor” tells the story of an unhappy couple. The husband does not dare to reveal to his wife that he actually likes the tree growing in the living room because he fears her rage. In the end, however, he takes matters in his own hands and literally tears down the walls alienating them from each other and from the tree. When the tree suddenly grows swiftly while his wife is on a trip, he decides to knock down the living room wall and convert the living room into a garden. He predicts all his wife’s reactions, which again recall Vermeulen’s “affective dispositions” of the Anthropocene and some of the stages of grief: “Sabía que ella primero, estallaría en cólera, luego entraría en negación, andaría un tiempo por la casa fingiendo no ver el cambio y, por fin, terminaría apreciando la idea de tener un jardín cuando lo viera florecido” (Hernández, 2013, pp. 25-26). As often is the case in Hernández, a big part of the story is not told in the indicative, but in the conditional and the subjunctive moods, stressing once more the present–future orientation, and even the speculative tone of the narration, underscoring all the things that could have happened or are probably going to happen. In the end, the narrator reveals that he even suspects that his wife planned it this way all along, and that she wanted the living room to be converted into a garden. This can be seen either as another sign of the dysfunction of the couple or, to the contrary, as a sign that they actually understand each other and anticipated each other’s wishes and reactions. In any case, on a deeper level, the story tells the tale of the irruption of a tree amidst the sacred homely and orderly space of bourgeois life. It speaks of the joy of tearing down those walls that separate humans from ‘nature,’ and rejoices in the agentic presence and unruly life of a tree that does not care about human boundaries. In the speculative form, in Hernández’s (extra)ordinary stories appears then again and again a mode of response to the challenges of the Anthropocene: multispecies conviviality. Letting life and death in, letting the other in, leaving the door open, and embracing an ethics of care beyond species, property, and borders.

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