Toxic Narratives: the Role of Poisoning in Contemporary Caribbean Novels

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Defense Date: April 1, 2024

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Languages in The Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the concept of toxicity through the lens of literature. It takes the Plantationocene on the Hispanophone, Francophone, and Creolophone Caribbean experiences as the starting point to understand how the period and location circumstances affect the narratives we create around biological exposure to toxins and ideas of immunity and biological harm. Through the analysis of six contemporary novels, drawing from health humanities, biopolitics, and ecocriticism, it offers an understanding of what toxicity entails in contemporary imaginaries of the Caribbean and what kind of narratives are born from the need to make sense of an existence surrounded by discourse about climate collapse, pandemics, and extinction.

The three chapters delve into intoxication in sacred spaces, the visual politics of infection using the zombie trope, and the role of storytelling in the transmission of abstract and material toxicity. They show how authors of this era offer alternative narratives of human existence in our current context that stray away from conservationist and purist ideas of ecology and planetary balance. The study aims to enhance our understanding of the centrality of toxicity in the Plantationocene context as well as the counterplantation practices that arise as alternatives for survival, contributing valuable insights into our post-pandemic world.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Juan Manuel Arias, who has triggered so many of the chemical reactions that helped me morph into what I am today. *Gracias hoy y siempre.*

Contents

Acknowledgments

When I started my Ph.D. I was convinced academic work had to be done in cooperation. I believed community was key in the process and refused the idea of an individual and secluded production of ideas. These four years have confirmed that I was right and so, this dissertation could not have been written without the support, influence, and insights of the communities I entered and belonged to. Here is a list, as comprehensive as I managed to make it, of those beings who helped me make this possible and to whom I am and always will be grateful.

I want to start with the obvious, but no less important: my committee. Dr. Jenson, thank you for pushing me to go beyond mammals in my interests and inviting me to think about less visible organisms when formulating my questions. Dr. Rosa, your class and the conversations it generated greatly shaped the first ideas of this project and I appreciate how adamantly you supported my choices, especially the ones regarding the linguistic context of this dissertation and my desire to come back home to write it. Dr. Jean-Charles, my mentor since the first day of my master's, thank you for your faith in me and for always being an inspiration to keep my political and ethical principles involved in my research. Mèsi anpil, ou te montre m ki jan yon fanm vanyan dwe ye. Finally, Dr. Joseph-Gabriel, words cannot describe how much you have helped me and this project. Thank you for working so closely with me, for your detailed feedback that helped me gain confidence in my English abilities, and for offering me opportunities to grow as a scholar and as a teacher. I will treasure what you have given me and, hopefully, it will make me a good mentor to others in the future, merci.

To the other faculty members who were not part of the committee but still supported me and mentored me, thank you too. Dr. Dubois, I appreciate how you have always guided me to grow and explore my scholarly profile, your guidance and support during my first year greatly shaped my Ph.D trajectory. Dr. Dainotto, how lucky I was to have such a sensible and present mentor during my first steps in this world. Dr. Tang, thank you for always corresponding with me and reminding me of how much you believed I could achieve. I know I would have never come to Duke without your help and support. Dr. Valnes and Dr. Paredes, Sandy and Liliana, thank you

for making me the pedagogue I am today and for giving me spaces to learn and practice about existing in constant dialogue between languages. Merci a las dos pour todo el apoyo. Dr. Pierre, ou te vreman enspire tès mwen. Mèsi anpil pou tout bagay ou te bay m, espesyalman lang kreyòl. Dr. DeFrantz, your class was pivotal for my academic methodologies. Thank you for inviting me to break barriers between disciplines and to gain confidence in who I am and what I have to say. And thanks to the CLACS at Duke, for the economic and scholarly support throughout these fourth years. Finally, thank you, Julia, for all the support that you offered. This dissertation would have never been finished without your efforts to schedule committee meetings, keep me up to date with bureaucracy matters, and your always kind and encouraging words.

To my colleagues, you were the community I needed far from home. Meaghan, ou te montre m men anpil chay pa lou. My cohort, I treasure how we came together and survived the pandemic times and all the times we were there for each other. Sam, and Helia as well, you made me feel less lonely. Thank you for all that we have shared and for being my partners in surviving life in Durham. To the beautiful, clever, and amazing trio: Samar, Isabel, and Nasanin, you are not only my peers in Francophone Studies, you are my inspiration and what kept me going in my darkest moments. Merci pour toujours avoir fait la révolution avec moi. To Devin and Jenn, our dinners are part of what I loved from Durham and I feel extremely lucky to have taken that Columbus class with both of you. To the Graduate Student Union, what an inspiration you all are. Thank you for welcoming me into your group and for all the times we shared both doing activism and having fun. To the Barbaras and Michaëlle, it is always magical to connect so well with peers who understand what being far from home is like. Daniella Sánchez Russo, thank you for inviting me to discuss this dissertation when it was only a prospectus, y por nuestra correspondencia sobre mitos urbanos de demonios bananeros. A mis colegas de la Javeriana, gracias por creer en mí cuando esto estaba apenas en proceso. Last but not least, Lynda, my sister, I hope we share a good arroz con coco and a portion of pastec soon to celebrate how far we have come since that first day at Boston College. Tu sais tout ce que tu es pour moi, asante rafiki yangu.

It would not be coherent with what I preach in this dissertation if I limited these section to those of you who supported me inside academia. A scholar is so much more than that and it can

be so easy to forget that when doing a Ph.D., but I would have never written this dissertation if not for the constant company and support of my friends and family (biological and chosen). Shea and Rahm, my lovely neighbors allowed me to have a life outside of Duke in Durham. Ma, An y Pa, Uber, Rosi, Eula y Ángela gracias infinitas por la compañía via telefónica durante mis años fuera y por creer en este proyecto sin conocerlo a fondo. Natalia, gracias por endulzar y llenar mis momentos de descanso con tu conversación y por ser la presencia silenciosa, ahí en tu silla en Portland, de mi proceso de planeación del prospectus. Simón, gracias por tantas conversaciones importantes a distancia y por tu fe en mis capacidades. Floriparche, mi columna vertebral y mi central de operaciones. Sin ustedes y nuestros pomodoros no habría tesis, gracias. Al grupo del Cineclub cuir, gracias por la barra, por leer mis frases sueltas y corregirlas, por acompañarme y entenderme en las tensiones de este proceso. Daniel, Zorro, gracias por tantas horas de cine y lecturas compartidas, por ser esa persona que me ha acompañado desde ese primer día de pregrado. Gracias por ser mi primer lector y tanto más. A Juan, Curry y Calila, mi hogar, cuya presencia constante estos cuatro años ha permeado esta tesis en más de un sentido. And thanks to my students, les de todas partes, for offering so many spaces of learning and intellectual stimulation, for reminding me of why I love doing this.

Finally, thanks to all the Durham insects, to the microorganisms that form me, to the creatures I crossed these years with or without noticing. Entering in contact with all of you has made me who I am today.

Introduction

As one navigates the city of Bogotá and other urban spaces of Colombia it is possible to identify a series of apparently obsolete objects that stand as the vestige of the authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic: signs urging people to cover their faces with masks, tape and marks on the floor indicating how to maintain social distancing, and entrance carpets that once contained liquid to clean people's shoes. All these policies that were created to keep people safe were not infallible nor ensured a completely sterile environment, but were nonetheless used and they spread through cities in Colombia so effectively that they now decorate our urban landscapes. The removal of these objects has taken a long time, sometimes because money was invested in them —the carpets might be the best example of this— and now they must be used regardless of the current sanitary advisories, sometimes because there is a latent awareness that the COVID-19 pandemic will not be our last and so they might become useful again soon. These objects stand not only as reminders of what the city went through in 2020 but also of human attempts to control what enters a body, a building, a community, a border.

I am not diminishing the importance of taking precautions to take care of ourselves and each other, which was the goal of the masks, the tape, and the carpets. Still, I also cannot ignore what the pandemic made so evident: our bodies are in contact with the world and with each other and that contact is both a means for survival — mentally, socially, and physically— and a cause of mortality. Sterility is an illusion, as our bodies cannot survive in it: life will touch them, penetrate them, change them, and no

border, natural or artificial can truly keep it all out, nor we would want it to. Ours is a toxic existence in a toxic world.

This dissertation was written from beginning to end in the heart of Colombia where I was surrounded by all those objects that reminded me daily of the permeability of my body, of the network of life I belong to. You, the person reading it now, are part of it too and are plagued and affected by forms of life so minuscule that you cannot see them or wash them off yourself. I offer us both the image of those vestiges of the pandemic so we can remember all through these pages how chemical interactions between organisms are not only what we are, but also how we got here, how we live, and how we will die.

Depictions of contemporary toxicity

In his book *For a Decolonial Ecology* (2019) philosopher Malcom Ferdinand advocates for using the term "Plantationocene," coined by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway, to describe the global era starting from the 16th Century and continuing to our days. He argues that the Plantationocene, originating in the colonial Caribbean, has profoundly shaped our relationship with the land and with ourselves. Ferdinand asserts that this era reduces the planet to a market of exploitable resources, prioritizing profit over the damage inflicted on ecosystems and organisms. He highlights the harmful impact of practices like pesticide use, invasive crops, and plastics justified by the logic of this era's economics. Understanding and combating climate change, Ferdinand contends, necessitates grappling with the concept of the Plantationocene.

This dissertation turns to literary texts to better understand how we are making sense of the toxic interactions that are typical of the Plantationocene. In it, I identify the ways fictional narratives account for how organisms, microbiomes, and environments exist in constant relation to each other and are, therefore, exposed to the changes and effects of a warmer and more polluted planet in an economic and political system that exploits and manipulates that exposure for economic profit. I am intrigued by the various ways in which toxicity can impact us, whether it be through physical materials or verbal concepts.

Given that the Caribbean is the birthplace of the plantation system and one of the areas of the planet that has and will suffer the environmental consequences harder and sooner (DeLoughrey 31), I ask: how the Plantationocene and, most importantly, the Caribbean experience of its toxic essence, is affecting the way people narrate? How is this informing our imaginaries, and our understanding of ecosystems, of organisms, and of ourselves? The texts that I write about here offer descriptions of human exposure to toxins in the Plantationocene and alternatives for survival stemming from Afro-Caribbean cosmologies and counterplantation practices[1].

Through these pages, I focus on six novels from the contemporary —1990s to our days— Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean, through primarily literary analysis, and argue that they stray away from puristic environmentalist views stemming from the idea of returning or conserving some sort of Eden, a paradisiacal original space where

[1] Haitian historian Jean Casimir uses this concept to talk about practices that stem from a relationship to the land that is not rooted in economic profit and exploitation (Dubois and Turtis 55).

harmony and cleanliness are the rule. These novels present us with ways of inhabiting our planet that not only accept toxicity and contamination as a given but also rely strongly on them for survival. They force us to think of current environmental and biological crises and the economic and political systems that created them as problematic and harmful without falling into the trap of imagining nature and biology as clean and pure. In them, survival is messy, dirty, and toxic, it depends on the interconnection between forms of life, on mutation, on toxification.

I consider it impossible to think about toxicity in Caribbean texts without engaging with the work done in other disciplines regarding the ecological, political, and economic consequences of our climate crisis. Who is affected by it and how? What implications do different understandings of "toxicity" have in depictions of the Caribbean? I have not only collected a group of narratives around the trope of toxicity, but also reflected on their connection to their historical, political, and economic contexts, as well as questioned how they shape our understanding of the changes and toxification of our planet. My analysis of the texts is then informed by the disciplines of health humanities, biopolitics, and ecocriticism. Through the works of Ferdinand and DeLoughrey, mentioned above, about ecology and ecocriticism, but also through the works of thinkers such as Vanessa Agard-Jones who talks about those elements and organisms that “remind us that at every scale in our social and biological worlds, contingent forms of non-life and life are being entwined, as synthetic chemicals embed, accrete, and leave their residue in our bodies” (Agard-Jones), I think about who and what

is considered toxic, who and what is deemed worthy of being conserved, of being alive, and who and what defines the limits between the safe and harmful dichotomy.

Many studies have made the connection between climate change, ecological exploitation, and toxicity evident in the past decade. It has been proven that deforestation and other human-made changes in biomes cause changes in the whole biosphere (Mahli et al. 170). These changes have and will increase the exposure of all forms of life on Earth to different types of pollutants and toxins (Cunningham and Odle) affecting the way of life of many communities and species. Although climate change is a global issue, not all areas of our planet are exposed at the same level to the effects of climate change. The Caribbean is one of those areas that are and will feel the consequences first and harder because of their location in the Tropics and the exposure of Caribbean islands to water-level rise (DeLoughrey 31). Taking this into account, it seems logical that Caribbean authors delve into these issues in their works, exploring their angles, anticipating their outcomes, imagining alternative ways of living, and understanding our connections to what surrounds us.

At the beginning of *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019), Elizabeth DeLoughrey asks "how Caribbean authors, who have long theorized and represented the rupture of modernity, might shed light on planetary challenges in an age of climate change" (DeLoughrey 33) and she defines "climate change" as a "rupture to an ecological system" (34). Following this question and definition, this dissertation turns to literary texts from Caribbean authors to understand the narratives we are creating around our

current existence amid toxicity and the ways we are using literary texts to do so. I agree with Victoria Saramago in that "literary works not only represent specific environments but also help forge and negotiate public perception of these environments" (Saramago 8). It interests me to identify the ways fictional narratives account for how organisms, microbiomes, and environments exist in constant relation to each other and are, therefore, exposed to the changes and effects of a warmer and more polluted planet. As I mentioned above, my interest here is to explore the contemporary narrative depictions of "toxicity" as a concept of something that can affect us both physically and mentally. Rather than viewing these as distinct categories, I believe it's important to recognize the interconnected nature of these effects on our mental and physical natures, and that our understanding of "toxic" can expand beyond organic matter to include ideologies and behaviors as well. Ultimately, toxicity can manifest in a variety of ways, and it's crucial to consider all of these factors when examining the topic, especially when doing it through narrative.

Thinking about toxicity from the Caribbean

Ferdinand invites us to think about our environmental issues such as climate change and the future of our species by taking the Caribbean as a starting point (Ferdinand). He links climate change to the consequences of colonialism and the slave trade, reminding us that the massive deforestation, the exploitation of the land of the so-called New World, and the huge environmental changes produced by the trade of non-human animals and plants

between continents, were caused by the racist and patriarchal plantation system. By acknowledging this, he argues, we can begin to build what he calls an "écologie décoloniale": a perspective of ecology that stems from a principle of a common world to all living forms (Ferdinand). I argue that the novels studied in these pages engage with this perspective in their thinking about toxicity, raising questions about how the characters see their exposure to the non-sterile surroundings they inhabit and how it affects not only their bodies but also their thoughts and psychology.

History shows us that toxicity is a central concept in the understanding of the birth of the Plantationocene. The Transatlantic Trade made possible a movement of different forms of life from one continent to the other. To Caribbean shores arrived not only enslaved and free humans, but also other animals, plants, and seeds: "European contact with the New World ushered in not only a period of exploration and conquest, but also a period of *biological exchange* in which peoples, plants, animals, and germs were carried across vast ocean networks to the Americas, Europe, and Africa. There, they radically transformed the ecosystems of four continents" (Carney 3, my italics). The Caribbean ecosystems we know today are the consequence of this movement of life forms and, using Carney's words, they are *radically* different from how they were before the arrival of Columbus.

The consequences of this biological exchange for human life have been widely studied, one commonly known example being the epidemics that drove indigenous communities to the verge of extinction:

> Migration of man and his maladies is the chief cause of epidemics. And when migration takes place, those creatures who have been longest in isolation suffer most, for their genetic material has been least tempered by the variety of world diseases. Among the major divisions of the species homo sapiens, with the possible exception of the Australian aborigine, the American Indian probably had the dangerous privilege of longest isolation from the rest of mankind. Medical historians guess that few of the first rank killers among the diseases are native to the Americas […] These killers came to the New World with the explorers and the conquistadors. The fatal diseases of the Old World killed more effectively in the New, and the comparatively benign diseases of the Old World turned killer in the New (Crosby 37).

As Crosby points out, the biological exchange meant exposure to organic elements —"killers"— that local bodies had never encountered before and so could not protect themselves against. European chronicles of the colonization of the so-called New World constantly mention in a worrisome tone the speed and magnitude of epidemics among the indigenous populations (38) and it is later depicted in the compilation of Nahua texts *Visión de los vencidos,* published in 1959, where images of toxification and epidemics are used to tell the traumatic story of Mexico's conquest by Spaniards. Conquistadors also wrote about the toxicity present in the environments of the "New World" as one can see in texts such as *Naufragios* (1542) by conquistador Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The biological exchange meant an alteration to organisms from both sides of the Caribbean,

with, as Crosby points out, the indigenous ones being at a bigger biological disadvantage than the Europeans. Although this apocalyptic era of disease eventually decreased significantly after the first century of the *conquista* (Idem), the constitution of the Caribbean human population was permanently altered (39).

However, the indigenous population was not completely eradicated by this biological exposure to new toxins. In *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* (2020), Ana-Maurine Lara denounces the academic myth of indigenous extinction in the Caribbean arguing that indigenous people exist in the area today (Lara 65). Lee Turtis and Laurent Dubois also acknowledge this harmful myth and agree with Lara:

> When we depict the indigenous as having vanished in the face of European conquest, we end up erasing the indigenous entirely from our sense of the broader history of the region. But indigenous populations profoundly shaped the history of the Caribbean from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The "devastation" most often invoked when speaking about European-indigenous contacts in the Caribbean, while vital to our understanding of the history of the region, is only part of the story. Like other indigenous populations, those of the Caribbean have been subjected for centuries to a narrative in which they are doomed, vanishing, always on the verge of becoming nothing more than a memory. And yet the indigenous Caribbean is still here, in communities who identify as such as well as in many of the lifeways and cultural practices of the

> Caribbean. They have been told they are vanishing for over five hundred years, but they have refused to do so (Dubois and Turtis 10).

Dubois and Turtis warn us against falling into taking "a part of the story" as representing the whole. This warning and Lara's denouncing of the academic myth of indigenous extinction in the Caribbean indicates that sickness was not the only thing spread with colonialism: it was accompanied by historical and ideological narratives of what constituted the so-called New World and what had happened to its "previous" inhabitants.

Some of the novels I focus on in this dissertation actively represent indigenous existence in contemporary Caribbean spaces. In *Querido primer novio* (1999), Zoé Valdés fights this myth and acknowledges the presence of Caribbean indigenous people by making Tierra, one of its protagonists, a direct descendant of the guanahacabibes, the last child of a line descending of a brother and a sister who reproduced themselves together to save their lineage (Valdés 155). The novel also denounces the continuing oppression and violence people like Tierra suffer because of land conflicts in the region and the aversion against their kind —they are called "incestous monsters" multiple times by the Cuban authorities— and the other protagonist, Dánae, receives constant instructions not to engage in conversation with them (168).

Indigenous extinction is not the only myth I will be wary of in these pages. There is also the understanding of "toxic" as inherently fatal and a direct antonym of "safe". The novels I study here remind us that where toxicity is possible, so is immunity and mutation, which means that not all toxification leads to fatal harm nor it must all be read

as undesirable. In these novels, there is desirable and undesirable toxicity with bodies deemed as toxic not necessarily due to their potential to biologically harm other organisms, but to alter the conditions of the Plantation economic systems in place in ways not beneficial to those in power. Also, organisms and species learn to adapt to new threats, so while recognizing that the colonization process deeply changed the demographics of the Caribbean, we must never assume that those changes meant a complete erasure of what existed before, nor the absence of resistance and immunity against the Plantation.

The biological changes of toxification, mutation, and immunity created by this constant and exploitative exchange that began with colonization were not limited to the human species because, as I have been pointing out since the beginning of this introduction, we do not exist in a vacuum. If there is something to learn from Crosby's statement about how human migration is the main cause of epidemics is that there is no such thing as a *human-only* migration or *human-only* existence. However, this is not limited to non-human mammals such as horses or dogs that were brought constantly by Europeans to Caribbean shores (Crosby 75), but also to microorganisms. We live in constant interaction with other organisms and the web that ties us together goes wherever one of us goes. Today we know that each human body contains "trillions of microorganisms —outnumbering human cells by 10 to 1" (National Institutes of Health), so when a group of humans moves so does a massive group of microorganisms, including pathogens that might be toxic to other forms of life:

> When Orson Welles said “We’re born alone, we live alone, we die alone”, he was mistaken. Even when we are alone, we are never alone. We exist in symbiosis – a wonderful term that refers to different organisms living together. Some animals are colonised by microbes while they are still unfertilised eggs; others pick up their first partners at the moment of birth. We then proceed through our lives in their presence. When we eat, so do they. When we travel, they come along. When we die, they consume us. Every one of us is a zoo in our own right – a colony enclosed within a single body. A multi-species collective. An entire world (Yong, "Prologue").

The human, says Yong, is not a single material organism, but an ever-changing ecosystem in itself. As Monique Allewaert argues, the concept of the self-sameness, unity, individual nature of a body stems from colonial political discourse (Allewaert 2) but does not stand when we study, as both she and Yong do, the interactions of organisms that make life possible. This is not only true for human bodies but applies to all forms of life, which means that the consequences of human movement are never just for the human species. Especially in a movement such as the one that happened during the Transatlantic Trade that included deliberate transfers of animals and crops (Carney 3). One clear example of this is the effects the arrival of domesticated animals caused in the Caribbean ecosystems:

> As the number of humans plummeted, the population of imported domesticated animals shot upward. The first contingent of horses, dogs, pigs, cattle, chickens, sheep, and goats arrived with Columbus on the second voyage in 1493. The

> animals, preyed upon by few or no American predators, troubled by few or no American diseases, and left to feed freely upon the rich grasses and roots and wild fruits, reproduced rapidly. Their numbers burgeoned so rapidly, in fact, that doubtlessly they had much to do with the extinction of certain plants, animals, and even the Indians themselves, whose gardens they encroached upon (Crosby 75).

What Crosby is describing is the Caribbean ecosystems in mutation due to the insertion of new species and organisms into the area, as all endemic forms of life were forced to confront predators and pathogens they had never faced before and that reproduced and spread fast because they were at an advantage in terms of survival.

These consequences of Transatlantic Trade did not happen by accident, albeit not all of them were planned. Behind the massive maritime movement of organisms existed Europe's economic motivation to exploit the possibilities of material production that the Caribbean lands offered in their eyes: the birth of the Plantationocene. For such exploitation of resources to be possible, a significant amount of bodies —human and non-human— were needed to perform labor, and so, they were brought from Europe and Africa to supply the Caribbean lands.

By the 16th Century, "the Caribbean was transformed into a world of plantations" (Dubois and Turtis 53) and the plantation system was developed to ensure a profitable production of materials such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco. This system "was unique within the larger sweep of world history" (Idem) and its functioning "depended on the constant use of violence and terror to assure the subjection of the enslaved majority,

and it entailed the conceptual, legal, and social deployment of new forms of racial hierarchy" (Idem). Not only did it transform, as I previously explained, the demography and ecosystems of the Caribbean itself, but it also had global consequences like the expansion of European Wealth and important changes in African demographies due to slavery (Idem). Although we could name other moments in our planet's history where big biological changes have been caused by humans, the Plantation is surely a particular case: "In terms of the magnitude, duration, and legacy of horror, plantation slavery in the Americas finds few, if any, parallels in world history" (Idem). It is this prevalent global impact of the plantation system that gave birth to the concept of "Platationocene" and its counterposition to "Anthropocene" to describe the era that began in the 16th Century and that continues today. Once again, the spread was not limited to biological matter, but also to systems and ideas beneficial to the economic interests of the powerful. The novels that I focus on in this dissertation will show how pervasive this spread has been to our days, infecting our mentality and perception of Caribbean ecosystems and our relationship with them.

Ferdinand's use of the image of the planet as a market in Plantationocene's logic is useful to understand our current environmental crises: the market's stock is finite and the agricultural practices of the Plantation have deeply hurt the Caribbean and our whole planet. One example of this is Haiti, formerly the colony of Saint-Domingue, which lost a significant amount of forests due to the Plantation: "À l'arrivée de Christophe Colomb en 1492, l'île était couverte à 80 % de forêts. À l'indépendance en 1804, après trois siècles

de colonisation, la plupart des plaines haïtiennes avaient déjà été déboisées pour laisser place aux plantations de canne à sucre et d'indigo" [At the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, the island surface was 80% forests. At the time of the independence in 1804, after three centuries of colonization, most of the plains in Haiti had already been deforested to give space to the sugar cane and indigo plantations] (Ferdinand). A more contemporary case is the one denounced by the collective Forensic Architecture in their digital project *Dispossessions and the Memory of the Earth: Land Dispossession in Nueva Colonia* (2022). The project shows the almost total erosion of the land and displacement of people that occurred due to the banana plantations in Nueva Colonia, in the north of Colombia.

Nonetheless, even though the plantation was "much like a hurricane transforming everything in its wake" (Dubois and Turtis 55), it was not the only practice in the area. Citing Haitian historian Jean Casimir and his above-mentioned concept of the counterplantation, Dubois and Turtis remind us of how indigenous and maroon communities managed to maintain a different relation to the land and the resources cultivating it provided: "there were always people, communities, and ecologies outside of it, including indigenous peoples and maroon communities who carved out spaces of autonomy and sovereignty against tremendous odds" (Idem). With the planting and maintenance of trees forming paths and labyrinths that broke with the geometrical landscape of the plantation (85) and the small plots of land that enslaved people could use to cultivate their food (86), another system of relation with the land was imposed parallel

to the plantation. These practices of counterplantation are present in the novels I study in this dissertation, as some characters actively resort to ways of inhabiting the land that do not respond to an exploitative logic.

Casimir explains how the counterplantation system grew across Haiti during the revolution and "generalized itself throughout the Haitian countryside" (Casimir 142). This relationship between the enslaved, maroon, and indigenous societies and Caribbean land not only represented an important botanical legacy that is still present today (Carney 138) but also played a crucial role in granting their independence from Europe: Maroon societies were able to keep slave hunters and European authorities at bay partly because of their knowledge of the land —a good example of this is the testimony of the maroon Esteban Montejo that Cuban Miguel Barnet interviewed for his book *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966)—, the *monte,* the wilderness, which allowed for survival and indigenous and African mastery of the properties of plants and animals proved to be a great weapon against the masters of the plantation (Dubois and Turtis 84). This last one is especially true in the events of the Haitian Revolution, with the use of poison, led by the former enslaved Makandal, playing a key role in scaring and debilitating the authorities and masters of the colony of Saint-Domingue. A moment of Haitian history that has been the subject of Caribbean novels several times by the hand of authors such as Alejo Carpentier and Évelyne Trouillot. All these practices included strong spiritual beliefs that helped people engage with the land and its resources differently by aligning themselves with

cosmologies that understood human life as interconnected with other, visible and invisible, forms of life.

Plantation systems did not end with Caribbean independence, nor did the responses and resistance practices to it. The counterplantation system of land ownership remained dominant in places like rural Haiti until the beginning of the 20th Century when the United States, driven by economic and political interests, started the military invasions that would transform not only land ownership, favoring US firms, but also the political climate: "During the early twentieth century, the United States invaded all of the independent Caribbean at various moments, occupying Cuba repeatedly, the Dominican Republic for eight years, and Haiti for nineteen" (Dubois and Turtis 142).

In Cuba, the occupation also meant the creation of the Platt Amendment, which had to be signed for the occupation to end, granting the US control of Guantánamo Bay, as well as of Cuba's international economic relations (151). For Haiti, it meant a significant change in the country's constitution that had been a thorn in the US side: "Haiti's constitution still contained a provision that U.S. politicians, bankers, and corporate leaders saw as a barrier to their plans: the ban on foreign ownership of property. Erasing this ban would be no simple matter. Back in 1867, a Haitian writer had called it the "Holy Grail" of the country’s liberty, and the provision was still tremendously popular half a century later" (Dubois 244). Through a series of corrupt and violent acts, the US managed to get rid of the ban in 1918 opening the path again for a plantation system to function in Haiti in favor of the US and its companies and banks: "It had taken a military

occupation, a dissolution of parliament, and a manipulated referendum, but American corporations had finally secured the clause they desired. Over the coming years, they would use it to transform Haiti's economic landscape" (247).

The actions of the US during their occupations of countries such as Cuba and Haiti demonstrate their interest in gaining land control to secure a Plantation system that would signify more profit for US corporations, as well as little resistance to it by local populations. A definite return to this agricultural economic system of capitalistic practices meant environmental consequences, as it did during the colonial era. Ferdinand reminds us that part of what he calls the toxicity of the Platationocene has to do with the Earth's transformation techniques of industrial agriculture, including using toxic substances such as pesticides (Ferdinand). In the economic culture of capitalism that prioritizes profit, imposed by the US governments and corporations in the Caribbean, the consequences of these practices for the environment and its inhabitants of all species are of little concern to those in power.

As is clear in the previous paragraphs, the US occupations of what Dubois and Turtis call the Independent Caribbean ended eventually, but not before radically changing their economic and political landscapes to benefit US control and economic profit:

> But U.S. leaders did not end the occupations until they achieved their core mission: the creation of a powerful new military both dutiful to U.S. interests and able to control society. These U.S.-created forces would remain central to the political life of these countries, underwriting dictatorial regimes friendly to the

> United States that ruled with unprecedented power and longevity. They remained dutiful out of fear of another U.S. invasion and as a result of ongoing training by and networking with U.S. military personnel. Through these new militaries, U.S. occupations left behind powerful states that were now seemingly beyond challenge from popular forces. The United States, in other words, formally withdrew but never really left (Dubois and Turtis 142).

This omnipresence of the US in the region that the authors describe not only affected the lives of humans and non-humans and the ecosystems that sustained them by contamination and deforestation but also by implanting a political climate prone to violence and authoritarianism (Idem) where the fight for the control of land is always present, as it will be evident in the novels I study in these pages. Even the case of Cuba, that saw the birth of a new revolution against capitalistic and plantation-like practices — the Sierra Maestra Manifesto signed by Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders needs agricultural reform and the end of capitalistic exploitation of the land and its inhabitants as a key point of the Cuban Revolution (Dubois and Turtis 213)—, could not eradicate the spread of the Plantation as the US imposed embargo in 1958 forced the socialist regime to turn into exploitative agricultural practices to feed the country.

This pervasiveness of the Plantation and its toxicity in the Caribbean has significantly influenced Caribbean literature. Besides the colonial chronicles and the indigenous testimonies I mentioned above, during the 19th and 20th Centuries the topic of toxicity prevailed in Caribbean texts as well. A clear example of this is Fernando

Ortiz's interest in medicinal and psychoactive ingredients present in tobacco production, as in Cuban indigenous traditions (Ortiz 71). José Quiroga also delved into the role of toxicity and contagion in "Imperial Laboratories" a text that follows the history of experimentation and biological tampering in the Caribbean and analyzes the baroque nature of the imaginary around the area since colonial times: both paradise and hell, both illness and cure (Quiroga 411). 20th and 21st Centuries texts such as Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949), Rita Indiana's *Papi* (2005), Kettly Mars *Fado* (2008), Giuseppe Caputo's *Un mundo huérfano* (2019) or the graphical documentary novel *Tropiques Toxiques* (2020) by Jessica Oublié on the scandal of Kepone in the Antilles, also engage with toxicity, contagion, and contamination as central conditions to a Caribbean existence in the Plantationocene.

Although toxicity has been present in Caribbean literary texts since the birth of the Plantationocene, I chose to focus here on the period beginning in 1990 until today because the end of the 20th Century and the start of the 21st have seen biological and environmental changes that are significant to our ways to narrate toxicity. Michelle Murphy tells us that "In the twenty-first century, humans are chemically transformed beings" (Murphy 696). Recently, it has been discovered that climate change is not only the consequence of residue and intoxication of environments but also the cause of new infections in planetary forms of life (Sebo 40). We are witnessing the constant evolution of bacteria resistance to antibiotics since the beginning of this millennium (Dolejka 21), and live surrounded and invaded by microplastics (Muthuvairavasamy 4).

Authors writing after 1990 in the Caribbean write in a world where radioactive elements, such as man-made strontium-90, are deposited in planetary soil, water, and bone tissues of terrestrial organisms after the multiple nuclear detonations of the Cold War (DeLoughrey 78) and where the HIV pandemic contributed to the stigmatization of Haiti (*The Zombie in Contemporary*... 3). Those writing at the end of the first decade of the 2000's are also writing after the cholera outbreak in Haiti due to incorrect waste disposal in the Artibonite River by United Nations' peacemakers that cost the lives of ten thousand people and affected the health of more than 829,000 (Barbanel 387), just before the change in the Dominican Republic constitution denying citizenship to anyone born to Haitian parents in the Dominican territory (Taylor 70) while its sugar industry depended on the system of the *batey,* "shantytown communities that have developed around sugar plantations, and they are known to have some of the worst living and working conditions in the country: no potable water, no electricity, no means of waste disposal, constant surveillance and policing by Dominican authorities, endemic diseases such as Dengue, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis (TB), and malaria to name a few" (Simmons 249), populated mostly by Haitian agricultural workers. Finally, those writing in the last decade, are doing it both during and after the experience of the scandal of the almost total pollution of Martinique and Guadeloupe with Kepone or chlordécone, a pesticide that causes biological alterations in human and non-human bodies leading to different forms of cancers and other illnesses, and of the COVID-19 global pandemic that started in 2020.

This dissertation takes these events into account and asks: how are they informing our imaginaries, our understanding of ecosystems, of organisms, and of ourselves?

I selected the corpus of this dissertation considering all of this. The six novels I converse with in the following pages were chosen because they stood up in my research as the best interlocutors to think through my questions and because they themselves mantain a constant dialogue. All of them refuse to think exclusively within the boundaries of the nations of their authors and stories and are constantly conversing with other Caribbean context in a way that contrasting them, putting them together, enriches the analysis and reveals not only the web of life connecting all earthly inhabitants, but also a web of literary tradition and dialogue in the area.

Key Concepts

There is a whole ecosystem of terms to talk about toxicity that I use throughout this dissertation. Since some sound and look similar, but do not work as synonyms, I include here a brief guide to navigate and engage with them.

In the last decade, the term "toxic" has become more prevalent in mainstream conversations: on one hand, it is used as an adjective to talk about pervasive and damaging ideologies and behaviors, particularly in matters of gender expression —toxic masculinity— and relationship dynamics —toxic relationships—; on the other, we are exposed every day to more information about our exposure to residue —microplastics, radiation— and the ways it permeates our bodies. In both cases, toxicity is framed as

undesirable, as something one should try to avoid. However, in this dissertation, I think about "toxicity" critically by acknowledging its complexity and fluid nature, going back to the etymology of the word —*toxikon* in Ancient Greek, which is derived from *pharmakon*— less charged with negative meaning since it could be used to talk both about something damaging as well as something curative. However, I propose an expansion of this understanding of "toxicity" as something that can be more than just the binary categories of damaging and curative: I intend to look to what is in between these two concepts and understand "toxicicity" as a more complex reaction. Ferdinand cautions us to not fall into an environmental discourse of conservation and purity that antagonizes other oppressed groups. He insists on the importance of intersectionality and a decolonial perspective for facing climate change and its effects, reminding us that they are not hitting everyone in the same way. To truly answer the questions guiding this dissertation, I must avoid thinking of toxicity through a pejorative lens and instead take into account its complex and fluid nature. Therefore, I use the term "toxic" to describe the quality of the state of a substance or organism to trigger toxicity in another and "toxicity" to mean a chemical reaction a biological organism or element has to contact with another that leads to harm. Here I am using harm as a description of what happens to the organism, but I am not assuming it as undesirable. Harm of a few cells can mean survival for an organism, so "toxicity" refers to a reaction, a movement triggered by contact that entails harm, but sometimes also survival.

Following this logic, "toxin" in these pages refers to a biological element that is toxic, so that is capable of triggering toxicity in organisms and substances. Many of the texts I study in this dissertation present toxicity as something that can be used as a form of resistance to the plantation system as well as something this system uses to maintain its power. The question accompanying this study of toxicity is then "toxic to whom?", as it helps better understand the narratives surrounding the presence of toxins in each case.

By straying away from assuming "toxic" as a synonym of "bad" and the antonym of "safe", I acknowledge that the contacts generating toxic reactions can also be beneficial, depending on the perspective. Being toxic to another being can mean being safe from that being or having power over that being. As Jody Roberts notes in his reflection about the "Toxic" symposium held at Yale University in 2016 and organized by Vanessa Agard-Jones, the dichotomy of safe/toxic is fluid and determined by politics as well as by science (Robers). A good example of this is the use of industrial pesticides in agriculture: as long as they benefit the growth of profitable crops and harm organisms damaging or eating those crops, the pesticide is deemed desirable, sometimes despite the harm it might cause to organisms nearby. The harm of a toxin will be measured by authorities and those using it depending on their idea of which lives are worth saving and which ones are expendable. This is not to ignore the objective outcome of fatal harm that some toxins may have on some organisms but to include it along the idea of toxins as necessary, unavoidable, and beneficial to some.

Finally, I also am very consciously avoiding mixing "toxification", which refers to toxic exaltation or the increase of toxicity in an element or organism, and "intoxication", which refers to the effects a toxic substance has over a brain, altering its perception. "Toxification" is used along with "pollution" or "contamination", while "intoxication" is reserved to describe the mental effects of toxins in humans and non-human characters. Toxification can cause intoxication, but not all contact with a toxin will mean the alteration of perception and the senses.

Besides the terms directly referring to toxins, there are a few terms that accompany them in this study that necessitate a clear definition as well. First, we have the concepts of "infectious" and "infected" that are connected to "contagion", all of these refer to the idea of a harmful, read as toxic, substance or organism that can spread at high speed and with considerable reach between organisms, such as a virus or a bacteria. Second, we have "transmission" that is connected to the previous but does not necessarily mean a quick and ample spread, just the dissemination of a toxin from one organism to another.

Dissertation Structure

Each of the three chapters that constitute this dissertation has been named after a Haitian proverb in Kreyòl because I consider this language as representative of the idea traversing my work: contact with others affects and transforms us. Kreyòl is a language that was born on the Plantation where people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds lived and learned to communicate with each other. It is the result of

counterplantation practices, the language of a revolution, and the proof that survival usually comes with adaptation. The proverbs are directly connected with the subject of the chapters and I engage with them in my analysis.

Each chapter also focuses on a space or social structure defining the relations and contact between organisms: the *monte,* an ample concept referring to an untamed sacred place filled with multiple forms of life; the city, with its debris, its laboratories, and its socio-racial-economic structure; and the *lakou*, the Haitian concept defined by Walter Mignolo in his foreword to Casimir's book as "the confluence of land (meaning complementarity of life and earth, not a piece of private property) that implies the extended family (not the Christian/bourgeois family and its private property) and spirituality (rather than institutional religion, which is a necessary component of even Western secular states)" (Mignolo xii). Charlène Désir explains that the *lakou* is, as Mignolo states, a family compound that is sacred and that allows for the conservation of memory and the connection with the ancestors (Désir 281). Mignolo is right at pointing out that the understanding of family in the *lakou* is not tied to the Christian/bourgeois concept of family and from Désir definition we can understand that the borders of what Mignolo has called “extended family” expand beyond the living and include ancestrial and spiritual forces.

In chapter 1, "Dèyè mòn gen mòn [after the mountain, comes the mountain]: a web of life and death," I explore intoxication in the *monte* due to poison and pesticides for economic and political motives. I argue that toxins are natural elements present in the

monte, capable of both harm and healing. By analyzing the novels *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995) by Mayra Montero and *Querido primer novio* (1999) by Zoé Valdés, I demonstrate that toxins are integral to the *monte* yet also wielded as human tools for control and exploitation. The chapter concludes that the novels present two possible alternatives to toxic attacks on the *monte*: mutation to survive in a chemically altered environment or facing death and extinction.

The second chapter, "Zonbi goute sèl [the zombie tastes salt]: the visual politics of infection," focuses on infected and infectious bodies through the uses of the zombie trope, a trope that originated in Haiti. In this chapter I argue that the zombie trope, as used in *Malas hierbas* (2010) by Pedro Cabiya and *Vigilia* (2022) by Daniella Sánchez Russo, reveals how the racial, social, and economic status of an individual, central factors of the Platationocene, can alter the way society perceives its toxic nature, arguing that the visual markers of such a status —skin color, cleanliness— are what make the zombie state of a person desirable or not, and what drives society to accept it or try to cure it. Because zombies have been portrayed as the consequence of infection and even as an infectious focus, the point of this chapter is to reflect on the Plantationocene society's reactions to infectious deceases and toxic bodies depending on who they affect and how visible the effects are on human bodies.

The third and final chapter, "*Pawòl gen zèl* [words have wings]: words as poison and contagious matter", focuses on toxic ideas and the fear of contagion through storytelling. In this chapter, I analyze the novels *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue*

(2018) by Esther-Sarah Bulle and *Laisse folie courir* (2020) by Gerda Cadostin that delve into the oral transmission of history and knowledge. In them, I argue, there is a connection between material poisons and the spread of ideologies through storytelling. Following the tales of two Caribbean families, one for each novel, I explore the fears and beliefs around the power of stories present in these two families following the idea that a study of narratives touching on toxicity cannot ignore the role of the actual stories we tell about it. Mayra Rivera tells us that "Words also become flesh. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. Social discourses divide the world and mark bodies differently" (M. Rivera 2), and this final chapter demonstrates how this is portrayed in literary texts concerning toxicity: words poison, words kill, words trigger mutations, words are powerful.

I started this introduction by invoking the vestiges of the State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic because I wanted to situate this dissertation in the context it was conceived. My analysis of the six novels is permeated by the material conditions of researching, writing, and reading in a specific place and moment. The ideas have mutated and been affected by travel, conversations, other people's texts, and even the weather of the places I have been during this process. These pages were not born in a vacuum, as my body, they contain multiple elements, some visible, and some not, that have made them what they are now. This is not a sterile product, as it was not a sterile process, and so I not

only know it has been touched by many other ideas and elements, but I also hope it will touch and affect whoever reads it.

Dèyè mòn, gen mòn: a web of life and death

There is a proverb in Haiti about mountains. *Dèyè mòn, gen mòn.* Behind a mountain, there is another. This evocation of infinity not only accurately describes the Haitian landscape —*Ayiti* means land of mountains (Dubois 18)— but also reminds us that terrestrial life, in its cyclic movements, is filled with repetition. The proverb is commonly used negatively to mean that problems come one after the other, but it can also be understood simply as meaning that a thing, good or bad, will always be followed by more of the same. The imagery of the climb as a difficult path to represent obstacles is obvious here. Still, one must remember that, following basic physics and geography, every way up means a way down. If mountains accumulate in chains, as they do, the paths they form cannot only go up. Something is soothing about the idea of *dèye mòn, gen mòn*: there is beauty in mountain chains, in Earth having a texture and a myriad of ecosystems that can only exist because of the different altitudes the terrestrial surface allows. Even in repetition, life offers variety.

In *El Monte*, an ethnographic study of Afro-Cuban traditions and religions, Lydia Cabrera recounts what the figure of the *monte,* the Spanish word for mount or mountain, represents in these practices and cultures: a place of origin where everything is found, from the saints and the spirits to all forms of material life, a sacred place that can only be penetrated after asking for permission (Cabrera 19). The *monte* is not, as one might think, a specific type of mountain. Also called *la manigua,* a swampy area covered in wild herbs, and, in the case of Cabrera's text, translated into English as "the wilderness", the

monte is an ample concept that can be understood as referring to any untamed place filled with multiple forms of life. And, following the simple truth of the above-mentioned Haitian proverb, a place we can find repeated multiple times on our planet, albeit with variations. After the *monte*, comes the *monte*.

The question motivating this chapter is how contemporary Caribbean novelists write about ecological and biological disasters. What they make of human and non-human vulnerability to toxic elements and how is toxicity portrayed in their texts. Cuban-Puerto Rican author Mayra Montero and Cuban writer Zoé Valdés situate their texts in *monte* spaces and engage with Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions to explore life, death, and the web that ties it together, in plantation and necropolitical systems that push land and its inhabitants to the edge for economic profit. Although their approaches are different in tone, Valdés seems to present us with a more optimistic account of the state of things than Montero, they both turn to cosmologies that see forms of life and death as interconnected, without putting the human species as superior to all others. How does this rooting in such cosmologies affect the ways they portray toxicity and organisms' exposure to it? How does this portrayal shape their engagement with environmentalist discourses of protection and conservation?

The *monte*, the place of origin and main scenario for the two novels is a toxic place. A space like the *monte,* so rich in life forms, will naturally create toxicity since toxicity is a chemical reaction a biological element has to contact with another. Toxins, those elements that can trigger such a reaction, are vital for the survival of the *monte*

inhabitants since they protect against predators and also make preying easier. As Montero and Valdés' novels will show, the elements of the *monte* are the home of different organisms who live in constant relation with others, causing toxicity to be a main chemical property of the *monte* space. Thus, toxicity is not presented by these authors as an intrinsic undesirable element.

The pejorative connotation "toxic" has in our language is dependent on perspective: toxic to who? A substance that is deemed toxic by one individual, might be safe, or even beneficial to another. For the cane toads or *Bufo Marinus*, for example, bufotoxin, the toxin their skin secretes, is a means of survival, a form of protection against predators and bigger animals. Meanwhile, for dogs, bufotoxin is usually fatal (Davis 94). The same substance protects one and kills the other. These kinds of toxins, present in reptiles, insects, or amphibious organisms, constitute a key ingredient to the fabrication of their antidotes as well: there can be no cure without access to the cause of the harm. The "good" or "bad" classification of a toxin will, then, depend on who is talking. This is not to say that toxicity in itself is relative, since the reaction will occur if the conditions for it are in place, but to put into question our uses of the term "toxic" as something that must be avoided because it could be fatal for ourselves. Montero and Valdés will show that toxins are a vital factor in life on our planet, impossible to avoid because organisms live in constant contact with each other. A toxin-free environment would be deadly, although this may sound counterintuitive.

The relativity of the negative connotation of "toxic" is not only due to their vital role in maintaining the flux of life in ecosystems but also to the political and economic needs or desires set by human societies. As mentioned in the introduction, Chloe Taft argues that "the safe/toxic dichotomy is as much an expression of politics as it is of science" (Taft). What Taft is saying here is that although "toxic" in itself refers to a biological element's potential to cause harm to an organism, we constantly play with it for political and economic reasons. Examples of this vary from context to context, but some of them are the lawful uses of pesticides for industrial crops, and the war against certain kinds of drugs, like marihuana and cocaine, but not others, such as alcohol or opioids. Chemotherapy, a popular treatment and sometimes cure for certain types of cancer, is another example since it depends on the toxicity, more specifically cytotoxicity — the quality of being toxic to cells—, of the chemicals inserted in the sick body to kill the cancer cells causing harm. Although processes like chemotherapy are recognized as causing harmful side effects, politically and medically we accept its use because we deem that the cancer cells are more harmful than the chemicals themselves: we prioritize a final result —keeping the body alive— above the loss of certain organs or bodily functions. What is "safe" then expands to what the body can tolerate better or, in the case of pesticides, what allows for better profit within the confines of local laws. What we will see in Montero and Valdés' novels is the tension between who has the power to decide what is considered "safe" versus who is affected by the introduction of a toxin in an environment. The novels raise the question of "safe to who and for what" as they portray

the uses of toxins by different agents who hold different political, biological, and economic power.

Stemming from this idea and as stated in the introduction to this dissertation, I will be using the term "toxin" to refer to substances that permeate bodies and force them to mutate as a response to harm, sometimes causing death, but not always. I choose to distance myself from the popular understanding of "toxin" that defines it as a substance that is negative to the body because Taft's reflection on the "safe/toxic" dichotomy tells me that this is sometimes dependent on perspective. As I will show in this chapter, Valdés and Montero are reflecting on toxicity and the different approaches human beings have to toxins and toxic environments depending on their political and economic ideologies, some of which stem from racist discourses that play an important role in defining which bodies and organisms are "safe" and which "toxic". This is why the *monte*'s toxicity in these novels functions as a spectrum, with each organism being affected differently by each substance: some will develop immunity, some will mutate or be affected in a non-deathly way, and some will find contact with a toxin completely fatal. Through this space, the authors remind us of the interdependence of life in ecosystems, how no organism, which is in itself a complex multitude of life forms, can exist on its own, untouched. Toxicity is presented by them as the result of this inevitable contact, one of the effects of the web that ties all life together. As Ed Yong announces in his introduction to his study of microbes:

> Through microbes, we find unity with our fellow creatures, despite our incredibly different lives. None of those lives is lived in isolation; they always exist in a microbial context, and involve constant negotiations between species big and small. Microbes move between animals, too, and between our bodies and the soils, water, air, buildings, and other environments around us. They connect us to each other, and to the world (Yong, "Prologue").

If after the *monte* comes the *monte*, then after life comes life in different forms, always in contact with more life. And toxicity is part of the web tying it all together: toxins such as microbes connect us to others and the planet.

In *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* (2020) Ana-Maurine Lara coins the term "body-land" which I bring here to understand the organism relations in Valdés and Montero's texts. For Lara, the concept of "body-land" comes from the idea that the constructions of bodies and the lands they inhabit happen simultaneously and cannot be separated from each other: "Rather than reproduce the same discourses of land as a subject-object that is phenomenologically distinct from the body as subject-object, we could conceptualize the two as mutually constituting subjects, where both act upon each other to inform the woven density of being" (Lara 62). Although Lara's understanding of body-lands does not explicitly include Yong's conceptualization of all bodies as land for microorganisms (Yong, "Prologue"), nor how lands themselves function as bodies, I believe they both share a principle of simultaneity that is useful to understand the complex relations between organisms, and spiritual forces, that are constantly happening

in the *monte*. Instead of understanding each form of life individually and the *monte* exclusively as a geographical space, Lara's concept allows us to think about the ecosystemic nature of the *monte* as a more complex concept.

Biotoxins, substances created by living organisms in nature, are not the only type of toxins that are present in the *monte,* as I mentioned earlier. Given that humans have access to it as well and participate in its web of life, and with the modern use of pesticides, plastic, radioactive elements, and other human-made materials, this sacred place of origin and life is filled with toxins coming from human laboratories. From the soil to the insides of every organism, the blueprint of scientific "progress" is present. Two sobering examples are strontium-90, a laboratory-made radioactive element, that is known to be found in every terrestrial organism after the nuclear accidents and explosions of the 20th Century (DeLoughrey 78), and kepone, the pesticide used in banana plantations, that contaminated the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique affecting the lives of 800 000 humans, and an unknown number organisms from other species (Oublié 6). The *monte* is not spared, no matter how sacred, as it exists with the rest of the planet.

This bears the question, how is the *monte* affected by the presence of human-made toxins? What kind of life can exist, and how, in it and at which point does it become a deadly place, and to whom? As pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation, I consider that exploring these questions through fictional narratives sheds light on how humans of the Caribbean are making sense of the ecological changes provoked by the current climate crisis, how the introduction of human-made toxins and

the existence of biotoxins informe the imaginaries of Caribbean authors of the last thirty years. The focus of this chapter will be to explore these questions through two literary works in which the Caribbean *monte* is exposed to different levels and types of toxicity. But also, coming back to Cabrera's explanation of the *monte*, I am aiming to show that Valdés and Montero deem spirituality and the numinous as intrinsic to these questions and their answers. In the words they built, there cannot be *monte* without spirits, so toxicity must be read with them in mind.

The first of these novels is *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995)*,* by Mayra Montero, it is a novel telling the story of Victor Griggs, a herpetologist from the United States who has been sent to Haiti in search of a rare amphibious called *grenouille du sang*, blood frog, and his expeditions with the local guide Thierry. The novel consists of three types of texts: the chronicle of the US herpetologist's trip to Haiti; the recorded testimonies of Thierry about his life as a guide and member of a secret abakuá society; and short half journalistic half encyclopedic notes on different amphibious species that have disappeared all over the world. Central to this novel and the search for the evasive frog, are two *monte* spaces, the Casetaches and the Mont des Enfants Perdus, that Victor and Thierry enter for nocturnal expeditions in the middle of political unrest and mass disappearance.

These *monte* spaces change through the novel: in Thierry's memories, they are still the sacred spaces that one can only enter after asking properly for permission; in the present, they belong to the *Tonton makout*, the government special forces, as well as other

armed groups dedicated to smuggling who have turned it into an infernal place of death and disappearance (Montero 130). Unlike Cabrera's *monte* where life and death coexist and biotoxins are just a part of that relationship, Montero's *monte* is unbalanced with different forces, human and non-human, fighting over its control. Human-made violence has come from the rest of the country, like a plague that leaves no surface untouched, which makes *Tú, la oscuridad* as Becky Boiling notes, an apocalyptic text where all life is ending. The novel proposes a parallel between the violence against Haiti and Haitians, and the violence against nature, which can be seen in the way people and frogs disappear simultaneously (Rivera Villegas 160). This chapter will demonstrate that Montero is offering a narrative where human actions plunge the *monte* into an apocalyptic transformation, making it a hostile place for humans. Whether it is also hostile to non-human ways of life, Montero never reveals, for the novel maintains the mystery of non-human agency, and their will and that of the spirits is never explained, with some characters attempting to do it but never being able to confirm their theories.

Although it also suffers changes by the hand of human-made violence, Valdés' *monte* is filled with light and life to the end of the novel, and all creatures, plants, animals, and spirits, share the space in apparent harmony. *Querido primer novio* (1999) tells the story of two girls who fall in love in a rural area of Cuba called La Fe during the post-embargo and post-fall of the USSR era of the Castro regime. One of them, Dánae, comes from Cuba's capital, Havana, and is in La Fe with her schoolmates to complete her first *Escuelas al* campo program, a government program that sent children and teenagers

from the city to work the land for two months as part of their revolutionary education (Castellanos). The other, Tierra Fortuna Munda, is native to La Fe and grew up in a *monte* with her family and the other inhabitants of the place, such as her godmother, the Ceiba tree. Her family's ties to the *monte* are visible in what seems the perfect portrait of Lara's concept of body-lands: each of the members' morphology has one or more elements that differentiate them from other humans. Tierra, for example, has six breasts and her navel emanates guava jelly (Valdés 153). Because of this, the city people reject them, afraid of contracting sickness from those bodies they perceive as toxic. To seize the whole area of La Fe and exploit it in favor of the Cuban government, the authorities end up poisoning their water sources, killing everyone except Tierra (Valdés 284).

Regardless of the, albeit fatal for some, poisoning, the *monte* of La Fe remains a sacred space throughout the novel, and its spiritual and living forces are not diminished even when wounded. The novel makes it clear that, in Valdés' fictional universe, humans can do harm and provoke drastic environmental change, but spiritual power and the purposes of deities, along with non-human forms of life, remain a higher force than any human economic or political system and are capable to restore some balance, which is not the same as returning to the starting point since after the poisoning, the *monte* changes.

Because their way of presenting the intoxicated *monte* is significantly different due to who is narrating it, putting these two novels together allows me to think about the ways different toxins, both naturally found in it or brought from the outside, transform

the *monte*, and the ways it fights back or adapts to new substances and human activities. As I said above, I am convinced that spirituality is central to understanding the *monte* 's toxicity. Since both novels think about non-human agency through the spiritual traditions of Palo Mayombé, Abakuá, and Vodou, the dialogue that occurs when putting them side by side is of great relevance to my study. Not only do these texts depict the *monte* as the sacred place of origin, life, and spirituality, as described in Cabrera, they also refuse to present non-human organisms as mere victims of contamination and land exploitation.

Both Valdés and Montero seem to understand the network of life existing in the *monte* as powerful in all its points and, therefore, representative of the complexity of the relations between organisms that cohabitate it. In *Querido primer novio,* the spirits are channeled by non-human species to protect the protagonists against harm caused by toxic elements such as pesticides. Also, their power and physical aspect are deemed toxic or polluted by humans of the regime due to morphological mutations created by their divine nature, which reminds us what Taft has already told us: that "toxic" is a label tied to ideology and can serve economic and political interests. In *Tú, la oscuridad*, the amphibian extinction being investigated by Victor is questioned by locals who believe the creatures have simply hidden in the sea after Agwè Tawoyo, the *lwa* of the ocean, called them to do so (Montero 131) and Thierry attributes agency to a *grenouille du sang* they meet, explaining its silence by saying she does not want to be found: "El pequeño anfibio, al parecer, también nos estaba oliendo a nosotros […] él [Thierry] llegó a sugerir que la *grenouille du sang* se había ocultado a causa de mi casco" [The tiny amphibious,

apparently, was also smelling us […] he [Thierry] suggested that the *grenouille du sang* had hidden because of my lantern helmet" (201). The belief that the frogs have agency and answer to Agwè is one of Montero's reminders about how the logics of the *monte* are not dictated by humans and must be understood through cosmologies considering other actors such as animals and spirits.

To delve deeper into this analysis and explore each of the two depictions of the *monte* offered by these novels, I have divided this chapter into three axes that intersect at the same point: the toxicity and toxification of an ecosystem. The first one focuses on the context of each one —Baby Doc's Haiti and post-embargo and post-USSR Cuba— and the way land and its resources are viewed and exploited by humans, which may result in the toxification of an ecosystem either to control a piece of land or as the consequence of having had control of it for a prolonged period. The second will delve into the question of who are the agents of toxicity in both texts and the motivations for it. Finally, the third will reflect on the *monte* as a place of the divine and the way spiritual forces engage with, and function as, toxins.

Montero's Haiti and Valdés' Cuba: the fight for land and resources

Understanding the contexts of *Tú, la oscuridad* and *Querido primer novio* is important to see how toxins affect the story they tell because they are tying their reflections around toxicity to the fight for land sovereignty and access to natural resources. *Tú, la oscuridad* occurs during the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier, also called Baby Doc, a regime

that followed Baby Doc's father's rule in its political terror and the use of the paramilitary force of the *Tonton Makouts* (Dubois and Turtis 185). Supported by the US, the Duvalier regimes claimed to have pro-rural masses politics that were never put into practice (184) continuing the capitalistic exploitation of Haitian land that was started during the US occupation at the beginning of the 20th Century (142). The Haiti Montero describes in her novel is a Haiti where land is constantly in dispute. As Thierry explains to Victor numerous times, the *monte* spaces have been claimed by powerful people: "El monte está ocupado […[ya me lo había dicho en Ganthier" [the *monte* is occupied […] they warned me in Ganthier] (Montero 63) he murmurs after they find human bones at the Mont des Enfants Perdus; "Este monte se usa para lo que yo sé, nadie puede subir ni tan siquiera a buscar ranas" [This *monte* is used for what I know, nobody can enter it, not even to search for frogs] (64) he insists after Victor tells him he wants to stay; "ellos usan este monte para guardar sus cargamentos y desaparecer los incordios. No quieren a ningún extraño en la zona, nadie que esté buscando ranas ni ningún otro bicho" [they use the *monte* to store their cargo and disappear nuisances. They don't want any stranger in the area, nobody loking for frogs or other criters] (67) he tells him after the scientist pressures him to reveal what is happening; "el Mont des Enfants Perdus tiene su dueño, y el dueño no quiere que usted suba" [The Mont des Enfants Perdus has an owner, and the owner does not want you to enter it] he concludes after Victor is attacked and robbed later in Port-au-Prince.

The *monte*, which normally required the permission of the spirits to enter, is now the property of dangerous human people as the space allows them to hide drugs and bodies to then sell them. No investigation can go on there, not even the search for elusive frogs, as Thierry specifies. Montero paints an apocalyptic environment where the powers ruling the land are shifting following a logic that Victor cannot fully grasp. The *monte* becomes a place where not only frogs but also humans and other animals are constantly disappearing and being murdered for the benefit of narco-traffic and political control.

In Valdés' case, the novel is set in Cuba after the fall of the USSR which left the country vulnerable to the economic consequences of the US-imposed embargo (Dubois and Turtis 278). Such consequences led to changes in the Cuban economy that forced it to lean more toward capitalistic and plantation-like uses of the land (279). The politics around land use to save Cuba from economic collapse are the cause behind the implementation of the Escuelas al Campo that Dánae attends, and also of the genocide of Tierra's family to achieve total control over the *monte* that is their home. We are told the government grabbed the lands of La Fe from her family: "…algún provecho planeaban extraer de aquellos locos miserables. Así pensaron extasiados ante la presencia de unas cuantas chozas medio derruidas con las puertas cerradas a cal y canto. Daba igual, las tierras no les pertenecían, los había expropiado" [They planned to extract some benefit from those miserable crazy people. That's what they thought before the few half-ruined shacks with doors shut tight. It was the same, the land was not theirs anymore, they had been expropriated] (Valdés 156-157); and later they poisoned them "en vista de que no

pudieron expulsarnos de aquí" [since they could not chase us from here] (284) as Tierra tells Dánae.

The events in both novels are then part of the consequences of the fight over Caribbean land by different forms of power, as well as of the implementation of a plantation system that allows such powers, regardless of which side of the political spectrum they claim to belong to —capitalist or socialist dictatorships—, to benefit from the resources present in the region. It is in this context that toxins will appear both as forms of resistance from the *monte* and its network of life and as weapons of oppression and eco/genocide.

This resistance is framed in practices that Haitian historian Jean Casimir has called counterplantation practices and that I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. Such practices stem from a relationship to the land that is not rooted in economic profit and exploitation, as Dubois and Turtis explain (Dubois and Turtis 55). Tierra and her family, as well as Thierry and his, to some extent, follow these practices in the way they engage with the *monte* space: respecting its limits and logic even when they are not beneficial for their desires and needs. This way to relate oneself with the land recognized a series of non-human agents whose presence must be respected and acknowledged without putting them below the human ones. In the following section, then, I will explore who these agents are and how they create or use toxicity in the *monte* space to regain control over the land or to survive invasion and exploitation.

Agents of Toxicity

The *monte*'s toxicity is due to the network of life that characterizes it: material organisms and spiritual entities interact with each other and that creates in them both the need to defend themselves using toxic substances and creating immunity against them. These interactions and adaptations for survival have a rhythm with various agents playing into it.

However, it is important not to confuse it with the idealistic *locus amoenus* that so many colonial chronicles used to portray the Caribbean. The *monte* is not a perfect, equilibrated paradise like Eden simply because it is not centered on what the human species needs and desires. I make the distinction between the *monte* and the *locus amoenus* because one must not forget that death and disease are part of the *monte*'s nature. As Malcom Ferdinand cleverly states, the discourse of natural environments as paradisiac tends to fall into a notion of nature as pure and good, a notion that many white environmentalists carry in their fight against climate change and that blinds them from seeing the roles of white supremacy, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression tied to the plantation system have in the environmental harm that has been caused to our planet (Ferdinand). The focus of my study is not to claim that Valdés and Montero plead for a return to a pure and ideal place of nature, because they do not, but to analyze how they present the *monte* and its toxic network of life as a place of the divine, outside human logic and understanding.

That said, humans are part of the web of agents of toxicity this section will explore, which does not mean they are the ones pulling the strings. Alongside, sometimes as their allies, sometimes as independent of them, and sometimes as their opponents, non-human species also play an active role as agents of toxicity in both novels, animals such as the *grenouille du sang* and plants like the *tulipe du mort.* And, as I have stated many times already, the divine, permeating all organisms, is a powerful agent of toxicity. But, how do we know this?

Valdés and Montero have each a different approach to whom they give voice throughout the novel. *Querido primer novio* has 9 narrators, 7 of them are non-human animals and plants, and only 2 of them are from the human species. Every narration, including the ones in human voices, is traversed by divine forces in one way or another: either it is what allows for an animal to speak or what drives a human to reflect and remember a specific thing. It is clear that in all cases, the realm of the divine is the one pulling the strings, particularly through Ceiba who grants wishes and protects her devotees (Valdés 144), and the one deciding how the story is told since the voices narrating it are the ones of the plants and animals possessed by the orishas and mysteries.

Tú, la oscuridad uses a different approach: the narrating voices are strictly human, albeit from different contexts and perceptions. Montero chooses to have Víctor as the main narrator, with Thierry's voice being present, but only through his boss' recordings, and intercalates these two with a scientific report-like voice that gives information about various amphibious extinctions. Besides the human-only approach to the novel narration

that contrasts with Valdés', Montero's text is veiled by what Ángel Rivera calls a poetic of silence (Rivera): there is a lot that is never said or explained, the whole story is covered by mysteries that must not or cannot be revealed; not only the frog refuses to sing when hiding and people never say they have heard it because it is taboo, but all characters have secrets that they refuse to share with others.

Nonetheless, humans are not the only ones with an agency "Mi padre me enseñó que antes de entrar a un monte hay que pedir permiso: se les pide a los *loas*, que son los "misterios" que mandan en esta tierra" [My father taught me that before entering a monte one must ask for permission: you ask the *loas*, who are the "mysteries" that rule in this land] (Montero 49, italics in the original), even if no narrator can explain the motives behind non-human organisms and divine forces' actions and behaviors. The focus of the novel is, after all, the mystery surrounding the disappearance of frogs at a global level. Non-human agency is presented as impossible to decode, that will not be revealed by language, but that will impact human lives because a lack of understanding does not mean the absence of interconnection.

1. The Silent Non-Humans

When the protagonist of *Querido primer novio* arrives in La Fe she discovers a world full of life and very different from her natal urban Havana. After a few pages, it becomes clear that the borders between humans and other species are blurred and almost impossible to maintain, even the borders between humans themselves disappear in most spaces, especially the latrines and the dorms where fluids from one body get mixed with

fluids from others creating a feast for crawling insects. The web of life of the *monte* is ever present and described in detail in the novel.

Soon, Dánae and her peers become aware of how living in La Fe is not a sterile experience, but that this does not mean an inherent danger to their lives, even when it becomes uncomfortable. The water they drink is full of mold and bacteria (122), one of Dánae's schoolmates tells them not to avoid eating the weevils in their rice because they are a source of protein (123), "King Kong" roaches parade in the improvised cafeteria tables and are confused by the students with moving candy (124), daily trips to the latrines are an eschatological sight of worms feasting on feces, blood, and urine (144), and Irma la Albina, Dánae's light-skin friend, adopts a litter of mice that she breast-feeds at night hidden in her bunk until they turn translucent and fat and make her even paler than she was before (248). There is even an incident where two girls, Renata and Salomé, fall into the latrines and have to be taken to the infirmary because their bodies are invaded by worms, but the whole episode is told as a comic moment, never as a life-threatening situation (217), as all the others mentioned here.

Mold, bacteria, worms, roaches, and mice, are there, but always silent, permeating into human-claimed spaces and forcing the young students, who, as the Ceiba reminds us, are clueless about the ways nature works (141), to adapt to the *monte*. This silent presence marks the break between Havana, where there is mostly concrete, dirt, and seawater, and La Fe, where the ever-changing teenage bodies of the city students get in contact with all life populating the *monte*, sometimes getting sick because of parasites —

diarrhea is constantly mentioned—, sometimes just growing a crust of dirt on top of their skin after a long day at the fields: "Los albergues, las casonas de tabaco y los campos se cundieron de plagas de mosquitos gigantescos, cucarachas y ratones bubónicos […] Pasábamos la mayor parte del tiempo ensopados de agua, la ropa se nos secaba prácticamente encima del cuerpo, apenas nos alimentábamos. El menú no pasaba de arroz gris de lo sucio que estaba y mermelada de tomate o boniatillo" [The dorms, the tobacco houses and the fields got filled with plagues of giant mosquitoes, roaches and bubonic mice […] we spent most of the time impregnated in water, clothes dried practically over our bodies, we barely ate. The menu was nothing more than grey rice because of the dirt and tomato jelly or *boniatillo*] (Valdés 243).

This change is acknowledged by Dánae when she tells herself, years after her experience in La Fe, "Yo era una bilonga de mar y de asfalto. Me faltaba tierra" [I was a spell of sea and concrete. I needed soil] (82). The "me faltaba tierra" seems to have a double meaning, one referencing her relationship with Tierra, but also to the endless days working the soil until her whole body was covered in it. Dánae knows she was not the same when she came back from La Fe: her body became receptive to the elements in a different way, like when the smallest ocean breeze touches her skin and brings back memories of working in the fields with her classmates, and she aches for the *monte*, even after decades of being back in Havana (14). She wants to go back to find herself, she says, recognizing the person there in Havana is not her, not entirely, she wants to find her

"yo enlodado" [her self covered in mud] (32) that calls her when her skin is penetrated by minuscule drops of ocean water.

In the introduction to her book *Ariel's Ecology* (Año), Monique Allewaert explains how the climate of the American tropics "produced a different materialist tradition in which the body (animal or vegetable) is invaded, rendered in parts, and otherwise deranged" (Allewaert 3). No longer a single material object, the human body cannot be understood as a specific, single identity, a static thing that remains the same. Dánae can feel that, the way her body, her self, has been fragmented by the contact with the *monte*, by working the soil and being exposed to other forms of life, and it becomes evident that being in Havana is killing her, which is why she decides impromptu to go back to La Fe and abandon her family (28). What in the beginning seemed like the most threatening environment because of all the hard work, toxins, parasites, microbes, and bacteria, now is Dánae's only option to save herself from slowly dying, consumed by the needs of her family life, of the rationing of the regime, of the daily sterile life in her tiny apartment, as she tells her husband in an imaginary letter: "Estoy harta de observarme trajinando en la caótica imagen multiplicada que me entregan los azulejos de la cocina. Estoy desanimada" (36).

For the human bodies in *Tú, la oscuridad*, it is a different story completely in the sense that the *monte* never feels like a safe place nor like a home. Not even to Thierry who knows his way around it and understands the signs of danger well enough to survive in it. When he recounts the last time he saw a *grenouille du sang*, Thierry mentions with

horror not only the encounter with the animal but also a series of poisonous plants living there, the *arble du diable* and the *tulipe du mort,* and describes the effects they have when in contact with the human body (Montero 51-53). Sent as a teenager to find the fleeing wife of a German tourist, he spends a couple of nights in the Casetaches where he meets both a *grenouille du sang* and the woman he is looking for (51). Before seeing the frog, he hears her:

> En eso estaba cuando escuché el canto de la *grenouille du sang*; no es un canto normal el de ese bicho, es una especie de glugluglú, como el de una gran burbuja que va subiendo desde el fondo […] La última vez que lo había oído yo era un niño y al otro día me cogieron aquellas fiebres, vi la muerte venir […] Ni a mí ni a nadie de mi familia nos ha gustado nunca oír el canto de esa rana.
>
> [I was doing that when I heard the singing of the *grenouille du sang*; it is not a normal singing the one that creature, is some sort of glewglewglew, like the one of a bubble that is going up from the bottom […] The last time I heard it I was a kid and the next day I got those fevers, I saw death coming […] Nor my family nor myself have ever liked hearing the singing of that frog] (50).

Thierry never says that he got sick because of the frog's song, but he does imply a connection. This subtle way of connecting the song as the cause of the fever builds into the mysterious powers of the *grenouille du sang* whose toxicity goes beyond what is possible to explain. Although never scientifically proved in the novel, it is implied that the *grenouille du sang* has harmful effects on humans to the point that just hearing one

causes fever and deathly visions, as if some powerful poison was transmitted through sound. With this, Montero not only insists on the mysteries of the *monte*, but she also reiterates the limits of science to understand the logic behind them. The toxic song of the evasive frog is also meant to confuse predators, by guiding them in the opposite direction (Idem). Thierry knows this because of his previous experience and, although he is terrified, he looks for the frog in the darkness without letting the sound confuse him, even if it makes him tremble until he finally achieves his goal (51).

In the Casetaches' episode it is not possible to say if the song harms Thierry because as he is marveled and petrified by the aspect of the tiny frog, he hears the woman he is looking for and they both engage in a ferocious fight in the middle of the *monte*. Eventually, Thierry feels a terrible pain in his shoulder: the woman has hit him with a branch of the *arbre du diable*, a poisonous tree with thorns, one of which enters his eye, blinding him for a while (52). The woman is bleeding and her aspect in the rain and the darkness of the night is oddly similar to the *grenouille du sang'*s, probably due to what Thierry had anticipated: the bites of both *cul rouge* spiders and violet scorpions (50), as well as the *arbre du diable* she is holding. She is no longer herself as the poisons of other species have penetrated her skin and made her bleed, changing her appearance.

Like Dánae and her classmates, the bodies of the woman and Thierry have been invaded and deranged, in Allewaert's words, and forced to mutate, but unlike the characters of Valdés' novel, these changes are truly threatening and terrifying. And these are not the only changes described by Thierry, he also mentions that the woman smells

like death because she has been drinking the juice of the *tulipe du mort* due to her not finding any other source of water during her time in the *monte* (55). Once more, the *monte'*s toxicity has a deathly smell in Montero's text. Thierry survives this expedition, as he will others with Victor, but the woman is not that lucky: once out of the *monte* and in the car she produces a sound similar to the frog's and vomits blood on Thierry's shoes, then dies in the arms of her angry husband (57).

The constant comparison Thierry makes of the woman and the frog tells us something about the consequences of being exposed to the toxicity of a place like the Casetaches: not only does it derange and invade the human body, but it transforms it into something that no longer seems human, changing its essence and identity completely. The woman loses her human aspect, her ability to speak coherently, and, if we believe everything Thierry recounts, she loses her mind as well. As Boiling explains, the blurring of the borders between her and the frog is a reminder that as the *grenouille du sang* disappears, we humans do as well, we are part of the web of life (Boiling 325). Montero shows us how invisible and powerful this web can be, and how, inadvertently, when studying the extinction of other species, we are studying our own.

The death of the woman in the car is one of the many mysteries of Montero's novel. Although it might seem logical for her to not survive such an experience and exposure to poison, it seems to me that her not dying while in the *monte*, but once out of it is significant, almost as if she had been transformed to the point she cannot exist outside of it. The fact that she was originally fleeing her husband, who is always

portrayed as intimidating and violent, and is determined to stay in the supposedly dangerous *monte* should not be ignored. Although she never mutters a single word, it becomes clear by the end that she was never safe with the man she married to the point where one might wonder what is the actual poison or toxin in the situation: the plants and predators of the Casetaches, or the company of the German man. Something similar will happen at the end of the novel, once the old *grenouille du sang* found by Thierry and Victor in the Mont des Enfants Perdus is taken by them to Port-au-Prince in a boat. The frog refrains from singing after she is captured, but it would seem that the effects of her song are long-lasting since the boat never reaches the capital of Haiti (Montero 241). She is taken out of the *monte* to be studied and hopefully understand what is making her species disappear, but it is once outside it that she is no longer reachable to the scientific community.

Although not all as a protagonist as this frog, all the silent but deemed toxic creatures of La Fe, the Casetaches, and the Mont des Enfants Perdus, are key in destabilizing the logic behind the dichotomies of safe/toxic, and of civilization/wildness. Through Montero's novel one cannot help but wonder not only if the real toxic harm comes from humans and their laboratories, and what we mean when we declare a species is disappearing. Are the frogs really in danger or are humans just no longer able to find them because the frogs do not want to be found? In Valdés' case, we wonder if the exposition to the toxins of the *monte* is what should be avoided, if a life such as Tierra's

family's is really what must be feared. It forces us to reflect on human exposure to the elements of this planet, and our efforts to sterilize our lives as much as possible.

2. Humans entering the monte

Thierry's respect and fear for the *monte* is partially due to his knowledge that humans can only access it with permission of the divine forces that rule it. Even he, who knows the Casetaches as the palm of his hand (Montero 47), seems to believe that humans do not belong there for prolonged periods. He learned this from his father, whose job was hunting rogue zombies in places like the Casetaches with other hunters called *pwazon rat* and who died in the *monte* on a hunting night.

However, humans do constantly penetrate the *monte* in both novels, and these incursions have different consequences depending on the activities and objectives related to them. I have identified in Montero's and Valdés' texts four types of humans in the *monte*: the ones who belong in there, like Tierra and her family; the ones who know how to be granted access, like Thierry, his father, and the *Tonton Makout*; the ones who break-in either by ignorance or by arrogance, like the Cuban authorities, or scientist like Víctor; and the ones who are called or invited in mysterious ways, like Dánae and the German woman. In what relates to the toxicity of the *monte*, some of them are immune, some meet their death because of it, and some bring new toxins into the space.

As I mentioned before, Tierra and her family's bodies are visually different from the ones of other humans and this is attributed to the practice of incest that has been

carried for generations to survive. However, the Ceiba calls these morphological differences "magic stigmas" (Valdés 156) and insinuates that they are connected to the strong link between the family and their habitat. Dánae's teachers and the authorities of La Fe see the family as some sort of biohazard as if what the city people assume are anomalies could be passed to other humans like a virus, which is why the students are told not to approach any of them (168). The stigmas are then commonly read as signs of a particular nature, but the Ceiba reads it as a good sign while the authorities and teachers see in it something dangerous and evil.

Because the family is treated both as outsiders and as a necessity —they are the ones who know how to cultivate the soil of La Fe— they function as what Allewaert calls "parahumans": "not legally or conceptually equivalent to human beings while at the same time not being precisely inhuman […] a kind of interstitial life between humans, animals, objects, and sometimes even plants" (Allewaert 6). This condition of parahumanity, as Allewaert explains, means a different relationship with non-human forms of life, which makes Tierra's family valuable and undesirable to the authorities at the same time: they understand what the government needs to exploit, but they also do not see those resources as exploitative and available for human benefit. From Valdés, I conclude that "parahumanity" also means a different immunologic system than "humanity", as Tierra and her family are immune, through their morphology, lifestyle, and spiritual connections, to substances that the city people find harmful, and vulnerable to other things that Dánae and her peers would never consider dangerous.

From her name, "Tierra Fortuna Munda" which is the sum of the Spanish word for "soil" or "Earth" and the name given in the Palo Mayombé tradition to the Ceiba, to her appearance, "an authentic mammal" per her godmother's words, Tierra is the embodiment of the connection of the *monte* and the parahuman forms of life. A literal body-land whose navel produces guava jelly like a plant and whose mouth first sucked from the Ceiba's sap before her own mother's milk (154). Such is the connection between her body's morphology to her habitat that as soon as she is forced to leave it after her whole family was poisoned by the Cuban authorities it mutates, losing the extra toes, fingers, and breasts: "…un buen día nos dimos cuenta de que también se había desembarazado de los sobrantes del cuerpo, ya no lucía seis dedos en las manos sino cinco, como todo el mundo, dos senos como cualquier mujer, aunque cuentan que del ombligo le sigue saliendo jalea de guayaba, qué asco" […one day we realized that she had gotten rid of her body left-overs. She no longer had six fingers in her hands but five, like everyone else, and two breasts like any other woman. Although they say that her navel still produces guava jelly, disgusting] (278). Once again, bodies are not equated to an unmutable identity, but as organic matter that is affected and affects its surroundings.

The family is so enmeshed with the *monte* that after centuries of surviving all sorts of harassment and a life in the middle of the jungle what kills them is an external toxin introduced by the authorities, that for a long time have wanted them gone:

> ¿Ya te contaron? Envenenaron a mi familia con un plaguicida del cual todos ignoran su procedencia, en vista de que no pudieron expulsarnos de aquí. Fue

> Cheo Cayuco el que planeó el crimen. Esperó a que mi viejo sembrara un lote de coles y lo regó con esa porquería. Devoraron coles como unos desaforados, menos yo. Terrible, no murieron en el acto, ¡no qué va! Quedaron paralizados como vegetales hervidos durante varios meses, los niños, los ancianos, las mujeres, todos. Entonces cargaron con ellos para una especie de hospital secreto donde hacen estudios del cerebro, les injertaron tajadas de hipófisis de bebés fallecidos al nacer. En una palabra, aprovecharon para experimentar, murieron de a puñado.
>
> [Did they tell you? Since they could not chase us from here, they poisoned my family with a pesticide whose origin everyone ignores. It was Cheo Cayuco the one to plan the crime. He waited for my father to plant a batch of coleslaw and watered it with that filth. They devoured coleslaws like crazy, except me. Awful. They did not die immediately, of course not! They were paralyzed like boiled vegetables for months, the children, the elderly, the women, everyone. Then they took them to a secret hospital where they studied brains and grafted slices of hypophysis from stillborns. In a sentence, they used them to experiment. They died by the handful] (284).

This description Tierra gives Dánae about the slow and violent death of her family is an interesting contrast to the passage I cited before from when a villager tells Dánae of Tierra's transformation. Both are disgusted by something and use words like "porquería" and "asco", but in one case it refers to a navel that produces guava jelly, and the other to the pesticide used in the killing.

The disgust felt by each of them is marked by what they consider natural and safe, clean even, given the choice of words, and reveals the fragility of the safe/toxic and clean/dirty dichotomies. In Tierra's case, it is especially revealing since she is talking about a substance made, per its name, to eradicate pests so, theoretically, to disinfect or keep clean, but she refers to it as "filth" because of the fatal effects it had. It also demonstrates once more that the authorities, as the villager talking to Dánae, see Tierra and her kind as they see the latrine worms or the roaches: as a pest. And due to the plantation system at play in La Fe, pests must be eradicated if profit is to be made from the soil.

The genocide of Tierra's family is one of the consequences of the entrance to the *monte* by humans who have no respect for its life network or its rules. But it is not the only outcome possible. In *Tú, la oscuridad* we see a different situation with Víctor, although one could argue that in the case of the *Tonton Makout* ruling the Casetaches and Mont des Enfants Perdus the result of human efforts to dominate the space is very similar to what happens in La Fe: an epidemics of death. But for Victor the consequences seem to be more evident in his own body than in the *monte*, perhaps due to the already unbalanced environment that the *Makout* and other human actors of violence have generated.

We know that Victor, an expert herpetologist, is used to spaces like the Casetaches in terms of climate and resources. He describes the almost amphibious nature of his job (Montero 14) and it seems to make him overly confident of his abilities to survive in the

monte. Boiling points out that he also thinks that he is *immune* to all harm due to his US origin and the privilege of his white skin (Boiling 317). This will all fail him in Haiti, especially when he enters the *monte* with Thierry and proves to be incapable of reading his surroundings correctly, depending on the guide to find the frog he is looking for, as well as to know when to leave in order not to get killed.

We can see how, as with the concept of "toxicity," the idea of "immunity" here is strongly tied to ideology: Víctor sees himself as existing outside Haiti even when in the country, his scientific objectivity tricks him into assuming he is not getting involved with the climate of death present there; he believes he can get out if he wants, but forgets that his biological exposure to the environment and its inhabitants does not respect political boundaries: "yo me sentí en el deber de desconfiar; de negar aquel peligro absurdo que amenazaba con interponerse en mi trabajo; de olvidarme de todo, menos de lo que me había llevado al monte" [I felt it was my duty to doubt him, to deny that absurd danger that threatened to intervene in my work, to forget everything except what had taken me to the *monte*] (Montero 63). Victor doubts Thierry's warnings because he sees his job and himself as separate from the rest of the *monte* and of the island. He deems the danger as absurd because, as he says, what can happen to a scientist who is looking for a frog and nothing else? (Idem).

He refuses to see the connection between his task and the context in which he performs it, with his mind already sheltered in a lab, away from the death and desperation he has encounter in Haiti. As he enters this new environment, he is in contact with all the

other life forms that inhabit him, and no passport or skin color can prevent that: "Encendí mi lámpara y me cubrí la cara con un repelente para insectos; se lo ofrecí también a Thierry pero no quiso untárselo: los bichos ya lo conocían de sobra, años atrás lo habían acribillado lo suficiente y ahora le perdonaban el pellejo" [I turned on the lamp and covered my face in insect repellent. I offered some to Thierry but he didn't want to use it: the critters knew him well enough, they had pestered him enough years ago and now pardoned him] (66). Unlike Thierry, who has been bitten so many times his flesh is now familiar to the *monte'*s insects, Victor needs the extra protection and his body is perceived as foreign and new by the creatures of the Casetaches.

No matter how much he tries to convince Thierry and himself of his immunity, Victor's body changes during his trip. He describes his body odor to be different (Montero 39) and he will eventually not survive his last excursion to the *monte* (241). Although the reasons for this are not revealed, the novel seems to insinuate —with Thierry's constant reminders of the power of the *lwa* and how one must have their permission to take anything from the *monte*— that it is due to his efforts to extract a part of the *monte*, the frog, from it without permission. Montero's novel denounces the hypocrisy of a scientific method that kills and extracts to conserve and study (Boiling 319) as if humans were outside the web tying all life together. The mysteries of the *monte* might not be revealed and explained, but we are cautioned by *Tú, la oscuridad* not to discard them as simple myths just because we cannot understand them or even see proof of their power.

Thierry and his father are different. Not exactly like Tierra and her family, who belong to the *monte*, but still, more in synch with it and its mysteries than people like Víctor. Thierry tells Víctor about how the *pwazon rat* not only asks for permission to enter the *monte* every night they hunt there, but they also have to pass a body inspection before doing so because it is very dangerous to go hunting there with an open wound or an STD (77). The reason for this is never explained, but it shows once more how exposed the human body is to the *monte*: "el monte, lógicamente, es un lugar peligroso para los que se aventuran en él sin tomar precauciones" [The *monte,* logically, is a dangerous place for those who venture into it without taking any precautions] (Cabrera 20). It also demonstrates how aware of this exposure humans like Thierry are.

This is even more evident when Thierry tells Victor how his father died: during a hunting, he hid in a bush to defecate, the most vulnerable moment of a man, he says, and was attacked by a pack of zombies (Montero 80). Even after asking for permission and taking all the precautions, Thierry's father is killed by a creature of the *monte* because, as his son explains, the cause of death of a *pwazon rat* is his overconfidence (79). He lowered his guard and forgot his exposed situation for a moment, and that is how he lost his life. The fact that he is killed by zombies reveals once again how Montero is constantly hinting at the human body's biological and spiritual exposure to change and toxification: a zombie is a human that, through poisoning and spiritual intervention, loses all agency and will. With this figure Montero not only points out human exposure by putting Thierry's father, a man who knows the *monte* and is aware of its ways, to die

defecating and murdered by the creatures he is trained to chase but also by choosing the zombie as the creature in question.

The humans that know the *monte* and that know how to take from it without punishment also take advantage of this knowledge to use the toxins of the *monte* against other humans. That is the cause of the death Papa Crapaud, Thierry's former boss. Papa Crapaud's wife, Ganesha, and her lover poison him using a special powder taken from one of the toads Papa Crapaud studies (117). They have access to this powder because Ganesha's lover knows people in Léogane, his birthplace, who know the mysteries of the *monte* and can use its creatures to fabricate poison. They are, however, not equal regarding their connection to poison and the *monte* as the Cuban authorities who kill Tierra's family: Ganesha and her lover use toxins endemic to their habitat to get rid of a man, Papa Crapaud, that prevents them from being together; the Cuban authorities bring a new poison created in a laboratory into the *monte* that is supposed to kill the family but also causes harm to other life forms, and the objective of this is the control of the land.

Finally, we have the last category of humans who penetrate the *monte*: the ones invited by mysterious forces into it. Both novels have at least one example of this. In Valdés' case, it is Dánae who after dreaming of Tierra for a few nights, feels the need to leave the field where she is working to explore the non-cultivated part of the *monte* of La Fe. The *monte* seems to swallow her up to the point where her skin starts to resemble the one from the plantains that surround her (Valdés 178). She falls asleep, she cannot help it and is found by Tierra. This is what prompts their first love encounter. In Montero's case

is the woman of the Casetaches, who inexplicably decides to walk to the *monte* with no guide, or supplies and is described as doing it as if she knew where she was going although she has never been there before (46). Thierry mentions this happens to a lot of women who visit the island: they go crazy, he says, there is something in Haiti that induces madness in their brains, and a man, always a man he says, must go fetch them up from places like the Casetaches: "bajan revueltas, con los vestidos sucios y los ojos brotados; así recorren el país, da grima verlas" [they come down unruly, with their dresses dirty and their eyes swollen. That is how they travel the country, seeing them gives the creeps] (Idem). This "mujeres de sus casas" [decent women] suffer a metamorphosis once they get to Haiti. Thierry is not sure why, but they seem to be particularly receptive to something that forces them to mutate, as if bewitched or spiked by some kind of powerful substance, which reinforces Montero's portrayal of Haiti and its *monte* as places that nobody is immune to.

Both Dánae and this woman have no logical reason to enter a space they know nothing about, but they seem to be pulled inside it by some force their peers cannot explain. As soon as they enter the space, their morphology starts to change and begins to resemble other forms of life around them, as if they were chameleons. In "Lignes de fuite du marronage: le 'lyannaj ou l'esprit de la forêt" Dénètem Touam Bona talks about the maroon practice of becoming one with the forest, to "faire corps avec le territoire" (Touam Bona 178), although usually reserved to people like Tierra and her family, this practice seems to describe what happens to Dánae and the woman in the

monte. Their bodies do not react to contact with the space like other humans, not even like the bodies of people like Thierry and his father who enter the *monte* according to its rules.

We know, because of the Ceiba's narration, that she is part of the reason for Dánae's incursion into the wilderness, so the girl is invited by the most powerful force in La Fe (Cuervo Hewitt 295). For the woman of the Casetaches, there is no way for us to know what or who decides that she is to be part of the *monte*. What we do know in both cases is that once Dánae and the woman leave the space, their bodies have mutated to be in relation with the nature of the *monte* and they react badly to the separation, as if it made them sick.

3. Divine forces: forces of life and death

What and who are those forces transforming human bodies and their immunity to toxins in the *monte*? I have already mentioned the Ceiba, but she is far from being the only one that matters for this analysis. Cabrera explains that the *monte* is a space completely charged with supernatural forces: everything natural exceeds nature's limits, and trees, bushes, or even animals are the home of spirits, both benevolent and not (Cabrera 20-21). In the *monte* everything has a master and to take something out of it (21), like Víctor and Thierry do with the frog, its divine master must be consulted. Dánae's friend, Enma, learns this when one night she takes an offering from the Palma Real and is scolded by

Agallú Solá, father of the orisha Changó, god of thunder, and told that if she does not return what she has taken, he will harm her (Valdés 247).

There are rules in the *monte*, rules that do not answer to human logic and that protect whoever ventures into it from its dangers and its whims. Humans are exposed to harm in there and the only way to make themselves immune to it is to follow those rules. But the harm not only comes from the toxic elements I discussed in the previous sections. Because the *monte* is full of supernatural forces, its toxicity goes beyond our plane and can also come from spirits and divine intervention. For example, Thierry advises Víctor to never rest under a tree in the *monte* unless he knows which trees are "cargados", charged, and which are not, and the same goes, he says, to any crab he finds far from the sea, since people can charge it with harmful forces that will be fatal (Montero 107). The *monte* is full of the dead too (Cabrera 19). In Valdés novel, the Ceiba casually mentions how the spirits of the dead are startled when the teachers wake up the students with screams (Valdés 141). Although a scientist such as Víctor would not consider it to be logical, it is clear that in these novels the harm or changes the *monte* can cause to the body can also be spiritual. Such a space is also spiritually toxic and the effects caused by spiritual toxification also have material consequences as both Valdés and Montero show it in their texts.

Dánae's dreams are a good example of this. Before she meets Tierra in the flesh, she dreams about her in the form of an androgynous horse rider and the erotic feeling of the dream materializes once she wakes up with some invisible force covering her body in

honey (Valdés 129). This dream appears to be a spiritual calling, an announcement of Dánae's future connection to the spirits of La Fe and the consequences of such a connection. The girl feels someone's hands touching her body, she is afraid of it being a ghost, but cannot wake up. A voice tells her that she will soon know who the owner of the hands is, and Dánae metamorphoses into a plant. Intoxicated by this dream and by the honey, Dánae later feels pushed into the *monte*. The effects of this experience, of the contact of those hands and the honey, nourish Dánae's interest in Tierra, as if intoxicated by a powerful substance.

The dream she has that night at La Fe foreshadows the events that will take place years later, at the end of the novel. After winning the case against them for anti-revolutionary behavior with the help of the *monte'*s spiritual forces, Tierra and Dánae leave the courtroom where they were being judged, and Tierra, in the middle of applauses and support, feels suddenly terrified. This terror drives her to ask her godmother for a favor: for Dánae and her to be transformed into two embracing majestic ceiba trees (344). Metamorphosed into the sacred tree, a plant like in Dánae's dream, they become a pilgrimage stop for lovers in Havana and can finally live together without being bothered by the racism and homophobia of Cuban society (Idem). This is the way the Ceiba manages to protect her goddaughter from further harm inflicted by humans: being sacred trees gives them immunity to hatred and the toxic outcomes faced by Tierra's family.

Even if Valdés' novel ends in this optimistic tone and demonstrates that no matter how much harm humans inflict on the *monte* its spirits are strong enough to fight back

and rebuild the sacred space, it does not shy away from showing the limitations of this strength. The enchanted, "cargado," manatee of La Fe says it himself: all the forces of the *monte* know a tragedy is approaching, but they cannot prevent it from happening (208), they can only do their best to protect Tierra and Dánae, and adapt to the aftermath of the pesticide. The two women's metamorphosis is also proof of this: the Ceiba cannot change the way society perceives them, nor change the laws that are designed to eradicate beings like them. What she can do is to provide an adaptation, a mutation, that offers a new and safer possibility of a life together.

In Montero's text, it is harder to understand spiritual agency in matters of toxicity and immunity because spiritual forces never narrate as they do in Valdés, nor do non-human beings. This is key because Montero seems to refuse a narrative where we have access to all answers, and she reminds us that even if we live in constant interspecies connection, it does not mean we have mutual understanding. Reflecting on the tension between speaking and silent non-humans in literature and the ethical implications of both approaches for ecocriticism, Adrew McMurry points out the dangers of what he calls the Phonocentric Fallacy:

> What is called for, then, are ways to theorize the procedures and assumptions we use to locate the boundaries of *our-selves*, boundaries which inevitably serve to locate *them* in relation to us—regardless of what they "really" are and what they "really" mean. In fact, their inscrutability, their stubborn otherness, may be their greatest protection from the recklessness which so often accompanies our desire

> to dissect and domesticate a world we have long wished would divulge its "innermost secrets." (McMurry 61, italics in the original).

What are the logics of the spirits? Of non-human animals? That is not a question Montero is interested in answering, although she does raise it constantly. The questioning itself is the core of the novel. We as readers are expected to witness all the mysteries of the Haiti she presents us with, grow hungry for answers, and live without them. What she does is put us at the level of other humans, especially at Víctor's, and guide us through the mysteries of life in the middle of Apocalypsis, always reminding us of our limitations: we are not the most powerful, we cannot understand it all. As Boukaka, Thierry, and Víctor, we can interpret and theorize. Still, there will always be things that escape our understanding, and it this through this mechanism that Montero proves how obsolete Victor's scientific knowledge and the concept of finding logical explanations with tangible proof for all phenomena is when put into practice in the Haitian context and, specially, at the *monte*.

Nevertheless, there are indications of spiritual and divine actions in matters of toxicity and immunity that cannot be ignored in this analysis. Perhaps the sea *lwa* Agwè's alleged influence in the disappearance of Haiti's frogs is the strongest one. Throughout the novel, the question of a possible toxic cause of this disappearance is raised multiple times. There is an assumption from the scientific community, of which Víctor is the representative in the case of the *grenouille du sang*, that *something* is killing all the frogs, perhaps toxic residues or a pesticide, but no proof of this has been found yet, which is

why herpetologists are looking for frogs to study in their labs with the hope of finding in their dead bodies traces of whatever is harming them.

This assumption is questioned by those who practice Vodou and Abakuá, like Emile Boukaka, a member of the secret abakuá society that Tierry belongs to, who tells Víctor the story of Agwè and the frogs: "Dicen que Agwé Taroyo, el dios de las aguas, ha llamado a las ranas para que vayan por un tiempo al fondo. Dicen que las han visto partir: animales de agua dulce metiéndose de cabeza en el mar, y las que no tienen tiempo ni fuerzas para llegar al lugar de la reunión cavan huecos en la tierra para esconderse, o se dejan morir por el camino" [They say that Agwé Taroyo, the god of the waters, has called the frogs for them to go down under for a while. They say that they have seen them leave: sweet water animals diving head first into the sea, and those who have no time or strength to get to the meeting place dig holes in the soil to hide, or they let themselves die along the way] (Montero 131). Many questions arise from this tale: why would a deity of the sea be calling all frogs to meet with him? Why would those unable to get there hide and what are they hiding from? Are they escaping from something and if so, what can be so terrible that they would rather die trying to meet the sea *lwa*? The novel refrains from answering a single one of these questions because the narrators never get to understand the motives of the frog's behavior, but the events at the end of the novel do hint towards at least a confirmation of Agwè's involvement since it is in the ocean that Thierry, Víctor, and the body of the last known *grenouille du sang* disappear after the shipwreck, and the possible answers too.

Due to the apocalyptic version of Haiti that Montero presents in the novel, perhaps it is possible to assume that the frogs are escaping from the death epidemic affecting that side of the island. Agwè may be offering protection from the harm inflicted by human societies to other species, just as the Ceiba does with Dánae and Tierra. In both cases, it seems that divine power can only protect their own by having them refuse involvement with human societies, with the difference that in Valdés the refusal is not radical as the two women live as ceibas in the middle of the Cuban capital. In contrast, the frogs seem to remove themselves from any point of contact with human beings.

This drives me back to the idea of immunity and the limitations of divine powers to stop the *monte* from getting harmed by toxicity. If I follow my theory about Agwè and the frogs, then the *lwa* is powerful enough to drive a massive exodus of amphibious, but he cannot intervene to the point that they all become immune to harm and be able to remain in their habitats. Not even in the *monte*, where *lwa* rule over all forms of life, can the frogs be completely protected against danger. Once the *grenouille du sang* Thierry finds is removed from the Mont des Enfants Perdus so Víctor can take her to the laboratory, the only way to prevent them from doing so is to cause a shipwreck and make them, and the frog, disappear at the bottom of the sea.

Once again, Valdés presents a more optimistic conclusion than Montero. While *Tú, la oscuridad* ends with the feeling that death is imminent, Valdés not only gives the two protagonists some sort of happy ending but also lets us know that even if they

succeeded in getting rid of Tierra's family, the authorities have failed to seize the land of La Fe to exploit it as Dánae discovers when she goes looking for her lover:

> Con los años, la geografía había variado considerablemente, la naturaleza desafiaba más perversa y endurecida. […] Fue difícil hallar el campamento; lo habían derrumbado, en su lugar descubrió una valla avisando que allí se construiría un hotel de lujo, pero, según informaciones de Rapsodia Imblú, la acompañante del tren, llevaban décadas en ese cuento del tío Tata, para nunca acabar, pues el terreno era demasiado movedizo e inseguro.
>
> [With the years, the geography had changed considerably, nature defied more, perverse and hardened […] It was hard to find the camping spot; they had torn it down. In its place she found a sign announcing that they were going to build a luxury hotel there, but, according to the information given by Rapsodia Imblú, her companion on the train, they had been saying that for decades, but the construction never happened it because the terrain was too shifty and unsafe] (Valdés 281).

As we can see in the passage, the *monte* fought back subtly, but firmly. Although it could never save all of Tierra's family, it adapted to make its exploitation impossible for humans to achieve. The pesticide intoxicated its environment a forced a change in its way of life, but it could not cause enough harm to make it completely exposed to human intervention.

Montero and Valdés write amid environmental catastrophe: the end of the century that saw the birth of the atomic bomb and nuclear disasters with global consequences for all species (DeLoughrey 78), as well as a Cold War that, for countries like Cuba and Haiti, meant more than space races and the menace of nuclear extermination: it meant the intervention of economic powers such as the US in its fight against Communism, seen by the powerful nation as an epidemic that had to be eradicated, which in its turn had severe ecological outcomes and the further development of the plantation system. They also write during the following decade to the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This pandemic would seriously affect the Caribbean, the second most affected area by it (Hankings et al. 27), and increase the stigmatization of Haitians in the global discourse (Swanson 3). *Tú, la oscuridad* and *Querido primer novio* show not only an awareness of the political climate in which they are written but also of the ecological and biological consequences of such a climate. They talk to us about how permeable our bodies are and explore the effects of necropolitics in our and other species.

As readers of the 21st Century, when what DeLoughrey describes as an "accelerated environmental catastrophe" (DeLoughrey 2) feels more and more like a reality, and after a global pandemic that changed our ways of interacting with other human and non-human bodies, we can find in Montero and Valdés more than one thing that resonates with our present. We share with the characters the experience of the Plantationocene, and our vulnerable condition to contact with other life forms. We share the fear of contagion, of extinction. May these texts remind us of our internal multitudes,

how they interact with everything else, and how mysterious their ways can be to us. Because if something is clear in both of the novels this chapter delved into, it is that we must mutate and adapt to survive this apocalyptic world. *Dèye mòn, gen mòn*. The *monte* is there, multiple times, and whoever decides to enter must relinquish the imagined control humans attribute to our species over the rest of the planet. Let's enter the *monte*, let's see our bodies as part of the web, and let's accept the mysteries that will remain unsolved.

Zonbi goute sel: the visual politics of infection

In the myriad of images of death that *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995) by Cuban-Puerto Rican writer Mayra Montero leaves us with, there is one that, albeit brief, lingers in my mind every time I read the novel. It is the image of the body of the Haitian guide and second narrator Thierry's father after he is killed by a herd of rogue *zonbi* he is hunting: "lo encontraron sin su piel, aquellas bestias lo habían despellejado y lo dejaron tirado sobre su excremento" [They found him without his skin, those beasts had skinned him and left him laying on his excrement] (Montero 80). His widow has to prepare the body for the funeral and, as she washes the excrement and dirt off, little veins get glued to her fingertips because of the lack of skin. The body is unrecognizable to human eyes, even to the woman who loved him. Completely changed, his family mourns him but his postmortem aspect leaves a strong memory in them.

Although in Montero's text we never get to see the zombies, "aquellas bestias", only what they leave behind, a skinned corpse laying in excrement, this episode is very telling of what interests me in this chapter: politics of visuality in the zombie[1] trope *vis-à-vis* toxicity. What does a zombie look like? Take, for example, the zombie figure in Guadeloupe and Martinique, a shape-shifting evil spirit that tricks humans into their death (*The Zombie in Contemporary*... 6), or even the constant mutation of the trope's visual representation ranging from a putrid decomposing body to a human/animal-like

[1] Following scholars Lucy Swanson and Sara Juliet Lauro, who have studied this trope before, I will be using two different words for the living-dead creatures: *zonbi*, from Haitian Creole, will refer to those who belong to the original understanding and Vodou tradition of it, while "zombie(s)" will refer to those closer to the US trope of brain-hungry hordes of bodies or other, non-Haitian Vodou specific iterations of the trope.

individual or ethereal spirit. If, as Emily Maguire points out, "The undead reveal the fragility –and the limits– of our own previously certain humanity" (Maguire 1) how does the aspect of zombies affect our perception of the aspect of a human? How does our ability to visually perceive toxins' effects, in this case, zombification, determine our reaction and relation to toxified bodies?

In the previous chapter, I delved into the space of the *monte* as a place of toxicity and biological exposure to mutation and harm. In this chapter, and continuing with my study of toxicity in contemporary literature by Caribbean authors, I explore what the *zonbi*/zombie trope tells us about life on a toxic planet. *Zonbi* and zombies have an undeniable connection to toxins: *zonbi* are created through poisons made of plants and animals, and zombies are always portrayed in mainstream media as a focus of contagion and many times as the consequence of epidemics or even radiation: "as the walking dead; a vacant-eyed drone; a vicious, animated corpse; a rabid, dehumanized *carrier of virus*; or a *toxic body* that passes on its psychopathic behavior with a bite" (Lauro 8, my italics). Given this, it is relevant to stop and consider the implications the zombie trope has in the representation of toxins in Caribbean narratives. The question guiding this chapter, then, is how the iterations of the zombie trope in contemporary literary texts from the Caribbean can help us explore the politics of visibility/invisibility that surround definitions of the safe/toxic dichotomy and our reactions and understanding of it.

Zonbi can be traced back to colonial times, with its influences coming from even before its birth in Caribbean soil (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 38) and zombies began

their appearance and proliferation in mainstream Hollywood culture by the first half of the 20th Century during the first US occupation of Haiti (2). Today, this version of the living-dead creatures has widely permeated the mainstream visual and narrative culture, at least in the Western hemisphere, some might argue, to the point of exhaustion (Lauro 2). Its prevalence in our days and the ways it has mutated in Caribbean texts make it relevant to a study focusing on the last thirty years of literary production in the area.

I am particularly interested in how a trope widely recorded and studied in Anglophone, Francophone, and Creolephone cultural traditions permeates the production of Hispanophone Caribbean texts of the last twenty years. A century after its exportation to the Hollywood mainstream media, zombies fairly constantly populate Hispanic cultural products, as David Dalton and Sarah Potter demonstrate in the introduction to the journal *Alambrique'*s special issue on it, "The Transatlantic Undead: Zombies in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Cultures". From its appearance in B-series movies narrated in Manuel Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) to the 2011 Spanish-Cuban cinematic production *Juan de los muertos,* the exploration of both zombification through witchcraft in Plantation settings and adventures in zombie apocalypses is not foreign to Hispanic narrative productions. However, unlike the case of Francophone and Creolophone contexts that include multiple archetypes of the trope, or as Swanson calls them "zombie avatars" (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 16) —"the slave, the trauma victim, the horde, and the popular zombie" (7)—, the Hispanic zombie corpus seems specifically focused on the zombie as a pulp fiction or horror trope featuring mostly the

horde that we see in films like *Juan de los muertos*. My interest here is to stray away from this iteration and look for less spectacular *zonbi* and zombies in Hispanic texts to determine the range of the trope beyond the Hollywood-esque version of the walking-dead apocalyptic horde. The reason for this is that I find more subtle and less spectacular appearances of the trope can certainly illuminate how fragile is the line between humans and zombies, between healthy bodies and poisoned ones.

For this chapter, I have selected two works of literature from the Hispanic Caribbean that seem to stand out in the mass of Hispanic representations of the trope because of their portrayal of it through a day-to-day lens. In these works, the *zonbi* and zombies are presented as part of the complex web of life forms of the Plantationocene instead of as a spectacular or world-changing occurrence that forces society to adapt and fight back. They are a natural consequence of the environments these stories develop into, not a sudden anomaly, which raises the question about how entangled human existence in the Plantationocene is to zombification. They exist in these two literary universes as something that instead of standing out, like it would be the case in an apocalyptic or horror zombie narrative, is not easily perceived by the naked eye. I will explore what, when included as daily occurrences in contemporary novels, *zonbi* and zombies reveal about human fears and perceptions of life in toxic environments and how their bodies are exposed to biological changes, such as zombification. This chapter will show that zombification is not only a natural occurrence of the Plantationocene but also not entirely

undesirable, depending on its conditions: where and why it happens, and what appearance the zombified person has.

The first novel I will be delving into for this chapter is the sci-fi-toned *Malas hierbas* (2010) —*Wicked Weeds,* in its English translation— by Puerto Rican author Pedro Cabiya. Moving back and forth between the two sides of the Hispaniola island, *Malas hierbas* tells the story of a *zonbi* and a human investigating in a laboratory setting the nature and essence of zombification and its possible cures. The novel is a compilation of three types of texts: first-person narration and reflections from the perspectives of the *zonbi* and the human, the transcription of the interviews conducted during a Police investigation after the *zonbi'*s alleged death, and a glossary of poisons at the end. In the fictional preface, signed by Cabiya himself, we are told the novel is the ensemble of Isadore's —the human investigating zombification and a descendant of a *zonbi*— notebooks. However, we are never provided with an explanation of how Isadore accesses the thoughts of her lab boss, the *zonbi* with whom she shares the protagonist role in the text.

This *zonbi*, whose name is never revealed, is aware of his zombification and is actively trying to solve the mystery behind it to hopefully find a way to go back to his previous human nature. Through the text, he will discover that Isadore and the other two women he has employed in his lab are also aware of him being a *zonbi* and are also experimenting to see if they can change him back. Although the *zonbi* himself goes to lengths to simulate humanity, none of the members of the lab seem terrified nor surprised

by his situation. Zombification in *Malas hierbas* is treated as any other daily phenomenon of scientific interest.

The only horror-like moments in the novel are narrated by Isadore who remembers her previous encounter with *zonbi*. She tells the story of what she calls the macabre *Tupperware Party* she witnessed as a teenager when studying at a friend's house in the elite neighborhood of Arroyo Manzano in the capital of the Dominican Republic. Her friend's mother, a light-skinned Haitian woman, presents her wealthy Dominican friends with a new "product": zombified dark-skin Haitians for sale. She also recounts her father's tragic incursion along with his cousin and her childhood friends into a *zonbi* village back in Haiti. The village functions both as a *kajou*, cashew, plantation, and as a sort of distribution center for *zonbi* who will be later sold and shipped to buyers to perform different types of labor. I argue that this trafficking of *zonbi* through the border dividing Hispaniola to provide "optimal" —read with no agency, will, desire, or rebel nature— domestic workers to the Dominican upper class constitutes the true horrific element of the novel.

Colombian writer Daniella Sánchez Russo's *Vigilia* (2022) serves as an important counterpoint to *Malas hierbas* since, instead of actual *zonbi,* it presents zombie-like individuals as a way to make sense of the growing toxicity of the environment the characters live in and it stirs away from a scientific perspective of experimenting with and discovering the functioning of zombification by choosing to narrate it all through a dream-like testimony of the day-to-day life of a family.

Sánchez Russo's novel is narrated in the first-person by its protagonist, whose name is also never revealed to us, and tells the story of her past and present as a member of the Barranquilla elite. Her memories are focused on the year she started menstruating, the same year her brother drowned in the Magdalena River. The trauma of her brother's death keeps her hanging in those memories during her daily life in the present. That present is also complicated, as she returned to her parent's house after she and her husband, both scholars of biology, failed to find a job in their field and she gave birth to unplanned twins. In a broken marriage and trapped in her trauma, the protagonist narrates the daily life in the wealthy society of Barranquilla, both during the times of kidnappings and disappearance along the Magdalena River —her past— and during the times of the burnings of the mangroves and the plastic pollution of the Caribbean coast of Colombia —her present—.

Although at first, it seems that, unlike *Malas hierbas, Vigilia* has no relation to the *zonbi*/zombie trope, I argue that the novel is indeed plagued by different *zonbi*/zombie avatars that are key to answering the questions I have posed at the beginning of this chapter. As shown in this chapter, the protagonist's marriage brokenness and her inability to connect with her husband are portrayed through a series of episodes and images that are reminiscent of the *zonbi*/zombie trope. Also, the story of the city and the Caribbean coast of Colombia as narrated in *Vigilia* is populated with legends of ghosts and spirits that share multiple of the signs of the different *zonbi*/zombie avatars identified by Swanson in her book.

To be clear, I am not arguing that Sánchez Russo *intentionally* wrote a zombie novel, but that by putting *Vigilia* in dialogue with *Malas hierbas* we can better explore the different ways in which the trope works as a literary medium to think through the current state of Caribbean environments human bodies inhabit. It also seems relevant to include a Colombian text since they are rarely included in studies around zombies in Hispanic cultural production. Even though many might think *zonbi* and/or zombies have only permeated Colombian cultural imaginaries through the US importation of the mainstream zombie horde, texts like *Vigilia* and its local cultural influences show us how diverse the trope can be in such a context, with iterations of the trope getting closer to the Haitian *zonbi* or the Martinican and Guadeloupean zombie than to the walking-dead apocalypse.

Zonbi/zombie avatars

In her book *The Zombie in Contemporary French Caribbean Fiction* (2023), Lucy Swanson identifies the "zombie avatars", "the slave, the trauma victim, the horde, and the popular zombie" (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 7), that she finds in works of Francophone Caribbean fiction. For this chapter, I will borrow the concept of the avatars to guide my study of *Malas hierbas* and *Vigilia*, and divide the analysis into sections dedicated to each avatar I have identified in both novels: the *zonbi kò kadav* or walking corpse, the sleep-walker, the demon or evil spirit, and the *zonbi astral* or the spirit of the dead. Through these diverse sets of avatars, that show the richness of both novels in their

treatment of the zombie trope, I explore the ways these authors engage with the tension between the visible and the invisible, given the differences in shape and appearance of each avatar. I also explain how they make sense of an embodied existence in the middle of different sorts of toxins, such as poisonous plants and animals, or even plastic waste, most of which are either the materials of zombification, the reasons it can be difficult to fight it, or even the antidote.

In both novels, these avatars originate from trauma, linked to the socioeconomic and racial dynamics of the Platationocene. As Swanson reminds us, the zombie legend has been commonly used as a "means of interpreting and narrating trauma" (93), both as the consequence and the cure for it. For each avatar I have identified in those novels, one or more traumatic experiences can be found to be the origin or at least connected to the surge of *zonbi* or zombies. These can be political, socioeconomic, racial, or even personal trauma stemming from interpersonal relationships with friends, family, and partners. Sometimes the motivation to induce zombification into other humans using poison, sometimes the trigger of a body reaction turning itself into a living-dead organism, trauma is ever-present in the examples of this chapter. The novels prove to us that, as long as we stay in the Plantationocene and experience the traumas it causes in us, we will live in a world where *zonbi* and zombies walk amongst us.

Neither Cabiya nor Sánchez Russo provide conclusive alternatives or cures to zombification or the conditions that make it possible, even if they might hint towards a few possibilities. Although some characters do want to find answers and solutions, like

the two protagonists of *Malas hierbas* and, to some extent, the married couple in *Vigilia*, the authors seem more interested in delving into the environments where this trope exists as a given, into the human condition and its biological and social exposure to mutation and toxification. Consequently, this chapter will follow their lead and avoid attempting to crack the code to the mystery of zombification, focusing mostly on its existence and what it can tell us.

Zonbi kò kadav across race, class, and gender

Almost by the end of the novel, the *Malas hierbas*' chapter "La Citadelle" gives us Isadore's account of the creation of the *zonbi* village from where the enslaved workforce is being shipped to different points of the island, presumably to the neighborhood of Arroyo Manzano as well. Founded by Placide, a young *bokor,* sorcerer, who shared a cell in the Citadelle's prison with Isadore's ancestor Papa Vincent, also a *bokor*, the *zonbi* village is born during François Duvalier's regime after the two *bokor* escape their imprisonment by faking their deaths —which seems to be a foreshadowing of what will emerge from one of them—.

After being dumped outside of the Citadelle by the guards who think them dead, Placide and Papa Vincent continue the farce for a while to be safe, but two men arrive to retrieve the clothes of the apparent corpses that have been promised to them by the guards of the prison. Unable to stand the humiliation of being undressed by thieves who are, to add insult to injury, making fun of his smell, Placide declares he is alive against all

of Papa Vincent's advice. Seeing what he is dealing with, the man undressing Placide forces the young *bokor* to take a black powder from a flask while his companion reminds him they are only allowed to take the clothes, not the bodies. The man, whose name we learn is Typhus, like the infection, concedes and leaves Placide with two flasks as compensation for what he has done to him: the one with the black powder, and another one with a white one that is said, by Typhus' partner, to be the cure of the first one.

Once they are alone, Papa Vincent helps Placide come back to his senses but notices a significant change in his friend who no longer looks nice, optimistic, or handsome —"ni optimista, ni bonachón, ni bien parecido" (Cabiya 204)—. They get away from there and arrive at a valley divided by a crystal clear river and decide to establish themselves there, but argue about what should be planted in those lands to assure subsistence. Placide wants to plant cashews, which can be sold at a high price, but Papa Vincent says the cashew plant is a "malevolent one that causes rashes" (Idem) and that he would rather plant peanuts, which are less profitable, but safer to humans. They cannot reach an agreement and part ways, each one at one side of the river, Placide with the black powder flask, and Papa Vincent with the white one. They never speak to each other again (Idem). The black powder seems to be the zombification powder, since years later, by Isadore's account, we know that Placide's cashew plantation has become a *zonbi* village, and because of the way him swallowing the powder is narrated: Typhus is said to have claimed "I got you" after making Placide faint with the powder, insinuating he is claiming ownership over the body as its *zonbi* master. Papa Vincent's noticing a change in

his friend is also telling, as it seems to indicate a sort of death of Placide's previous personality, which hints towards the trope of the *zonbi* once more.

This episode of *Malas hierbas* is plagued by nods to the zombification process present in the Haitian Vodou imaginary. As Swanson explains: "the most iconic form the zombie takes in Haiti (although perhaps not the most widespread), is that of the soulless body or *zonbi kò kadav*—an individual who has been buried and revived after a portion of their soul has been stolen by a *bòkò* or sorcerer (not to be confused with an *oungan* or Vodou priest) and/or who has ingested a zombifying powder provoking a catatonic state" (*The Zombie in Contemporary*... 6)—. Besides the fact that Placide and Papa Vincent pretend to be dead to escape the prison, Typhus gives Placide the black powder that makes him faint, which is not a catatonic state but is still a state of immobility and loss of conscience. However, there are two different powders in the episode, a black and a white: Typhus' companion mentions that the white powder reverses the effects of the black one —"Déjale un poco de tu arena blanca para que pueda remediar algún día, si quisiera, lo que hiciste" (Cabiya 204)—, but Placide never takes it and Papa Vincent is the one to keep it. The use of color symbolism in the episode is quite clear as it represents a traditional light versus darkness dichotomy in which zombification, the death of the soul, is caused by a dark material while its antidote comes in the shape of a clear one.

When the two former friends part ways, each taking one powder, the colors indicate the path each has chosen: Placide's is the path of death and greed, which comes to life at night and is kept hidden from peering eyes, while Papa Vincent's is the path of

community and life. Papa Vincent claims having offered multiple times to give some of the white powder to Placide before they split, but Placide argued that he was fine as he was (Cabiya 223). That Papa Vincent tells this story and that he even insists on clarifying he did not try to keep the powder to himself proves also that no matter how much the colors of the powders point out the opposition, the novel keeps showing the unbreakable link between the two *bokor*: the antidote cannot exist without the poison since it is created *for* it, and so Papa Vincent and his descendants, Isadore is the main example of it, will forever be tied to Placide's *zonbi* village as keepers of the white powder and neighbors of the horror happening there.

The connection between Placide's *zonbi* in Haiti and the trade of zombified individuals in the Dominican Republic is drawn by Isadore when she recounts, through the transcription of the oral testimony given to her by Sandrine, her father's cousin, and the elder of her family's village, that there were rumors about Placide lending his *zonbi* to sugar multinationals and that he even auctioned some to private anonymous clients, which "gave him many more benefits than the sales of cashews at the market" (Cabiya 222). The novel also hints at the connection between Placide's trade of *zonbi* and the macabre *Tupperware Party* through the presence of Gracieuse, Sandrine's childhood friend who is captured in the *zonbi* villa after Sandrine challenges her group of friends to trespass despite Papa Vincent's warning (175) and reappears at the *Tupperware Party* as the sample product of the business (47). Placide's actions, his choosing of the "darker" path, are situated in the economic context of the capitalistic trades —the cachew

plantations, the sugar multinationals, and the phenomenon of the *Tupperware Party*— of the Plantationocene where individuals can always be stripped of agency and voice to exploit them for profit.

Besides the trauma caused by the encounter with the clothes and body thieves who zombify Placide, there is a deeper traumatic experience giving origin to the division between the two friends and Placide's choice to prioritize economic profit over community wellbeing: the Papa Doc's regime and the experience of being held prisoners by *Tonton Makout*, Duvalier's private militia, in the Citadelle due to their *bokor* powers. Although the novel never claims this political trauma as the origin of all *zonbi* life, Placide's hurt pride, his inability to stay quiet while being insulted, during the episode of his zombification could explain his need to regain some power and respect afterwards. Such political trauma constitutes the origin of the trade of *zonbi* leaving Placide's plantation and arriving in Arroyo Manzano to be bought by rich families.

Placide's trauma manifests itself through his ambition, which surprises Papa Vincent when they argue about what to plant in this new land they have found. Probably stemming from his humiliating experience with the *Makout* and his zombifier, Placide develops greed and ambition: "Papa Vincent dijo que había cosas más importantes que el dinero. Placide respondió que a él nadie había podido demostrarle, con evidencia concreta, que eso fuera verdad" [Papa Vincent said that there were more important things than money. Placide replied that nobody had be able to prove to him, with concrete evidence, that such a thing was true] (204). His previous experiences are read by Placide

as proof of the need for economic power. His need to succeed economically and not only survive and have a peaceful life by the river as is Papa Vincent's wish drives him to choose cashews as his crop even if he knows the dangers such a plant poses to those working with it. As Papa Vincent explains to Isadore when talking about the dreadful night of Gracieuse's zombification when Pascal, Isadore's father and Sandrine's cousin from the capital, is also zombified, cashews have a direct connection to the *zonbi* state:

> No nos gusta el cajuil, pero aún si nos gustara no lo comeríamos. Quien come cajuil y no muere se vuelve cajuilero, decía Papa Vincent. Pasar demasiado tiempo entre esas plantas y esa gente tenía el mismo efecto. Perdona a tu papá, tifí, si alguna vez te trató con frialdad, si te pareció inhumano o avariento en ocasiones… Esa noche Pascal tuvo la mala suerte de tocar lo que no debía.
>
> [We do not like cashews, but even if we did, we would not eat them. Those who eat cashews and do not die become *cajuilero*, Papa Vincent used to say. Spending much time with those plants and those people has the same effect. Pardon your father, little girl, if he ever treated you with coldness, if he seemed inhuman or greedy at times… That night Pascal had the bad luck of touching what he should not have touched] (223).

This passage contains two key pieces of information to understand zombification in the novel. First, we see yet another level of trauma: Isadore's relationship with her father was anything but loving and safe —"coldness", "inhuman"— which drives her to want to understand his past and his genealogy. Second, it gives us clear proof of the connection

between cashews and *zonbi* since Papa Vincent states not only its toxicity, but also the fact that some eat it and do not die from its poison, but become what he calls *cajuileros* that in this case means *zonbi.* He also hints at Pascal's fate being caused by touching the cashew plants, although he does not explain this further to Isadore. This connection between the cashew plant and zombification lands Cabiya's use of the zombie trope in the capitalistic logics of the Plantationocene: it is not the magical effect of the black powder alone, it is the exploitation of toxic resources such as cashews in the name of economic profit what makes *zonbi* part of the ecosystem in the novel.

Besides this explanation from Papa Vincent that seems to equal the toxicity of the cashew plant to the toxicity of the people from the *zonbi* village, Isadore includes information about cashews in the glossary of "wicked weeds" at the end of her scrapbook in which she explains that the *pomme-cajou* "belongs to the family of poisonous weeds and in its raw state can cause rashes and inflammation of the skin only through the touch, which makes its market value very expensive since the process to make it consumable is long" (247, my translation). This explains the need for a labor force lacking life and will to harvest the plant for free, as hiring non-zombified humans would mean fewer benefits for Placide. He initially creates *zonbi* to better exploit the plant without having to deal with workers complaining about the risks of its cultivation, but lately discovers the plant itself helps him create more and more *zonbi* which proves to be more profitable as a product than the cashews.

The physical appearance of Placide's *zonbi* reflects their racial and economic status on the island. It is not only that they have been zombified but also that they belong to the lower class in Haiti. We know, because of the testimony of Isadore's ancestors, that there is a huge economic gap between people from her village and the people from the city. This is very common in Haiti where people from the countryside are referred to as "moun andeyò" —people from the outside— in a pejorative way and where there exists a huge economic difference, in terms of resources and access between urban spaces and rural ones, connected to this depiction of the Haitian peasants (Dubois 115). This division between the inside and the outside is further emphasized by the zombie trope in Cabiya as *zonbi* are outsiders of human existence, marginal because of their lack of soul and agency, the literal "moun andeyò" of our species.

This becomes especially evident during the *Tupperware Party* episode in which the economic gap and the constructed racial difference between Haitians and Dominicans are present. The women at the party are complaining about the domestic workers they have hired to take care of their houses and families as well as poor people in general, arguing that they are filthy, thieves, full of sexual desire, and bad intentions who will resell all that you offer them, because as poor people they just "love being poor" (Cabiya 43). When Gracieuse appears the women are terrified:

> Era una congo *tan negra* que arrojaba destellos azules. Su cabello era tan *desastre, erizado y descuidado*, como si recién hubieran desatado las correas que la sujetaban a una *sesión de electroshocks*. Era bajita, de brazos largos y *cara*

ruin. Estaba *descalza* y cubría su desnudez con una *miserable* faldita amarilla y una *vieja* blusa rosada. Ambas prendas le quedaban muy pequeñas, como si la niña se hubiera convertido en mujer de un día para otro...como si nunca se hubiera quitado la ropa que le pusieran alguna vez durante su infancia. Pero lo más *terrible* de su aspecto eran los ojos: orbes blanqueados que no dejaban de dar vueltas en *cuencas desprovistas de párpados.*

[She was a congo *so dark* that she through blue sparks. Her hair was so *disastrous, bristly, and unkempt* as if someone had just released the belts holding her during an *electroshock session*. She was short with long arms, and a *mean face*. She was *barefoot* and covered her nudity with a *miserable* and tiny yellow skirt and an *old* pink blouse. Both looked small as if the child had become a woman overnight… as if she had never taken out the clothes, someone put on her one day when she was a child. But the most *terrible* part of her aspect was her eyes: blank orbs, that would not stop turning around *without eyelids*.] (47, my italics)

An ominous embodiment of their description of immigrants and poor people, Gracieuse stands in front of the crowd for them to examine. Her hair and skin emphasize her race, according to the way these women see it; her clothing and filthiness confirm their suspicions about her social status. The women look at her petrified, covering their mouths with their hands, but we discover this is mostly because they cannot compute her presence in such a luxurious space. After all, they feel she does not belong in that living

room, at that party. She is exactly what they have been saying they would prefer to ignore in their day-to-day lives. As Maguire points out in her study of Cabiya's novel:

> The episode with Gracieuesse lays bare in the ways in which the exploitation of the most vulnerable is both sanctioned by and sustains the elite elements of Dominican and Haitian society. Gracieusse's physical appearance carries all of the signs of marginality for the cultural environment of urban Santo Domingo: dark skin, unkempt hair (that in its natural state further emphasizes her blackness), ragged, ill-fitting clothes. What initially upsets the women at the party is not that Gracieusse should be allowed to exist in this state –indeed, she is a cypher for the many others who exist in something close to this situation– but that her abjection has been made temporarily visible" (Maguire 9).

Not only Gracieuse should not, according to these women's understanding of the world, be present at the party, but in the country at all. She represents what they think should be kept at the other side of the border, what their nation has fought hard to eradicate from its society. And so she scares them. It is not the fact that she has been zombified, her agency and desires taken from her, that terrifies the woman. It is her presence, with her blackness and lack of social status, in that living room of Arroyo Manzano. They are confronted with one they deem as "other", an undesirable "other" that they want to keep out of sight.

Although Maguire understands this episode as Gracieuse's abjection being made *temporarily* visible, I argue that what happens is the way the women read such abjection mutates. When their host explains that Gracieuse is the perfect domestic worker since she

lacks agency and desire, and will comply with all orders from the first person she hears and sees after her blindfold and earwax have been removed, the women are fascinated by what their host is offering to them (Cabiya 48-49). Gracieuse's filthy aspect is no longer a cause of disgust, but a reflection of her lack of self-awareness and agency, thus a sign of things being put in the "correct" social order. They perceive her as low maintenance and they anticipate she would not awaken any desires in their husbands and sons, which is exactly what they would dream to have in any domestic worker they hire. Her abjection is proof of her *zonbi* nature and this instead of bothering them, makes them calm, as their eyes confirm their beliefs every time they look at her.

Gracieuse nationality is important to understand how quickly the women change their reactions towards her aspect. Because she embodies what they imagine a poor black Haitian woman looks like they don't think twice about this issue. They seem satisfied that their fantasy has become a reality. If Gracieuse had been a white, wealthy Dominican woman, or even a Haitian of the same racial and social status, their reaction would have certainly been different. Because they don't see in her anything resembling themselves, they are comfortable with the business their host is offering. In their eyes, this is the place a woman like Gracieuse must occupy. Her zombification is then desirable according to the social structures of the Plantationocene:

> …it could be argued that in Dominican nationalist discourse, Haiti has often functioned as the Dominican Republic's "negative sensorium," a poorer, darker country whose problems make possible a narrative of Dominican success and

> Dominican whiteness. Building on the historical and symbolic connection between Haiti and the zombie, the undead in Cabiya's and Díaz's texts illustrate the extent to which a "culture of taste" and the "negative sensorium" that sustains it is still operative. Through the question of sentience in its relationship to both the living and the undead, both texts highlight the ways in which systems of social exclusion present at the Caribbean's colonial founding have permeated present – and future – Caribbean society (Maguire 4).

It is this racial and social division created by the Dominican national narrative that defines the limits between good and bad zombification and, therefore, between good and bad poisoning or toxification. Simplification cannot be in the eyes of these women a bad thing, as long as it is used as the solution to their perceived problems. If people like Gracieuse, cannot feel desire, have no agency, and can be controlled, these women think, then the mix —read "pollution"— of their class and race with Gracieuse's will be prevented and everyone will stay in their place. Gracieuse's aspect, her dark skin and her unkempt appearance, is the reason why none of these women tried to stop their host or condemned the business she represents.

Isadore's horror is not triggered by Gracieuse, but by this reaction of the guest and their acceptance of the deal. As soon as they start making orders for *zonbi* to their host, Isadore returns to her friend in the kitchen, shaken to the bone: "Yo estaba atónita. Sólo entonces me di cuenta de que había sido testigo de una especie de macabro *Tupperware Party*. Valérie se había puesto a estudiar de inmediato cuando vio de qué se trataba.

Regresé a la mesa y la miré de modo que no le pasara desapercibida mi conmoción. Necesitaba compartirlo. Ella también la sentía, pero no había sido causada por las mismas razones" [I was aghast. Just then I realized I had witnessed some sort of macabre *Tupperware Party*. Valérie had gone study as soon as she understood what was going on. I returned to the table and stared at her in a way that my commotion was visible. I needed to share it. She felt it too, but it had not been caused by the same reasons] (Cabiya 50, italics in the original). Isadore's comparison of what she witnessed to a *Tupperware Party* further emphasizes how Cabiya frames zombification in the context of capitalistic consumption: Placide *zonbi* are produced massively and sold in domestic spaces, just as any *Tupperware* product. By stating that her commotion and Valérie's are triggered by different reasons, Isadore emphasizes as well the difference in perspective between them, and between her and the guests of the party. Unlike everyone else in that house, Isadore can see herself in Gracieuse, in her skin color, which she has mentioned before is a problem with Valérie's parents when she visits (39). She realizes how close she is of *zonbi*, of being perceived as a tool for domestic work.

This episode is not only speaking about race and class divides in the Hispaniola social spheres, but also about gender. Gracieuse's gender plays a crucial role in that chapter as is the gender of the spectators. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson reminds us that "black female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of "the human" and its matrix-figure" (Jackson 3). The fact that Gracieuse, a zombified Black woman, is being sold to light-skin women highlights the divide in the gender experience of womanhood between

race and class status. Gracieuse's black skin and unkempt state mix with her gender and reinforce the other women's ability to separate their bodies, their flesh, with the *zonbi.* By choosing a female character being sold in a domestic space, Cabiya is reminding us of the Black woman's liminal place in the constitution of "human" in racist societies that Jackson focuses on. The episode shows where the "human" ends for these women and how marginal to the species a body such as Gracieuse is build up to become.

The way zombification is read and reacted to works differently with the protagonist of the novel, a white man who belongs to the higher class of Dominican society. As Maguire indicates, Placide's *zonbi* lacks conscience, but the *zonbi*-scientist does not: "Tacking back and forth between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, *Malas hierbas* plays with the contrast between conscious and unconscious zombie models to present the intertwined tales of two very different zombies" (3). Although we are not aware of how or why the protagonist ends up transformed into a *zonbi*, it is clear that his social status allows him to have a life that is very different from the one that awaits those like Gracieuse.

The *zonbi* protagonist uses his inheritance to fund his research to try and find the key behind zombification, and hopefully create a cure. His privilege allows him to think he has some control over the situation: "He is, in short, not only aware of his condition but convinced that he can control —and ultimately, to change — it" (5). He reflects a lot about simulacrum, appearance, and the trap behind it. In "Rojo", one of the chapters where he is the narrator, he asks himself about the "real" appearance of the world, about

whether or not there can be such thing as "real appearance" (Cabiya 28). As an explanation for this question, the *zonbi* proceeds to talk about the way human brains make sense of light stimuli:

> El color rojo es una respuesta neural al estímulo de ondas electromagnéticas sobre la retina; en otras palabras, se trata de una idea, una figuración. Una etiqueta que nuestro cerebro adhiere a esa parte del espectro visible que exhibe la mayor longitud de onda. Del rojo al violeta, en gradación descendente, nuestro cerebro distingue rangos según la distancia entre la cresta de una onda y la siguiente. Y para separar y señalar la experiencia de cada uno de estos rangos inventa una sensación: anaranjado, amarillo, verde, azul… la adscripción de cada cual es tan arbitraria como la creación de una palabra para designar un objeto cualquiera. Un color es, de hecho, una palabra, pero una palabra tan indeleblemente estampada sobre nuestra experiencia de lo real que no podemos imaginar que pudiera ser de otra manera. Pero podría serlo…
>
> [The color red is a neural response to a stimulus of electromagnetic waves on the retina. In other words: it is an idea, a figuration. A label that our brain sticks to that portion of the visible spectrum exhibited by the longest wave magnitude. From red to violet, in descending gradation, our brain distinguishes ranges depending on the distance between the crest of one wave to the other. And in order to separate and signal the experience of each of these ranges, it makes up a sensation: orange, yellow, green, blue…the ascription from each of them is as

> arbitrary as the creation of a word to designate any object. A color is, in fact, a word, but a word stamped in such an indelible way on our experience of reality that we cannot imagine it possibly be any other way. But it could be…] (Cabiya 27).

Here he explains the biological mechanisms —"neural responses"— that shape our perception of reality and our languaging nature's role in the process. He tells us that we built a narrative —"a label that our brains stick to that portion of the visible spectrum"—, which he calls a set of lies, of what exists around us, and even inside us, through the arbitrary translation of stimuli into language. Through the example of colors, the *zonbi* reflects on how we make sense of visual stimuli and he points out how pervasive our previous knowledge affects our reading of each one of these stimuli —"we cannot imagine it possibly be any other way".

By concluding that our way of making sense of reality through perception is biased by our previously acquired knowledge of it and our languaging nature, he also questions his nature and the difference between him and humans, given the similarities in their appearance: "Si me vieran por la calle a mí creerían que estoy vivo" [If someone saw me in the street they would think I am alive] (21). How can they not, he says, he looks so clean a life well-kept, if he embodies the image of a human, the desirable human of Dominican national narrative: a successful, wealthy, young light-skin man. As he tells us: to enjoy and profit from what his family left him, he only has to simulate being alive (32). He also relates how as soon as he emerged from his grave, he found soap and clean

water and washed himself. He also let us know that his family's wealth allowed them to buy the best coffin in the market, so his body was not attacked by any critter while he was inside (21). This is the complete opposite of Placide's *zonbi* whose zombification not only stems from Placide's own traumatic experience but is in itself a very violent process as we see with Gracieuse: as she and her friends enter into the *zonbi* village, she touches something and is held captive by the inhabitants of the place who seem indifferent to her cries for help (175). No luxury coffin, no soap, no inheritance.

This means that the difference between the protagonist and *zonbi* like Gracieuse not only lies, as Maguire tells us, in their conscious or unconscious state, but also class and race status —based on visual cues—, and how they play in a particular national narrative. Gracieuse could not have, even if conscious, walked around in a zombified state in the Dominican Republic without being read as undesirable. Just the tone of her skin will constitute an impediment since it would immediately provoke questions about her origin and social status. The *zonbi* is "emblematic of enslavement" ("Blankness, alienation, and the zombie…" 178): it represents an individual stripped of agency that can be exploited for someone else's profit. Therefore, it is attributed to those bodies usually assumed as connected to enslavement.

This is what happens to Isadore as she is being interrogated by the police after her boss's murder. One of the agents asks her about her nationality and, although she responds she is Dominican, he refuses to let the matter go because of her skin tone. For him, this makes her Dominicanism impossible (59). Even if this is an issue of nationality

and origin, in the context of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, it is tied to skin color and racial narratives of discrimination. By the time of the publication of *Malas hierbas* the constitution of the Dominican Republic had already been changed to deny nationality to all born from Haitian parents, regardless of place of birth (Taylor 70). Although Isadore comes from a more privileged background than Gracieuse —which is evident in the fact that her father Pascal manages to avoid Gracieuse's destiny in Placide's village even if both of them were captured the night of their adventure, otherwise Isadore would not exist or be in the Dominican Republic at all— she descends from Haitians and has dark skin, and so she is constantly questioned about her real place in the Dominican society while her boss, a literal *zonbi*, is treated the same as before his zombification. Isadore even recounts how she was aware of her difference in status because of her skin tone since a young age: when telling the story of the macabre *Tupperware Party* she mentions how her host's parents, light-skin Haitians, disapprove of her friendship with Isadore, with whom they might share a nationality, but not the social class "that is the same as saying skin tone" (39). As I mentioned before, she can see herself in Gracieuse and understands how she is perceived by those around her in the Dominican Republic.

Through the use of the trope of the *zonbi kò kadav*, Cabiya achieves to show the social and racial dynamics between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. With the different reactions of humans to *zonbi* with different skin tones and nationalities, we can see how embedded the narrative of a white-purity is in Dominican national narratives. Some bodies can and should be zombified, while others get the privilege of passing as humans

without having to prove it because whiteness is read as equal to purity. This reminds us of the visual and racial politics of HIV/AIDS, still present in our culture today that imagines Haiti as one of the sites of the virus and Haitians as naturally infected with HIV, according to the vision of the country, as a place of death and contagion (*The Zombie in Contemporary*… 3).

Although the *zonbi* tells us "Para los vivos no somos más que una horripilante fuente de infección" [For the living we aren't but a horrific source of infection] (Cabiya 97), the novel proves this is not completely true as it only applies to those who look like *zonbi.* He seems unaware of his privilege, attributing the success of his human simulation to his ability to act correctly and clean his body, but never acknowledges his skin color or class as defining factors in people's perception of him. This is, perhaps, the biggest divide between him and Isadore as narrators: he theorizes *zonbi* as something unrelated to politics, but Isadore is aware of the deep connection between race and class politics and zombification. Cabiya is not solely using the zombie trope to denounce the racist dynamics of the Dominican Republic, but reflecting on perception and the ways it is affected by our preconceived ideas and experience

Sleepwalkers and insomniacs

Gracieuse's eyes are, according to Isadore, the most horrific part of her *zonbi* aspect: they look unfocused, lack pupils, and have no eyelids (Cabiya 47). Previous to her detailed study of the *zonbi* or zombie in *The Zombie in Contemporary French Caribbean Fiction*,

Lucy Swanson published an article on the gaze of zombies analyzing this very characteristic factor of their appearance in mainstream media. Swanson tells us that even if the *zonbi* or zombie trope differs on some level in each context "representations of the corporeal zombie across cultural traditions and generic boundaries are characterized by a key physical trait: the blank stare" ("Blankness, alienation, and the zombie" 178). Following the common saying that the eyes are windows to people's souls, this representation of *zonbi* and zombies as creatures with a blank gaze represents their lack of a soul, their dead state. As Cabiya's *zonbi* claims, *zonbi*/zombies have no soul (Cabiya 91). This focus on the *zonbi* and zombie blank stare ties it up to another common trait of the trope: somnambulism. Because of the slow motions and lack of a focused stare of typical zombies in media, the trope has been represented many times in a way that evokes or is directly connected to sleep-walking (*The Zombie in Contemporary*… 166).

Unlike the *zonbi kò kadav*, sleepwalkers come in and out of their somnambulistic state multiple times in a lifetime: they simply fall asleep or wake up, with no need for black and white powders. Somnambulism, sleep-walking, is particularly interesting since it generates motion in the body that is not responding to the visual stimuli present in the space where it is moving, but to the stimuli created by the mind itself during a dream. A person looking at a sleepwalker will have access to a reality that is very different from the one the sleepwalker is perceiving at that moment. This means the agency of the person who is moving while dreaming is determined by what they see in their dream. If the *zonbi kò kadav* actions were determined by the *zonbi* master, for the sleepwalker it is their mind

playing the role of the puppeteer, but following cues that it is creating in the dream state and not one it is picking from the outside. This is why the second avatar I will be exploring in this chapter is the sleepwalker, even when not directly called "zombie". If an individual's actions are determined by an illusion of stimuli created by their brain, their reaction to the toxins surrounding them will change as the dream will determine how they perceive them, sometimes with fatal consequences. Also, the delirium of the dream is sometimes the consequence of prolonged exposure to the toxins of a polluted environment, making sleepwalkers another interesting zombie trope for the study of the role of toxins and their effects in narrative texts.

Vigilia is plagued by numerous passages where someone tells horror legends from the areas surrounding the city. Some of them are actual legends from the Colombian Caribbean that Sánchez Russo recuperates in her novel, and some are made up by her. One of those first ones is the legend of the ghosts of the railway, whose origin resonates curiously with the trope of the zombie as an epidemic that creates hordes of mindless sleepwalkers: "…hubo una época en que a las vías del ferrocarril que atravesaban la Zona Bananera llegaban sonámbulos que languidecían ahí y despertaban en el más allá" [there was a time when sleepwalkers arrived to the railway tracks that crossed the Banana Zone, languished there and woke up in the afterlife] (Sánchez Russo 112). This unexplainable epidemic of somnambulism, attributed to the evil spirit of a woman who seduced the victims, caused the death of many in the 1950's and created the legend of the haunting of the now abandoned railway tracks by the ghost of those who died sleepwalking in them

("Historias de Ultratumba…"). As with Placide's *zonbi*, these ghosts are connected to the trauma of the plantation system in the Caribbean since the Banana Zone this legend refers to is the area in the Magdalena department of Colombia where the United Fruit Company committed the Banana Massacre —mentioned in Colombian Nobel price Gabriel García Márquez most famous novel *Cien años de soledad*— in 1928 to put an end to the banana workers strike that had been going for a month.

The connection to the trauma of the macabre business of the banana plantations of United Fruit Company and, therefore, to the plantation system economy is made much more clear when in that same paragraph they talk about another legend tied to the first one: "…en esos años existió un hombre blanquísismo, casi transparente, que en un tablado de su mansión llevaba a cabo sacrificios para multiplicar su riqueza. ¿Qué sacrificaba? Peones de fincas adyacentes. ¿A quién los sacrificaba? Al demonio de la banana" [Back then there was a man so white that was almost translucent. This man used to perform sacrifices on a platform in his mansion to multiply his wealth. What did he sacrifice? Workers from neighboring estates. Who did he sacrifice them to? To the banana demon] (Sánchez Russo 112-113). As with the sleepwalkers of the railway tracks, the tale of this man is a real legend from the area. The mansion of the man who supposedly sacrificed workers for wealth is a touristic sight of the city of Ciénaga in the Magdalena department of Colombia, and it is called "La Casa del Diablo", the Devil's House ("Historias de Ultratumba…").

The emphasis on the man's white skin —"blanquísimo, casi transparente"— takes us back to the relationship between class and race that we already saw in Cabiya's novel and sets up the stage for the politics of race present in banana plantations. Like in the Dominican Republic, in Colombia's Banana Zone skin tone was significant in one's role in the plantations: Ciénaga, the city of Magdalena where this evil man lived was originally an indigenous village, and by the time the UFCO arrived, was filled of mixed-race Colombians supporters of the Liberal Party who had fled from other parts of the country because of the political persecution they faced (LeGrand 21). The arrival of the UFCO around 1900 led to the privatization of the land in the Magdalena, as well as an increase in its market value, inviting foreigners, usually white men from the United States, to invest there (22). Some white and wealthy families from the department's capital, Santa Marta, and the prosperous city of Aracataca were offered credits by the company to buy land and plant bananas in it (Idem). Ciénaga stayed mostly a small planter's zone but received a significant flux of Italian and Jewish migration that changed the demography of land-owners (26).

This means that, although 90% of the banana workers were Colombian (24), the ethnical and national distribution of land and economic power was inclined in favor of foreigners, especially from the UFCO who offered credits to independent landowners. The strike was provoked by the alliance between small landowners and the workers of the plantation who pleaded for the nationalization of the railway and the irrigation channels, but the UFCO stopped most attempts from the central government to do this (27). This

and other unjust UFCO policies led to the strike that ended when the military murdered the strikers in favor of the foreign company.

If in the case of Placide's *zonbi* there was the black powder and the hugely toxic cashew plants to make zombification and entrapment possible, in the case of both the railway sleepwalkers and the evil man from Ciénaga we have the banana plantations. In both cases, there is a matter of greed that triggers the traumatic events that seem to give origin to zombification, in the latter case represented by somnambulism, because such greed calls for a cheap and meek workforce to produce the means for economic benefit. Because zombification is emblematic of slavery, as I mentioned before, the fact that there is a legend about hordes of sleepwalkers who go to die in one of the symbols of the UFCO exploitation of the area and its people resonates with other iterations of *zonbi*/ zombies from the Caribbean. Although Sánchez Russo does not mention zombification at any time when using these legends in her novel, the close relationship sleepwalking, plantation systems, and epidemics have to the *zonbi*/zombie trope makes it relevant to this analysis.

There is another mention of somnambulism, years before the protagonist is told the two legends I already mentioned. This time it is Luzmila, the woman working as a cleaner and nanny at the protagonist's childhood home, who talks about it while telling the protagonist about her sister who sleepwalks back in their birth village. One day the protagonist is sitting at the edge of the house's pool with her feet on the water and her eyes closed, meditating. Luzmila asks her if she is awake and adds: "Por un momento

pensé que estabas como mi hermana. A veces, en la madrugada, camina dormida por el pueblo y los borrachos que se quedan despiertos le gritan que esté loca y se totean de risa. Pero si uno de ellos va para la casa ahí mismito se la llevan. La devuelven a donde el esposo, que la mete enseguida a la regadera para limpiar el barro que cogió por la calle" [For a moment I thought you were like my sister. Sometimes, in the early morning, she sleepwalks around her village, and the drunk men who have stayed awake scream at her that she is crazy and burst out laughing. But if one of them is going back home they take her immediately. They return her to her husband, who puts her under the shower right then to take off the mud she collected on the street] (Sánchez Russo 34). The protagonist answers that Luzmila's sister must be a somnambulist and Luzmila replies dismissively "she must". It is important here to notice it is not Luzmila who throws out a diagnosis for her sister's condition, she only refers to sleepwalking as "the thing that happens to my sister". It is the protagonist who suggests somnambulism as an explanation which immediately ends the conversation, as if Luzmila had other things to say that she saves for herself after hearing the certainty in the young woman's voice. The ambiguity of her silence becomes more complex by the end when, as she reads the manuscript the protagonist has written on their lives, she admonishes her for including the story of her sister and says it is a lie: "que no se trataba de una hermana sino de una tía, no, ni siquiera una tía sino una amiga cercana" [that it was not a sister, but an aunt, no, not even an aunt but a close friend] (208). Although we will never know the truth, the fact that she keeps changing the version from a sister to an aunt, to a close friend, tells us

she is distancing herself more and more from the sleepwalker in the story, as if not doing so might make others see her as the people at the village see the sleepwalker woman.

These legends and Luzmila's anecdote do not exist in a vacuum in the text, they serve the purpose of setting the scene for more subtle elements so we can read them through the lens of what they tell us: they are the stimuli our brains translate into a narrative that will then be our map to make sense of what the protagonist tells us. Luzmila has seen her sister, or someone she knows, sleepwalk and it is that experience that drives her to suspect, once she sees the protagonist by the pool in the early morning and with her eyes closed, that she is also sleepwalking. We, as readers, go through the same process after reading about different cases of sleepwalking: when another character behaves in a way that reminds us of those stories, we read them as cases of somnambulism. The episode where Luzmila questions the veracity of the anecdote —and of other things we just read through the novel— only makes the role of those stories more evident, since we become aware thanks to Luzmila's critics that what we have read is indeed the manuscript the protagonist has gave her. Whether what she recounts there is true or not is not the point, but the fact that she is building through her narrative a certain version, a way of seeing what happened to her and the people in her life. She is giving us a lens to interpret her life.

This is the case of Tomás, the protagonist's husband, who, I argue, is described by his wife as a sleepwalker zombie because of his behavior. After being forced into working at his father-in-law's plastic factory, Tomás, a biologist and activist for the

environment, changes completely: he lives in a constant lethargy (20), stops talking or engaging with the family, and, more importantly, his eyes lack spark, as if he were not there (22). Here, we encounter once again the vacant stare tied to an individual who seems to be dead and alive at the same time just after he is forced to work at someone else's business with elements toxic to humans, in this case, plastic. The protagonist points out this lack of life in her husband's eyes more than once talking about how he looks at her without seeing her or how he throws uninterested and unengaged stares at their babies (110). This way, she connects his behavior to the ones in the legends and anecdotes she drops now and then in the text: he is there, but not really and she cannot reach him anymore. She also gives away the subjectivity of her claims at some points of the narrative, like just after affirming her husband seems like a living dead: "Creo que fue así. No estoy segura de si fue así. Fue así. Punto" [I think that is what happened. I am not sure if that is what happened. It is what happened. Period.] (Idem). Just like in Cabiya's novel, we had the tension between real *zonbi* who either looked like it or not, in Sánchez Russo we have humans who look like zombies and are described as such but are never confirmed to be zombified.

As the protagonist builds up her husband's zombie character in the text, she also, perhaps without noticing, does it for herself as well. Suffering from chronic insomnia, her experiences at night blur the line between reality and fantasy, which she describes as a dangerous line (20), as she jumps from a state of half-sleep to being awake, mixing what she sees in both, trapped in the process until the morning comes (19-20). She describes

herself as confined in a past that inexplicably affects her present (Idem) and that seems to be the only thing available as she cannot anticipate any kind of future for her or her family (25).

She also mentions a recurrent dream that she has in this state of vigil: she tours a house, supposedly her own, and encounters members of her family, from her dead brother Federico to her husband (133). Although this is technically a dream, it is reminiscent of the somnambulism of other characters since she has already set the stage for us, readers, to doubt what happens in her mind and what is part of her insomniac state, and since she is dreaming of walking around, mindlessly, without a clear objective and without knowing why is she there or what she wants. As she claims about the difference between her dreams and reality: "de alguna manera esa realidad [el sueño] parecía más exacta que el camino a tientas de un espacio a otro, palpando objetos, adivinando la distancia entre mi cuerpo y las paredes, o las puertas de entrada y salida" [in some ways that reality [the dream] seemed more exact than the groping my way from one space to the other, touching objects, guessing the distance between my own body and the walls, or the entering and exit doors] (149). This description of reality, of what she experiences once she is awake, not only reminds us of her recurrent dream of touring a house but also turns the idea of reality/fantasy around by claiming that it seems less exact, less real, than dreams. This is interesting given the fact that she emphasizes the contrast between light and darkness, and therefore between vision and blindness, in her comparison of both

states: when awake, she has to feel her way through the house because she cannot see anything at nighttime, but her dreams are usually filled with light (134).

However, one could ask the question of what causes her and her husband's apparent zombie state. In all the previous cases there was a link between the *zonbi*/ zombie state and some kind of toxic environment or substance. But, how could they be victims of the same fate as the others when living surrounded by such luxury, away from all plantations? Well, when one follows carefully the narrative the protagonist offers it is possible to find answers to this question. In Tomás case it seems easier since his wife points out directly that he changed when he started working in the plastic warehouse her father owns (21). His change, represented mostly by his blank stare, seems directly tied to the exposition of plastic, a substance that he not only detests because of his principles and his training as a biologist but is also known to be highly toxic, and also a substance covering all the beaches of the area in the form of residue and as decoration (191).

Still, plastic is not the only toxic substance mentioned by the narrator, nor the only one we could tie to her zombie-like state or her husband's. Barranquilla and its surroundings are described in the text as a toxic area, not only in the present when the protagonist and Tomás come back to her parent's home but also in the past. Barranquilla is portrayed as "una ciudad que, siglos atrás, fue abaste ida de inmigrantes que se adaptaron al Caribe, porque solo aquí pudo erigirse una colonia tan perfecta y duradera" [a city that, centuries back, was stocked with immigrants that adapted to the Caribbean because only here could such a perfect and durable colony stand up] (41).

Although Barranquilla was never a colonial city per se, the flux of white European migration created a particular elite that followed the classist and racist parameters of coloniality to the letter. Even if the protagonist and her husband are not on a plantation, they live surrounded by its benefits and consequences: those luxuries none of them seem able to escape from (118) would not be there if it were not for the economic system of the city that benefits from foreign investing and is always kinder to the powerful families of its elite, "never constituted by hybridity, but by repetition of an eternal lineage" (156, my translation). A profoundly exploitative and capitalistic environment, Barranquilla and its surroundings as described in *Vigilia* are proof of the pervasiveness of the plantation system even where colonial powers never officially stood.

This city is not only deeply racist and stratified but also alarmingly polluted by capitalistic consumption. The narrator explains it through what she names the monstrous system of the Colombian Caribbean:

> …los problemas de esta ciudad jamás cambian ni terminan: si acaso se trasladan a otras zonas mientras la ciudad *engulle* pueblos aledaños para *engrandecerse*; si acaso se *deforman* para emitir, en nuevos cuerpos, mensajes atávicos […] que ese tipo de construcciones se alcen sobre calles que no las resisten es, en realidad, una pequeñísima muestra de cómo creamos bolas de nieve en el Caribe: amontonando *irregularidad tras irregularidad*, esperando que lo sólido y luminoso provenga únicamente de lo *oscuro y enclenque*; yuxtaponiendo *errores e impulsos* […] La esencia [del Caribe] que se quiere jovial y estricta al tiempo; *devoradora* y justa;

la esencia que condona cualquier comportamiento con tal de mantenerse en pie. [The problems of this city never change or end: if anything the move to other areas while the city *gobble up* neighboring villages to grow, or they *deform* themselves to produce, in new bodies, atavistic messages […] that those constructions stand up on streets that cannot support them is, truly, a small proof of how we create snowball effects in the Caribbean: pilling up *irregularity after irregularity*, hoping that the strong and luminous emerges from the *dark and weak*; juxtaposing *errors and impulses* […] The essence [of the Caribbean] that presents itself both as jovial and strict; *devourer* and fair; the essence that condones any behavior in order to stay standing] (173-174, my italics)

In this quote, the semantic field of monstrosity stands out in the protagonist's description of the Colombian Caribbean and Barranquilla: a devouring force, that wants to be perfect and shiny but is deformed and deadly; an ever-growing force reminiscent of the zombie horde as understood by Cabiya's *zonbi*: the representation of the horrific fear of being consumed and transformed by hordes of irrational and fetid beings (Cabiya 96).

As the description of Barranquilla continues, the narrator makes the connection between that massive and destructive monster, that is, she says, the essence of the Colombian Caribbean, and slavery and racism:

Se tapan, para ello [para mantenerse en pie], las heridas más profundas; se esconden bajo capas y capas de discursos y ondas de radio y televisión y aparatos móviles, se esconden hasta que lo vivo los sepulta. Si no hay cupo debajo de la

tierra, por encima de ella se yuxtaponen pilas de cuerpos heridos hasta que dejan de tener sentido. ¡Son tantas! Tantas pilas con tantos cuerpos que ya ninguna se entiende y es que es mucho trabajo siquiera entender. Otro ejemplo del sistema-monstruo puede encontrarse en la falta de memoria sobre el mercado de esclavos que existió a solo media hora de la ciudad. Es verdad que como testimonio de ese mercado están las zonas rurales donde se instalaron los negros que escaparon […] Sin embargo, al tiempo que se conserva —por las minorías— esa isla en medio de la tierra, las construcciones de la ciudad mantienen, detrás de sus cortinas diseñadas en poliuterano, una habitación del servicio en donde duerme una mujer (Luzmila) cuya tarea es la de consumir el sucio que los patrones sueltan. [To ensure that it stays standing, the most deep wounds are covered: covered by layers and layers of discourses and waves of radio, television and mobile devices, covered until the living buries them. If there is no space underground, on top if it piles and piles of wounded bodies are juxtaposed until it makes no sense. ¡There are so many! So many piles of bodies that none of them makes sense anymore and just trying to make sense of them is so much work. Another example of the monster-system can be found in the lack of memory about the slave market that existed just an hour and a half away from the city. It is true that as a testimony of this market there are the rural areas where Black people who fled it settled […] However, at the same time as the minorities keep this island in the middle of the land, the buildings of the city keep, behind their polyurethane designed kitchens, a

service room where a woman (Luzmila) sleeps. A woman whose job is to consume the dirt released by the boss]. (Sánchez Russo 174)

Through the grotesque image of the mass of bodies that reminds so much of the zombie horde —"just trying to make sense of them is so much work"— the narrator takes us to the link between the current state of the city and its monstrous dynamic and colonial past. Slavery and the countless Black bodies it cumulated might be forgotten by the inhabitants of Barranquilla and hidden at the visible surface of its landscape, but it permeates the architecture of their society in the form of the tiny service room present in all apartments of the upper classes. Unconscious, mechanical, automated, like a giant sleepwalker, and at the service of the new iterations of the plantation —urban, in this case—, the colonial and racist rhythm of Barranquilla is in itself zombie-like but hides from the naked eye with shiny and luxurious structures almost successfully until the rain season comes and brings back all its residue and true nature. Trapped in a dream of a shiny, neat, and beautiful landscape, the people of the city sleepwalk through pollution, waste, death, and exploitation waking up only when the rain comes. Once again, as with the protagonist's own experience of her vigil state, luminous and shiny are connected to what is perceived as an illusion by her, while darkness and impossibility to see, is understood as real and tangible.

The zombifying powder in this case is, then, this polluted environment and its shiny facade. I say polluted both in a conceptual and a material sense: the city is not only based on its past and present violence but also billions of corpses —they reappear with

every rain season (54 and 173), floating around the city, filling the beaches at dawn and the newspaper pages every morning (191)— and garbage. Every flood carries all imaginable objects of urban life, from furniture to car parts and guns that people throw away every time it rains as part of the consumerist logic of buying and throwing to buy again (54). Barranquilla is also surrounded by shanty towns where plastic and garbage are a central part of the landscape (122) as another example of the link between pollution and the stratified society that inhabits the area.

The protagonist and her husband are then exposed to, and actively participate in, all this hidden but strongly toxic pollution. In her memories of her childhood, she swims in green, jelly-like pools; her family is awakened every night by the smoke of burned mangroves and has to navigate the myriad of discarded objects floating on the streets on rainy days. Breathing, drinking, and watching this zombifying powder they end up sleepwalking, lacking desire, with blank stares and an unbreakable silence. Trapped in this urban zombie town, so similar to Placide's in its essence even if not in its appearance, by the access to luxury, a warm bed, the convenience of Luzmila's service, and the relief of the family's wealth. Like the railway sleepwalkers, the protagonist and Tomás walk mindlessly to their death, following the rhythm of the Plantationocene.

The evil shape-shifting demon

In her study of zombie avatars, Swanson also delves into the iteration of the trope that exists in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Not a living-dead body, but an evil spirit, this

zombie can shape-shift at its will and lead anyone wandering at night to a certain death (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 6-7). Unlike the Haitian *zonbi* or the Hollywood walking-dead hordes, this zombie does not come from human bodies nor adopt human-like looks at all times, but its power lies in its ability to trick people by changing its appearance.

Vigilia by Sánchez Russo has a shape-shifting murderous spirit who takes the life of those wandering the beaches at night. This is the same creature the white owner of a plantation sacrificed workers to in order to maintain his wealth. Called the Banana Demon, once again referencing the macabre legacy of the banana plantation, this zombie appears in the legends the protagonist hears about the area she inhabits. She is told the story of two boys who wander the beach at night when they are supposed to be back at home for dinner:

> …los chicos paseaban tranquilos por la orilla, cuando notaron un cerdo rosa con vetas negras que había comenzado a seguirlos. El animal, en un principio, les pareció inofensivo […] Pero después de más o menos treinta minutos, cuando los muchachos estaban por emprender le camino de regreso, en un microsegundo en que uno desaceleró el paso para contestarle algo al otro, ¡chaz!, el animal le mordió la parte posterior de la pierna derecha a la altura del muslo, le arrancó un pedazo de carne y, mientras estaba paralizado por el dolor, ¡chaz!, atacó por segunda vez. El amigo del herido no se atrevió a auxiliarlo, aunque sí corrió […] para pedir ayuda. Cuando volvió con varios hombres al lugar de los hechos […]

> encontraron solo huesos, y los hombres, al examinarlos, coincidieron en que eran humanos y en que el ataque no había sido ocasionado por un cerdo, sino por el demonio que cada tanto disimulaba su forma para saciar el hambre. [The boys wandered calmly at the shore when they noticed a pink pig with black highlights that had started to follow them. At first, the animal seemed harmless […] but after about half an hour when the boys started going back, in a microsecond as one decelerated to answer something to the other, zap!, the animal bit the posterior part of his right leg by the thight, tore of a piece of meat and, as the boy was paralyzed by pain, zap!, the pig attacked a second time. The friend of the wounded boy did not dare to help him, but did run […] to find help. When he came back with several men to the place of the attack […] they only found bones and, after examining them, the men agreed they were human and that the attack had not been caused by a pig, but by the demon that concealed his shape to satisfy his hunger] (Sánchez Russo 113).

Thanks to his pig appearance, the demon manages to seem harmless to the two boys until he is close enough to attack. The darkness of the night and solitude of the beach play in his favor, as the men explain to the surviving boy since he will never attack when someone is watching (114).

Besides its similarity with the Antillean zombie avatar identified by Swanson, the image of the demonic pig is reminiscent of a similar vision at Placide's *zonbi* village in Cabiya's novel. Isadore's ancestor sees "a maroon pig the size of a horse" mounted by a

kid whose hand is on fire (Cabiya 173). The maroon pig, a black or brown species introduced to the Caribbean by Spanish colonizers is directly tied to the history of the fight against slavery because of the wild and free nature that made domestication extremely difficult. Once again, the connection between the plantation system and the zombie avatars is highlighted in the texts, in this case through the vision of an emblematic species. The existence of the Banana Demon seems to be caused by the violent plantation system put in place in the Magdalena department and it is what kept him fed thanks to the multiple sacrifices performed by the white man. He only survives thanks to darkness and the community's common accord that he must be fed (Sánchez Russo 114), another iteration of the cumulation of bodies that sustain the Caribbean societies described in the novel.

Even though it appears only briefly in *Vigilia*, the shape-shifting demon is, of all the avatars I have and will discuss in this chapter, the most dependent on visual tricks. Even if nobody truly knows his real aspect, the demon always makes sure he is seen as harmless until it's too late to run and he always attacks at night without witnesses. We are told he is modest (Idem) and he hides from peering eyes while continuing the bloody legacy of the banana plantations. That the protagonist chooses to tell us about this legend can be understood as a warning sign to distrust what we see as it can not only trick us but even kill us, just as the monstrous city of Barranquilla does to the protagonist and her family, seducing them with luxuries and beauty to trap them forever in a vigil state. The consequences of the Platationocene can shape-shift so they seem harmless, a friendly pig

looking for company, but will eventually eat us alive violently so we go join the mass of bodies it has already consumed in one way or the other.

Zonbi astral or spirit of the dead

The last avatar I have identified in these texts is the *zonbi astral*: "The counterpart to the Haitian corporeal or bodily zombie is the spirit zombie or *zonbi astral*. This zombie is described as consisting of the *bon anj*, the portion of the soul that is stolen to make the *kò kadav*" (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 6). The protagonist of *Vigilia* says she is trapped in the past, a past tied to the death of her brother Federico at the *ciénaga*. She confesses feeling his presence everywhere, even in her twin babies whom she constantly sees as the reincarnation of Federico (Sánchez Russo 19, 135, and 189), making it seem like his soul still inhabits and haunts the house, trapping her with him.

Although the haunting alone is not enough to connect Federico's incorporeal presence to a *zonbi astral*, there are once again hints in the narration linking him to the living dead trope. Here I want to reiterate that my objective is not to claim that Sánchez Russo is writing a zombie tale, but that some aspects of the trope permeate her building of how the protagonist makes sense of her trauma, the polluted environment of her city, and the consequences of the constant exposure to toxins. Most of this is invisible to the naked eye, except perhaps for the occasions when the river brings all the city's residues to the surface, and she resorts to folk legends and the supernatural to shape it in a coherent and manageable way. This is exactly the role that the zombie trope has had in our history,

as Lauro explains: "the zombie […] has come to be legible as a *global mythology* and interpolated in society n*early as a symbol, a kind of icon of disempowerment* that can be made to *signify everything* from distrust of the government to fears of terrorist attack or viral pandemic to suspicion of science or *a critique of consumerism*" (Lauro 9, my italics). Sánchez Russo's critique of the Colombian Caribbean society, its colonial past that permeated the present, and its capitalistic consumerism, inserts itself in this tradition of resorting to the image of the living dead to represent the toxic and traumatic reality of the characters.

As I mentioned, even before his postmortem haunting of his sister, Federico embodies what Lauro calls the "zombie dialectics," meaning the fact that the zombie trope represents the unity of opposites: "of living death, of singularity/plurality, of enslavement/rebellion" (5). A fragile, sick boy who from his birth was "flirting with death" (Sánchez Russo 152), Federico is always clean and well dressed while his room is kept chaotic and dirty (66). His father claims he is turning into a *marica,* "pussy," and so in his sister's memories, he embodies both the feminine and the masculine. He is even, according to her, obsessed with death to the point where he throws tantrums when he thinks of it: "Mi hermano nunca se ve tan vivo como cuando se piensa muerto" [Mi brother never seems more alive than when he thinks himself dead] (38). If his sister embodies the blur between a waken and asleep state, Federico does for the blur between a living and dead one. His cleanliness represents his almost dead state as if the narrator was aware of the connection between death and sterility.

One of the characteristics of the *zonbi astral* is that it usually comes back to cause disease and destruction, as a virus, infecting bodies, animals or plants, where it goes. This is the case of Federico in *Vigilia*, whose haunting presence in the house seems not only to invade the waken and sleepy mind of his sister but also his mother to the point she has been almost bedridden since his death without any apparent sickness afflicting her (171). According to the protagonist, Federico and their mother had always been connected, as if the umbilical cord had never been cut. She describes them as a two-headed monster embodying both strength and weakness, health and sickness, infinitude and finitude (87). Describing her mother as sick and bedridden, the protagonist makes visible the haunting absence of her dead brother, turning it into an infectious and deadly possession of the inhabitants of the house. Throughout the novel, the protagonist sets a game of mirrors, of doubles, where Federico is the face of every reflection, and that materializes in her having twins that look nothing like their father, but a lot like her brother. This seems to be the catch trapping the protagonist and her mother in the house: just like the shape-shifting demon of the banana uses the shape of a pig to seem innocent and trick people into approaching him, all the echoes of Federico's face seduce his family into not wanting to wake up from the stupor his death has induced them to.

As *zonbi astral* has also been said to invade people's dreams and suck their vital force (*The Zombie in Contemporary…* 142), Federico seems to be the cause of the protagonist's recurrent dream of the big house and vigil state of remembering: always penetrated by her brother's presence. Her hopelessness for the future and entrapment in

the past also means she loses her vital force and starts acting more and more like a dead person. Poisoned by Federico's spiritual presence, the protagonist and her mother get swallowed by the luxurious house, by the guilt of their compliance to a system that drowned the boy even before he fell into the water and stopped breathing.

Her and her mother's trauma is better understood once one learns they witnessed the loss of the boy. Federico's death at the *ciénaga* ties once again the question of the visual to the effects of the toxic by increasing the effect of the boy's haunting of his family to them watching him disappear:

> Federico, en el entretanto, sigue rascándose con furia, y noto que en ciertas partes de su cuerpo ha comenzado a brotar sangre. Lo abrazo para inmovilizarlo y me percato de que su corazón palpita más rápido que cuando corre detrás del perro en el jardín, y que, en paralelo, el río también palpita, fluye como la sangre, y comienzo a pensar que el cuerpo de mi hermano y el cuerpo del río se conectan y se confunden. El río, pútrido y viscoso al principio, espeso en las vertientes, platinado cuando se pierden sus orillas, es como mi hermano, luminoso y oscuro. Federico le pide a mamá que lo mire, se lo pide a gritos, y ella escucha, pero igual no hace caso […] la nube de insectos se acrecienta y mi hermano vibra y se desprende con una fuerza de la que jamás lo hubiera pensado capaz. Antes de que pueda atraparlo, se oye un golpe seco, y Federico cae o se lanza al río, y después de unos segundos sin poder atisbarlo comienza su búsqueda… [Meanwhile, Federico keeps scratching himself furiously and I notice that blood is coming out

> from certain parts of his body. I hug him to keep him still and I notice that his heart is beating quicker than when he runs after the dog at the backyard and that, parallel to it, the river also beats, fluctuating like blood. I start thinking that my brother's body and the river's are connected and mixed. The river, putrid and viscous at the beginning, thick at the slopes, platinum when its shores are lost, is like my brother, luminous and dark. Federico ask our mother to look at him, he asks her screaming and she hears, but ignores him […] the cloud of insects grows and my brother vibrates and breaks free with a strength that I would have never think he had. Before I can catch him, there is a dry blow and Federico falls or throws himself to the river. After a few seconds of not seeing him, the search begins…] (Sánchez Russo 202-203).

The vision the protagonist describes of the river emulating her brother's body and the later impossibility of seeing him once he is in the water reinforces her impression of something supernatural and obscure happening at the *ciénaga*. This is probably what strengthens her obsession, her constant finding of Federico in everything alive around her. Also, Federico's last plead to be seen by his mother explains why they cannot stop seeing him afterward in every object and subject of the house. Just like with the other zombies in Sánchez Russso's novel, Federico goes to die and disappears at a place where trauma and violence are central: the *ciénaga* is where the famous "pescas milagrosas," a famous method of kidnapping in Colombia, are happening then. Federico's fusion with

the polluted and blood-stained river, as well as the loss of his body to the waters, makes his dead part of the ecosystem of violence and toxicity present in the Magdalena River.

At the end of the novel, Luzmila claims the body was indeed found immediately after the boy drowned. Still, the protagonist's tale says otherwise covering the episode in a veil of mystery that opens the door to interpretations such as the possibility of supernatural outcomes, supported by Federico's apparent fusion with the river and the lack of visual proof of either his death or his survival. Joining the giant mass of bodies the violent environment of the area has claimed, Federico then becomes a spiritual and invisible presence, haunting and possessing his mother and sister —and by extension her twins— to the point of draining them of any vital force. When alive, he is the disruptor of the *status quo* at home, the river, that same river where he fuses with at the end, that brings back all the waste and pollution to the city's surface with every storm —tantrum—. Interestingly and as a continuation of his embodiment of the "zombie dialectics", he then becomes both the image of his sister's entrapment, the reason for the compliance to the *status quo* that harmed him so much, and a parallel that explains Tomás transformation as they both stray away from society's strict gender norms.

Zonbi goute sel

The Haitian proverb that gives this chapter its name, *zonbi goute sèl*, nudges to an important question around the zombie trope: the cure, the white powder Papa Vincent keeps after he and Placide part ways. The belief that this proverb is talking about says

that if a *zonbi* tastes salt they will wake up and realize they are dead which causes them to turn against their master (Lauro 124), which is why all food given to *zonbi* must be saltless. The importance of the cure is not only key for the trope in general, but also in the case of the novels I have been analyzing in this chapter: Cabiya's protagonists are looking for it in the laboratory and theorize about it through the pages, drawing from different traditions and possibilities; Sánchez Russo's characters are not thinking about zombification, but the protagonist does seem to look for a way out of the inert state her and her family are currently at. Both novels hint at one or more answers to the question of such a cure, to where to find that salt that will awaken the zombified once and for all.

During the police interview Isadore is subjected to in *Malas hierbas*, the agents reveal that her boss suffered from a rare mental illness called the Cotard Syndrome which would seem to give a scientific explanation to his *zonbi* experience:

> Heredero de una fortuna desmesurada, pero afectado desde hace veinte años por el Síndrome de Cotard. ¿Lo conoce? […] la desconexión emocional no afecta sólo el reconocimiento de rostros amados… La desconexión emocional afecta el reconocimiento de absolutamente todo… *incluyéndose a sí mismo.* ¿La historia que inventa el cerebro para explicar la situación? "Debo estar muerto y putrefacto". [Heir of an excessive fortune, but affected for twenty years by the Cotard Syndrome. Do you know of it? […] the emotional disconnect not only affects the ability to recognize the faces of loved ones…The emotional disconnect also affects the ability to recognize absolutely everything…*including one self.*

¿The story that the brain makes up to explain the situation? "I must be dead and putrid"] (Cabiya 232, italics in the original).

The agent tells Isadore that her boss was some kind of Don Quixote, filled with horror tales he made up a delirious narrative to explain his perception of the world. This would be coherent with the protagonist's statement of the mechanisms the brain uses to make sense of the visual stimuli it receives in the chapter "Rojo". However, one must not forget what the novel itself has shown up to that point: that scientific explanations are never the full story, just another narrative the brain has created, another interpretation of perception. The novel reminds us of the importance of the numinous in the *zonbi*/zombie trope (97). The numinous is, usually, invisible, less materially present, and more difficult to study especially when it presents no evident symptoms, as is the case of Isadore's boss, which makes the scientific explanation of the Cotard Syndrome much more palpable than the idea of him being a real *zonbi*. We also have Isadore's account of the macabre *Tupperware Party* she witnessed, which cannot be explained by her boss's suspected delirium.

Regardless of the truth, which is not what interests me in this study, Maguire points out a possible cure that is given to us readers through the *zonbi*'s interaction with his laboratory workers since they seem to awaken his emotional abilities, including sexual desire, abilities that he had before been faking as part of his human-simulacrum (Maguire 7). How does this happen? The three women who work for him, including Isadore, seduce him until his body begins to respond to stimuli, using sexual desire as a

gateway to emotion and human consciousness, as the salt of white powder that will awaken him.

Something similar, although not identical, happens in *Vigilia* with Tomás. One day, Luzmila and the protagonist talk about how something has changed in him after months of having no desire nor plans for the future, that he is unrecognizable (Sánchez Russo 24). They refer to his previously blank stare and lack of drive, which has been changed to rage against his wife and an interest in volunteering to clean the beaches during his free time. Like Cabiya's *zonbi*, there seems to be an emotional awakening, although not one in favor of his family. This could be explained by the belief that when *zonbi* awakens, they turn against their master: being his wife the indirect cause of his entrapment —it is her father who forces him to work in the plastic factory and it is her who insists on having the twins, which makes money, and therefore the factory's salary, more necessary— he turns against her and her family, including the twins.

The reason behind his sudden wokeness is not, as in *Malas hierbas*, due to a woman's seduction. One night, as the protagonist is having an episode of insomnia, she surprises him returning home late at night and hiding his face from her. He goes into the shower, drunk and clumsy, and when she follows him he tells her "You don't want to see me" (52). The protagonist insists on looking at him and discovers traces of makeup on his face and, terrified, she turns out the light and runs to bed (Idem).

The mystery of the makeup and Tomás' awakening seems to be resolved when, in a sudden and desperate act to try and connect with her, he invites his wife to a party at

one of the members of the organization he volunteers with. At the party, the protagonist asks one of the guests if no women are volunteering with them and he responds laughing that there are, that she just has to look more carefully (120), and so Tomás, who had disappeared minutes before, comes back to the group transformed: shaved, red-painted lips, eyeliner on, and wearing a flower dress (121). The protagonist panics and vomits, without being able to hear the others explaining to her that it is just a performance, causing Tomás to change back into his clothes, remove all makeup from his face, and then take her back home in silence (122). In both scenarios, the shower and the party, the protagonist's reaction is to pretend nothing has happened after and wish for her husband to never mention it again. To close her eyes and be blind to this new Tomás. She seems less terrified by the blank gazed Tomás from before than the one covered in makeup who wears dresses and does performances.

By the end of the novel, Tomás, the protagonist, and the twins go spend a day at one of the beaches he cleans with the organization, and, as they are having lunch, a young man approaches them to sell them food. The protagonist notices that he recognizes Tomás, but after he leaves Tomás says vaguely "I have come here so many times and there have been so many young men that I cannot recall" (192, my translation). However, minutes later an old man brings back the food they ordered and asks them to never return to the beach after that day, "not even if you come clean all the garbage your kind produces" (Idem). Although the protagonist never says it, the episode hints at Tomás having had affairs with the young man, driving the old one to expel the family from the

place in disgust. Tomás leaves the house a few days after this family trip and never returns.

His invitation to the protagonist to accompany him to the party seems his only and last try to awaken her as well and free her from the entrapment of the conservative society she belongs to. He seems open to sharing his new self and showing her a way out, but she responds by going back home and ignoring the situation. One could conclude, then, that the cure for his zombification, the white powder, is not only cleaning the area of the plastic that he is forced to produce at the factory but also refusing the traditional gender and nuclear family roles associated with his father-in-law's perception of the world. To understand the social dynamics Sánchez Russo is presenting here, one must remember that Tomás, unlike the protagonist, does not come from the economic elite of the country: he is said to be in the same college program as her because of a government scholarship (112) and his darker skin tone is implied by the insistence that the twins, white as Federico, look nothing like him (192). The protagonist is unable to follow him and stays at the house, with the memory of Federico and all its luxuries, with her twins, and insisting on the old ways of Barranquilla's high class.

The cure of zombification is, then, problematized both by the agency for it returned to the zombified instead of being given to the masters and by presenting it as something that is, firstly, not achievable by all and, secondly, not even desired by all. The protagonist of *Vigilia* prefers a zombified Tomás to the one covered in make-up, and the

inhabitants of the monstrous city prefer to stay in their delirious state rather than see what truly surrounds them.

Cabiya does something of the sort too, as the last chapter of his novel leaves us with the idea that, instead of returning to a human state, the *zonbi* is re-zombified by Isadore: "The zombie describes a kind of awakening: a blindfold he has been wearing is removed, and he finds himself in the presence of three women (implicitly Isadore, Mathilde, and Patricia Julia)" (Maguire 11). The blindfold is reminiscent of the one Gracieuse had at the *Tupperware Party* and, according to what Isadore hears that day, once it is taken off, the *zonbi* will follow and obey the person who took it. This ending gives another turn of the screw to the *zonbi*/zombie trope and the quest to find its cure:

> In spite of the suffering connected to the formation of the undead that Isadore's research uncovers, she ultimately chooses to make her own zombie […] As a dark-skinned woman of Haitian descent, Isadore's choice to zombify a wealthy Dominican man can be seen as a kind of writing-back to historical patterns of domination. Her decision subverts the narrative of masculine seduction that the zombie's own narrative traces, as well as the story of the zombie's mental illness and subsequent murder that the two police detectives insist on. If the zombie's history is one of exploitation, Isadore's zombie seems to have been made for a different purpose (11-12).

What Maguire suggests here is that Isadore not only subverts the gender and race logics of zombification but also transforms the *zonbi* figure into something new as her *zonbi* can

feel what in his previous zombification was taken from him: the emotional consciousness. He says that he now has eyes and can see (Cabiya 216) as if the new *zonbi* state had opened the door for a new kind of perception. Although Maguire believes that this time the *zonbi* seems to have been made for something other than exploitation, I argue that what this ending shows us is the inevitability of zombification under the Plantationocene: there is no real cure for *zonbi*, there is only mutation, which can look hopeful as it does at the end of *Malas hierbas*. This reminds us that the toxins of the Plantationocene are already in us and around us, the mass of bodies under the city is part of the city, whether we see it or not. We cannot undo or cure our bodies from it, we can only mutate, re-zombified, to something different and unknown.

Both Cabiya and Sánchez Russo offer endings that hint at the possibility of an antidote to zombification while at the same time complicating what we understand by "cure" or "antidote". Cabiya gives us the option not of a return to the human state, but a second and new type of zombification, a step further that brings peace to the *zonbi* and keeps him apparently, if we trust his perception, safe. Zombification is, once again, presented as something that might be desirable, depending on who one asks. Similarly, Sánchez Russo proposes the impossibility of any method to work when one's mind is too set on old ways, with capitalism and the logic of the Plantationocene being difficult walls to walk through when they benefit us, as is the case of *Vigilia*'s protagonist. Sometimes toxins, the pollution of our bodies and environments, are not something avoidable as they come with the systems we live in, as a pact we sign in exchange for privilege and luxury,

or just comfort and peace. And most times we are more likely to turn against the consequences of toxins that become visible and hard to look at, but ignore those that are either invisible or pleasant to the eyes. However, we know that the pig will turn into a demon and the waste will come back to the surface, regardless of how innocent or far away they seem.

Pawòl gen zèl: words as poison and contagious matter

The protagonist of *Vigilia* (2022), by Daniella Sánchez Russo, and her husband rarely converse in the novel. However, there are some occasions in which she manages to get a verbal response from him as she is telling him about the similarities she notices between their twins and her dead brother:

> …a veces los mellizos y mi hermano se parecen tanto que he llegado a pensar que heredaron su vacío originario —ese hueco que nadie nunca podía suplir y que se notaba en sus más triviales movimientos, en sus mínimas inflexiones de voz, en el brillo opaco de sus ojos— […] Le he comunicado a Tomás la teoría sobre los mellizos y mi hermano las noches en que lo siento de buen humor y, aunque casi siempre me evita, a veces contesta, lacónico, que algo tan abstracto no se transfiere así como así y que deje el tema.
>
> [Sometimes the twins and my brother are so alike that I have considered that they inherited his original void —that hole that nobody could fill and that was evident in his more trivial movements, in his minimal voice inflections, in the opaque shine of his eyes— I have communicated to Tomás the theory of the twins and my brother during those nights that I feel he is in a good mood and, although he almost always ignores me, he sometimes answers, laconic, that something so abstract does not get transmitted just like that and that I should drop it] (Sánchez Russo 24).

In this quote, we can see that the narrator is not only focusing on her twins inheriting her brother's eyes or hair, which they do, but also about them sharing with him something she can barely grasp, a void she struggles to explain and that she recognizes in their cries, in their opaque eyes, and their movements. Tomás finds this absurd, as there seems to be no explanation for his children inheriting something so abstract from a man they never met, he never met. His irritation is palpable in his terse response and demand for her to stop talking about it. The tension between Tomás and his wife illuminates the question of this final chapter: how is toxicity understood in narratives where the abstract, such as the void mentioned by *Vigilia*'s protagonist, can be transmitted from one generation to another? How are ideas, feelings, and prejudices shown to spread in literary texts as a contagion inside communities and families? As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the case of *Vigilia* is explained through the logic of spiritual possession or reincarnation since Federico seems to haunt his family and childhood home after his death. But, what about other texts where this is not the case?

This dissertation has so far focused on toxicity from biological and spiritual perspectives understanding it as the chemical reaction an organism can have to contact with another or with foreign elements, both material and spiritual. This chapter will consider these two perspectives as well but will also include a third that focuses on language and the communication of ideas. In a world that has expanded its understanding of "toxic" and "viral" to apply them to social phenomena, mostly in the realm of social media, as with "viral posts" or "memes" (Husein et al. 849), or ideologies that produce

behaviors that cause harm to one or more groups of people —"toxic masculinity"—, a study of narratives touching on toxicity cannot ignore the role of discourse and ideas. As Sylvia Wynter explains, humans have a hybrid existence, *bios* and *mythoi*, we are a "hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species" (Wynter and McKittrick 25). Our biological existence, then, can only be understood along with our storytelling tendencies.

We build narratives to make sense of our life on this planet, our interactions, needs, desires, and traumas are explained through stories we tell others and ourselves. We transmit beliefs through stories, we tell others and others tell others, and that way our narratives spread, just like viruses and bacteria, through contact between organisms. This means that not only do we make sense of toxicity and our biological participation and exposure to it through storytelling, but the act of reproducing narratives itself functions as contagion as we repeat what has been told to us about our existence. History might be an excellent example of this dynamic. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot cleverly states: the only difference between "History" and other narratives is the pretense of truth (Trouillot 6), which is in itself a commonly accepted narrative about a genre of stories that was collectively classified as official and true. We create narratives around our narratives, then, and through that, we decide, as Trouillot explains, which of them enter the category of "what happened" and which go to "what is said to have happened".

Repetition and replication play an important role in this classification process as it does in the spread of toxic matter. As the psychological concept of the Mere Exposure

Effect shows: the the more an individual is exposed to a stimulus, the more they are likely to absorb it as true and real (Van Dessel et al. 299), which means that narratives that are constantly repeated and replicated become official and are considered part of "what happened" instead of just "what is said to have happened," just as a virus that achieves to replicate itself multiple times go from isolated cases to a global pandemic, a shared experience through the globe and species. Therefore, the stories we tell, the paradigms we create for storytelling, and the origin myths we reproduce in our societies articulate how we understand ourselves and our realities and shape our behaviors.

In this chapter, I bring the examples of two novels of the francophone and creolophone Caribbean in which, unlike the case of Sánchez Russo's, toxic generational transmission of the abstract —what cannot be traced back to a bacteria or other form of material biological toxin— is attributed not to spiritual possession but to storytelling. The novels show how ideas get spread like toxins through examples such as the Haitian Revolution and the link between the fight for freedom and the use of poison or by presenting a character whose storytelling power is so big, that their family fears the effects it can have on the younger generation. They show the effects of this transmission by constantly presenting it as part of the realm of toxic contagion and allow me to reflect on its dynamics and implications for understanding how human exposure to toxicity is not limited to material body effects.

Guadeloupean Estelle-Sarah Bulle's *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue* (2018) and Haitian Gerda Cadostin's *Laisse Folie Courir* (2020) both tell the story of the

Caribbean diaspora in the French hexagon through conversations between two women, one young, born and raised in the Parisian *banlieues,* and another old, who migrated later in life to the French capital. Because of the centrality of oral discourse in them and the power attributed to it by the characters, Bulle's and Cadostin's novels allow me to explore how abstract toxicity can be passed from one generation to another through storytelling. These novels are similar enough that putting them side-by-side to analyze their depiction of the oral transmission of memory can result in fruitful ideas, like the strong link existing between a maintained connection to one's roots and how attuned or immune we are to different narratives.

In Bulle's novel, the eldest voice in the conversation is Antoine's, the protagonist's aunt, although her two younger siblings, Lucinde and Petit-Frère, intervene from time to time as the counterpoint to her narrative afraid of what their sister is putting into her young niece's head: "Ta tante Antoine, c'est une fatigante. Elle va te chauffer les oreilles avec ses bavasseries et te manger tout ton temps. Ne va pas trop souvent dans son gourbi sous prétexte qu'elle te raconte des choses qui te fascinent. Elle pourrait te transmettre des maladies, c'est une malpropre" [Your aunt Antoine is a tiring person. She will get in your hair with gossip and waste all your time. Don't go so often to her hut under the pretext that she tells you stuff that fascinates you. She could transmit diseases to you, she is an unclean person] (Bulle 45). Their perception of Antoine as a dirty, toxic, and dangerous person to the young protagonist is directly tied, as seen in this quote, to the power of her words and the fascinating things she can tell her. The antidote Petit-Frère and Lucinde try

to protect the protagonist comes also in the shape of words: warning monologues on the dangers of conversing with Antoine as well as different versions of the stories she tells her niece.

Gran Sang Cochon is Cadostin's equivalent to Antoine. Still, unlike the latter, she is revered by her family and nobody intervenes in her conversation with Gerda, also called Gran Gette, Cadostin's alter ego and the youngest of her lineage. The toxic members of the family, as described by the narrators, are those belonging to the Estimé branch, the poison makers, ostracized from the rest: "Nan lakou Estimé, sauf Estimé bèbè, ils sont tous très méchants. Ces mots se passent de génération en génération" [*In the lakou Estimé*[1], except for *Estimé the mute*, they are all bad people. These words are transmitted from generation to generation]. As the women converse, we discover this to be a consolidated belief in the whole lineage of Gran Sang Cochon and Gran Gette: no Estimé can be good, except for one of them who has lost the ability to speak. This stand is reinforced over and over again by the women of the family to Gran Gette in similar words to the ones quoted above.

The cases of Bulle and Cadostin's novels demonstrate how characters are susceptible to contagion not only in the senses I have analyzed in the previous chapters but also in how their ideas of the world are shaped through conversation. Toxicity in these cases would then refer to the reaction the mind of a person has to contact with others' ideas through language. Although most characters attribute the toxicity they

[1] Italics represent Kreyòl in the original.

perceive in others —Antoine, the Estimé branch— to unavoidable elements of their nature, inherited defects that cannot be prevented, the texts themselves give us proof that storytelling plays the central role in determining both the behaviors deemed toxic and the parameters that make someone in the story perceive them as such. These two novels are clear examples of how intrinsic is storytelling to our biological existence, and how the stories we tell can determine the state of our organism, its health, its appearance, and its needs. They stand as beautiful proof of how central storytelling is to our species

Avaler les mal paroles comme l'eau de coco: the power of words

Both *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue* and *Laisse folie courir* attribute great power to language and storytelling not only regarding Antoine and the Estimé branch but in most areas of life. Storytelling as a way of transmitting the memory of a lineage is the central point moving both plots forward. This is coherent with the place that telling stories and using them to transmit communal knowledge holds in the Antilles. Patrick Chamoiseau explains in the preface to his book "Contes des sages créoles" the spoken word's importance in the Antillean culture by talking about its role in the survival of Black enslaved people during the Plantation. He presents this role through the figure of the "conteur", a storyteller, usually an old person who would tell stories to the enslaved community at night as the master was asleep. The "conteur" is the "délégué à la voix d'un peuple enchaîné, affamé, vivant dans la peur et les postures de la survie" [delegated to the voice of a chained, hungry people, living in fear and postures of survival] (13). Its power

to tell stories and carry the memory of the community is transformative to those listening and determinative of their survival. Antoine and Sang Cochon function as these novels' storytellers referencing and honoring this central figure of Antillean culture. Both characters acknowledge the power of words and transmit this core belief in their storytelling to the young member of their lineage. They recount how the spoken word has defined their relationship to communities and their paths in life. A great example of this is Antoine's recollection of how she and her siblings were ostracized in Morne-Galant, their birthplace, by the other children due to her mother being considered suspicious because of her white skin:

> Les autres gamins ne nous parlaient pas tellement et je prétendais que ça ne me déplaisait pas. On vivait trop loin des autres cases, et avoir une mère pareille, ça n'arrangeait pas les choses. Ils nous ignoraient à cause d'elle. Même si toutes les familles allaient se ravitailler dans le lolo de maman, plus d'un adulte avait des mots durs derrière son dos, et tu sais que les enfants avalent les mal paroles comme l'eau de coco. Il y avait sa couleur de peau d'abord; cette sorte de blanc cassé. Et puis le coffre d'acajou qu'elle avait amené avec son mariage et qui était la seule chose précieuse de notre case. Ça suffisait d'entrainer bien des spéculations sur l'argent qu'on pouvait avoir. [The other kids did not speak to us that much and I pretended not to care. We lived too far from the other huts and having such a mother was not helpful. They ignored us because of her. Even if all the families went to mom's shop for supplies, more than one adult had said some

harsh words behind her back. And you know children swallow bad words like coconut water. There was, firstly, the issue of her skin color, sort of broken white. And then there was the cashew wood chest that she came with the day of her mariage. The only precious thing we had at our hut. It was enough to provoque speculations about the money we could have] (Bulle 23).

The community's children's rejection of Antoine and her siblings is caused by gossip and prejudices expressed aloud by adults. This is all described by Antoine as some sort of poison that the younger generations are susceptible to as they "swallow it as coconut water", which implies they simply absorb it as a sweet treat and have no resistance to it. The children are also constantly exposed to this gossip as Antoine describes it as a repetitive event —"plus d'un adulte avait des mots durs derrière son dos"— which enhances their willingness to believe it, as explained by the psychological concept of the "Mere Exposure Effect" that I mentioned earlier. It does not matter if Antoine's mother supplies Morne-Galant with all that is needed nor if her family is truly rich as the neighbors suspect, what matters is what is being said repeatedly, the gossip the children hear. And the effect is immediate rejection from the community of Morne-Galant.

This immovable effect of the adults' words is coherent with the beliefs of the community of Morne-Galant as Antoine and her siblings portray them. There is, for example, the use of two names: "Chez nous, on donne un prénom de batême, mais on n'utilise que le nom de savane pour embrouiller les mauvais esprits" [Back home we give people a baptism name, but we only use the savannah name to confuse the bad spirirts]

(34). The savannah name, the public one that everyone knows, is there to "ramaser toutes les mauvaisetés de la vie" [Pick up all the bad things of life] (50). Its widespread use —"chez nous, on donne…"— shows the sanctity and power people of Morne-Galant attribute to words: just knowing and sharing someone's baptism name can be used to harm them.

Spoken words' power is so entrenched into the cultural landscape that the day Lucinde gets her period for the first time a neighbor tells her "À partir de maintenant, si tu parles à un homme, tu tombes enceinte!" [From now on, if you speak to a man, you get pregnant!] (70). Although one might argue that the neighbor does not believe that a man's words can impregnate Lucinde's womb and that she is referring to how convincing a man can be through speaking, Lucinde certainly takes those words to the letter —swallows them as coconut water— and is terrified: "elle s'enfuyait comme un lapin si un gars se pointait à l'horizon" [she fled like a rabbit if a boy appeared on the horizon] (idem). Regardless of the true effect words have on someone's physical health, just the belief that they could cause such a huge change in one's is enough to define Lucinde's behavior towards boys and men for years until she and Antoine understand that it was just "tout bitin an kouyonad" [everything is bollocks] (idem). From then on, they pretend to be scared so their virtue is not questioned (idem).

Besides local traditions and ideas around language, some linguistic rules and beliefs can be traced to the central role the French language has in the building of French identity: "In [France], culture and the language in which it is expressed have been an

affair of state for many generations. Language has played a crucial role in the shaping of national consciousness and in determining membership in the political community" (Safran 40). Monolingual policies began in the 18th Century as a way to ensure unity and adherence to Republican ideals (42) and were particularly strengthened by the World Wars of the 20th Century due to languages such as German being a mark of cooperation with the enemy (43). Although there was a more relaxed climate favoring language diversity in the French territories by the second half of the 20th Century (44), recent years have shown how the centrality and preference for French have become more entrenched in State policies. For example, the state's migration laws since the beginning of this century have become stricter about the dominance of French to receive citizenship[2].

Although Morne-Galant is presented by Antoine as a bilingual community, she also tells her niece that speaking Creole as a kid could entail the punishment of "nous laver la bouche avec du savon" [to wash our mouths with soap] (26). Antillean Creole has had a complex role in the area: both used as a domestic and familial language as well as presented as inferior to French and a mark of lack of education and civilization (Condon 294). Antillean parents are persuaded that the influence of Creole can hurt their children's

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[2] The early 2000's introduction of the concept of the FLI (Français Langue d'Intégration) and the CIR (Contrat d'intégration républicaine) have turned the suggestion of acquiring a certain advanced level of French for immigrants from outside the Schengen space into a requirement for obtaining French citizenship. For more information on this, I recommend Episode 16, "La langue française, modèle d'intégration ?", of the podcast *Parler comme jamais*:

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French President Emmanuel Macron's speech at the Académie Française on 20 March 2018, mentioned in the episode, also illuminates the stance the French State has on the role of the French language in the global position of the Republic. A summary of this speech can be found here:

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education and ability to act as civilized citizens and prohibit the use of their native language at home (Idem), discouraging the use of Creole in their children through punishment and prohibition as Antoine describes.

However, regardless of this fear of the effects Creole can have on children's education, it remains a central language of family, community, and collective memory (Idem). Antoine also reveals that even if it has been officially forbidden to the children, it is a tasty and irresistible language for all members of the community: "Le parler créole qu'on nous ordonnait de détester était si savoureux que les adultes s'en servaient abondamment pour se raconter des histoires" [The Creole speech that we were ordered to detest was so tasty that adults used it abundantly to tell each other stories] (50). Creole then becomes this powerful and pleasant secret in the community of Morne-Galant and is the vehicle for gossip —"se raconter des histoires"—, which we know by the effects it has socially for Antoine's family that can certainly shape the whole community's behavior and beliefs towards others.

Antoine's use of words reminiscent of food and beverages in her description of how language works in her community —bad words being swallowed like coconut water and creole as tasty for all people— reinforces the idea that they penetrate the body of those who hear them as any herbal medicine or poison causing a strong effect in the mind. Antoine gives the abstract words a materiality to show their power and capacity to enter into contact with material organisms, shaping them noticeably. This is coherent with how language has worked in the colonization and shaping of the Caribbean since the

arrival of Europeans to its shores. As Guillermina De Ferrari explains "colonial domination was based […] on the vulnerability of the material body to the forces of symbolic power" (De Ferrari 8) as seen in the importance of discourse as "one of the most pervasive and enduring forms of colonization" (7). All this sets the stage for Antoine's portrayal by her family as this powerful storyteller whose narratives can shape and harm her niece's mind easily.

Similar to what happens in Morne-Gallant, the people from Guérot, the birthplace of the characters of Cadostin's novel, attribute a sacred and strong power to the spoken word. This is acknowledged textually when Gran Sang Cochon tells Gran Gette the story of the Haitian Revolution. In a fragment representing a dialogue between personified France and Haiti, France tells Haiti "Ça va te coûter très cher ma « Perle des Antilles » […] Tout d'abord, bouche cousue sur ta liberté contagieuse! Et ta bataille de Vertières!…Bataille de Vertières…Jamais de la vie dans un dictionnaire en France! Jamais!" [It will cost you greatly my Antillean Pearl […] First, sealed lips on your contagious freedom! And your Battle of Vertières!…Battle of Vertières…No way, never in a dictionary in France! Never!] (Cadostin 30). This clear allusion to the historical silencing (Trouillot 27) by France of the revolutionary ideas born in the Haitian Revolution is anchored in the object of the dictionary as the gatekeeper of French ideas. This way, Sang Cochon tells Gette that France's punishment of Haiti is based on linguistic censorship and imposition of a specific language and specific narratives around what happened between them.

The discussion between the two states in this dialogue is continued and in both France's and Haiti's statements we can see a constant use of words referencing contagion and toxicity: Haiti accuses France of intoxicating French and Haitian people with a lie —"Vermine! Tu veux que ta descendance et la mienne passent des siècles en cure de désintoxication?" [Vermin! Do you want your descendants and mine to spend centuries in rehab from this intoxication?] (31)— and France responds by saying that that is what politics do: "Fraîchement-libre, la politique, c'est de l'intoxication. Les gens sont comme des malades en soins intensifs, on leur injecte ce qu'on pense: trous, fantômes, tailles, brouettes, tours, passoires racines, lavements, chiottes. Ainsi, notre planning d'intoxication des Français fonctionne à fond malgré des petits élans de consience par-ci par-là" [Newly free, politics is intoxication. People are like patients in intensive care, we inject them with what we think: holes, ghosts, sizes, wheelbarrows, towers, root strainers, enemas, toilets. Thus, our planning of poisoning the French is working at full capacity despite small bursts of conscience here and there] (Idem). The eschatological vocabulary of France's explanation of its *modus operandi* ties once again narratives to toxicity: ideas communicated through words —those allowed entrance into the dictionary of the Republic— are part of a meticulous state-planned poisoning of minds. Storytelling is then controlled by this poisoning of the people with only the effective toxic narratives being approved by authorities and, therefore, being allowed to spread. This is how Sang Cochon perceives the French Republic actions towards Haiti and all intent of independence since the Haitian Revolution by the territories and citizens of its empire.

Besides this strong narrative on the power France imposed on narratives and language to subjugate the liberated Haiti, Gran Sang Cochon gives other examples of how words and storytelling can affect people at Guérot: "Mais dès la nuit tombante, la peur gagne leurs tripes. À force d'avoir entendu dès leurs enfance des histoires. Sur les vivants. Les morts ambulants. Les vivants morts. Les mauvais Esprits…" [But as soon as night falls, fear takes over their guts. From having heard stories from childhood. On the living. The walking dead. The living dead. The bad Spirits…] (25). All inhabitants of Guérot are haunted by the stories they heard as children from the mouths of their elders, the storytellers, and, even in their adulthood, the night brings back the same feelings as the stories did the day they were told to them.

This is exactly what Gette says happens with the prejudices against the Estimé branch —"Ces mots se passent de génération en génération"— so all people at Guérot attributes evil to every Estimé. However, as Da, Gette's aunt, points out in the passage I quoted earlier, there is an exception: Estimé bèbè. A story told by Sang Cochon further explains this:

> Dans son enfance, Estimé bèbè parlait. Un jour, jouant avec son frère Œil crevé, surgit un énorme mygale noire vélue avec une croix rouge sur le dos. En tout cas, Bèbè n'avait pas vu la croix […] Ni une ni deux, le petit Estimé œil crevé, déjà apprenti-poison, a semé une poudre d'un champignon dans la bouille de son frère. Trois jours. Tripes cordées. Ventre fait mal. Ventre passé. Nausées. Vomissement.

> Tête virée. Perdre parole […] Estimé le doux est devenu Estimé bèbè. Vaut mieux être bébé vivant que diseur mort. Depuis, Estimé bèbè a abandonné les mots.
>
> [In his childhood, Estimé bèbè spoke. One day, playing with his brother Œil crevé, an enormous hairy black tarantula appeared with a red cross on its back. In any case, Bèbè had not seen the cross […] Without thinking about it, little Estimé œil crevé, already a poison apprentice, sowed a powder of a mushroom in his brother's food. Three days. Corded guts. Stomach hurts. Crushed belly. Nausea. Vomiting. Head turned. Losing words […] Estimé the gentle has become Estimé bèbè. It's better to be a living baby than a dead teller. Since then, Estimé bèbè has abandoned words] (66).

In this quote, the connection between speaking and poisoning is highlighted by mutism being the consequence of the traumatic experience of Estimé bèbè and how this sets him apart from his family. The only member of the Estimé branch who is not condemned by the rest of Guérot as essentially evil and with a tendency to poison others —"déjà apprenti-poison"— is Estimé bèbè and he is also the only Estimé who has lost his words. There seems to be in Sang Cochon's telling of this story a notion of innocence in the mutism of this young Estimé and he is portrayed as having lost his potential evil after being poisoned by his brother and becoming a mute, which is expressed in his change of name, "bèbè" meaning mute in Kreyòl.

We are told his mutism is not a physical effect of the poison his brother gave him, but a way to keep himself and others safe from death: "Ici, pour un mot qui tombe mal,

vengeance-cimetière en tête" [Here, for a word that comes at the wrong time, revenge-cemetery in mind] (65), he thinks. "Estimé bèbè a choisi de ne pas s'en prendre aux mots. De les laisser tranquilles. Pour durer sus la terre à Guérot. Toute la sainte journée, sa vie d'Estimé, censée empoisonner, se passe en silence" [Estimé *bèbè* chose to not worry about words. To leave them be. To last in the land of Guérot. All the holy day, his life as Estimé, supposed to poison, passes in silence] (66). Estimé bèbè is aware of how powerful, and therefore dangerous, words are in Guérot. He sees them as the source of death and violence and decides to stay away from them to ensure his survival. This active and conscious refusal of spoken language separates him from the fate of his whole branch, from his poisonous fate. The widely accepted narrative gets edited by Sang Cochon and the women of her branch and "except for Estimé bèbè" is added to the "all Estimé are bad" motive in their stories, creating a new narrative: the one connecting an Estimé's act of speaking with their tendency to poison others.

Sang Cochon's telling of the story of her lineage also heavily points out the uses and powers of language not only in the content, as shown in the previous pages, but also in the style. She uses a mix of Kreyòl and French without the text ever indicating the difference typographically. By doing this, Cadostin is not only using a style that creates the illusion of a real conversation between an elder from Haiti's rural area and a young woman from the Paris banlieues, but she is also emphasizing Kreyòl's centrality in Haiti's memory and culture. Haitian historian Jean Casimir identifies the role of Kreyòl in the enslaved community of Saint-Domingue as much more than a communication device:

"The community of captives appropriated the Kreyòl language and reconstructed it. They transformed Creole into its own project, one that transmitted the group's memory and culture. The language recuperated and conserved the keys to acceptable behavior. It identified the paths to success, along with the punishments that awaited those who deviated from the emerging social norms" (Casimir 21). Such a role is transmitted by Sang Cochon's natural use of its expressions and terms. Gette receives her education on her lineage and origins through the words of someone who recognizes the importance and the power of Haiti's language —"gen 90% moun pou pi piti, ki pa konn okenn lòt lang pase kreyòl ann Ayiti" [at least 90% of people in Haiti do not speak another language besides Kreyòl] (Zefi 11)— and uses it constantly putting it at the same level as French. This is a political gesture on Cadostin's part, especially due to the lack of typographical differentiation between both languages or translations of the Kreyòl words and sentences. Storytelling in Haiti, she is telling us, has Kreyòl at its core.

Kreyòl has historically been relegated by those in power, an elite minority, to an inferior place in the linguistic hierarchies of Haiti and considered as less than a language, a "brikolay n ap fè" [a do-it-yourself we do] (Idem). As Michel DeGraff explains: "Gen yon ti elit k ap enpoze franse kòm lang prensipal pou dikasyon ak pwogrè ekonomik. Epi se yon ti pousantaj Ayisyen sèlman ki ka benefisye" [There is a small elite that is imposing French as the main language for education and economic progress and only a small percentage of Haitians can benefit from it] (DeGraff 140). Given this, Cadostin's gesture is once again forcing us to look carefully at the power and works of language:

Kreyòl is not set apart nor treated as foreign to the readers or the writer, it is not presented as something that cannot belong to an educated sphere or literary texts, it is naturally and simply there, printed in a published novel, as memory is transmitted from one member of the lineage to the other. One has to navigate the text as a testimony of the diverse linguistic history of the Haitian people and its diaspora and give oneself entirely to Cadostin's translanguaging style of mixing Kreyòl and French without warning nor typographic indication of a line that separates them.

Sang Cochon refrains from large, elaborated sentences, preferring the use of short phrases, sometimes with no verb —"Trois jours. Tripes cordées. Ventre fait mal. Ventre passé. Nausées. Vomissement. Tête virée. Perdre parole"—. This gives her narrative style the effect of a cumulation of ideas, some of which are emphasized by anaphora —"Et ta bataille de Vertières!…Bataille de Vertières…Jamais de la vie dans un dictionnaire en France! Jamais!"—, as the echo of the many voices that have told the story before, reinforcing the notion of repetition and, therefore, of contagion that I explained before. She also digresses and begins every chapter with "Où j'en étais" [Where was I?] and makes erotic jokes (Cadostin 45). It is all a mark of orality, as the discourse of the storyteller described by Chamoiseau: "Sa narration tournoie sur de longues digressions humoristiques, érotiques, souvent même ésotériques. Son dialogue avec l'auditoire est incessant, ponctué d'onomatopées et de bruitages, qui visent autant à retenir l'attention qu'à ôter de son propos toute évidence alors dangereuse" [His narration revolves around long, humorous, erotic, often even esoteric digressions. His dialogue with the audience is

incessant, punctuated with onomatopoeia and sound effects, which aim as much to retain attention as to remove any obviously dangerous evidence from his remarks] (Chamoiseau 15). She tells her story in a way that seems innocent and simple, while she is transmitting a legacy to Gette, the memory of her lineage.

This simplicity in sentence structures does not mean simplicity in the transmission of meaning, it makes the discourse denser and harder to read, as if it was delivered in a secret code that one must decipher and even surrender to. Cadostin seems to be reclaiming what Édouard Glissant calls the right to opacity:

> Si nous examinons le processus de la «compréhension» des êtres et des idées dans la perspective de la pensée occidentale, nous retrouvons à son principe l'exigence de cette transparence. Pour pouvoir te «comprendre» et donc t'accepter, il me faut ramener ton épaisseur à ce barème idéel qui me fournit motif à comparaisons et peut-être à jugements. […] Non pas seulement [ils nous faut] consentir au droit à la différence mais, plus avant, au droit à l'opacité, qui n'est pas l'enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable, mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible.
>
> [If we examine the process of the "comprehension" of beings and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we find the requirement of transparency as its principle. To "comprehend" you and so accept you I need to bring your thickness against this ideal scale which provides me with grounds for comparisons and perhaps judgments. […] Not only [we have to] consent to the right to difference

> but, further, to the right to opacity, which is not confinement in an impenetrable autarky, but subsistence in a non-reducible singularity (Glissant 204).

Opacity refuses reduction and singularity. Sang Cochon and Gette's conversation, with the mix of Kreyòl and French, the short almost onomatopoeic phrases, the echoes of previously said things, and the references to local events that the readers are not necessarily exposed to any further, maintain an opacity that will make it impossible for us to reduce it to something simple and transparent. We the readers, are presented with this narrative and will then consume it, but it will not be possible to swallow it as easily as coconut water, we must accept that some things will not be digested and not everything will taste sweet. This is how Cadostin presents the role and power of storytelling and how we experience it by being exposed to its effects.

Bulle and Cadostin give us texts where we can witness and experience the importance of storytelling in our constitution as a species and they both center their portrayal of the act of telling stories in the realm of toxicity. They tell us stories will permeate us and generate reactions in our bodies, and this can be beneficial or harmful for our survival. Stories spread and are contagious. To understand toxicity in human communities and realities, we have to consider how storytelling shapes contact between organisms, how we make sense of poisonous substances and their effects, and how we participate in spreading material and conceptual toxins.

Saturer l'air de paroles: who detains the power of the spoken word

In his portrayal of the "conteur", Chamoiseau shows the power of the spoken word in the metamorphoses that the "conteur" goes through as the time to tell stories approaches:

> Cet homme n'a pourtant rien de particulier; d'âge mûr, il n'est ni plus ni moins insignifiant que les autres. Le jour, il n'est qu'un nègre de cannes qui travaille, souffre, transpire, et qui vit dans la crainte, la révolte ravalée. Peut-être même est-il plus discret que plus d'un. Mais la nuit, une exigence obscure dissipe a sa lassitude, le dresse, l'habite d'une force nocturne et quasi clandestine: celle de la Parole dont il devient le Maître. C'est le Conteur.
>
> [However, there is nothing special about this man; middle-aged, he is neither more nor less insignificant than the others. During the day, he is just a Black man who works, suffers, sweats, and who lives in fear, suppressed revolt. Perhaps he is even more discreet than more than one person. But at night, an obscure demand dissipates his weariness, raises him up, inhabits him with a nocturnal and almost clandestine force: that of the Word of which he becomes the Master. It's the Storyteller.] (Chamoiseau 12).

The power of the Word, as Chamoiseau calls it, turns this ordinary, quiet, and fragile person into this mythical, strong character so important to the culture of the Antilles. The old age is central, as it both creates the illusion of fragility and vulnerability and carries the tradition and memory of previous generations. It also emphasizes the apparent magical power of storytelling as the transfiguring force that can drastically turn the weak

and invisible into the powerful and known by all. Antoine and Sang Cochon are both the elders of their lineage, which is what gives them the knowledge and status to embody the role of the storyteller: they are the ones who lived and saw the most, the ones who can remember what happened before their interlocutors were even born. They detent the power of the Word because of this, and because of their connection to their history.

Antoine is not in fact as old in comparison with Chamoiseau's "conteur" and Sang Cochon: "ce n'était pas une vielle dame. Dans l'encadrement de la porte, j'ai redécouvert cette grande femme arborant un sourire plein d'assurance que je n'avais pas vue depuis des années […] Son visage sentait l'huile de jojoba et la crème Miss Antilles. Un visage plein, épanoui, à peine ridé" [she was not an old lady. In the doorway, I rediscovered this tall woman with a confident smile that I had not seen for years […] Her face smelled of jojoba oil and Miss Antilles cream. A full, blossoming face, barely wrinkled] (Bulle 15). The description her niece offers of her communicates an energetic presence, full of life and beauty that the niece seems to oppose to her perception of old age. However, Antoine does play the role of the elder of the family. Her niece views her as "celle qui relie le passé au présent, la Guadeloupe à Paris, comme une racine souterraine et pleine de vie" [the one who links the past and the present, Guadeloupe and Paris, like a underground root full of life] (17). Even if she has her father and another aunt to tell her about the past and their native land, it is Antoine the one who is perceived by her niece as that root tying everything together.

Antoine's siblings are not only younger, especially Petit-Frère whose nickname makes it seem as if "il n'était jamais devenu autre chose que cet être fragile que mes tantes ont plus ou moins guidé dans leur enfance" (Idem), but they are also eclipsed by Antoine in every regard. While Antoine and her niece narrate most of the chapters, those granted to Lucinde and Petit-Frère can never stray away from the figure of their older sister: "Quant à Antoine, il ne fallait pas compter sur elle" [As for Antoine, we mustn't count on her] (43), says Lucinde in the second paragraph of her first intervention; "Tu n'imagines pas comment était Antoine : belle comme un soleil, irradiante dans son délire. Je peux te raconter, moi aussi, ce qu'était la Guadeloupe" [You can't imagine what Antoine was like: beautiful as the sun, radiant in his delirium. I too can tell you what Guadeloupe was like] (45), argues Petit-Frère around the same time in his; "Antoine, prête à montrer les dents et à s'en servir, faisait à peu près ce qu'elle voulait" [Antoine, ready to show her teeth and use them, did pretty much what she wanted] (73), remembers Petit-Frère at the beginning of his second intervention; Antoine's name is mentioned by Lucinde in the first page the second time she speaks at least once in each paragraph as the reference she uses to compare herself to (109). Petit-Frère insists they also can "raconter ce que c'était la Guadeloupe" , but as they try and share their version of their past, Lucinde and her younger brother always end up reacting to what Antoine was to them or what she has told her niece about certain events. In their discourse, she is the Sun even if they see her as delirious and full of nonsense. She fascinates them, but as they cannot understand her, the reject her knowledge and behaviors. In the novel, Antoine and her

niece are the ones capable of using storytelling to captivate an audience and the ones who know how to listen, Lucinde and Petit-Frère serve as characters, accessories to the conversation between aunt and niece.

Their lack of power with words can be explained through their disconnection to Guadeloupe and their history. Of it, Petit-Frère remembers only "quelques éblouissements et puis rien que des blessures" [a few glares and then nothing but injuries] (45) and refuses to speak and teach Creole to his daughter because "il n'y avaint aucune raison à cela. Je voulais que tu fasses des études brillantes et que tu t'élèves dans la société" [there is no reason to. I wanted you to do brilliant studies and elevate yourself in society] (Idem). Lucinde has always seen herself as superior to anyone else at Morne-Galant: "J'étais une sorte d'aristocrate, moi […] je n'étais pas comme les autres. Dans ma tête, je n'avais rien à voir avec ce trou perdu de Morne-Galant" (43). Antoine's niece is different, she wants to connect with Guadeloupe and with her family history: "Je voulais qu'on me raconte la Guadeloupe" [I wanted someone to tell me about Guadeloupe] (21) In Paris, she feels a "constant sentiment d'ambigüité, de décalage" [constant feeling of ambiguity, of discrepancy] (22), wondering why she was born in that "paradis sans histoire, sans rituels, sans traditions" [in this paradise without history, without rituals, without traditions] (86), and she hopes to find in the retelling of the past "le tour de ma propre existence" [the turn of my own existence] (Idem).

Later in the novel, Antoine reveals what makes her able to listen and, therefore, to *tell*: "J'avais déjà le fluide pour parler aux êtres invisibles. Je pourrais t'apprendre si tu

veux, mais pour ça, il faudrait que tu sois un peu plus à l'écoute de Dieu" [I already had the fluid to talk to the invisible beings. I could teach you if you want, but for that, you must be listening to God a bit more] (42). She connects this "être à l'écoute de Dieu" with listening to the land: "Je m'étais allongée en haut du morne, de là où on peur deviner la mer au loin, comme un nuage bas d'un bleu un peu plus dense que le ciel, et j'ai laissé le vent me parler. Pendant très longtemps, j'ai devisé avec les fourmis manioc et la terre embrassait tout mon corps" [I lay down at the top of the hill, where you can see the sea in the distance, like a low blue cloud a little denser than the sky, and I let the wind speak to me. For a very long time, I conversed with the cassava ants and the earth embraced my whole body] (Idem). This is what allows her to begin to understand the hidden celestial messages as she then recalls how suddenly the branches started forming words above her head (Idem). That day, she becomes attuned to the angels words by listening to nature: "J'ai alors déchiffré de longues phrases soufflées par Gabriel et par le plus beau des anges, Michel, qui veille spécialement sur moi, côte à côte avec le grand Victor Schœlcher, pour qui les Noirs d'ici ont toujours voté et qui a mis un bon poin final à l'esclavage, tu dois savoir ça et si tu ne le sais pas, tu ne sais rien de la République" [I then deciphered long sentences whispered by Gabriel and by the most beautiful of angels, Michael, who watches over me especially, side by side with the great Victor Schœlcher, for whom Black people here have always voted and who put a good final point to slavery, you must know that and if you don't know it, you know nothing about the Republic] (Idem).

At this point of her life, just before she leaves her father's house to start a new life in the city of Pointe-à-Pitre, Antoine has already learned to *listen* to the invisible forces of the land she inhabits. She listens with her whole body and pays attention to stimuli such as a tingling on her fingers (Idem). This is an ability she has not lost in all the years she has been away from her birthplace —"Encore aujourd'hui, ils me prodiguent des conseils" (Idem)— and what she is telling her niece to learn to do —"que tu sois un peu plus à l'écoute de Dieu"— so she can teach her how to speak to the invisible. Antoine describes this connection of the land —"la terre embrassait tout mon corps"– as a conversation and the passage is full of vocabulary referring to language and verbal communication: she says she *talks* to the invisible, invites her niece to open herself to these stimuli by *listening* to God, angels are said to *whisper* secret to her ears, she lets the wind *talk* to her that day on top of the hill, she *converses* with the cassava ants, and the branches on top of her *form words* she begins to *decipher* as they become long *sentences*.

This is all described as well as forces penetrating and getting mixed Antoine's body in different ways: she lets the ocean wind and the sound of the ants enter her ears. As the land embraces her, she is capable of deciphering the messages Gabriel is leaving for her. Land and body come in material contact so listening is developed, and, even if Antoine never considers this contact as toxic, what she is describing —the tingling on her fingertips, the sensation of being embraced by the earth, the reshaping of the branches into something legible— is a mental shift, a reaction, caused by this contact, as if she had ingested something whose chemical properties had intoxicated her, shaping her

perception of sound, touch, and vision. This is what Antoine is preparing her niece for, this is what "être un peu plus à l'écoute de Dieu" means.

There is a spiritual element to this listening Antoine describes, which seems to be lacking in her siblings, but not in her niece even as she still needs to be trained before she acquires the ability to truly use it. Régine Jean-Charles explains in her latest book, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (2023), the spiritual nature of the dialectic between the visible and invisible words in Vodou: "For the Vodou practitioner, serving the spirits relies on this dialectic of visible and invisible worlds. One interacts with the visible world knowing that there are always invisible forces at work. What you see is regulated by what you cannot see" (Jean-Charles 99). Although Antoine never mentions Vodou and she is not from Haiti, she referring to a spiritual connection, a link with an invisible realm that can only exist if the person becomes attuned to it. Petit-Frère and Lucinde are deaf to the voices of this invisible word and their voices in the novel serve as the representation of an alienation from one's roots that is further emphasized by Antoine's niece's latent need to connect with Guadeloupe and its history. Analyzing the Haitian novel *Kasalé* (2003) by Kettly Mars, Jean-Charles provides a lens to read the community dynamic we see in Bulle's novel as well. Jean-Charles says of Mars characters:

> If Antoinette emblematizes Vodou as a reflection of Haitians, she also serves as a reminder that most of the other characters in the novel are alienated from the religion, and thus alienated from themselves. Kasalé becomes a place without

> memory, without roots, bereft of sacred knowledge. Sophonie and Antoinette are the rare exception to this alienation, and their relationship allows us to witness the transmission of Vodou as a belief system and spiritual practice from one generation to the next in order to countervail its decline (Idem).

This quote could be applied to the characters of *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue*: Antoinette could be Antoine, Sophonie could be Antoine's niece, and Kasalè the Antillean community of the banlieues represented by Lucinde and Petit-Frère, who have lost the memory of the sacred roots of their existence and thus refuse to transmit it to the younger generation. I bring this quote not to conflate all Caribbean experiences into one, but because Jean-Charles analysis of *Kasalé* illuminates the dynamics of what Bulle presents through Antoine and her family. Antoine is not transmitting Haitian Vodou to her niece nor are they from Haiti, as is the case of Antoinette and Sophonie, but she is transmitting a spiritual belief and a practice of linguistic relation to the land they inhabit, a land other family members have no longer a connection with. All this through storytelling.

The niece's fascination with her eldest aunt, Petit-Frère's worst fear from the start, is palpable from her first description of Antoine as she watches her leave from the window after their conversations: "Une tête de plus que les autres passants, qui ne reprenait leur taille normale qu'après son passage" (Bulle 17). Everyone seems to be smaller, less significant to the niece next to Antoine, who she wants to please constantly —"J'avalais tou pour lui faire plaisir" (Idem)—. The niece seems enchanted and her perception is changed by her aunt's presence. This is explained by Antoine. At the

beginning of the novel when she is about to start her storytelling she tells the younger woman: "c'est pour ça qu'on se parle bien toi et moi. On a ce fluide, là, je le sens au bout de tes ongles. Tu sens? Comme un onde électrique" [that's why you and I talk well to each other. We have this fluid there, I can feel it at the tips of your nails. Do you feel? Like an electric wave] (Bulle 12). Once again there is an invisible, but material and perceivable by Antoine, element that allows for the transmission of knowledge and beliefs from one organism to the other. This connection between the two women, one forty-five years older than the other, is explained by this electric current linked to their ability to communicate with each other and brings both bodies into contact, creating a reaction in the young woman that opens her up to listening. Antoine, so good at saturating the air with words (65) sees in her thirty-year-old niece a worthy listener who, in her turn, will repeat the stories Antoine shares with her.

Sang Cochon's status in her family is very different from Antoine's since she is not questioned, but revered by most members. Besides the sections narrated by Gette herself, her storytelling has a few interventions from Man Da, Gette's aunt, but they are always confirmations of what Sang Cochon has said, as an echo serving to enhance Gette's understanding of something. The best example is when she brings Gette and Sang Cochon some herbs to protect them from evil while they talk:

> La voici, aux pas décidés, qui nous apporte, à Sang Cochon et à moi-même, un bol de riz madan gougous, legim fey. Ma tante Da a trois sens toujours aux aguets

pour fouiner dans l'air vengeur de Guérot, afin d'intercepter des odeurs magiques, des gestuels, des bouts de paroles à grossir.

— Grann Gette, tu ne sens pas quelque chose?

— Quoi, ma tante Da?

— Une odeur de magie rentre dans mes trous de nez. Mmmmm, c'est sûrement nan lakou Estimé, oui. Ah ces malfaiteurs! À cause d'eux, plus de Gaboton, plus d'enfants!

[Here she is, with determined steps, bringing Sang Cochon and myself a bowl of *madan gougous* rice, *legim fey*. My aunt Da has three senses always on the lookout to search through the vengeful air of Guérot, to intercept magical smells, gestures, bits of words to magnify.

— Grann Gette, don't you smell something?

— What, my aunt Da?

— A smell of magic enters my nose holes. Mmmmm, it's probably nan *lakou* Estimé, yes. Ah these criminals! Because of them, no more Gaboton, no more children!] (Cadostin 23)

Aunt Da comes to reiterate what Sang Cochon has said and will repeat about the Estimé: that they are the poisoners, the evil people of the area, and that they must protect themselves against them because they are causing damage. Gette mentions she is always investigating the air of Guérot on the lookout for poisonous elements, one of them being words, which indicates the evils of the Estimé can also come in the shape of language and

storytelling, as does the protection against it. This intervention, unlike the ones from Petit-Frère and Lucinde in Bulle's novel, serves as a confirmation of the knowledge shared by Sang Cochon, a repetition to reinforce the facts she is telling, showing the strong link between the women of all generations in Gette's family: the memory is passed from one to the other impeccably, no disagreement on what is being transmitted to the youngest of them.

This reverence for Sang Cochon and lack of questioning of her tale is due to her participation in the Haitian Revolution and her presence in the birth of the nation. Constantly drinking immortality water (12), the elder has kept herself alive for centuries, which allows her to witness Haiti's history. The name her family uses around her, Sang Cochon, is given to her after she flees the plantation where she was enslaved, joins a maroon community, and participates in the ceremony of Bwa Kaiman: "elle a bu le sang du cochon à la cérémonie de Bois-Caïman, organisée par Dutty Boukman le 14 août 1791. D'où son nom Sang Cochon" [she drank the pig's blood at the Bois-Caïman Ceremony, organized by Dutty Boukman the 14th of August 1791. That's where her name Sang Cochon, Pig's Blood, comes from] (54), explains Gette. The Bwa Kaiman Ceremony, the religious ceremony where a black pig was sacrificed and enslaved people decided to fight for their freedom, is considered the founding event of Haiti, "the moment where the seed of liberty was planted" (Dubois 92). It constitutes a foundational narrative guiding the Cadostin family's storytelling thread.

Man Da says Sang Cochon was even present at the death of Haitian revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Cadostin 54) as well as in the arrival of the first people to Guérot after the creation of the Haitian State (Idem). Sang Cochon is Haiti and Haiti is Sang Cochon: "Chaque Haïtien es un Sang Cochon ! Un Sang libre !" [Every Haitian is a Sang Cochon ! A free-blood !] (Idem), which means that what Gette is receiving through her ancestor's storytelling is not only the story of her family, as in the case of Antoine's niece, but also the story of her people and their nation. The pig's blood flows through the veins of all free Haitians and it never dries out (55) through the power of memory and storytelling, as Sang Cochon is visited every year by accolades who want to meet her and listen to her stories (Idem).

Interestingly enough, there is only one silence in Sang Cochon's storytelling, and is the one regarding her arrival to what is now Haiti. Aunt Da reminds Gette never to ask the elder about it and tells her about the time she heard it herself: "Un jour, au temps longtemps-longtemps-longtemps-longtemps, mes seins commençaient à peine à pousser. Je n'avais pas encore touché un garçon. Beaucoup d'étudiants arrivaient à Guérot pour rencontrer Sang Cochon. « Vous Africaine, quel diable vous a amenée ici? ». Cette question empoisonée avait faillit l'emporter" [One day, a long-long-long-logn time ago, my breasts had just started to grow. I had not touched a boy yet. A lot of students came to Guérot to meet Sang Cochon. 'You, African, which devil brought you here?' This poisoned question almost took her from us] (51). Sang Cochon's trauma is presented by Aunt Da through this concept of the poisoned question that almost kills the elder just by

being uttered to her by the students. The question, she says, provokes a strong bodily reaction in Sang Cochon, just as if she had taken a poisoned drink or touched a poisoned organism: "Silence. Silence. Silence. Corps agité. Sang Cochon se gratte le cou jusqu'au sang. Allergie. Boutons. Quinte de toux. Vomissement. Froide comme la mort. Perd parole. Fièvre-frissons. Trois jours. Trois nuits. Médecine feuilles. Esprits Guinen. Enfin, deux yeux ouverts. Sang Cochon se jette sur les mots l'un après l'autre" [Silence. Silence. Silence. Agitated body. Sang Cochon scratches her neck until she bleeds. Allergy. Spots. Coughing fit. Vomit. Cold as death. Mutism. Fever-chills. Three days. Three nights. Herbal medicine. Spirits of Guinea. Finally, two opened eyes. Sang Cochon throws herself into the words, one after the other] (52).

This passage can tell us two things about the power of the storytelling in Cadostin's text: stories can kill and hurt as bad as any material poisonous element and, unlike in Bulle's novel, Sang Cochon and Gette are not the only ones with the Power of the Word. Language is powerful in itself, not due to who is uttering the words, which explains how Sang Cochon's depiction of Haiti's punishment by France attributes the European nation the power to contaminate its people with poisonous discourse even if, as Petit-Frère and Lucinde, it is disconnected from the spiritual and natural realms of the Caribbean who in Bulle's are the ones gifting such power.

From one generation to the next: the effects of the Power of the Word

Cadostin's and Bulle's novels share a lot of similarities. However, their understanding of what Chamoiseau calls "the Power of the Word" differs in one crucial factor: in Bulle's, the consequences of the transmission of words are mostly abstract in the sense that *ideas get transmitted*, but they do not cause physical changes in the bodies that receive them; in Cadostin's words have *direct* power to kill not in the sense that they justify or empower the act of killing, but in the sense that *just by being heard* they produce strong bodily reactions that can have fatal results. This is not to say that Cadostin is depicting storytelling as more powerful than Bulle does, but that their relation to the concept of toxicity is different and, therefore, is dealt with through different methods by the characters.

While in *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue* Petit-Frère and Lucinde use words to try and counter Antoine's narrative effect on her niece, in *Laisse folie courir* Sang Cochon, Aunt Da and all the inhabitants of Guérot mix stories with herbal medicine to block the evil spirits and poisons of the *lakou* Estimé. Just as in the Haitian Revolution the highly contagious idea of freedom spread quickly hand-in-hand with the mass poisoning of humans and non-human animals led by Makandal to generate terror in the colonizers, in Guérot plants, venom, prayers, and storytelling are used together to hurt and to protect individuals and communities. All this plus the fact that Sang-Cochon is the link between the Revolution and the present signals that the conversation between Gette and her ancestor is the continuation of a tradition that assumes stories as having material

power and being as useful to survival as herbal medicine and food. For free Haitians to remain Sang-Cochons, for the pig's blood to keep flowing through their veins, words must be spoken and repeated.

Antoine also uses herbal medicine in her daily life, which Petit-Frère finds as another proof of her dirtiness (Bulle 45), and she has her own *jardin créole*, "un endroit minuscule où se mêlent des plantes medicaments, des plantes nourricières et des fleurs dont la beauté nourrit les yeux." [A minuscule space where medicine plants, edible plants, and flowers whose beauty feeds the eyes get mixed] (Bulle 282). This garden, says Antoine, serves to dialogue with the ancestors (282). It is the media through which one can connect with one's origins and past when separated from one's land. The Creole garden is presented as a place of conversation and memory, as well as a symbol and means of survival. However, unlike the women in Guérot and besides this passage included at the end of the novel on the Creole gardens, Antoine focuses mostly on the transmission of abstract ideas —traditions, beliefs— and memories that built a family heritage that must be preserved in the consuming and alienating climate of the Paris *banlieues* her niece finds so rootless. Even as Antoine talks about the importance of the invisible and abstract, she presents plants and animals as vehicles for ideas and secrets that are being transmitted to her by the angels: it is the ideas and stories that hold the power, they are what must be preserved, while nature offers itself as the material channel for it in some occasions.

The garden and its plants are a vehicle for language and memory to flow, not, as in Cadostin's novel, an ingredient of the powerful mix of words and material toxins in nature. This is coherent with Antoine's experience of life and materiality: material possessions are ephemeral in her experience and this includes her garden and the plants from her birthplace, nothing stays with her for long and she goes through many losses. When talking about how her father Hilaire wasted her mother's money she says that he left them, his kids, "pas d'autre héritage que la parole" [no other inheritance than words] (32), and that is what she can take with her everywhere she goes along the secrets the angels have told her. It makes sense, then, that her depiction of the power of words is less related to material elements: what she has to offer her niece is her knowledge and memory and that is how the distant Guadeloupe will stay alive in the family's veins.

Another element that is relevant to understanding this difference in both novels has to do with location: where are the stories being told? In Bulle's case, Antoine and her niece meet in Paris and the transmission of the family's memory is done outside of Guadeloupe, in a place that the niece has described as lacking traditions, memory, or rituals. Gette is in Haiti, in Guérot, when she talks to Sang Cochon and Aunt Da, her relationship to the land of her ancestors having been kept alive by the strong oral tradition practiced by the women of the family even as she is living in France to the point that she is no stranger to Guérot. It is not that all members of Guérot keep family traditions and memory alive once in exile "Ces diasporas ont oublié jusqu'aux noms de leurs Esprits protecteurs" [those diasporas have forgotten even the names of their protecting Spirits]

(Cadostin 72), but, again, those who do not, according to Sang Cochon, belong to the Estimé branch.

Laisse folie courir never truly answers how the Estimé branch's poisonous fate is maintained through time as affirmed multiple times by Sang Cochon and Gette, but it gives some information that might help formulate some theories:

> D'arrière-grand-papa, grand-papa, papa, fils, lakou Estimé, c'est la branche à malheur. Ils travaillent tous avec le mal et la mort. Leur aïeul a fourni tous les environs en poison. Pas seulement. Quelques revendeurs ont traversé la mer et tout le pays pour s'en procurer jusqu'à Guérot. L'arrière-grand-papa d'Estimé n'envisageait toute vie humaine qu'à partir des corps couchés dans un cercueil. Personne ne buvait une tasse de café avec lui. Pas même sa femme qui a fugué avec son dernier bébé, après qu'il a éteint tous les autres avant leur premier anniversaire. Ni une ni deux, tout Guérot a poussé l'arrière-grand-papa d'Estimé au cimetière avant l'heure. Sa femme est revenue avec son jeune enfant qui, lui-même, a dégringolé sur les traces de son papa. Depuis, chaque mâle descendant est initié avant même que son esprit ne saisisse le monde.
>
> [From great-grandpa, grandpa, dad, son, *lakou* Estimé, it's the branch of misfortune. They all work with evil and death. Their ancestor supplied all the surroundings with poison. Not only. Some dealers crossed the sea and across the country to obtain it as far as Guérot. Estimé's great-grandfather only considered all human life from the bodies lying in a coffin. No one drank a cup of coffee with

him. Not even his wife who ran away with his last baby, after he killed all the others before their first birthday. Without even thinking, all of Guérot pushed Estimé's great-grandpa to the cemetery before his time. His wife returned with their young child who, himself, fell in his father's footsteps. Since then, every male descendant is initiated even before his spirit grasps the world] (37).

According to this, the males from the Estimé branch are initiated into the poison-making tradition even before their birth. However, due to the existence of Estimé bèbè and the fact that this started only with the great-grandpa that the quote is referring to, it does not seem to be a genetic matter, but a cultural one. If we follow the logic of the novel and take what we have seen at play with Sang Cochon and Gette's branch, it seems possible that the Estimé branch's culture of murdering and poisoning has been transmitted to the young members in the same way as Guérot memory of freedom and spirituality has to Gette. Estimé bèbè refusal to speak indicates, as I mentioned above, that he has learned to link language and poisoning, language and death, which also tells us the transmission of this culture is made through language, through storytelling.

This is hinted at by Sang Cochon when she tells Gette about the spirit that protects Guérot, the "homme à cheval" [man on horseback]: "Malgré les on-dit, l'Esprit ne fait pas de parti pris. Il s'accorde tout simplement à ses protégés. Mais la jalousie a brouillé les méninges des Estimé qui se plaignent: « L'homme à cheval nous a laissé tomber. Cependant nous sommes aussi des Cadostin. Mmmm, tout ça n'est pas naturel. Nous disons vengeance pour les oubliés ! »" [Despite what is said, the Spirit does not

take sides. He simply fits in with his protégés. But jealousy has confused the minds of the Estimés who complain: 'The man on horseback has let us down. However, we are also Cadostins. Mmmm, this is all unnatural. We say revenge for the forgotten!'] (27). Once again we see a constant use of words referring to the spoken word and storytelling —"les on-dit", "se plaignent", "Nous disons"— which indicates that this narrative that Sang Cochon affirms is a lie and the Estimé hold as their core belief has been repeated out-loud multiple times on that *lakou,* a pervasive and powerful narrative leading to a poisoning-prone behavior. As with the children in Morne-Galant that belief the gossip about Antoine's mother, the members of the Estimé branch have heard about them being abandoned by the Spirit since before their birth. This, together with being exposed to poison since gestation —many of the children never survive the first year, as we see in the passage on the Estimé great-grandfather—, creates a solid tradition and culture of hate and poisoning. The same is true for Gette's branch as the prejudice about the Estimé is transmitted by storytelling to all members of the family until it leaves no doubt in their minds that no Estimé can be truly good.

I began this chapter by quoting Russo's novel and its protagonist's theory of the transmission of an original void. I did it because it opened up the question of how the abstract, as in behaviors, ideas, and emotions can be passed from one generation to the next, as organic matter like genes, bacteria, and virus are. Cadostin and Bulle present an answer to this question by depicting language, specifically storytelling, as a vehicle for transmission and even a toxic matter itself. Their characters transmit ideas, traditions, and

even behaviors through narratives that are repeated aloud from one generation to the next, in some cases generating resistance from some members, Petit-Frère, Lucinde, and Estimé bèbè, who want to stop the spread either by speaking different truths or by silencing themselves.

By the end of *Laisse folie courir*, Gette takes the relay from Sang Cochon and finishes the story by adding the portion regarding herself and her life:

> — Grann Sang Cochon, mèsi! Mèsi anpil! Anpil anpil! Pour ton récit sur Guérot. Sur mes arrière-grands-parents défunts, Sidieu et Mirasia. Mes grands-parents défunts, les inséparables Joséphine et Aline avec Raphaël. Ma mère Vierge. Les Esprits. La branche Estimé.
>
> Mes deux bras entourent son cou pendant que mes yeux battent paupières pour contenir mon transport d'amour et d'affection pour les vivants et les morts à Guérot.
>
> — Maintenant, c'est moi qui raconte la suite.
>
> — Oui Grann Gette. Mais avant, pitit mwen, donne-moi une timbale d'eau trempée de feuilles médicinales.
>
> ["Grann Sang Cochon, *thanks! Thank you so much! So so much!* For your story on Guérot. On my late great-grandparents, Sidieu and Mirasia. My late grandparents, the inseparable Joséphine and Aline with Raphaël. My Virgo mother. The Spirits. The Estimé branch.

My two arms surround her neck while my eyes flutter to contain my transport of love and affection for the living and the dead in Guérot.

— Now it's me who tells the rest.

— Yes, Grann Gette. But before, *my child*, give me a tumbler of water soaked with medicinal leaves] (189).

Gette begins with gratitude and by acknowledging the gift that her ancestor has given to her, she does so in Kreyòl, showing through language how much she has absorbed the legacy she is receiving. She then hugs Sang Cochon before announcing it is her turn to do what women in her family do: tell a story. She is adding herself to the thread of stories that make the Cadostin's oral legacy and by doing so she is inserting herself into the lineage and keeping it alive for the next generation. With this gesture, she not only ensures the continuity of the legacy, but also shows how what was transmitted to her was not only the content of the stories but also the act of storytelling itself.

Finally, Sang Cochon speaks her last few words in the novel by asking for her medicine, the one that keeps her immortal, which indicates that Gette might be taking the relay, but Sang Cochon is not leaving yet. Is she staying alive because there are other Gette's that have not heard the stories yet? With the Cadostin lineage being so broad —it even includes the Estimé branch— we can imagine Gette is the latest sprout of one of many branches that Sang Cochon can pass her knowledge. Sang Cochon might also be meant to live forever and reinforce the work of younger storytellers as she does with Aunt Da who tells Gette parts of the story, but always with her ancestor's support.

Unlike Sang Cochon, Antoine's death is announced as a possibility as we learn she has cancer (Bulle 281). We also learn that her niece has a baby girl who is present in their conversations and who is the main cause the niece wants to hear Antoine's story. The niece collects Antoine's interventions, as well as her sibling's:

> J'avais cessé depuis bien longtemps de les interroger tous les trois. J'avais bu leurs paroles et leurs silences avec avidité, comme si quelque chose d'important allait se perdre, un temps mythique d'avant ma naissance. J'avais exploité mes notes, construit un récit qui tenait comme il pouvait, lu et relu mon texte. Je ne leur avais encore rien montré. Ils savaient que je menais une sorte d'enquête, mais ils ne m'avaient pas questionnée, comme si après s'être livrés sans retenue, une espèce de pudeur les empêchait de me demander ce que j'avais fait de leurs confidences, ou comme si le fait de m'avoir parlé suffisait amplement.
>
> [I had stopped questioning all three of them a long time ago. I had drunk their words and their silences with avidity as if something important was going to be lost, a mythical time before my birth. I used my notes, constructed a story that held together as best it could, and read and reread my text. I hadn't shown them anything yet. They knew that I was conducting a sort of investigation, but they had not questioned me, as if after having given themselves up without restraint, a kind of modesty prevented them from asking me what I had done with their confidences, or as if just talking to me was enough] (Idem).

Using, as her aunt, a vocabulary of food and drinks to explain her listening to her elders' words, the niece describes how the stories she has heard have stayed with her. The words and silences have entered her body and become part of her, just like it happened to Antoine with the angels' secrets. She also admits to having written her version down: unlike Gette, she does not tell her story out loud, but writes it down, afraid of forgetting and of losing that part of herself while her elders seem satisfied with having talked to her. Even if, just like Gette, she continues the thread of stories and does so her child will one day be able to access them, Antoine's niece edits the legacy by modifying the medium of transmission.

This gesture ties us, readers, to the thread of transmission. We read what the niece has written and we become exposed to the stories she got from her aunt. A new narrative is added to our repertoire and we might, as I have done here, transmit it with our edits and added ideas, participation in its replication and repetition to ensure its survival. We readers are, then, exposed to toxicity by these authors: they made us listen to their character's storytelling. The effect of this exposure will depend then on the repertoire of narratives we carry. We might be like Petit Frère and Lucinde and carry versions of our human stories that make us skeptical of what Sang Cochon and Antoine tell; we can be like Gette, whose brain is culturally attuned to the logic of Sang Cochon's stories; or we can be like Antoine's niece, a mix of these two. In the end, we will react to the contact we have with these texts because our existence is one of storytellers and our biological nature can never be separated from that of builders and reproducers of narratives.

Conclusive remarks: Diverse Planting in Creole Gardens

By the end of *Là où les chiens aboient par la queue* (2018), Antoine and her niece talk about ways to keep Guadeloupe close to them while in Paris and mention the figure of the *jardin* créole, a small parcel of land to grow food and medicinal plants for survival. They also comment on how part of the point of a *jardin créole* is the mix of different types of plants: "On fait exprès de mélanger les espèces, ça les protège des maladies" (282). The Creole garden is a small but powerful piece of land where contact between species is required for survival as pathogens, as these usually specialize in one plant species and therefore have less chance of growing strong in such a diverse soil environment (Lynch).

This planting method of plant diversity is the opposite of the tendency of monoculture in industrial agriculture. Monoculture answers to technical and practical needs (Idem) and reminds us of the extended plots of land dedicated to a single crop in both colonial and contemporary plantations. It focuses on economic benefits and massive production. The creole garden is not a massive method because it is not intended to help the planter achieve a cumulation of capital, it simply allows the planter to have a small piece of land for their survival and connection to the soil, and it is supposed to last a lifetime. Monoculture, by contrast, tends to lower soil fertility eventually. Besides not inserting itself in capitalistic relationships with the land and refusing Plantation economies of monoculture, the plant diversity method of the creole garden also strays away from notions of purity, reminding us that survival can never come from isolation and preservation. The planter has to get dirty with soil, has to open their body to the

effects of the organisms present in their garden as they plant, care for the species in it, and nourish and heal themselves with their properties.

I have set the image of the *jardin créole* as a referent for this dissertation. I insisted on opening these pages to outside ideas, disciplines, and multiple languages, letting the diversity of elements create a rich and healthy soil to feed each line. I tried to open my body and mind to it and let it affect me, contaminate me with questions and worries, and intoxicate me with excitement or obsession. The idea of the creole garden forces us to ask ourselves what are we prioritizing in our quest for environmental balance. How are we thinking about the survival of our species and those around us? How do we conceive our life on this planet when we try to define what is harmful and what isn't? As Malcom Ferdinand and other critics of non-intersectional environmental activism and thought have argued numerous times, thinking about ecology and the battles for an environmentally friendly society as having a goal of preserving and maintaining some sort of purity in what we call nature fails to understand the complexities of life interdependence.

I have shown how the authors of the six novels I studied in this dissertation demonstrate the necessity to understand our current environmental crises through a lens that sees our species as interconnected to other forms of life and stray away from ideas of purity and the conservation of what we imagine nature to be, as the idealized image we have created of the "natural" tends to separate it from our existence following the famous dichotomy of civilization/nature. They embrace toxicity, not because they refuse to

acknowledge it can cause us harm, but because they know that *we* are part of it too. I have repeated in these pages how we do not exist in a vacuum, and the authors portray that through characters like Victor who believe themselves immune to all harm and are unaware of how exposed they are to toxicity or how toxic they can be to other organisms; characters like Tierra who are so connected to the land they inhabit their bodies mutate with it until they completely change species; characters like the Ceiba tree who is not exclusively a plant, but also not exclusively a deity; characters like Tomás and Federico, whose sensibility to their environment is so high they just cannot leave without embracing their connection to it and are sicken by life in a human society that is oblivious to it; characters like Cabiya's *zonbi* that remind us how illusory and performative our physical and conceptual borders are, how there is a lot we cannot keep *outside* of us; characters like Sang Cochon who gets sick just by being asked about her trauma, but is healed by sharing it and transmitting the memory of it to her descendants; characters like Antoine who allow plants, animals, water, wind and the spirits to intoxicate her until she can hear the secrets of the angels.

Every one of these novels offers alternatives to think about our existence on Earth that stray away, or at least try to, from Plantation logics of life. The first chapter presents two novels asking about extinction, ecocide, and even hints of the Apocalypse. They appeal to current human anxieties around the conservation of ecosystems and species around the globe. Time and time again we see petitions and discourse around extinction —the myriad of photos of skinny polar bears balancing on a tiny melting piece of ice

comes to mind—, but when confronted with the haunting data of yet another species in danger of disappearing, what are we *truly* afraid of or sad about? What is the result of preserving a suffering species through conservation —zoos, for example— if we do not see the thread tying us to them and their pain?

Montero shows us how our quest for saving species on the verge of extinction like the *grenouille du sang* is connected to how we see the frog as a reflection of ourselves. A refusal to understand our biological exposure to harm and how deeply in contact with the frog's existence we can be is what leads to failure to understand why we are losing them, and losing ourselves. If we keep believing, as Victor did to the end of the novel, that we are merely witnessing extinction, that we are collectors and spectators of ecosystems and their inhabitants, we will fail to engage in ways to live on this planet that ensure survival or that solves the environmental issues that scare us. We are not immune to our entrance to the *monte* and our bodies are also affected by the ways we interact with other species and environments as we are part of planetary life and not outside of it.

Valdés's proposal enriches this reading as it explores the alternative of metamorphosis, mutation, and refusal of human life as we know it not only by having the two protagonists choose to become Ceiba trees by the end but also by her constant hints towards the failure of the Cuban socialism in terms of environmental practices. While the Escuelas al Campo can be understood as having the intent to value agricultural work and break the elitist and capitalistic view of land workers as exploitable as well as of land as private property, Valdés shows how its logic is still tied to Plantation practices: it still

views land as property, albeit not private, of the state and the people, and the definition of "people" is still too narrow, which leads to racist and specist actions by the authorities, such as the ecocide and genocide of the inhabitants of the *monte*. The land and everything deemed not human is still perceived as exploitable to exhaustion and extinction for the benefits, not of private business but of the nation, failing to conceive a truly counterplantation human inhabiting of the land.

Cabiya invites us to ask ourselves what are we and how we define a human. He offers a narrative that plays with perception, questions our certainties about our species, and shows the violent but at the end obsolescence of borders, not only through the portrayal of constant traffic through the line between Haiti and the Dominican Republic but also the river dividing Papa Vincent's and Placide's village. We can draw lines, limit interaction, and create laws prohibiting crossing, but we will still be connected and dependent on others on this planet, no matter who they are or how they seem.

Sánchez Russo's novel reveals the polluted and harmful realities of seemingly clean and controlled spaces, it brings the debris of our species back to the surface and forces us to look and interact with it. It also is an excellent example of the transmission and pervasiveness of tropes such as the zombie, since without ever presenting her novel as a zombie novel, Sánchez Russo offers a deeply interesting portrayal of the trope and our uses of it to make sense of contemporary human existence in the Plantationocene. It makes evident how narratives are contagious, how we can find echoes of stories we know in new ones, and how they also do not exist in a vacuum. This is lastly emphasized by

Bulle's and Cadostin's portrayal of the centrality of storytelling in toxic transmission and the building of human societies. The importance of storytelling for human survival makes it inevitably interact with toxicity, both conceptually and materially, because it goes hand in hand with our biological reality.

This garden of words depends on the mix and chapters are linked below the soil, roots touch and feed together. Ideally, other seeds can enter and thrive in it, maybe some will even mutate to adapt to the contact with the others. And, as any garden, it is still alive, not frozen for eternity in these pages. Time will change it, make adaptation necessary multiple times, and require movement to maintain fertile soil. This is then just a snapshot, a glimpse of its current state.

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