

INVERTING THE DISCOURSE OF CIVILIZATION
AND BARBARISM IN *MUNDO DEL FIN DEL MUNDO* AND
UN VIEJO QUE LEÍA NOVELAS DE AMOR BY LUIS SEPÚLVEDA

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American critic Raymond Leslie Williams has convincingly argued that a desire to be modern is a central characteristic of the 20th century Latin American novel.¹ Williams's argument also coincides with Octavio Paz's assertion that modernity has been a topic of interest to Latin American intellectuals since the 19th century.² A glimpse of the terminology used by authors and critics to name various Latin American movements over the past 125 years—*modernismo*, *posmodernismo*, *avant-garde*, *modern novel*, and *post-modern fiction*—gives us a sense of the persistent desire of Latin American authors to engage in a dialogue on Latin American subjects' positions within modernity. Since the 1990s, a corpus of works has emerged in Latin America that suggests that it is already possible to speak of the environmental novel as an authentic subgenre of Latin American fiction. The development of the Latin American environmental novel can be understood as a further manifestation of the historical desire of Latin American intellectuals to engage with the concept of modernity. This new subgenre arises in the context of an order of global neocolonialism in which the authors elaborate counter-discourses to the economic models of modernity that have frequently been imposed by wealthy nations. In the present essay, I offer readings of two environmental novels by Chilean novelist Luis Sepúlveda—*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* (1989) and *Mundo del fin del mundo* (1989)—as examples of the Latin American environmental novel's engagement with the concept of modernity. Specifically, I analyze how Sepúlveda's novels undermine the Eurocentric notion of modernity proffered by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in his 1845 treatise *Civilización y barbarie o vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga*.³ Ultimately, I argue that Sepúlveda's ironic inversion of Sarmiento's concept of civilization and barbarism can be understood as a decolonial gesture.

Luis Sepúlveda (1949-2020), has been widely recognized by critics as one of the most prominent voices in contemporary environmental literature in Latin America.⁴ Juan Gabriel Araya Grandón, for example, has briefly summarized the contributions of Sepúlveda's writings as follows:

Sepúlveda has installed an ecological narrative (an econarrative) based on a critical discourse that deals with the frictions produced between environmental protectors and predators, between the autochthonous element and the so-called “civilized,” between the interests of transnational companies and the communities that defend their natural sources of sustenance, between the use value of resources and their exchange value, between civilization and barbarism, in addition to developing interesting points of view in relation to bioethics.⁵

In the present essay, I focus on two of his most noteworthy environmental novels: *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* (1989) and *Mundo del fin del mundo* (1989). *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* is the story of a conflict between the environmental ethics of foreign extractivism and those of the indigenous inhabitants of the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Mundo del fin del mundo* focuses on illegal whaling in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. In this essay I will establish important similarities between the two novels, specifically asserting that both novels interrogate the concept of modernity in Latin American fiction and insist on the need for a paradigm shift regarding the relationship between human beings and the environment.⁶ I also suggest that in both *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* and in *Mundo del fin del mundo*, Sepúlveda posits that literature has the unique capacity for fostering ecological awareness and imagining futures that privilege the wellbeing of ecosystems on the one hand, while resituating literary works of the past in the present moment of environmental calamity on the other.

The protagonist of *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, Antonio José Bolívar Proaño, and his young wife move from the high mountains of Ecuador to the Amazon jungle in hope that the change of climate will help them conceive a child. Before long, however, his wife becomes infected with malaria and dies. When the narrator informs the reader that the protagonist, “wanted to take revenge on that cursed region, on that green hell that took away love and dreams,” it seems that the narrative is going to revolve around a struggle between humans and nature in the style of the Creole novels of the 1920s, but that notion is abandoned when the reader learns that “However much he tried to revive his old feeling of hatred, he did not stop feeling at ease in that world, and then the hatred faded as he was seduced by those vast expanses without frontier or owner” (34).⁷ Proaño learns to hunt and fish from his Shuar neighbors, and acquires from them a deep knowledge of the jungle and its animals.

As Scott M. DeVries points out in his study *A History of Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature*, the wisdom and diligence of the Shuar with regard to nature stands in sharp contrast to the behavior of outsiders.⁸ This is evident in the following passage:

Both the settlers and gold prospectors made all kinds of stupid mistakes in the jungle. They pillaged it unmercifully, so that some animals turned really hostile. [. . .]

There were also the gringos who came from the oil installations. They arrived in noisy groups carrying enough weapons to equip a battalion and headed off into the jungle ready to eliminate everything that moved. They unleashed themselves on the ocelots, cubs and pregnant females alike, and then, before clearing off, they photographed each other beside dozens of skins staked on poles.

The gringos went away, the skins remained there rotting until a caring hand flung them in the river, and the surviving ocelots took their revenge by tearing apart the half-starved cattle.⁹ (49)

While the Shuar only hunt and use what is necessary to sustain themselves, the gringos kill for sport, unaware of the ecological effects of their actions. The main conflict in the novel, therefore, is not a struggle between human beings and non-human nature but rather a clash between two different views of the relationship between humans and the environment. The sense of ecological disillusionment displayed in the protagonist's description of the outsiders' treatment of the jungle ecosystem is an example of what Jorge Marcone views as a central characteristic of Spanish American environmental literature.¹⁰

For Charlotte Rogers, the disillusionment that Marcone observes can be partially attributed to the failure of the promise of El Dorado as an imagined place that could satisfy the economic demands of sixteenth-century Europeans. She explains,

the concept of El Dorado is based on the assumption that the South American tropical forest is a site of inexhaustible natural resources, an idea that calls up paradisiacal notions of nature's bounty but incorporates them into nascent global economic networks set in motion by Europeans' arrival in the New World. [. . .] The legacy of El Dorado endures from the colonial period to the contemporary era in practices ranging from mineral mining to timber logging, and from rubber tapping to oil drilling.¹¹

In *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, the foreigners wreaking havoc on the local flora and fauna are precisely gold and oil prospectors who represent the

continued practice of international extractivism that began with the European colonization of South America.

In spite of the anthropocentric vision implied in the myth of El Dorado and evidenced in the behavior of the foreigners in the novel, several images reinforce the text's ecocentric orientation. For example, when a group of North American tourists is attacked by monkeys on an expedition into the jungle and one of them is killed, the narrator describes the sight of his remains as follows: "The ants had done a magnificent job, leaving their bones as smooth as plaster. The American's skeleton was receiving the last attention of the ants. They were carrying away his straw-colored hair strand by strand, like tiny women woodcutters felling coppery trees to strengthen the entrance tunnel to their anthill" (84).¹² The anthropocentric worldview represented by the tourists is undermined in this passage in two ways. First, they are violently reminded of their lack of a privileged status in the natural world as they are attacked for having encroached on the monkey's territory. Second, the image of ants systematically dismantling the remains of the deceased is a stark reminder to the reader that while the death of the human character is a tragedy to his fellow humans, to the rest of the ecosystem, the human is merely life-sustaining nutrients for a variety of animals, plants, and microbes.¹³

The distance between the anthropocentrism of the foreigners and the ecocentrism of the Shuar is clearly seen in the novel's denouement when Proaño is forced to shoot a female ocelot that has killed several men in revenge for the death of five of her cubs. Saddened and furious by the death of a prohibited species, Proaño curses "the gringo responsible for the tragedy, the mayor, the gold prospectors, all those who whored on his virgin Amazonia" (131).¹⁴ Thus, the novel ends with a denunciation of those who unbalance ecosystems for their own benefit without considering the destructive consequences of their actions.

Despite this severe criticism, there is also a glimpse of hope in the last image of the novel in which Proaño wishes to return to "his novels that spoke of love in such beautiful words that sometimes they made him forget the barbarity of man" (131).¹⁵ With this parting image, Sepúlveda brings to the fore the importance of literature in current ecological crises and, according to Laura Barbas-Rhoden, suggests its ability to "awaken a love for nature" in the reader.¹⁶ The novels that Proaño reads deal with romantic love and the suffering that accompanies it, with "the delights and torments of love that outlasted time" (61).¹⁷ The implicit question in the last image of the novel is whether human beings will find the altruistic love that will be necessary to change the barbaric and destructive route that our relationship with the planet is currently taking. Through the heroic character of Antonio José Bolívar Proaño, *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* suggests the need for a paradigmatic shift towards sustainability in both individual actions—such as hunting and fishing—and extractive

behaviors in industries such as petroleum and mineral mining.¹⁸ With regard to the destruction of the Amazon, deforestation as a result of colonization has not slowed since the publication of *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*. As Matt Sandy reports, “Today their logging yards, cattle enclosures and soy farms sit on the fringes of a vanishing forest. Powered by murky sources of capital and rising demand for beef, a violent and corrupt frontier is now pushing into indigenous land, national parks and one of the most preserved parts of the jungle.”¹⁹ Despite the integration of environmental rhetoric into mainstream Latin American political discourse since the 1980s, the forces of coloniality unleashed more than five centuries ago continue to wreak havoc on the Amazon. If, as Sepúlveda’s novel suggests, there is hope for a change of course, time is quickly running out. “With as much as 17% of the forest lost already, scientists believe that the tipping point will be reached at 20% to 25% of deforestation even if climate change is tamed. If, as predicted, global temperatures rise by 4 [degrees Celsius], much of the central, eastern and southern Amazon will certainly become barren scrubland.”²⁰

Mundo del fin del mundo displays a similar ethic to *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* regarding the commodification of nature but with a change of scenery. The novel is divided into three parts. In the first part, the protagonist recalls that in his childhood in Chile, inspired by the novels of Jules Verne, Emilio Salgari, and Jack London that he received from his uncle, he had always longed for an adventure on the high seas aboard a whaling ship. At the age of sixteen, during his summer holidays, in search of adventure, he sets out for Patagonia in the hope of participating in a whaling expedition.

Above all, his journey is inspired by *Moby Dick*, a book, he says, that changed the trajectory of his life: “I was fourteen when I read that book, and sixteen when I could no longer resist the call from the south. [. . .] Through other readings I learned that several small fleets of whaling ships anchored in the pre-Antarctic continental confines, and I was eager to meet those men whom I imagined were heirs of Captain Ahab.”²¹ When he reaches the port from which the expedition embarks and finds himself in the restaurant of an inn with the captain and the first officer of a whaling ship, they ask him about his reasons for wanting to join the expedition, to which he responds, “Because . . . because . . . the truth is that I read a novel. *Moby Dick*. Are you familiar with it?”²² Learning that they are unfamiliar with Melville’s novel, he proceeds to narrate his own version over the next two hours, drawing more and more listeners from the tables around him. He reflects on his storytelling, suggesting that “Herman Melville would have forgiven me if that version of his novel had something of my own making, but at the end all the men had pensive faces, and after patting my shoulders they returned to their tables.”²³ The next morning, he is on board when the ship leaves the port.

His experience on board, however, affects him in an unexpected way. He

had set out in search of the excitement of an epic battle between man and nature in the style of a Melville or London novel, but he could not have foreseen his reaction to the success of the mission. He describes in great detail the image of the whale carcass on the seashore:

The next morning, two boats towed the animal to the beach, and there the *chilotes* cut it open with knives similar to hockey sticks. Blood bathed the stones and shells, forming dark rivers that made the water red. The five men wore black oil-cloth garments and were bloodied from head to toe. Seagulls, cormorants, and other seabirds flew overhead crazed by the smell of blood, and more than one paid for the audacity of getting too close by receiving a stab that tore them in two in mid-flight.

It was a quick chore. A part of the sperm whale ended up salted and stuffed into the barrels, but the bulk of the animal was thrown on the beach, with remains of meat adhering to the bones that would soon join the ghostly panorama of Londonberry Island.²⁴

Upon returning to port, the young man decides that although he enjoys being at sea, he does not want to be a whaler. The captain responds: “You know, *paisanito*, I'm glad you didn't like hunting. Every day there are fewer whales. We may be the last whalers in these waters, and that's fine. Time to leave them alone. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, they were all whalers. If I had a son like you, I would advise him to chart another course.”²⁵

In the second part of the novel, the reader learns that the protagonist eventually moves to Germany and starts an independent news agency with three freelance journalists. He describes how the creation of the agency was the result of a fortuitous encounter:

From that talk was born the idea of creating an alternative news agency, fundamentally concerned with the problems that afflict the ecological environment, and with responding to the lies used by wealthy nations to justify the plunder of poor countries. The plunder not only of raw materials, but of its future. It may be difficult to understand the latter, but think about it: when a rich nation installs a chemical or nuclear waste dump in a poor country, it is looting the future of that human community, well, if the waste is, as they say, “harmless,” Why don't they install the landfills in their own territories?²⁶

This passage is an excellent example of what Gisela Heffes, in her study *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación*, identifies as a fundamental element in Latin American environmental writing, “the garbage dump as a trope of a global biopolitics.”²⁷ Moreover, the protagonist’s argument that the richest nations are ultimately looting the resources of their global neighbors also supports Laura Barbas-Rhoden’s thesis in her study *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction* that, in large part, Latin American environmental fiction is a denunciation of the economic model of neoliberalism in which Latin American governments frequently grant wealthier and more powerful countries access to their local resources through agreements that lead to the destruction or depletion of those resources.²⁸ In this sense, Sepúlveda’s novel clearly stands in opposition to the economic model of modernity proposed by neoliberalism.

What is striking about the change from Part I to Part II of *Mundo del fin de mundo* is that the main conflict is no longer between humans and non-human nature, as suggested in the intertextual references to Melville and London at the beginning of the novel. Due to the protagonist’s transformation, in the second part, similar to *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, the focus becomes a battle between opposing human interests and the exploitation or protection of natural resources. That is, the conflict is now between environmentally conscious citizens and the forces of global capital. The battle turns violent when a Puerto Montt journalist, Sara Díaz, is hit by a car and robbed of the photos she had developed after photographing the Japanese whaling ship, the Nishin Maru. The assailants leave her on the road with a broken leg and two broken ribs, threatening her with death while she recovers in the hospital. When the protagonist is notified of this attack, he immediately leaves Hamburg to return for the first time in several years to the southern region of Chile which he refers to as the world at the end of the world.

The captain of a local fishing boat, Jorge Nilssen, greets the protagonist and tells him about the various forms of environmental destruction that he has witnessed over the years. Recalling an encounter with a Japanese whaling ship, Nilssen describes the following:

With a pipe about two meters in diameter they suctioned the sea water. They removed everything causing a current that we felt under the keel, and, afterward, the sea was turned into a dark soup of dead water. They suctioned it all without stopping to think of species that were prohibited or under protection. We watched in horror, nearly breathless, as several baby dolphins were sucked in and disappeared.

The most horrible part of it all was to see that the unwanted remains of the carnage were being returned to the water through a drain at the stern.²⁹

Given the brutal attack against Sara Díaz and the unscrupulous plunder of the sea described in this passage, it is not surprising that the protagonist frames the conflict as a form of barbarism. Describing the Greenpeace fleet tasked with patrolling the sea for illegal whaling ships, he reflects that, “Yes, it was a small fleet in the face of the magnitude of modern barbarism.”³⁰ The use of the phrase “modern barbarism” is reflective of the way in which Latin American environmental novels not only engage in a dialogue about the discourse of modernity but also point to the failure of capitalist models of modernity to protect Latin America’s ecosystems.

The word “barbarism” inevitably evokes Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s 1845 essay *Civilización y barbarie o vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga*. Strongly influenced by the thought of the French enlightenment, Sarmiento proposes a highly Eurocentric notion of civilization in his vision to civilize the Argentine pampas. What Sarmiento posits is a model of modernity that is grounded in the positivist notion of an inexorable human march toward ever higher forms of civilization through scientific progress. By incorporating the phrase “modern barbarism,” this passage ironically inverts Sarmiento’s notions of civilization and barbarism. As portrayed in the novel, scientific advances unleashed by the forces of capitalism are now being used for the barbaric destruction of ecosystems. Nilssen’s description of the Japanese ship is the most visible example in the novel of how scientific progress, the centerpiece of the Enlightenment model of modernity and the great hope of the positivists, can also be used for purposes that destroy the environment.

The critique of the discourse of civilization and barbarism in *Mundo del fin del mundo* is also found in *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*. For Sarmiento, the superiority of European culture is central to the notion of civilization, as evidenced in his perception of the urban/rural cultural dichotomy in Argentine culture. He maintains:

The city is the center of Argentine, Spanish, and European civilization; there are the workshops of the arts, the shops of commerce, the schools, the courts, everything that characterizes, in short, the educated peoples [. . .] The man of the city wears the European costume, lives by civilized life as we know it everywhere: there are the laws, the ideas of progress, the means of instruction, some municipal organization, the regular government, etc.³¹

Sarmiento's emphasis on education in this passage underscores the centrality of the transmission of Western knowledge in his model of modernity. As Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo remind us, "Western expansion was not only economic and political but fundamentally epistemic."³² In both of Sepúlveda's novels, the supposed superiority of Western knowledge is undermined. In *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, it is the settlers and tourists whose knowledge is inadequate for success in the jungle, and in *Mundo del fin del mundo* it is technologically advanced whaling ships, propelled by the forces of capitalism, that are systematically destroying ocean life.

The narrator of *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* informs the reader, for example, that "the settlers destroyed the jungle building the masterpiece of civilized man: the desert."³³ This passage again presents an ironic inversion of Sarmiento's ideas, since for the Argentine it was necessary to civilize the pampas by importing and adopting European customs, and, in Sepúlveda's novel, the Western concept of progress turns out to be barbaric compared to the sustainability of Shuar indigenous culture. Furthermore, since the barbaric destruction of the jungle and its animals is carried out by people who come from supposedly civilized places, the last words of *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, "human barbarism," serve to contradict Sarmiento's argument that wild spaces are what lead to barbarism.³⁴

In *Mundo del fin del mundo*, the narrator's comment a few chapters after referring to "modern barbarism" clarifies the critique of the paradigm of modernity that is based on blind faith in scientific progress:

But ecological deterioration, daily murder of the planet, is not only limited to the killings of whales or elephants. An irrational vision of science and progress is responsible for legitimizing crimes, and it seems that the only heritage of mankind is madness. [. . .] And to think that there are still spokesmen for a so-called modernism who find a platform in the European newspapers to disqualify the measures for the protection of nature by calling them "ecolatrics," and they try to elevate the speech of the fool who burns his house to warm himself to the category of a new ethic. "I despise what I do not know" is the motto of curious philosophers of destruction.³⁵

The vitriolic criticism unleashed in this paragraph suggests that humanity can no longer blindly trust that scientific progress will lead us to ever higher forms of civilization. This, of course, is not a new idea since the romantic writers of the nineteenth century often shunned what they saw as the evils of the industrial city and avant-garde authors of the twentieth century condemned the use of new technologies to destroy human beings in massive quantities during the

first world war. However, by proposing a paradigm in which the protection of non-human nature is privileged over financial gains, thus rejecting the foundation of neoliberalism, *Mundo del fin del mundo* participates in the impulse of the Latin American environmental novel towards a heightened ecological awareness that will lead to environmental justice.

In the third and final section of the novel, the protagonist finds himself once again aboard a ship in Patagonia. In his investigation of the assault on Sara, he comes across the site of an epic battle between the Japanese whaling ship, the *Nishin Maru*, and local wildlife. Nilssen and his partner Pedro Chico tell the protagonist the story of their encounter with the *Nishin Maru*, describing how a few days before their arrival, they had observed the Japanese ship lifting at least two dozen whales on board as the water filled with the blood and the remains of the animals. Pedro Chico decided to row a lifeboat towards the *Nishin Maru* knowing that they would attack it with the water cannons and that the whales would feel that he was in danger and would come to help him. As Nilssen recounts:

Then, obeying a call that no other man has heard at sea, a call so high that it shook the eardrums, thirty, fifty, one hundred, a multitude of whales and dolphins swam until they almost touched the shore, to come back even faster and crash their heads against the ship.

Not caring that in each attack many of them died with their heads blown off, the cetaceans repeated the attacks until the *Nishin Maru*, pushed against the coast, threatened to run aground.³⁶

Several of the *Nishin Maru's* crew fall overboard during the battle and are left for dead by the fleeing captain. A few days later when the protagonist arrives at the battle site, he finds several whale skeletons on the water's edge and thousands of birds of prey hovering over the remains. The bloody description of the battle and its aftermath underscores the novel's critique of the destruction wrought by a barbaric form of capitalism.

In the novel's denouement, the protagonist returns to Germany with Sara, the wounded journalist. During the transatlantic flight he observes a young boy reading and, out of curiosity, leans over to see what he is reading. He discovers that the book is *Moby Dick*. The return to Melville's novel in the context of the protagonist's transformation from whaler to environmentalist provides a glimpse of hope that future generations will be inspired to love and protect the sea like Pedro Chico and the other characters in the novel.

In conclusion, *Mundo del fin del mundo* participates in the critique of mo-

dernity that is common among Latin American environmental novels. The protagonist's transformation of ideals regarding the relationship between human beings and non-human nature represents a heightened ecological awareness that parallels the trend toward an increased presence of environmental issues in Latin American fiction of the 1990s-2020s. In contrast to nineteenth-century novels such as *Moby Dick* in which nature is presented as the adversary of humans, the contemporary environmental novel affirms an ecocentric vision of the world that perceives humans as one more element of a larger biological network and rejects the anthropocentrism of previous conceptualizations of modernizing projects.

Barbas-Rhoden has astutely observed that Latin American ecological fiction suggests that "modernization has been predicated on the exploitation of natural resources and the marginalization or elimination of other ways of living on the planet."³⁷ For Walsh and Mignolo, this can be explained by understanding the inextricably intertwined relationship between modernity and coloniality. They maintain, "Coloniality is constitutive, not derivative, of modernity. That is to say, there is no modernity without coloniality, thus the compound expression: modernity/coloniality."³⁸ In this sense, Sepúlveda's novels can be understood as continuing the representation of "the continent's predominant economic forms and, as a result, its gradual incorporation into the international capitalist system" that Jennifer French observes in Spanish American regionalist writing of the 1920s and 1930s.³⁹ Similar to French's argument that Spanish American regional narratives should be included in discussions of international literature on colonialism as they reflect "the global struggle for access to land and control of natural resources" in the context of the "invisible" British economic empire in Latin America, Sepúlveda's novels portray analogous conflicts with more broadly defined neo-colonial capitalist forces at the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ The whaling, gold, and oil industries in Sepúlveda's novels exemplify the proliferation of extractivism in the late twentieth century in Latin America facilitated by the broad adoption of neoliberal policies that often allowed for the privatization of natural resources and the deregulation of environmental protections.

Returning to the attack on Sarmiento's model of modernity in Sepúlveda's novels, I would suggest that Sepúlveda's inversion of Sarmiento's notion of civilization and barbarism can be understood as a decolonial gesture that undermines the notion of Western epistemological superiority that is central to both coloniality and modernity. As Walsh and Mignolo assert, "you cannot decolonize knowledge if you do not question the very foundation of Western epistemology."⁴¹ Although his novels do not articulate a specific alternative, Sepúlveda's suggestion that modernity itself is barbaric in its destruction of nature implies the need for a radical epistemological shift. Both novels' critiques of the environmental damage wrought by capitalism are consistent with his

participation in the Chilean Communist Youth, and his support of the socialist government of Salvador Allende.

Elsewhere I have argued that the shift toward heightened ecological consciousness in Latin American environmental fiction can be understood as yet another manifestation of the desire of Latin American intellectuals to redefine modernity in a new context.⁴² Read in this light, *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* and *Mundo del fin del mundo* propose that being modern at the turn of the 21st century is no longer to demonstrate mastery over non-human nature as in the great novels of the 19th century and the early part of the twentieth century. Instead, the redefinition of modernity offered in Sepúlveda's novels would be a heightened ecological awareness in which capitalist surplus is no longer privileged over the well-being of ecosystems. However, assertions by scholars such as Walsh, Mignolo, and Aníbal Quijano regarding the inexorably entangled nature of modernity and coloniality give rise to the question of whether or not it is possible to radically redefine modernity and simultaneously move toward decoloniality or if the entire project of modernity must be abandoned.⁴³ Is it possible, as suggested by Sepúlveda's protagonist in *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, for Western and indigenous epistemologies to complement each other in ways that would deconstruct the colonial framework that has led to five centuries of social injustice and environmental destruction? In both novels, literature is portrayed as having the potential to inspire a respect for nature that will be necessary to alter human interactions with the planet.⁴⁴

NOTES

¹ Raymond Leslie Williams, "Modernist Continuities: The Desire to Be Modern in Twentieth-Century Spanish-American Fiction," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 79 (2002), 369.

² Octavio Paz, *Poesía en movimiento: México 1915-1966* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1966). 5.

³ Martín Camps makes a similar argument in his essay, "Barbarian Civilization: Travel and Landscape in *Don Segundo Sombra* and the Contemporary Argentinean Novel" in *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings*, ed. Adrian Taylor Kane (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2010), 154-172.

⁴ See, for example, Laura Barbas-Rhoden, *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); Scott Devries, *A History of Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2013); and Jonathan Tittler, "Ecological Criticism and Spanish American Fiction: An Overview" in *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures*, 11-36.

⁵ Juan Gabriel Araya Grandón, "Otra ética para un nuevo mundo: El 'principio de responsabilidad' de Hans Jonas en *Mundo del fin del mundo* (1994) de Luis Sepúlveda. Notas para una investigación ecocrítica," *Acta Literaria* 44 (2012): 153-165, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0717-68482012000100010>. "Sepúlveda ha instalado una narrativa ecologista (una econarrativa) basada en un discurso crítico que trata las fricciones producidas entre protectores del medioambiente y depredadores, entre el elemento autóctono y el llamado "civilizado", entre los intereses de las compañías transnacionales y de las comunidades que defienden sus fuentes naturales de manutención, entre el valor de uso de los recursos y su valor de cambio, entre la civilización y la barbarie, además de desarrollar interesantes puntos de vista en relación con la bioética" (153-154).

⁶ Catherine Humières acknowledges the importance of the concept of modernity in *El viejo que leía novelas de amor*, arguing that the novel denounces "los estragos cometidos por la ignorancia de los hombres y el profundo materialismo de la sociedad moderna." "Viajar hacia el Fin del Mundo, según Jean Raspail y Luis Sepúlveda" *Cyber Humanitatis* 41 (Summer 2007).

⁷ In text page references to translations are from Luis Sepúlveda, *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993). Original Spanish quotations are from Luis Sepúlveda, *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* (1989; Barcelona: Tusquets, 2002). "Por más que intentara revivir su proyecto de odio, no dejaba de sentirse a gusto en aquel mundo, hasta que lo fue olvidando, seducido por las invitaciones de aquellos parajes sin límites y sin dueños" (44-45).

⁸ Devries, *Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature*, 139.

⁹ “Tanto los colonos como los buscadores de oro cometían toda clase de errores estúpidos en la selva. La depredaban sin consideración y esto conseguía que algunas bestias se volvieran feroces. [...] Y estaban también los gringos venidos desde las instalaciones petroleras. Llegaban en grupos bulliciosos portando armas suficientes para equiparar a un batallón, y se lanzaban monte adentro dispuestos a acabar con todo lo que se moviera. Se ensañaban con los tigrillos, sin diferenciar crías o hembras preñadas, y más tarde antes de largarse, se fotografiaban junto a las docenas de pieles estacadas. Los gringos se iban, las pieles permanecían pudriéndose hasta que una mano diligente las arrojaba al río, y los tigrillos sobrevivientes se desquitaban destripando reses famélicas.” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 59-60.

¹⁰ Jorge Marcone, “Jungle Fever: Ecological Disillusion in Spanish American Literature,” *Encuentros* no. 58 (November 2007): 1.

¹¹ Charlotte Rogers, *Mourning El Dorado: Literature and Extractivism in the Contemporary American Tropics* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 7.

¹² “Las hormigas realizaron su trabajo de manera impecable dejando huesos mundos que parecían de yeso. El esqueleto del norteamericano recibía la última atención de las hormigas. Trasladaban su cabellera pajiza de pelo en pelo, como diminutas leñadoras de árboles cobrizos, para fortalecer con ellos el cono de entrada del hormiguero.” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 93.

¹³ Jonathan Tittler makes a similar observation in his essay “Ecological Criticism and Spanish American Fiction: An Overview,” regarding human death in “El hombre muerto” by Horacio Quiroga. He asserts, “What bears all the signs of tragedy for the man, however, is no more than a routine day for the cosmos, which continues its cycles of life and death, creation and destruction, with absolute impassivity” (16).

¹⁴ “...al gringo inaugurador de la tragedia, al alcalde, a los buscadores de oro, a todos los que emputecían la virginidad de su amazonía...” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 137.

¹⁵ “... sus novelas que hablaban del amor con palabras tan hermosas que a veces le hacían olvidar la barbarie humana.” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 137.

¹⁶ Barbas-Rhoden, *Ecological Imaginations*, 88.

¹⁷ “... las dichas y los tormentos de amores más prolongados que el tiempo.” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 71.

¹⁸ Eun-kyung Choi argues that “Sepúlveda proposes a utopian world of anti-consumption, anti-capitalism, and anti-modernization.” See “Debates on Latin American Postmodern Novels through Solari, Sepúlveda and Bellatín’s Literary Proposals” *Asian*

Journal of Latin American Studies 31, no. 2 (2018): 12, EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete.

¹⁹ Matt, Sandy, “The Amazon Rain Forest is Nearly Gone: We Went to the Front Lines to See if it Could Be Saved,” *Time: Special Report: 2050: The Fight for Earth*, September 12, 2019, <https://time.com/amazon-rainforest-disappearing/>

²⁰ Sandy, “Amazon Rain Forest.”

²¹ English translations of *Mundo del fin del mundo* are my own. Luis Sepúlveda, *Mundo del fin del mundo* (1989; Barcelona: Tusquets, 2010). “Tenía catorce años cuando leí aquel libro, y dieciséis cuando no pude resistirme más a la llamada del sur. [. . .] Por otras lecturas supe que en los confines continentales preantárticos fondeaban varias pequeñas flotas de barcos balleneros, y ansiaba conocer a aquellos hombres a los que imaginaba herederos del capitán Ahab” (16).

²² “Porque...porque... la verdad es que leí una novela. Moby Dick. ¿La conocen ustedes?” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 30.

²³ “Herman Melville habrá perdonado si aquella versión de su novela tuvo algo de mi propia cosecha, pero al terminar todos los hombres mostraban semblantes pensativos, y luego de palmoearme los hombros regresaron a sus mesas.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 30.

²⁴ “A la mañana siguiente, dos botes remolcaron el animal hasta la playa, y ahí los chilotos lo abrieron con cuchillos semejantes a bastones de jockey. La sangre bañó las piedras y conchuelas formando oscuros ríos que enrojecieron el agua. Los cinco hombres vestían atuendos de hule negro y estaban ensangrentados de pies a cabeza. Las gaviotas, los cormoranes y otras aves marinas sobrevolaban enloquecidas por el olor a sangre, y más de una pagó la osadía de acercarse demasiado recibiendo una cuchillada que la partió en dos en pleno vuelo. Fue una faena rápida. Una parte del cachalote terminó salada y metida en los barriles, pero el grueso del animal quedó tirado en la playa, con restos de carne adherida a los huesos que muy pronto se unirían al panorama fantasmal de Isla Londonberry.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 41.

²⁵ “Sabe, paisanito, me alegro de que no le haya gustado la caza. Cada día hay menos ballenas. Tal vez seamos los últimos balleneros de estas aguas, y está bien. Es hora de dejarlas en paz. Mi bisabuelo, mi abuelo, mi padre, todos fueron balleneros. Si yo tuviera un hijo como usted, le aconsejaría seguir otro rumbo.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 42.

²⁶ “De esa charla nació la idea de crear una agencia de noticias alternativa, preocupada fundamentalmente por los problemas que aquejan al entorno ecológico, y por responder a las mentiras que emplean las naciones ricas para justificar el saqueo de los países pobres. Saqueo no solo de materias primas, sino de su futuro. Tal vez sea difícil entender esto último, pero, veamos: cuando una nación rica instala un vertedero de desechos químicos o nucleares en un país pobre, está saqueando el futuro de esa comunidad humana, pues, si los desechos son, como dicen, ‘inofensivos,’ ¿por qué no instalan los

vertederos en sus propios territorios?” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 48.

²⁷ Gisela Heffes, *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación: apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2013), 75. “. . .el vertedero de basura como tropo de una biopolítica global. . .” (75).

²⁸ Barbas-Rhoden, *Ecological Imaginations*, 2.

²⁹ “Con una tubería de unos dos metros de diámetro succionaban la mar. Lo sacaban todo provocando una corriente que sentimos bajo la quilla y, tras el paso de la succionadora, la mar quedó convertida en un oscuro caldo de aguas muertas. Lo sacaban todo sin detenerse a pensar en especies prohibidas o bajo protección. Con la respiración casi paralizada de horror vimos cómo varias crías de delfines eran succionadas y desaparecían. Lo más horrible de todo fue comprobar que por un desagüe asomado a popa devolvían al agua los restos no deseados de la carnicería.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 102.

³⁰ “Sí, era una flota pequeña frente a la magnitud de la barbarie moderna.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 62.

³¹ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Facundo, in *Las cien obras maestras de la literatura y del pensamiento universal*, vol. 2, ed. Xavier A. Fernandez and Reginald F. Brown (Boston: Ginn, 1960). “La ciudad es el centro de la civilización argentina, española, europea; allí están los talleres de las artes, las tiendas del comercio, las escuelas y colegios, los juzgados, todo lo que caracteriza, en fin, a los pueblos cultos [. . .] El hombre de la ciudad viste el traje europeo, vive de la vida civilizada tal como la conocemos en todas partes: allí están las leyes, las ideas del progreso, los medios de instrucción, alguna organización municipal, el gobierno regular, etc.” (36).

³² Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 137.

³³ “los colonos destrozaban la selva construyendo la obra maestra del hombre civilizado: el desierto.” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 60.

³⁴ “. . .la barbarie humana. . .” Sepúlveda, *Un viejo*, 137.

³⁵ “Pero el deterioro ecológico, el asesinato diario del planeta, no se ciñe sólo a las matanzas de ballenas o elefantes. Una visión irracional de la ciencia y el progreso se encarga de legitimar los crímenes, y pareciera ser que la única herencia del género humano es la locura. [. . .] Y pensar que todavía hay voceros de un pretendido modernismo que encuentran tribuna en los periódicos europeos para descalificar las medidas de protección de la naturaleza tildándolas de ‘ecolatrías,’ e intentan elevar el discurso del necio que quema su casa para calentarse a la categoría de una nueva ética. ‘Desprecio lo que ignoro’ es el lema de curiosos filósofos de la destrucción.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 78-79.

³⁶ “Entonces, obedeciendo a una llamada que ningún otro hombre ha escuchado en la mar, una llamada tan aguda que estremecía los tímpanos, treinta, cincuenta, cien, una multitud de ballenas y delfines nadaron veloces hasta casi tocar la costa, para volver con mayor velocidad aún y estrellar sus cabezas contra el barco. Sin importarles que en cada ataque muchos de ellos morían con las cabezas reventadas, los cetáceos repitieron los ataques hasta que el *Nishin Maru*, empujado contra la costa, amenazó con encallar.” Sepúlveda, *Mundo*, 135.

³⁷ Barbas-Rhoden, *Ecological Imaginations*, 15.

³⁸ Walsh and Mignolo, *On Decoloniality*, 4.

³⁹ Jennifer French, *Nature, Neo-colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 13.

⁴⁰ French, *Nature, Neo-colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers*, 29, 37-38.

⁴¹ Walsh and Mignolo, *On Decoloniality*, 136.

⁴² Adrian Taylor Kane, “Redefining Modernity in Latin American Fiction: Toward Ecological Consciousness in *La loca de Gandoca* and *Lo que soñó Sebastián*,” in *Ecocriticism of the Global South*, ed. Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 135-149.

⁴³ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580, *Project Muse*.

⁴⁴ Barbas-Rhoden explains in *Ecological Imaginations* that Sepúlveda, in *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, “argues for the importance of literature in awakening to love of nature in a reading public far removed from global hot spots” (88).