

PART III

Waste, Disaster, Refugees,
and Nonhuman Agency

CHAPTER THREE

Nonhuman Agency and the Political Ecology of Waste

The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us.
—Amitav Ghosh¹

The more waste modern societies produce, the less their members want to think about it, and thus dominant cultural narratives are dedicated with increasing vigor to obliterating the link between growth and pollution. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, ‘we dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking’.² Usually, waste is left out of the dominant ‘distribution of the sensible’ (as Rancière would put it) and its symbolic order, which determines and prearranges what can be visible or thinkable in advance and therefore significantly limits our epistemological, imaginative, and political possibilities. In this chapter I claim that if we are to ‘reconfigure the map of the sensible’, we need to create a political ecology of waste that persistently disrupts and disturbs the growth imaginary with narratives and practices that redefine what can be thought, said, and seen.

Capitalist economic processes are transforming material and energy into

¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 62–63.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 27.

waste with increased velocity. This entropic and carcinogenic economic system not only reduces the future availability of such resources for other economic inputs, it generates toxic outputs that will alter the biogeochemistry of the Earth for millennia to come. The longevity of capitalism's 'toxic progeny' leads Heather Davis to label plastic pollution the 'bastard child that will certainly outlive us'.³ In this chapter I will approach the problem of waste from several angles: How should we think—ethically, aesthetically, and politically—about the agency of such toxicity operating in different temporalities and on different scales? What politics of representation are useful to connect this toxic progeny with the growth imaginary in a critical way? How might we mobilize a poetics of waste in such a way that it is not co-opted by neoliberal reason, but instead encourages the emergence of postgrowth imaginaries?

In 2010, José Luis Pardo, one of Spain's most thought-provoking philosophers, published a collection of essays under the title *Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura* (Never Was Trash so Beautiful). At the beginning of the eponymous essay, Pardo reformulates the first sentence of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, replacing the word 'commodity' with the word 'trash': 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as "an immense accumulation of trash"'.⁴ According to Pardo, modern society has produced such quantities of waste that they now threaten the survival of modern institutions.⁵ The crisis of modernity is marked by the end of the utopia of a world without waste:

un mundo ordenado, en el cual cada cosa esté en su sitio ... La entrada en crisis de este modelo, el despertar de este sueño, fue por tanto ese momento en el cual llegamos a pensar que la basura acabaría devorándonos. Que era el fin del progreso.⁶

[an organized world in which each thing is in its own place ... The crisis of this model, the awakening from this dream, was the moment in which we started thinking that waste would end up devouring us. This meant the end of progress.]

Interestingly, Pardo suggests that the end of the teleological notion of progress coincides with the moment in which modern societies realize

3 Heather Davis, 'Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures', *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 5, no. 2 (2015): 232.

4 José Luis Pardo, *Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2010), 163.

5 Pardo, *Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura*, 163.

6 Pardo, *Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura*, 167–169.

that things in general and waste in particular have an unexpected agency that might destroy us. Progress perceived as constant economic growth is therefore nothing but an epistemological trap with dire semiotic and material consequences. The most obvious example is the transformation of Earth's ecological systems into a toxic landfill that suffocates life. But redefining progress in a postgrowth fashion is difficult given the tenacity of the dominant imaginary and its dream of unlimited growth.

Now that trash is everywhere—expressing itself in different fashions, from global warming and plastic patches the size of Mexico floating in the ocean to heavy metals in mothers' breast milk—one of the newest strategies to hide it is to look at it with aesthetic joy. Trash is actually beautiful:

¿Y si lo que llamamos basura no lo fuese en realidad? Entonces no tendríamos que preocuparnos porque nos devorase, no nos sentiríamos asfixiados por los desperdicios si dejásemos de experimentarlos como desperdicios y los viviéramos como un nuevo *paisaje urbano*.⁷

[What if that which we call garbage were not really garbage? Then we would not have to worry about being devoured by it, and we would not feel asphyxiated by waste if we stopped perceiving it as waste and saw it as a new *urban landscape*]

If modern waste were to be seen for what it is, a toxic byproduct of economic growth and the result of a pathological social metabolism, the dominant imaginary would need to be changed; however, if trash is presented as something with aesthetic and monetary potential, the problem disappears and the capitalist mode of production and consumption can continue. Compare the media celebration of Northern European countries that produce energy out of waste, or the increasing popularity of industrial ecology and eco-design using industrial waste as raw material, to the 'invisibility' of communities around the planet whose lifestyles and systems of social organization never produced industrial waste to begin with. Why are the former highlighted and celebrated as models of human ingenuity while the latter are trivialized and erased from memory? Why does the clever reuse of waste materials hold so much appeal for the most progressive sectors of the dominant imaginary? The answer is simple: this reform environmentalism keeps the dream of constant growth alive by implying that a few technological fixes and changes in management can solve the problem without addressing its structural and epistemological causes. Unfortunately, technology is not a panacea. In fact, it often exacerbates the existing problem.

7 Pardo, *Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura*, 170.



ECOALF by Boamistura, picture by Luis I Prádanos

In May 2013, the ground floor facade of one of the buildings facing Santa Bárbara Square in Madrid was painted with graffiti by Boamistura, a group of street artists based in that city.

The mural, measuring ten meters square, consists of an amorphous Earth—labeled *mundo* (world) in large capital letters—full of anthropogenic materials (car tires, buildings, bottles, and an industrial chimney). Interestingly, neither biomass nor humans are visible in this global allegory of massive human appropriation of net primary productivity. The perturbing image implies that humans have been devoured by their material pollution, but the integrated text (semiotic pollution?) offers a strained optimism with the sentence ‘Aceptando el mundo comienzas a cambiarlo’ [By accepting the world you can start changing it], as if humans have not sufficiently changed the world already. The word ‘recycle’ crowns the mural. Furthermore, the enigmatic word play in the phrases ‘in trash we trust’ and ‘tras(h)umanity’ appear respectively above and below the word *mundo*, and the whole functions as a textual sandwich in which the world is the main ingredient to be consumed. Is this a piece of street art intended to make people aware of the unsustainable proliferation of waste created by capitalism or, as Pardo would suspect, a neoliberal reminder that ‘there is no alternative’ to the current wasteful capitalist dynamics? Is it a challenge to growth or

an invitation not only to accept capitalism's toxic progeny, but to love it by seeing the potential beauty of trash? Is this a call for political activism or for passive acceptance?

The context of the mural can shed some light on these questions. Near the bottom right corner of the wall appear the words 'ECOALF by Boamistura'. ECOALF is a clothing store established in 2009 and located near the mural. According to its website, 'the idea was to create a fashion brand that is truly sustainable', and thus ECOALF manufactures and sells clothes and accessories using recycled materials. ECOALF has its own 'manifesto tras(h)umanity' that states:

Tras(h)umanity is a paradoxical concept. Like the 21st century. Like you. We must stop the continuing pollution of the environment. But ECOALF isn't willing to settle for just that, it wants to invert the process. *New technologies allow us to do that, revolutionizing the idea of raw material.*

Tras(h)umanity accepts that trash is an *inherent* feature of our species.

By accepting the world you can start to change it. Only then can we think of ways to clean up that reality in an intelligent, useful way.

Tras(h)umanity isn't a utopian term. It's an awareness of trash. We are looking for a *new generation of conscious consumers* who are not willing to reject their *aesthetic values*.

We create objects that make your life more enjoyable without damaging our relationship with nature. And we do it by erasing part of the ecological footprint that is fouling the world.

ECOALF wants to share with you its passion for beautiful, useful *products that clean up the planet*. Help us *take the concept of trash into the future*.

This time, *trash is good news*. (my emphasis)⁸

This could very well be a manifesto produced by a neoliberal think tank attempting to convince us that trash is beautiful. A critical discourse analysis quickly unveils the document's neoliberal rhetoric of reform environmentalism. The affirmation that 'new technologies allow us to do that, revolutionizing the idea of raw material' is not only a celebration of techno-optimism, but an invitation to participate in a conceptual

8 As of November 2016 the ECOALF manifesto was not available on the company's English- or Spanish-language websites. An archived version from February 18, 2015, is available at http://web.archive.org/web/20150218172250/http://ecoalf.com/us_en/about/manifesto/.

revolution (rather than a political revolution) that will invert the process of environmental degradation. Apparently, for ECOALF the problem has nothing to do with capitalism, colonialism, power asymmetries, racism, socioecological injustice, gender inequality, wealth distribution, hubristic individualism, or anthropocentrism. The problem is that we got the idea of raw material wrong! If we could only understand and accept that ‘trash is an inherent feature of our species’, we could right all wrongs. And the protagonists of these changes are not to be concerned (politically organized) citizens but rather a ‘new generation of conscious consumers who are not willing to reject their aesthetic values’. By consuming we can solve the problems of overconsumption! Because there are ‘products [rather than ecological cycles] that clean up the planet’. Moreover, we should, according to ECOALF, ‘help take the concept of trash into the future’, as if global warming or nuclear waste, with deep temporalities unthinkable on a human scale, were not already part of our future. The final sentence, ‘trash is good news’, sounds like black humor, considering, for instance, the massive number of birds and fish dying every day from ingested plastic, and the cancerous lungs of children informally recycling e-waste in African countries, India, and China. In sum, ECOALF proposes to solve environmental problems by repurposing industrial waste (good luck with nuclear waste!) and relying on consumers to make ethical choices. This well-intentioned discourse undermines the possibility for more radical responses—namely, collective politics that challenge the dominant imaginary.

Make no mistake, I agree that we need both technology and an economy that closes the cycle of materials in a circular fashion, but a growth-oriented economy is ill-equipped to make this happen since it is, by definition, an organization of ecological relations that ‘becomes more wasteful over time’.⁹ The representation of waste in cultural texts and media is a crucial arena in which to do battle with the dominant imaginary. How waste is represented and narrated matters because such representations can enhance or undermine the effectiveness of a postgrowth political ecology. A recycling economy is not a circular economy, as discard studies shows and as Josh Lepawsky and Max Liboiron remind us:

recycling captures a fraction of waste, uses virgin materials in its process, creates pollution, and naturalizes disposables and other forms of harmful waste under the guise that recycling ‘takes care’ of things. In short, recycling as it is currently structured perpetuates growth

⁹ Jason W. Moore, ‘Nature in the Limits to Capital (and Vice Versa)’, *Radical Philosophy* 193 (September–October): 15.

and dominant economies rather than providing a social or technical avenue for change.¹⁰

A politically effective representation of waste must understand the deep temporalities and perverse socioecological entanglements that play out in the emergence of modern waste and attempt to track its physical as well as discursive networks. Rather than reducing waste to an ahistorical, post-political, and isolated material waiting to be repurposed and revaluated by the growth economy—as ECOALF proposes—the ‘political ecology of waste’ I propose functions, instead, as an entry point to expose the historical, political, material, and semiotic network of power relations that encircle modern waste. An efficacious political ecology of waste does not celebrate trash, because it does not overlook its dire social and ecological consequences.

‘El número de objetos de basura espacial que rodean a la Tierra se ha duplicado en 15 años’ [The number of discarded objects orbiting the Earth has doubled in the last 15 years] is the title of an article published in November 2015 in the Spanish newspaper *eldiario.es*.¹¹ The author explains that in the previous week, two of these orbiting pieces of refuse landed in a meadow in Murcia, Spain, and another was expected to fall into the Indian Ocean the next Friday. Another 100 million such objects orbit the Earth! Humans are not only filling the Earth with trash, but also outer space. According to the journalist, however, the possibility that any of these discarded objects will wreak a lethal revenge seems unlikely, so readers can rest assured that, most probably, cosmic debris will not strike them down while they are reading the news and enjoying their coffee. The most disturbing revelation comes later in the report, when the reader finds out that in 2009 a collision between an abandoned satellite and an operating one produced 2,000 new objects, thereby multiplying the risk of future collisions:

el consultor de la NASA Donald Kessler planteó un escenario en el que la enorme cantidad de basura en órbita podría empezar a colisionar entre sí, y con los sistemas actualmente operativos, creando una reacción en cadena que terminaría por destruir la mayoría de los

10 Josh Lepawsky and Max Liboiron, ‘Why Discards, Diverse Economics, and Degrowth?’, *Society & Space* (2015), <http://societyandspace.org/2015/08/14/why-discards-diverse-economies-and-degrowth-josh-lepawsky-and-max-liboiron/>.

11 Teguayco Pinto, ‘El número de objetos de basura espacial que rodean a la Tierra se ha duplicado en 15 años’, *eldiario.es*, November 11, 2015, http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/basura_espacial-astronomia-ciencia_o_451105767.html.

objetos en órbita, incluyendo satélites de comunicaciones, plataformas científicas o incluso estaciones espaciales.

[NASA consultant Donald Kessler suggested a scenario in which the enormous number of pieces of orbiting waste could start crashing into each other, and into currently operating machinery, creating a chain reaction that would end up destroying the majority of orbiting objects, including communication satellites, scientific platforms, or even space stations]

Again, this example suggests that objects set in motion by humans can unexpectedly reveal their own agency and cause unimagined damage. Global warming, ocean acidification, desertification, toxic chemical synergies, pandemics related to industrial agriculture, mass extinctions, and the imminent threat of a post-antibiotic (and maybe also post-satellite, according to Kessler) world are just a few of the proliferating dire, unintended consequences of capital accumulation. The growth-oriented imaginary grossly ignores the agency of the nonhuman at society's peril, while setting in motion socioecological processes that function as threat multipliers and can neither be controlled nor reversed.

Thinkers working on the philosophy of science urge us to abandon the epistemological dichotomies established at the core of industrial modernity between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, and active subject and passive object. Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad, among others, compellingly argue that such rigid distinctions are not only grossly inaccurate accounts of how material processes operate across different temporalities and scales, they are also vastly dysfunctional when dealing with current socioecological issues. New materialisms have proliferated in recent years and are convincingly claiming that ignoring or rejecting the agency of the nonhuman is no longer advisable, or even possible, at the current geohistorical moment. Humans are not individual and autonomous creatures whose behaviors are determined solely by rational economic choices. They do not control and exploit environments that are radically separated from themselves, as neoclassical economics implies. Rather, humans are transcorporeal beings, as Stacy Alaimo notes, because 'we inhabit a corporeality that is never disconnected from our environment ... we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous borders'.¹² We always exist in constant and inextricable co-transformative relations with other species and things. Presently, many

12 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 156.

health problems in consumerist societies are associated with the loss of biodiversity (bacteria and worms) in our own guts!¹³

We are not just embodied beings. 'We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes'.¹⁴ As Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour remind us, we are *naturecultures*, intersecting in multiple semiotic and material networks composed by human and nonhuman actors, where everything can have agency, but nothing acts alone.¹⁵ All actions are 'intra-actions', as Karen Barad beautifully puts it, since individual agencies are co-constituted and only emerge through connections with other agencies.¹⁶ In Jane Bennett's words, 'human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds—indeed, ... insofar as anything 'acts' at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage'.¹⁷ I believe that cultural criticism could benefit from recognizing that humans are not the only actants, to use Latour's term, and that cultural scholarship could be significantly enhanced by paying attention to the agency of the nonhuman in all cultural domains.

Timothy Morton suggests in *Ecology without Nature*, and again in *The Ecological Thought*, that 'in order to have 'ecology', we have to let go of 'nature ... [and start] thinking of interconnectedness',¹⁸ since nature is nothing but a reification of a myth of 'the lump that exists prior to the capitalist labor process'.¹⁹ This myth implies that capitalist societies and their transformations are something radically different and autonomous from the ecological and historical processes in which they are entangled. Similarly, Latour invites us to be cautious with the concept of nature in its possible articulations by political ecology because, too often, nature has been used precisely 'to abort politics'.²⁰ So both ecological thought and political ecology have to let go of 'nature' in order to become transformative enough to transcend the dominant

13 William Parker, 'If Being Too Clean Makes Us Sick, Why Isn't Getting Dirty the Solution?', *The Conversation*, January 13, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/if-being-too-clean-makes-us-sick-why-isnt-getting-dirty-the-solution-50572>.

14 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112–113.

15 Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–165; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

16 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

17 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120–121.

18 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

19 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 113.

20 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 19.

imaginary of the growth paradigm. What interests me most, however, is how the much-needed change of thinking advocated by new materialists is advanced in recent Spanish cultural manifestations, and how an ecologically oriented cultural criticism can help to facilitate the emergence of postgrowth imaginaries. Morton recognizes that ‘one of the things that modern society has damaged, along with ecosystems and species and the global climate, is thinking’,²¹ but, paradoxically, the ‘current ecological disaster ... has torn a giant hole in the fabric of our understanding’,²² which creates an opportunity to open up refreshing new imaginaries and possibilities for thinking beyond capitalism and, as such, for reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible and the thinkable, in Jacques Rancière’s sense. As Morton writes, ‘The ecological thought must imagine economic change; otherwise it’s just another piece on the game board of capitalist ideology. The boring, rapacious reality we have constructed’.²³

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how recognizing the agency of waste helps us imagine radical economic change by exposing the nonsensical and uneconomical dynamic of a social system oriented towards constant economic growth. In the last few years, Spanish cultural manifestations that focus on discarded materials and degraded spaces have multiplied greatly, placing objects and processes that the dominant system usually keeps out of sight at the center of our attention. This has a number of aesthetic, semiotic, and political consequences that could be better understood from a material ecocritical perspective. I believe that by moving to the foreground the agency of the massive waste generated by our linear socioeconomic metabolism, these cultural expressions are challenging the dominant narratives of progress as unlimited economic growth. How can converting the biosphere into an uninhabitable landfill and a toxic, acidified seascape be equated with progress? If the byproduct of growth is widespread toxic waste that depletes the life-supporting systems of the planet, then the ability to progress towards a healthy society that can thrive in a healthy environment lies in developing a postgrowth society. Note my intentional semantic shift in recontextualizing the verbs ‘to progress’ and ‘to develop’ in order to detach them from the growth-oriented imaginary that has monopolized their semiotic and rhetorical possibilities for too long. Progress and development could be radically redefined in order to be unlinked from economic growth.

Drawing on Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, I refer to ‘the political ecology of waste’ as the rhetorical strategy

21 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 3.

22 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 14.

23 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 19.



Brieva 'Chabola'

of foregrounding the things which the growth economy discards. Waste stubbornly problematizes its own existence by showing off its agency. This proliferation of the visibility of wasted bodies, materials, and discourses discarded by the economy of growth signals the tipping point past which dominant imaginaries can no longer sustain their aseptic fantasies and solipsist aesthetics of disconnection. A cartoon by Miguel Brieva vividly expresses the effectiveness of displaying 'the political ecology of waste' in order to unveil neoliberal fallacies.

At the center, a man and a woman, easily identified as a stereotypical North American heterosexual, patriarchal, middle-class couple from the 1950s, smile while standing in front of a dilapidated house located on a desolate piece of suburban property. Their property is entirely fenced in and guarded by a host of security devices and symbols (electrified fencing, surveillance cameras, and warning signs). The husband, wearing a self-satisfied smile, states, 'Somos felices porque protegemos lo nuestro' [We are happy because we defend what is ours]. The neoliberal discourse that views individual property as an arena for competitive self-realization and hyperbolized autonomy is disrupted by the scene of socioecological devastation surrounding the house. The perturbing contrast immediately calls attention to the toxic physical consequences of the articulated semiotic pollution: the house, which is actually a shack, is surrounded by a landscape of waste and industrial pollution. In the end, individual greed and the commodification of reality did not translate into well-being and prosperity for all, just the opposite. Interestingly, the two characters in Brieva's vignette are both victims and perpetrators of the dominant imaginary. The hegemonic discourse which the married couple embraces shifts public concern to individual anxiety or, as Zygmunt Bauman says, 'from the economic and social roots of trouble and towards concerns for personal (bodily) safety'.²⁴ This movement benefits the security and military industries (two of the most profitable and wasteful corporate complexes), which easily align themselves with the managerial and individualistic neoliberal ideology, while preventing any meaningful collective political reaction from challenging the systemic causes of the safety issues that such an ideology exacerbates.

Brieva's drawing suggests that the hegemonic, obsessive, managerial regime of total command and control represented by the fenced-in property causes massive disorder elsewhere; the couple's internalized neoliberal biopolitics create a deadly geography. The omnipresence of material waste and semiotic pollution on the global level shows that there is no getting away

24 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 7.

from the ecological process of the biosphere, and that so-called ‘economic externalities’ are not only vast market miscalculations, but irrefutable proof of the fantasy out of which the mainstream economic imaginary arises. Nothing is external because everything is interconnected. Pervasive waste and toxic discourse flow through and over everything to reveal that an economy based on growth becomes a frenetic machine of garbage production, social corrosion, and ecological depletion. A political ecology of waste points to the fact that the current crisis—which the dominant imaginary attributes to lack of growth—can only be overcome by discarding the growth model, and not by reactivating growth. To do so requires a new economic culture that minimizes waste not by recycling (which is a neoliberal notion bound up with the need of humans to constantly reinvent—recycle—themselves according to the changing moods of the market) but by changing production and consumption patterns, modifying power relations, closing the cycle of materials, and minimizing the material and energy throughput of the social metabolism.

As William Connolly suggests, we need to ‘render the fragility of things more visible and palpable’ in order to expose neoliberal fantasies and account for the vast nonhuman forces unleashed, but hidden, by the material and semiotic infrastructure supporting and perpetuating such ideology.²⁵ According to Connolly, ‘the *fragility* of the late modern order seems insufficiently articulated in radical theory today.’²⁶ Degrowth researchers and activists, as I point out in Chapter 1, are doing just that by articulating a radical critique of the modern order based precisely on its social and ecological fragility. If we subscribe to Jane Bennett’s brilliant reformulation of political theory in light of a new materialist perspective, it becomes clear that politics is always a collective assemblage of the human and the nonhuman, as well as a congregation of distributive agencies implicated in events.²⁷ An effective political ecology thus ‘give[s] up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman’ and pays more attention to shared environments in which we all participate.²⁸

It seems to me that an emancipatory radical politics for the Anthropocene—one that cannot be co-opted by the logic of growth—can articulate itself through the lens of a radical ecology and a new way of understanding materiality. I claim that radical politics can reduce the risk of co-optation by resisting anthropocentrism as well as teleological and hierarchical illusions.

25 Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 37.

26 Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 32.

27 Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 20–21.

28 Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 116.

Unless we adopt a non-anthropocentric postgrowth political perspective, human prospects do not look good, as Mick Smith notes when commenting on the irony of state and corporate powers using the ecological crisis to further their agenda (this point will be elaborated upon in the following chapter), the crisis is presented '*as the latest and most comprehensive justification for a political state of emergency, a condition that serves to insulate those powers against all political and ethical critique ... [and] to further extend the state and corporate management of biological life, including the continuing reduction of humanity to bare life*'.²⁹ Apparently, we must let go of a few things to avoid destructive, totalitarian biopolitics and envision emancipatory postgrowth imaginaries. We have to let go of nature, human exceptionality, and growth, but in order to do this we must disable the anthropological machine, which reproduces the fantasies that justify the growth inertia. A political ecology of waste could help to get rid of these pervasive fantasies, because a postgrowth poetics of waste—unlike the ECOALF poetics of neoliberal recycling—makes plain that nothing is unaffected by economic processes (there is no nature), humans are not exempted from the ecological messes they set into motion (they are not exceptional), and pursuing growth on an overstressed planet with billions of vulnerable bodies—human and nonhuman—is as unethical and violent as putting poison in people's food (which industrial agriculture is already doing). Put otherwise, as long as the main objective of societies is confined to pursuing economic growth, the possibility of engaging in meaningful politics—namely, intervening in the vastly asymmetrical architecture of power, tracking its historicity, and modifying it in favor of the most vulnerable and powerless constituencies—is deactivated. Under the dictate of growth, there is no room for collective debates and decisions on how we should gather and live together, but only pre-framed discussions about the best way to grow under current circumstances. A growth-oriented society generates a post-political hegemonic culture, where the norm becomes fighting on the individual level to secure one's survival at all costs in an ecologically crumbling competitive society—as the family in Brieve's vignette does—rather than collectively changing the rules of the destructive and suicidal game of neoliberal globalization.

If the anthropological machine makes distinctions and marks what is worthy and what is not, what can be spared and what can be exploited, the growth machine does the same thing by using a reductive economic language of valuation, as political ecology reminds us. The anthropological machine is nothing but an engine of valuation and devaluation that transforms differences into inequalities. To subvert this order of things, we should include

29 Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 126.

different languages of valuation in a nonhierarchical way, as proposed by Joan Martínez-Alier³⁰ or, even better, recognize that everything that exists is priceless, that no value can be assigned to it. In other words, the worst strategy to protect something is to assign economic value to it (the main purpose of environmental economists), because it can then be devaluated, depreciated, and wasted without ethical or political consideration, or transformed beyond recognition by the industrial process to extract its value.

A postgrowth political ecology refuses utilitarian and monetarized notions of value and thinks instead in terms of non-anthropocentric agency and relational ontology. The key is to extend not monetarized value but ethics and empathy to the more-than-human. Here there is no room for hierarchies, exceptionalisms, or rigid distinctions, but rather different arrangements of things becoming 'matters of concern', to use Latour's term. Matters of concern can be ethically and politically thinkable. If in the Anthropocene our trash and pollution acquires a virulent agency that exercises a 'slow violence' that massively kills human and nonhuman beings, what prevents us from thinking about it legally, politically, and ethically? According to Rob Nixon, 'a major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects. Crucially, slow violence is often not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier'.³¹ To counter such unfolding environmental violence, Nixon suggests, it is critical to revise our narrow notion of violence to include the 'discounted casualties ... that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change'.³²

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.³³

I argue that a political ecology of waste engages the representational challenges of tracking and linking flows of toxic materials and neoliberal

30 Joan Martínez-Alier, *El ecologismo de los pobres: conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de valores*, 3rd ed. (Barcelona: Icaria, 2004).

31 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 3.

32 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2-3.

33 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

discourses while rendering visible the slow violence perpetrated by the massive waste resulting from consumerist societies, individualist cultures, and growth economies.

Material ecocriticism is perhaps the most persistent attempt to incorporate new materialist concerns into the arena of cultural studies. One of its main precursors, although not environmentally oriented, is the ‘thing theory’ articulated by Bill Brown, in which things are recognized to have an important role in forming human subjectivities and in mediating relations among humans. However, the most important aspect of thing theory for material ecocriticism may be, as Matthew Zantingh points out, its attention to the ‘myriad ways that objects refuse to simply act by the codes that have been assigned them by consumer culture’.³⁴ The ecological crisis ‘is a crisis of urgent materiality ... [Materiality] refused to play the passive role assigned to it by nation-states and corporations’.³⁵ Only when things behave unexpectedly do we pay attention to their agentic properties. In the Anthropocene, where ‘hyperobjects’ emerging out of industrial byproducts—like global warming and nuclear radiation—proliferate everywhere, not paying attention to such things becomes suicidal. A proper and consistent theorization of the ‘material turn’ by ecocritical scholars has only emerged in the past few years, with the publication of a cluster of essays on the topic in the summer 2012 issue of *ISLE* and an edited volume on material ecocriticism that appeared in 2014.³⁶ Interestingly, both contain contributions that focus on waste and excrement and their agentic capabilities. Such is the case with Heather I. Sullivan’s ‘dirt theory’ and Dana Phillips’s ‘excremental ecocriticism’.³⁷

Green is the color usually associated with the reductive and selective environmental imagination of a pristine, undisturbed, and balanced nature that never existed. It is the color of pastoral romantic landscapes, bourgeois environmental thinking, and packages of commodities produced by green capitalism, but is by no means the color of a postgrowth radical ecology. Green cannot be the color of a transformative political ecology for the

34 Matthew Zantingh, ‘When Things Act Up: Thing Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Toxic Discourse in Rita Wong’s Poetry’, *ISLE* 20, no. 3 (2013): 624.

35 Zantingh, ‘When Things Act Up’, 625.

36 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds., *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

37 Heather I. Sullivan, ‘Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism’, *ISLE* 19, no. 3 (2012): 515–531; Dana Phillips, ‘Excremental Ecocriticism and the Global Sanitation Crisis’, in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 172–185. *ISLE* vol. 20, no. 3 (2013) includes a special cluster on the topic of waste.

Anthropocene, for the current geohistorical moment demands that we face the dark, unpleasant, and disturbing side of ecology if we want to escape the fantasies of individualistic and consumerist green growth and its ideology of disconnection. A variety of articulations of a post-green ecocriticism can be found in the delightful volume *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, as well as in Timothy Morton's reflections on 'dark ecology'.³⁸ These post-green ecocritics all emphasize the misleading discourses of a green environmental imagination that insists on keeping out of sight and refuses to account for material agencies that do not match prefabricated ideas of what the natural world should be like. This way of thinking, predominant in ECOALF, could easily be co-opted by the dominant imaginary of economic growth (think of the oxymoronic 'green growth'), because it neither challenges historical and shifting constructions of human/nature nor problematizes existing asymmetrical power relations. This superficial environmentalism perpetuates the ideologies of disconnection ingrained in the hegemonic way of thinking. A cultural criticism more attentive to the political ecology of waste could better resist the temptations of green capitalism and ecomodernism while helping to unleash a radical economic imagination leading towards desirable postgrowth societies.

3.1. Politics and Aesthetics of Garbage in Post-2008 Spanish Culture

In the last two and a half decades, the generation of waste in Spain has increased by more than 90 percent as a consequence of urban growth, massive tourism, and a deficient regulatory legal frame. Only very recently, and as a consequence of pressure from the European Union, has Spain adopted comprehensive, but still insufficient, laws for waste management and reduction. Still, a sustained attention to waste as a serious socioecological problem was excluded from the Culture of Transition because of the Spanish transition's superficial and unproblematic treatment of consumerist cultural modes. After 2008, accumulating problems could no longer be hidden as the Culture of Crisis revealed the pathology of the dominant imaginary. For example, child malnutrition is peaking in the Spanish state while obscene quantities of edible food are wasted and discarded by supermarkets each day. A recent rise in Spanish cultural manifestations focusing on

³⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

discarded materials, toxic pollutants, and degraded spaces mirrors the simultaneous waste management crisis affecting some Spanish cities.³⁹ These cultural expressions are exposing ‘neoliberal fantasies’, including human exceptionalism, individual hyper-autonomy, the assumption that humans can control and manage passive environments, and the belief that individual greed magically benefits the common good and deregulated capitalism optimizes resource allocation.

In his book *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?* Michel Serres makes a relevant distinction between hard and soft pollution. By ‘hard pollution’ he means the negative environmental disturbances of our economic activities and consumerist patterns, the toxic outputs of our growth-oriented economic metabolism. ‘Soft pollution’, instead, refers to corporate and capitalist semiotic pollution:

tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding rural, civic, public and natural spaces as well as landscapes with their advertising. Even though different in terms of energy, garbage and marks nevertheless result from the same soiling gesture, from the same intention to appropriate, and are of animal origin.⁴⁰

While environmental studies tend to focus on hard pollution and ignore the mental toxicity that goes with it, Serres urges us to pay attention to the pervasiveness of semiotic pollution and not to forget the fact that:

images, colors, music, and sounds are just as excremental and invading and pollute space just as much as the stifling stench of carbon dioxide and tar. Hard pollution appropriates the hard world. Just as dangerous if not even more harmful, soft pollution appropriates humans with often subtle links and discreet consciousness.⁴¹

The political ecology of waste I propose is a good antidote to the soft pollution disseminated by the dominant imaginary, because it calls

³⁹ This chapter does not attempt to enumerate all the cultural manifestations foregrounding waste in Spain that have appeared since 2008. Other good examples that could not be studied here include, just to mention a few, the graphic novel *Los vagabundos de la chatarra* by Jorge Carrión and Sagar Fornies, the latest novels by Rosa Montero and Rafael Chirbes, and *Obsoletos* (obsoletos.org), a collective that repurposes electronic waste. For a study of photography and waste in Madrid, see Samuel Amago, ‘Basura, cultura, democracia en el Madrid del siglo veintiuno’, *Journal of Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film* 2 (2014–2015): 33–69.

⁴⁰ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 41.

⁴¹ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 62.

attention to the hard pollution that accompanies toxic discourses (as Brieva's cartoon does). Two good examples of deploying the political ecology of waste in a playful but effective way are the collective Basurama and the website ConsumeHastaMorir. Both subvert the dominant imaginary by expanding creativity in unexpected ways through an intentional and critical repurposing of waste materials and toxic discourses. Rather than ignoring the massive circulation of soft and hard pollution, the interventions of these two artistic and political projects engage them in innovative ways and disrupt the commonplace patterns of thinking ingrained in the dominant imaginary.

Basurama is a multidisciplinary collective headquartered in Madrid and dedicated to research, creation, and cultural production. Its main focus is the dominant growth-oriented model of production and consumption, and its massive generation of waste. Basurama intends to foster fresh perspectives regarding the vast amounts of virtual and real waste resulting from consumerist societies through a number of creative interventions among discarded materials and spaces. While the dominant imaginary ignores the material reality that supports it and the downsides of its economic activities, Basurama, on the other hand, thinks through that materiality and explores the creative and critical potential of repurposing industrial and consumerist waste. Waste is explored from different complementary physical and symbolic angles (including design, architecture, performance, and the visual arts, as well as multiple aesthetic, social, ecological, political, and cultural possibilities) and on different continents.

Some of Basurama's most interesting installations are part of a project named 'urban solid waste'. This project develops different activities that gravitate around three principles: repurposing waste, using public space, and working with local communities to enhance existing projects. Similarly, the Autobarrios San Cristobal project in Madrid mobilizes local resources and the skills of local people to enhance the socioecological situation of degraded spaces in the low-income neighborhood of San Cristóbal de los Ángeles. Repurposing discarded materials, always with the collaboration of locals, these interventions transform disinvested public spaces into vibrant and inclusive places for communitarian education, entertainment, encounter, and cohesion (places to think and play together). Many of these projects clearly question the supposed benefits of neoliberal dynamics: attracting massive investment, fostering growth at all costs, encouraging privatization and corporatization of space, developing top-down macro-projects with huge socioecological downsides, and so on. Basurama demonstrates that by using local and discarded resources and channeling the synergy of local knowledge and cultures, communities themselves can create a socially

desirable, aesthetically pleasant, and ecologically sound public space in which people can thrive and enjoy themselves.

The publications developed by Basurama are open access and can be downloaded from the collective's website (www.basurama.org). For example, *6.000 Km. Paisajes después de la batalla* (6,000 km: Landscapes after the Battle) is a multimedia reflection on the enormously destructive consequences of the urban metabolism of Spanish cities that is currently damaging vast parts of the landscape as a result of the construction boom. Another publication is *Enciclomierda* (Encyclopedia of Shit), an ironic glossary of concepts that directs readers' attention to the soft pollution ingrained in our common use of language, where neoliberal ways of expressing reality are normalized. By redefining common terms and coining new ones, the *Enciclomierda's* entries challenge such normalizations and make the reader think about material and linguistic realities often ignored by consumerist and growth-oriented discourses. Basurama also offers practical guides for constructing several 'convivial tools' (to use Ivan Illich's term), from public couches to children's playgrounds, out of used tires. The problematic materiality flowing from excessive consumerism becomes not only the vehicle for a new functional and critical postgrowth aesthetics, but also the material with which to create a renewed public space. Unlike ECOALF, Basurama does not recycle, but reuses; it does not celebrate waste for its potential to become a new market commodity, but repurposes it in socially meaningful ways unmediated by monetary transactions and therefore enjoyable by all; it does not perpetuate the logic of unlimited growth by encouraging endless consumerism, but criticizes the dominant imaginary by embracing alternative ways to relate to community, materiality, and space.

Similarly, the website ConsumeHastaMorir (consumehastamorir.org) introduces itself with the statement: 'ConsumeHastaMorir es una reflexión sobre la sociedad de consumo en la que vivimos, utilizando uno de sus propios instrumentos, la publicidad, para mostrar hasta qué punto se puede morir consumiendo' [ConsumeHastaMorir is a reflection on the consumerist society in which we live, using one of its own tools, advertising, to show how it is possible to die of consumption].⁴² If corporate advertising campaigns are a pervasive and ubiquitous semiotic waste that aggressively appropriates public space, ConsumeHastaMorir undermines their effectiveness by creating counter-narratives that oppose or subvert their marketing strategies. The members of ConsumeHastaMorir generate counter-advertisements in different media. They also organize workshops and a variety of pedagogical activities focused on processes of collective creation. The site includes tabs

42 'Quiénes somos', <http://consumehastamorir.com>.

such as *contrapublicidad*, *contranuncios* (counter-advertising), *artículos* (articles), and *educación* (education). These tabs are subdivided into sections dealing with specific topics, such as food, environment, globalization, and so on. Most of the articles and counter-advertising pieces satirize and expose the contradictions of a consumerist society that needs to create nonexistent necessities to continue selling useless things that deplete the planet, exploit humans, and keep consumers dissatisfied. They also point out the neurotic and misleading aspects of a society that promotes an unsustainable over-consumption that compromises consumers' health, happiness, and self-esteem (promoting unhealthy industrial foods and beverages or impossible beauty standards, for instance) while offering false solutions to these manufactured problems by supplying other commodities produced by the same polluting chemical, agro-industrial, and pharmaceutical mega-industries that generated the problems.

The site reveals the devastating social and ecological consequences of mass consumption and how advertising not only tends to hide such problems, but also contributes to them. Highly harmful corporations sometimes celebrate their products' social and ecological friendliness. The counter-advertising pieces use irony, photo montages, and wordplay to subvert the logos deployed by popular advertising campaigns and to expose the systemic contradictions of the growth society. Most of the materials and publications produced by ConsumeHastaMorir are available online thanks to a Creative Commons license. On the site, it is possible to download several books, such as a guide to making graphic counter-advertising or a compilation of the best *contrapublicidad* created by the members of ConsumeHastaMorir. These interventions direct attention to the environmental and social effects of consumerism by combining a shocking dark humor with quotations from academic reports or other authorized sources that explicitly reveal consumerism's impact. Under the *videos* tab, the site presents an enlightening documentary about advertising strategies and consumerism titled *Gran superficie*. Advertising not only triggers unsustainable consumerist behavior, but the marketing industry itself directly depletes huge amounts of energy and materials in order to run an operation that is not only superfluous and unnecessary but also socially harmful. Advertising in a postgrowth society would not make any sense. In a context of climate change and energy crisis, why spend limited and vital resources to convince people to buy things that are not needed and whose production depletes more resources? Is this obscene waste of mental and physical resources what mainstream economists mean when they refer to the 'efficient allocation of resources' of capitalist markets? If ECOALF uses marketing strategies to create a greenwashed image of a company that perpetuates a depoliticized rationality of individual consumerism,

ConsumeHastaMorir repoliticizes and problematizes the culture of wasteful consumerism. In short, ConsumeHastaMorir subverts icons of soft pollution to direct attention to their adverse rhetorical and material consequences, while Basurama artistically repurposes and foregrounds solid waste to encourage public debate that exposes soft pollution. Both are a fine example of a powerful political ecology of waste. Rendering visible the transformative, uncontrollable, and subversive agency of discarded things makes waste thinkable and visible as a contested political issue.

From the vantage point of the political ecology of waste that I propose, the Anthropocene cannot be interpreted as a geological periodization that recentralizes human agency. Rather, it highlights nonhuman agency. During most of capitalist modernity, a main concern has been to make waste disappear from the urban space of industrial cities, but in the current time of planetary urbanization, overpopulation, climate change, and agroindustry, all possible sinks on the planet have become congested. Thus, waste management in the context of globalizing consumerist cultures and growth-oriented policies cannot provide a solution—it is only a futile attempt to cut off the hydra's heads. Addressing the root of the problem demands a rapid reduction of waste production, which entails a massive reduction of material and energy throughput (a downsizing of the global economy), a strategy that mainstream politicians and economists are ill-equipped to imagine, let alone pursue. The global success of the dominant imaginary is ironically making more visible what it can neither see nor imagine: the ecological limits of the Earth and its incapacity to absorb capitalist waste.

The oceans present a paradigmatic example of this lack of imagination. Oceans are vast planetary ecologies being used as pollution sinks that are often overlooked by our terrestrial-centric dominant thinking. Only recently has ecocriticism begun to pay attention. Stacy Alaimo's essay 'Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea' opens with an alarming list of problems:

Climate change. Ocean acidification. Dead zones. Oil 'spills'. Industrial fishing, overfishing, trawling, long lines, shark finning. Bycatch, bykill. Ghost nets. Deep-sea mining. Habitat destruction. Dumping. Radioactive, plastic, and microplastic pollution. Ecosystem collapse. Extinction. The state of the oceans is dire. The destruction of marine environments is painful to contemplate and tempting to ignore.⁴³

43 Stacy Alaimo, 'Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 186.



Basurama 'Tsunami'

Alaimo studies activist practices that expose the harmful consequences of plastic in ocean ecosystems and points out 'the disturbing ways in which the materials of everyday consumerism are the very stuff of destructive global networks'.⁴⁴ The political ecology of waste strives to make visible this network by tracking the connections between growth-oriented consumerism, socioecological issues, and the proliferation of waste. Basurama does precisely this in one of its most interesting projects, 'Tsunami de basura' (Tsunami of Waste), installed along a semi-abandoned and deteriorating seaside walkway in Santo Domingo in 2009.⁴⁵

Basurama's intervention consisted of the installation of a huge wave made out of discarded plastic bottles that seemed to stretch up from the sea and threaten the walkway. The installation was enhanced by lighting and music, and all locals were invited and encouraged to participate in the event. According to Basurama's website, the goal was to revitalize the public space while calling attention to the deficient waste management situation in the Dominican Republic. The installation serves as a symbolic and material node connecting and making visible the natureculture entanglements implicated in the 'destructive global network' of 'everyday consumerism', as well as the massive agency of waste that refuses to disappear in the sea and, instead, returns violently as a wave. As playful as the installation may be, it represents a tsunami, a fearful disaster for humans that, at least according to the dominant imaginary, is allegedly natural and not

44 Alaimo, 'Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea', 200.

45 <http://basurama.org/en/projects/rus-santo-domingo-tsunami-de-basura/>.

the result of human activity. The installation, however, implies that the wave is, substantially and semiotically, quite anthropogenic: the wave itself is made out of industrially produced and discarded plastic bottles, and the current global increase in the frequency and intensity of tsunamis has been attributed to anthropogenically induced climate change.⁴⁶ The installation can be read as revealing that the water coming from the sea is actually composed of wa(s)te(r): waste (the discarded bottles) and water (the tsunami) are symbolically interchangeable.

The plastic tsunami calls attention to the vast amount of plastic pollution in the oceans: some areas of the ocean hold a mass of plastic particles six times greater than that of the plankton they contain, and virtually all the fish on the planet have plastic in their stomachs. The uncanny agency of waste embodied by an artificial tsunami made out of ordinary plastic junk, such as shampoo and soda bottles, highlights the dark reality that our current wasteful lifestyle is giving shape to catastrophic agencies that can kill us slowly as does cancer from petrochemical overexposure or, in the case of the tsunami, suddenly exterminate us in a massive disaster. This installation aligns with Alaimo's advocacy for a 'more potent marine trans-corporeality [that] would link humans to global networks of consumption, waste, and pollution, capturing the strange agencies of the ordinary stuff of our lives'.⁴⁷ The 'innocent' and 'familiar' plastic bags and receptacles made out of synthetic polymers and used to package our daily commodities can become terrifying and dangerous killers when operating on different scales and temporalities.

Today there are five giant Garbage Patches growing in the oceans, all of which serve as useful 'hyperobjects' to highlight the colossal scale of global waste production and its rhetorical invisibility. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a plastic soup estimated to be the size of Mexico, yet it has almost no presence in corporate media, political speeches, and daily conversation. It remains invisible as long as it does not disturb the fantasies of constant growth and the daily consumerist activities that spur the proliferation of such waste. As Alaimo points out, 'the Western conception of the ocean as "alien", or as so vast as to be utterly impervious to human harm, encourages a happy ignorance about the state of the seas'.⁴⁸ An effective political ecology of waste highlights the atrocious dimensions of such harm and its links to

46 See Bill McGuire, *Waking the Giant: How a Changing Climate Triggers Earthquakes, Tsunamis, and Volcanoes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

47 Alaimo, 'Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea', 188.

48 Stacy Alaimo, 'New Materialisms, Old Humanisms, or, Following the Submersible', *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 19, no. 4 (2011): 283.

economic growth, in order to mobilize its symbolic powers and question the material, political, and ethical implications of superfluous overconsumption and continual growth.

On his 2011 album *Presidente*, the Andalusian indie singer and composer Sr. Chinarro (Antonio Luque) included a song, 'Vacaciones en el mar', that explicitly talks about plastic in the sea.⁴⁹ Its ironic chorus promotes 'vacaciones en los plásticos del mar' (vacations in the sea's plastics) as an exciting and paradisiac experience. The second stanza suggests that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is an appealing tourist destination: 'He visto en Google Earth un sexto continente: / botellas, trastos y presentes / flotan en un remolino, creo que es divino' (I have seen a sixth continent on Google Earth: / bottles, junk, and gifts / float in a whirlpool, I think it is delightful). The excerpt emphasizes both the technological mediation that allows us to visualize such vast, unintended accumulations of waste, and the superfluous mainstream response to such disturbing reality. The final part of the song continues the joyful tone, which sharply contrasts with the alarming reality of plastic pollution. This extreme disparity between the playful treatment of the topic and its gravity replicates the divergence between the optimistic and celebratory discourse typical of the dominant imaginary and the dire socioecological situation that the globalization of that imaginary actually produces.

Sr. Chinarro not only foregrounds the global problem of plastic pollution in the oceans, but also shows the potential and perturbing dominant response to such an issue: transforming the problem into a business opportunity for further growth by convincing consumers that the Garbage Patch is not a problem, but an ideal tourist destination.⁵⁰ We can assume that those tourists in the sea of plastics will further contribute through their unnecessary activities to the plastic pollution they are 'enjoying'. Considered in the context of the international branding of Spain during the last few decades (la marca España)—where tourism has been often celebrated as an economic engine while its role as one of the world's greatest polluters is ignored—the song's combination of the ridiculous rhetoric used to market vacation destinations, the vast scale of plastic pollution, and the childish public response to a huge socioecological issue effectively reveals the senseless inertia of the dominant imaginary. The lyrics of the

49 Sr. Chinarro, 'Vacaciones en el mar', *Presidente*, Mushroom Pillow MP114, 2011, compact disc.

50 For a real example see 'Melting Ice Allows Northwest Passage Cruise—But at What Cost?' (interview with Michael Byers conducted by Robin Young), WBUR, September 12, 2016, http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2016/09/12/northwest-passage-cruise?utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=storiesfromnpr.

song suggest that the plastic sea is the result of a culture of ownership, competition, greed, induced desires, and commodification:

yo tendré un velero y llegaré primero ...
 un gran bazar todo a 100 ...
 Descorcharé el champán, me dejaré besar,
 diré que es mío cuanto me rodea.

[I will own a sailing boat and will get there first ...
 a big store where everything costs a dollar ...
 I will uncork the champagne, I will be kissed,
 I will say that everything around me is mine]

Sr. Chinarro depicts a culture of cognitive and emotional capitalism that constantly falls in love with novel commodified experiences, no matter what kind. From the vantage point of the dominant imaginary it is easier to accept that trash can be beautiful, consumable, and seductive than to admit the necessity of slowing down growth and the consumerist machine. ‘Vacaciones en el mar’ notes, as Alaimo did with regard to a video of environmental activism titled *Plastic Seduction*, ‘the power of plastic to seduce us all into a collective consumerist state of blissful ignorance.’⁵¹ Developing a romantic relationship with garbage and appreciating its beauty may be the last distorted twist given to the dominant imaginary once the scale and agency of planetary waste becomes impossible to ignore, as José Luis Pardo supposed in his essay and the rhetoric of ECOALF has confirmed. If we fall in love with the toxic outcomes of economic growth, the ‘necro-politics’⁵² of capitalism is suddenly transmogrified into a romantic passion to be consummated and to die for: it becomes an individualized erotic desire, not a political issue! Thus do we become pathologically trapped in an abusive emotional relationship with capitalism. An effect similar to the one created by Sr. Chinarro’s song is achieved by the movie discussed in the previous chapter, *Gente en sitios*, in the sequence where a socially marginalized character strives to find a gift in a scrapyards to express his love for the person he has been dating. And several of Miguel Brieva’s cartoons in *Memorias de la tierra* do the same using pictorial art. All of these cultural productions expose the absurdity of the neoliberal ‘trash is beautiful’ rhetoric by depicting characters who quite literally fall in love with or show their love through waste.

51 Alaimo, ‘Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea’, 197.

52 Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, ed. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 161–192.

Another good example of a cultural manifestation that deploys the political ecology of waste in an effective way is the documentary *Comprar, tirar, comprar: la historia secreta de la obsolescencia programada*.⁵³ Prior to 2011, the term ‘planned obsolescence’ was almost unknown to the average Spaniard, but that changed dramatically after the public Spanish channel RTVE broadcast the documentary in January of that year. *Comprar, tirar, comprar* investigates the historical formation of planned obsolescence, that is, the designing of products to have a short useful life cycle so that consumers need to replace them over and over again. This practice, although obviously unsustainable and overly wasteful, is widespread in consumerist cultures and emerges in the context of a society addicted to constant economic growth. The film emphasizes the disturbing amount of waste and the rapid environmental depletion that results from this practice. *Comprar, tirar, comprar* provides historical examples of products that were originally made to last indefinitely (light bulbs, nylon pantyhose, cars) and whose lifespans were purposely reduced to increase sales. These historical accounts are complemented by several voices critical of planned obsolescence, as well as by the personal experience of one of its victims. The first sequence of the film focuses on Marcos, a local computer expert from Barcelona who has a technical problem with his printer. After several IT stores tell him that it is cheaper to replace his printer than to repair it, Marcos decides to look for do-it-yourself solutions online. Eventually, using information volunteered by internet users around the world, he discovers that most printers are programmed to fail after a specific number of pages, and he learns how to deactivate this perverse program. The last scene of the documentary is a close-up of Marco’s printer working properly again. The film ends with the repair of the malfunctioning electronic device introduced in its opening minutes, symbolizing the overcoming of planned obsolescence and the triumph of the circular economy demanded by a desirable, non-wasteful, postgrowth society on a limited planet. The film’s circularity contrasts sharply with the linear metabolism of economic growth and its unsustainable tendency to accelerate entropy.

Comprar, tirar, comprar puts materiality in the spotlight and links it to the capitalist discourses, social injustices, and ecological processes in which it is embedded. It does so very effectively by paying attention to the massive electronic waste that results from a combination of digital culture, consumerism, and planned obsolescence. One of its featured narratives is the story of an iPod produced by Apple whose battery could not be replaced

53 Cosima Dannoritzer, dir., *Comprar, tirar, comprar: la historia secreta de la obsolescencia programada* (Pozuelo de Alarcón, Spain: RTVE, 2010).

when it failed, so that consumers had to replace the entire device. The irony is that Apple presents itself as a socially responsible corporation, a sort of model for green capitalistic innovation and creativity, while cheating its customers and seriously adding to the environmental challenge posed by e-waste. This situation provoked numerous consumer reactions, including a collective suit.

Another narrative line features Mike Anane, a journalist and activist committed to reporting the social and environmental consequences of e-waste in Ghana. The scenes devoted to this narrative are very effective in their deployment of the political ecology of waste, because of their combination of informative, emotional, and visual nuances related to e-waste's socioecological imbrications. Mike clearly explains that rich countries and corporations, in order to navigate the laws that prohibit sending e-waste to Ghana, deliver their electronic garbage under the guise of donating secondhand devices to help narrow the digital gap between the global North and South. The fact is that, according to Mike, 80 percent of the devices that arrive in Ghana do not work and end up polluting the waterways and making people sick. Mike laments how the hellish environment and toxic river shown by the camera was once a nice place where he used to play as a child. This personal and emotional account is reinforced by the combination of close and long shots framing the socioecological degradation Mike witnesses with shots from his perspective and the perspective of poor young men and children burning e-waste to earn an income on the side by harvesting the metals it contains. Staring into the camera with red eyes and haggard faces, they explain that they are getting sick from breathing toxic fumes. A couple of slow panning shots reveal the larger panorama in which the characters are embedded—a devastated landscape full of e-waste. The audience is left to connect the dots between the two stories, imagining how the Apple devices identified as cool and innovative rapidly become obsolete and end up contributing to the cancer of a poor child in Ghana by poisoning the country's rivers.

The film explicitly introduces a radical degrowth critique of the present order of things by featuring Serge Latouche. He explains that a growth society is not only unsustainable on a finite planet, it is also socially undesirable because the economy grows for the sake of growing and not to satisfy needs. According to Latouche, this economic model creates artificial and harmful needs while undermining the conditions necessary for meeting genuine needs. Advertising, planned obsolescence, and debt-driven credit are some of the dead-end strategies that maintain the high level of human dissatisfaction that leads to the consumption of unnecessary commodities. While other critiques of the current economic model featured

in the film suggest that most problems can be avoided by modifying aspects of the existing system (implementing laws, insisting on corporate responsibility, introducing techno-fixes, and embracing industrial ecology and environmental economics), the degrowth movement advocates a radical change of paradigm.

Whereas the dominant imaginary hides the materiality of new media and its disturbing agency, the political ecology of waste moves it into the spotlight and situates it in the larger context of a pathological growth paradigm. *Comprár, tirar, comprar* focuses on how the abbreviated life cycles of electronic commodities will negatively affect the environment for centuries to come. The waste, energy pollution, and human exploitation involved in the creation of media technology can be traced back through time, as Jussi Parikka suggests when he speaks of the geology of media:

minerals [were] sedimented for millions of years before being mined by cheap labor in developing countries for use in information technology factories. After that short use-period of some years, they become part of the materiality of e-waste leaking toxins into nature after river-dumping or incineration, making them into toxic vapors that attach to the nervous systems of cheap labor in China, India, Ghana, etc.⁵⁴

The political ecology of waste need not limit itself to highlighting the aftermath of the consumer products churned out by the growth economy, but could also track all kinds of toxic material and energy outflows enmeshed in capitalist productive processes throughout a variety of historical periods with their different materialities and intensities. The political ecology of waste can examine all energy and materials degraded and mobilized through extractive activities, processing and assembling, chemical transformations, advertising, transportation and logistics operations, storage and retailing infrastructure, and so on. These processes often remain aesthetically separated from the final commodity as their social and ecological consequences are obliterated by the dominant imaginary and by mainstream economic calculations. The ecological and social costs are externalized, so that capitalists benefit from the operation but are not held accountable for its massive socioecological consequences.

54 Jussi Parikka, 'New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012): 98.

3.2. Soft Pollution, Social Metabolism, and Surplus Population

In Spanish cultural studies much has been said in recent years about immigration and multiculturalism in relation to the demographic and cultural changes experienced in the Iberian Peninsula from the 1980s to the present. Very little, however, has been said about the root causes of these migratory movements. The connection between transnational movements of human bodies and other global flows of material, energy, and discourses has not been consistently made. Immigration flows follow in the wake of energy and materials that have often been extracted from migrants' territories. There is a clear correlation between global economic growth spurred by the planetary expansion of capitalist modernity and the massive proliferation of both unmanageable waste production and surplus population. Immigration may be understood as people displaced by (or escaping the toxicity generated by) the flows of material, labor, and energy mobilized by economic modernization to facilitate its consumerist, predatory, and wasteful practices. Ironically, in a perverse rhetorical turn, people escaping from toxicity are often represented by anti-immigration discourses as 'toxic people'. It never occurs to opponents of immigration that their lifestyles produced the toxicity that triggered the immigration they resist.⁵⁵

According to Srnicek and Williams, the three principal capitalist mechanisms that produce 'larger and larger surplus population' are the following: automation of industrial activities, primitive accumulation, and the exclusion of necessary activities of social reproduction from wage labor.⁵⁶ The second and third of these destroy traditional livelihoods by exterminating subsistence economies and forcing people into market economies. As a result, their survival becomes dependent on wage labor and market dynamics. It has long been a capitalist strategy to appropriate other ecological spaces previously devoted to subsistent and communal activities outside the market and, in doing so, to create the abundant surplus population needed to perform industrial jobs cheaply. However, under contemporary conditions, the amount of surplus population in relation to available capitalist jobs—including even the most precarious forms of employment—is vastly disproportionate. The solution offered by orthodox economics for creating more capitalist jobs for the rapidly increasing global displaced population is, unsurprisingly, to grow further and expand the market economy as much as possible, hoping that such growth will translate

55 Thanks to Kata Beilin for reminding me of this important point.

56 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 88–90.

into job creation (paradoxically, capitalist economic expansion itself created the problem it is now trying to solve with additional expansion).

The truth, however, is that the relationship between economic growth and job creation is not guaranteed under economic financialization. During the last few decades of global neoliberal hegemony, the mechanisms for producing surplus population have rapidly intensified with the appearance of new forms of 'accumulation by dispossession', while jobless growth and financial speculation have gained ground. Needless to say, under the slow-growth or no-growth scenarios faced by some Southern European regions after 2008, the perversity of this order of things becomes more visible (it has always been obvious for the impoverished regions of colonized lands). Moreover, efforts to recover the rate of economic growth that preceded the crisis may not be an option for these countries, given the ecological situation and current global geopolitics. The logical solution to the problem of surplus population (regulating global financial speculation and harmful economic activities, expanding and recovering local and traditional economies, transitioning from agroindustry to agroecology and from petromodernity to postcarbon cultures, introducing a universal income, reducing working hours, and so on) is never discussed in hegemonic discourses. From the perspective of the degrowth movement, it is obvious that the best way to stop population displacement is to reverse the ongoing processes of primitive accumulation, privatization of commons, and land dispossession in impoverished regions, while simultaneously reducing working hours and overconsumption in overgrowth countries. In other words, rich countries need to stop appropriating and monopolizing the Earth's carrying capacity with their disproportionate economic metabolisms and start liberating ecological space for other regions to thrive. Again, moving beyond capitalism is a condition *sine qua non*. Here is the ongoing capitalist conundrum:

capital requires a particular *type* of surplus population: cheap, docile, and pliable. Without these characteristics, this excess of humanity becomes a problem for capital. Not content to lie down and accept its disposability, it makes itself heard through riots, mass migration, criminality, and all sort of actions that disrupt the existing order. Capitalism therefore has to simultaneously produce a disciplined surplus and deploy violence and coercion against those who resist.⁵⁷

Most of the surplus population currently being produced has little chance of being incorporated into the urban proletariat, a fate that used to be

57 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 98.

the norm throughout the history of industrial capitalism. Contemporary surplus population that serves no function in the dominant mode of economic and social organization accumulates in refugee camps, detention centers, prisons, slums, and shantytowns all over the globe.⁵⁸ Under neoliberal hegemony, the surplus population has been transmogrified from potential urban proletariats to human waste, as Zygmunt Bauman brilliantly highlights in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. Bauman notes that modern economic processes produce increasing quantities of unsustainable and unmanageable amounts of waste (human and nonhuman) in their constant expansion.⁵⁹ During the historical period in which capitalist modernization was limited to a few regions, it was possible, and relatively easy, for such privileged societies to appropriate and colonize other ecological spaces and use 'global outlets for local excesses'. Once the process of economic modernization had extended globally, however, both waste-producing sites and surplus population mushroomed, and the ecological sinks available to contain such excesses rapidly overflowed. As a consequence, more socioecological conflicts arise not only on the commodity frontiers, but also elsewhere as surplus populations rise and planetary boundaries are rapidly transgressed. One among many possible examples of this dynamic is the disturbing rise in foreign corporate acquisitions of land for toxic agro-industrial or extractive activities that expel people from their ancestral lands and condemn them to migration and poverty.⁶⁰

The colonial and neocolonial tendency towards waste externalization and (mis)management cannot be universalized, for if all regions in the planet were to embrace wasteful consumerism, there would be nowhere to put the garbage produced by excessive material and energy usage (which is already the case). Economic growth always needs colonial/neocolonial ecologies and peripheral societies to absorb, suffer for, or pay for its externalities. That is why such a system cannot be sustained given its global aspirations. Rather than finding 'global solutions to locally produced' problems, as colonial powers used to do (and still do under their neocolonial economic and epistemological structures), newcomers to the project of modernization and development are left to seek biophysically impossible 'local solutions to globally produced problems'.⁶¹ Once modern economic processes expand

58 See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

59 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 4–5.

60 Saskia Sassen, 'Migration Is Expulsion by Another Name in World of Foreign Land Deals', *The Guardian*, May 29, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/may/29/migration-expulsion-foreign-land-deals>.

61 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 6.

everywhere, it becomes more challenging and geopolitically frictional for each advanced economy to use 'the rest of the planet as a dumping site'.⁶² Thus, economic growth becomes more socioecologically costly as toxic waste disturbs planetary ecological boundaries and 'wasted humans' disrupt social and political stability worldwide.⁶³

Waste production, neocolonial eradication of traditional subsystem economies, and surplus population are therefore the signature outcomes of economic growth. Such a socially and ecologically parasitic process can only be managed and sustained as long as it is not globalized. Paradoxically, it is the nature of capitalism to expand by appropriating and depleting more and more ecological space, and so global capitalism creates the conditions of its own demise. The faster it expands, the more biophysically impossible and socially unbearable its project becomes: the sustaining capacity of the planet is transgressed, there are no more societies living outside of market economies to be dispossessed, and there is no 'empty' place to put waste and surplus populations. The scale of the problem becomes impossible to ignore, even for previously privileged regions (think of Southern Europe today). Unfortunately, this visibility does not necessarily destabilize the dominant imaginary and reconfigure the map of the sensible in politically meaningful ways. In a recent dangerous and perverse discursive turn, victims of economic globalization are being blamed for the insecurities and precarious conditions that neoliberal policies entail. Immigrants and refugees, rather than the inequities that produce them, are held responsible for the economic and socially insecure climate manufactured by neoliberal institutions. Neoliberal states, actively contributing to economic vulnerability and irresponsible to its social consequences, seek their legitimacy in fighting abstract security threats: 'Unlike in the case of market-generated threats to livelihood and welfare, the extent of dangers to personal safety must be intensely advertised'.⁶⁴ Such is the case in post-2008 Spain, where we see the simultaneous implementation of policies aimed at deregulating labor, cutting social services, and criminalizing poverty, immigration, and protest (a recent law, *Ley Orgánica de Seguridad Ciudadana*, explicitly claims to promote the personal security of citizens).⁶⁵ This toxic securitization discourse, the subject of Brieva's cartoon, has dire social and ecological consequences.

62 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 69.

63 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 70.

64 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 52.

65 'Ley Orgánica de Seguridad Ciudadana', Documento BOE-A-2015-3442, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, no. 77, March 31, 2015, pp. 27216-27243, <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2015/03/31/pdfs/BOE-A-2015-3442.pdf>.

In this last part of the chapter, I want to show how cultural manifestations inspiring postgrowth imaginaries through a ‘political ecology of waste’ are well suited to effectively link the displacement of human bodies with toxic materiality and the discourses instigated by the paradigm of economic growth. As Bauman points out, paraphrasing Paul and Ann Ehrlich, rich consumerist societies are “‘high entropy’ centers, drawing resources, most notably the sources of energy, from the rest of the world, and returning in exchange the polluting, often toxic waste of industrial processes that uses up, annihilates and destroys a large part of the worldwide supplies of energy’.⁶⁶ Surplus populations are composed of people who lose their livelihoods in this process and are forced to relocate in order to survive. Environmental refugees and migrants are the logical consequence of the asymmetrical flow of energy and material mobilized to feed the voracious high-entropy centers. In order to cease creating surplus population, rich countries must stop being insatiable high-entropy centers and reduce their disproportionate economic metabolisms. Promoting walls and xenophobic discourses while encouraging overconsumption and economic growth is counterproductive, to say the least. Instead, the challenge is to promote postgrowth economies and radical empathy to create a society that produces neither human nor nonhuman waste.

In Europe this point is vital today, for as I write (early 2016), the so-called crisis of refugees (the largest since the Second World War) traveling to Europe mainly from Syria is generating enormous social and political tension. So far the European response has been not only divisive and inadequate, but shameful. Xenophobic discourses are gaining traction and most European nations are either washing their hands of the problem or, worse, making plans to seal their borders. In the meantime, refugees are abandoned in improvised and inadequate camps springing up in Greece, Jordan, and other regions; thousands of unaccompanied children are disappearing; and countless people are losing their lives either to malnutrition and illness or to the seas they must cross. Most European governments are not even honoring the flimsy terms agreed to in their communitarian agreements. Spain, for example, had initially committed to provide asylum to more than 17,000 refugees, but as of March 2016 had accommodated fewer than 50.⁶⁷ A recent agreement between the European Union and Turkey—ignoring international law

66 Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 43.

67 Ernest Urtasun, ‘Europa encierra los refugiados en Grecia y se lava las manos’, Euroblog, *eldiario.es*, March 3, 2016, http://www.eldiario.es/euroblog/Europa-encierra-refugiados-Grecia-manos_6_490710954.html.

and human rights—allows all refugees who enter the former illegally to be sent to the latter.

Climate change is also tied to current patterns of mass migration.⁶⁸ The Syrian refugee crisis is a good example: changes in the hydrologic cycle due to global warming provoked an extreme drought that ruined over 60 percent of crop production in Syria and played a crucial role in the destabilization of the country that triggered the civil war. According to many reports, environmental refugees are going to increase dramatically during the next few decades as a consequence of climate change.⁶⁹ Targeting the root causes and not manipulating the symptoms for political gain is paramount in order to avoid not only catastrophic ecological collapse, but the opportunistic emergence of right-wing populism, neofascism, and eco-totalitarian regimes that would benefit from such chaos. The risk of embracing simplistic explanations that promote an ideology of disconnection would be catastrophic in every sense.

On November 15, 2015, Manel Fontdevila, a regular contributor of satirical political cartoons to *eldiario.es*, published a drawing titled ‘Llueven refugiados’.⁷⁰

Two figures holding umbrellas converse while a literal rain of human bodies is falling from the sky. One character states the obvious: ‘It is starting to rain refugees’. The other, a tall white man wearing an elegant suit who represents the European Union establishment (he holds a blue umbrella with yellow stars) replies, ‘It is because of the water cycle! This is not our fault either!’ Fontdevila’s cartoon captures the relationship between the forced and traumatic mobility of bodies (surplus population), the manipulative ‘naturalization’ and ‘depoliticization’ of ecological cycles that human economic activity is disrupting, and the dominant discourse in European nations that pretends that there is no connection between their international politics, their financial activities, their overconsumption, their irresponsibility, and the ongoing traumatic disruption of ecological and social phenomena. The dialogue in the cartoon calls attention to the dominant ideology of disconnection as well as to the dire material and human consequences of both its economic policies and semiotic pollution. By transforming the rain into refugees, the cartoon creates a

68 Ellie Mae O’Hagan, ‘Mass Migration Is No “Crisis”: It’s the New Normal as the Climate Changes’, *The Guardian*, August 18, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/18/mass-migration-crisis-refugees-climate-change>.

69 Jessica Hellmann and David Ackerly, ‘We Are Entering a New Era of Migration—and Not Just for People’, *The Conversation*, October 15, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/we-are-entering-a-new-era-of-migration-and-not-just-for-people-48650>.

70 http://www.eldiario.es/opinion/Llueven-refugiados_10_448755126.html.



Manel 'Llueven refugiados'

visible socioecological network of human and material flows mobilized (and denied: 'this is not our fault either') by hegemonic economic practices and political discourses. In the Anthropocene, environmental issues and migration dynamics cannot be separated from the economic activities and political institutions that set them in motion.

Interferències [*Interferences*], an interesting and well-researched low-budget audiovisual experiment in Spanish and Catalan, is another example of a recent Iberian cultural manifestation that strives to connect the material and discursive dots concealed by the dominant imaginary of economic growth.⁷¹ Released in May 2011, *Interferències* brings together the energy and immediacy allowed by minimalist theatrical techniques—such as abundant body language, improvisation, a limited number of actors who each play several roles, and sober but symbolic scenarios—with the disseminative and multimedia possibilities of audiovisual technologies. The film, blurring the limits between process and product, documentary and fiction, theater and film, diegesis and extradiegesis, and acting, directing, and writing, combines fragments of a play rehearsal with discussions among the crew (actors and director) about how to better express the complexity of the topic that the play engages, namely, the acceptance of the unacceptable in the exploitative relationship between the global North and South. The film suggests a meta-reflection on effective and original ways to make visible the historical continuity of North-South economic and epistemological

71 *Interferències*, <http://www.interferencies.cc/proyecto>.

domination through a complex network that connects irresponsible Western consumerism, illegitimate debt, perverse international financial mechanisms, neoliberal free-trade agreements, the systemic violence and corruption that perpetuate existing power asymmetries, environmental injustice, and neocolonial exploitation of humanity and the nonhuman.

In a discussion about the minimalist staging of a scene (black plastic bags and a photograph of a poor child playing with garbage), the actors ask themselves if that materiality is enough to express 'el consumo exagerado del norte que convierte al sur en un basurero' [the excessive consumerism of the North that transforms the South into a landfill]. The title of the film refers to the historically iterative interferences of colonial/neocolonial powers in the impoverished global South in order to exploit their ecologies and labor. As in *Tirar, comprar, tirar*, the connection between economic growth and global destruction is explicit, and the film clearly endorses the notion that the efforts of rich countries to help 'poor' regions develop are nothing but a fraud. The latter do not need help from the former. Rather, they need to be liberated from their compulsory subsidization of the wasteful consumption patterns of the wealthy.

One of the most interesting features of the film is a discussion about the limits of representation. The main challenge the characters face is how to effectively talk about, and modify, the distribution of the sensibility perpetuated and monopolized by the dominant imaginary. The difficulty of representing and thinking about the insidious material and semiotic networks that hegemonic discourses conceal leads the actors to conclude that they do not have a coherent topic to represent, and they decide to cancel the premiere of the play. At that moment, real images of the 15-M movement in the streets are incorporated into the film, replenishing the energy that the actors were losing. Afterward, the crew meets again and experiences an epiphany: 'Las alternativas, ése es el tema' [Alternatives, that is the topic]. Some alternatives to the dominant imaginary that are aligned with the degrowth movement are enumerated, and at the end of the film there is an homage to Ramón Fernández Durán (a recently deceased radical Spanish thinker and one of the most sophisticated critics of the growth society). The homage to Fernández Durán reinforces the film's alignment with postgrowth imaginaries.

Jason Moore recently argued that 'flows of nutrients, flows of humans, and flows of capital make a historical totality, in which each flow implies the other'.⁷² *Interferències* intends to render this totality perceptible and thinkable, so it can re-enter the arena of the politically and ethically

72 Moore, 'Nature in the Limits of Capital', 15.

relevant. Along these same lines, one of the most effective films in presenting the aforementioned web of flows in a way that aligns with what I call the political ecology of waste is the Spanish and Mexican film *La jaula de oro* (Golden Cage, 2013), written and directed by Diego Quemada-Díez.⁷³ The majority of the movie follows three teenagers, later joined by a fourth (an indigenous boy from the Chiapas region who does not speak Spanish), as they try to emigrate from a shantytown near a landfill in Guatemala to the United States. The freight trains crossing Mexico, over whose packed roofs the characters move, provide the recurring motif that dominates the movie. The metallic, rusty solidity of the trains is contrasted with the vulnerable bodies of the main characters. A few panoramic shots capture the Mexican landscapes through which the train passes, but during most of the film the camera leisurely frames the body movements and facial expressions of the characters as they interact with each other, using an abundance of close and medium shots. The film generates a sense of intimacy, but also points to the fragile materiality of the human bodies, which sweat and experience fatigue, pain, distress, hunger, and fear. The main characters remain vulnerable throughout the trip and all become victims of aggression and mistreatment. The harsh realities of migrants' lives are not overlooked, as one character dies, another gives up, and yet another is kidnapped by a criminal gang dedicated to sexual trafficking. Nevertheless, they also experience some enjoyable moments. Interestingly, while most of the traumatic events are triggered by monetarized and exploitative activities, the happy moments are not tied to commodified goods but are the result of human interactions with no direct link to goods produced by the market economy (dancing, singing, laughing, and playing).

The aforementioned web of the flows of nutrients, humans, and capital that the film reveals, as well as their connections with the production of both industrial waste and surplus population, are at the heart of the film. The setting of the first sequence, the shantytown where the three teenagers live is constructed of discarded materials and recovered waste. The scene features Juan, the leading character, walking through the informal and marginal human settlement made out of discarded objects where discarded people (surplus population) struggle to survive. The significance of this disposable materiality is reinforced in a subsequent scene, when Juan looks for his friend in an adjacent landfill. His friend is searching with others through the garbage to find elements with which to make a life. Industrial commodities that have reached the end of their life cycle pile up in the landfill, out of sight of the original consumers. This endgame of the consumerist process

73 Diego Quemada-Díez, dir., *La jaula de oro* (Barcelona: Cameo, 2013), DVD.

becomes the symbolic beginning of the film and the trip. Waste materials and surplus population converge in the shantytown, acquiring agency and refusing to accept the disposable, passive, and invisible place assigned to them by the economic system that produced them.

Similarly, at the end of the movie, there is a relatively long and slow scene without dialogue (93:02–96:19) featuring the meat factory where Juan works, presumably illegally, after entering the United States. The shots are unified by the white (workers' uniforms) and red (meat and blood) colors that predominate in the factory, and by peaceful but melancholic offscreen music. The camera slowly moves along the mechanized lines where meat is cut and packed by the factory workers. Juan's task is to clean up the leftover tissue (a sticky amalgam of blood and nerves) that adheres to the factory floor and equipment. What is most relevant in this scene is not the obvious irony of Juan risking his life to escape the landfill of Guatemala only to end up collecting waste at a different stage of the industrial chain, but the fact that waste is produced throughout the process and, no matter where he goes, he will always be located on the side of visible waste production, not the side of consumption.

The choice of a meat factory is significant for several reasons. Industrial meat production and the globalization of its overconsumption is ecologically devastating. According to the United Nations, raising animals for food 'is one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every point on the scale from local to global'.⁷⁴ The high-density animal populations on industrial farms produce enormous amounts of methane (a potent greenhouse gas) and a highly toxic runoff. Another problem is that according to many environmental organizations, we are literally 'destroying the Amazon to make burgers for the North'. The need for forage to feed the animals triggers the clearance of forests and the replacement of traditionally diverse agricultural practices that sustained the local populations with extensive monocrops engineered to support industrial animal farming. The globalizing, unhealthy meat-based diet of the North is not only deforesting the South, but also contributing to climate change, water depletion, chemical pollution, eradication of food sovereignty and security, land grabbing and human displacement, and many other socioecological problems. It is important to note, in order to reinforce this connection between asymmetrically distributed flows of commodities and human bodies, that Juan only achieves his goal of physically crossing the Mexico-US border by carrying drugs for a criminal organization.

74 Henning Steinfeld et al., *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006), xx.

La jaula de oro is a film about the correlation between overconsumption and waste production in the North (represented by the meat factory at the end of the movie) and waste accumulation in the South (seen in the landfill at the beginning of the movie), along with the flows of humans and other materials between sites of waste production and waste accumulation. The trains travel from south to north as they simultaneously transport both raw materials to be consumed in the high-entropy centers of the North and people who have been displaced and disposed of as a consequence of the appropriation of such materials by the global market economy. Most of the film focuses on these simultaneous flows of surplus population and commodities as they are juxtaposed on the trains. The surplus population follows the flows of energy and materials mobilized by economic globalization. Interestingly, the materials that are destined to feed the overconsumption of the North travel undisturbed, while all significant diegetic action is triggered by the different obstacles, official or not (police, army, criminal organizations), that prevent human flows from following the commodity flux. Commodities circulate legally, surplus population illegally. The surplus population is hardly able to follow the material flows put into motion by the entropic dynamics of neoliberal globalization.

The toxic securitization discourse discussed earlier in this chapter is central to the film, which depicts the persistent intervention of police and military forces that discourage the movement of surplus population. A similar dynamic governs one of the final scenes after Juan and Chauk have finally crossed the border. They are wandering through US territory when suddenly a sniper shoots and kills Chauk. Because the sniper does not wear an official uniform, he is presumably a member of one of the informally organized racist groups who patrol the borders to stop illegal immigrants. The disturbing proliferation of xenophobic aggressions, securitization policies, and toxic discourses proves lethal, just as it did at Tarajal Beach in February 2014. Fifteen migrants attempting the short swim from the northeastern border of Morocco to the neighboring city of Ceuta, a Spanish territory located on the North African coast, died in Spanish waters while Spanish security forces fired rubber ammunition to prevent them from reaching the shore instead of assisting them.⁷⁵

Even when official institutions can no longer ignore the effects of climate change on mass migration, corporate mass media outlets, research funding, and irresponsible political statements favor a ‘threatening narrative’ whose effect ‘has been a progressive shift of the environmental immigration

⁷⁵ *Tarajal*, a recent documentary, investigates the facts and makes visible these perverse dynamics.

studies towards security studies'.⁷⁶ This tendency towards a securitization discourse grossly ignores the root causes of the problem by focusing on its symptoms: the attempts at relocation made by the most vulnerable victims of neoliberal globalization. Migrants are identified as the main problem, to be addressed with severity, while the true causes remain unchecked and concealed. This securitization is a challenge to democracy itself and does not recognize the nexus between capitalism, inequality, and climate change.⁷⁷ Today, the environmental problems and social instability caused by economic expansion are used as excuses to reinforce and secure the military power and economic neocolonial domination that created them in the first place.

Paisajes de desolación is a collection of photographs that clearly captures the connections between surplus population, securitization, and the disproportionate social metabolism (including appropriation of ecological space and massive waste production) of the overdeveloped regions.⁷⁸ José Palazón Osma's series won the 2015 Ortega y Gasset Award in the category of graphic journalism. One photo shows the fence that separates Morocco from Melilla, another Spanish city on the North African coast, from the perspective of an adjacent golf course located on the Spanish side. While a couple in sportswear play golf on abundantly irrigated green grass, a group of 11 black migrants are trapped on top of the fence, waiting to be deported by a policeman ascending a ladder. Two dramatic contrasts are projected by the image: on the one hand, the leisurely recreation of the indifferent golfers juxtaposed with the migrants' plight and, on the other, the lush golf course separated by the fence from an arid and thirsty landscape. The indifference of the golfers is even more disturbing given the proximity of the migrants. The panoramic composition of the photograph resists the temptation to zoom in on the individual features of the trapped migrants, as is usually the case in graphic journalism that strives to create empathy and awareness. It focuses instead on the space produced and guarded by the fence, as well as the contrasts it hides and perpetuates. In other words, the image, rather than appealing to an audience's depoliticized empathy and compassion for individual stories and characters, encourages the viewer to question the global systemic and structural socioecological network in which both the

76 Marco Armiero, Richard Tucker, and Sergio Prieto Díaz, 'From the Apocalypse to the Possibilities. New Stories about Immigrants and the Environment', *Miradas en Movimiento* (January 2012): 8.

77 Carol C. Gould, 'Beyond the Dual Crisis: From Climate Change to Democratic Change', *Minded Nature* 9, no. 1 (2016): 15.

78 <http://periodismohumano.com/migracion/el-video-de-la-foto-juegan-al-golf-mientras-varios-inmigrantes-intentar-saltar-la-valla-de-melilla.html>.



Palazón 'Desolation Landscapes'

migrants and the privileged golfers are inextricably enmeshed. This image disturbs the hegemonic distribution of the sensible by making visible and thinkable the social and ecological interdependency that the dominant imaginary keeps in its discursive blind spot.

The framing of the image displaces the dominant order of the perceptible from the preferred subject of depoliticized individual misfortune onto the structural injustice that creates such misfortunes. The golf course occupies more than two-thirds of the image, crowding the migrants and the parched landscape beyond the fence against the upper border of the photograph. The relationship between human density and ecological conditions on both sides of the fence is also asymmetrical. Only two people are using the golf course, which consumes vast amounts of water, while 11 people are fleeing the arid environment on the other side of the fence. The asymmetrical framing of the image graphically depicts the relationship between the appropriation of a disproportionate ecological space for superficial and wasteful activities and the displacement of surplus population. The water, soil nutrients, and energy mobilized by the golf course could have been utilized on the other side of the fence to grow multiple crops to feed the local population. This unfair order of things can be easily extrapolated to the global level, where human bodies, as we saw in *La jaula de oro*, follow the asymmetric flows of

energy and material mobilized by the growth economy in order to survive. In this light, the indifferent golfers are transformed from innocent people trying to enjoy themselves into insensitive participants in the slow violence that creates the surplus population they refuse to see. Their superficial consumption of materials and energy causes real human suffering. The physical securitization that the fence achieves is effective at stopping the victimized bodies from entering the physical space of the golf course, but they disrupt the visual landscape for the players, as well as for people who encounter the photograph on social media. The deregulation of trade and financial activities to facilitate the global circulation of commodities and capital parallels the strict regulation of nonprivileged human bodies and the criminalization of their circulation. Ironically, the same neoliberal discourse that celebrates mobility and freedom severely represses it when it is not market-oriented, as is evidenced by the rapid proliferation of fences in Europe in the past couple of years and the global proliferation of border walls and border agents over the last 25 years.⁷⁹

The dominant imaginary assumes that migrants move to ‘developed’ countries because such regions are desirable destinations due to their sociopolitical models and economic success. Accordingly, orthodox economists of different ideological colors recommend helping underdeveloped countries to develop in order to reduce migration (although they may disagree on the most effective ways of doing so). José Palazón makes visible and perceptible what these discourses both omit and conceal, namely that the economic growth of overdeveloped countries is what triggers the socioecological conditions that create surplus population. Development understood as constant economic growth is the problem, not the solution!

For Donna Haraway, the Anthropocene implies the massive disappearance of places of refuge that abounded during the Holocene and sustained biocultural diversity: ‘Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge’.⁸⁰ I agree with Haraway that the best we can do under contemporary circumstances is to ‘join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses’.⁸¹ Human walls, economic growth, and neoliberal fantasies are rapidly destroying the last planetary refuges by filling the Earth with their semiotic

79 Wayward Wandering, ‘Las fronteras de la historia’, *Diagonal*, January 5, 2016, <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/blogs/wayward-wandering/fronteras-la-historia.html>. See the work by Reece Jones for a global evolution and proliferation of border walls.

80 Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene’, 160.

81 Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene’, 160.

and material pollution.⁸² It is my hope that the cultural manifestations collected in this chapter under the auspices of the political ecology of waste might help to disrupt the dominant order of the perceptible, foster postgrowth imaginaries, and motivate radical economic cultures. A persistent cultural focus on nonhuman agency, socioecological interdependency, material flows, and waste visibility has the potential to expose the fallacies embraced by the toxic discourse of economic growth.

82 Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene', 160.