

Signs of the Inhuman: Hauntings and Lost Futures in Verónica Gerber Bicecci's *La Compañía*

Marcela Romero Rivera

Vassar College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Romero Rivera, Marcela. "Signs of the Inhuman: Hauntings and Lost Futures in Verónica Gerber Bicecci's *La Compañía*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.1 (2022): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4296>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 2 times as of 08/15/22.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 24 Issue 1 (March 2022) Article 16

Marcela Romero Rivera,

"Signs of the Inhuman: Hauntings and Lost Futures in Verónica Gerber Bicecci's *La Compañía*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/16>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.1 (2022)**

Special Issue: ***Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, The Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture.***

Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/>>

Abstract: Current criticism of works of eco fiction maintains that one of the central contributions of this literary genre is a consciousness-raising effect that these works have on their readers by virtue of alluding, with varying degrees of specificity, to real-world environmental problems, implying that this is a central step towards remedying our current planetary climate crisis. This article suggests, conversely, that literary criticism of eco fiction necessitates a more rigorous material analysis—specifically one attentive to class and class antagonism—of these works and their conditions of production to understand their relation to power, as well as their affordances and limitations as tools for climate justice and remediation. Taking the example of the critically acclaimed book *La compañía* (2019), by Mexico's Verónica Gerber Bicecci, this article deploys a material analysis to evaluate the political implications of its strategy of appropriation of previously existing materials, the periodization it chooses and its haunting significance in Mexican history, and the expression of the *inhuman* nature it bestows on its working-class characters. The article ends with a series of observations towards a further theorization of the *inhuman* as an epochal figure evoked in this and other works of eco fiction.

Marcela Romero RIVERA**Signs of the Inhuman: Hauntings and Lost Futures in Verónica Gerber Bicecci's *La Compañía***

La compañía (*The Company*) by Verónica Gerber Bicecci (Gerber Bicecci) is an example of eco fiction embraced by the transnational community of literary critics as a timely, urgent contribution aimed at helping us, its readers, picture the causes and the extent of the environmental devastation that will condition the future we are entering into in the 2020s. This is a visual-literary project that has captured the attention and imagination of its public and critics, and it is not an exaggeration to say that it is one of the most successful Latin American cultural products today: *La compañía* was declared "the most fascinating book" of the year 2019 by Jorge Carrión writing for *The New York Times en Español*.

The powers of literature as cultural product or ideological artifact are defined by its capacity to conjure symptomatic figures of our historical present, or in the most urgent, best cases, to unveil the ones that define our futurity. As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, the question of the future—Do we have one? Will it be horrid?—that confronts us in every realm, seems to be the one that so-called world literature asks most frequently. The effects of colonial histories, of environmental degradation, and of the continued exploitation and violence that still condition the lives of marginalized communities, are among the socio-historical ailments that receive treatment in the works of the successful world-literature authors of our day. Eco horror, dystopic narratives, and speculative fiction are some of the genres of choice that frame a symptomatic incursion on the part of contemporary world literature into the realm of environmental crisis. In a curious displacement of political consensus, the transnational publishing-industrial complex seems to have reached a degree of clarity that continues to elude its neo-extractivist, agrochemical, or manufacturing counterparts. Unlike all the interest groups and governments included in the Paris Agreement or the recent COP 26 conference, for instance, eco fiction seems to accept on principle that mining and its by-products are bad; agritoxins in water and food are terrible; CO₂ in the atmosphere is worse, and therefore all of these should be terminated *tout court*.

Surely the problem, posits Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, is the elusive, non-spectacular temporality of environmental violence, which like other *longue-durée* processes such as settler colonialism and its genocidal tactics, continue operating today in ways that are not immediately, visually apparent. *Slow Violence* prescribes the lens provided by writer-activists of the Global South to help us see, or rather to conjure, non-visual images that will compel us, finally, to perceive the true horror of a continued violence that disproportionately affects the poor of the world. However tenuous, we can find a periodizing intention in Nixon's often-cited argument, at least in two ways; not only does he propose a characterization of the temporality of environmental crisis as slow moving, which occludes the causes of violence, dissimulated as small incremental changes over a stretched-out chronological arch; but he also seems to suggest that the work of the writer-activists who he praises inaugurates a new period of non-visual figurations of urgency that will unveil the reality of the horror of environmental violence, once and for all.

Conversely, what I propose in the following pages is that there is a more revealing lens to read eco fictions than Nixon's invocations of slowness, invisibility, and the affected *poor*: that is, a class-conscious materialist analysis. By reinserting class as an important element in cultural criticism, I am also countering the notion that we should declare our former critical tools obsolete, or that the only form of materialist analysis worth pursuing today is one that situates the core antagonism behind this crisis as that between humans and the non-human, that prescribes "making kin" with pigeons and fungi as a solution, and considers that a critical reading of class antagonism—its powers exhausted by decree—can and should be discarded. If I were to attach a periodization to the cultural and critical landscape of the first decades of the twenty-first century, it would have to be one defined by the looped, recurrent temporality of "hauntology" (embracing Mark Fisher's appropriation of the term rather than Jacques Derrida's definition). Accordingly, the analysis I present here tries to be attuned to the signs and spectral presence of "the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate" as they still appear today—though not always in the places or guises in which the author's PR announces them—offering us the possibility, still, despite everything, yes, even now, of an emancipatory cultural politics that grants us the "capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" ("What Is Hauntology?" 16).

If we pause before taking all contemporary eco fictions' stated liberal pro-environment agenda at face value, and instead read them against the grain as it were, with an eye on the images that they create of the working class (defined not merely by poverty, but by the diverse forms of exploitation they

are submitted to), we can better elucidate the material, political conflicts of interest that lie at the core of the ineffectiveness of capitalist, liberal and neoliberal solutions to our environmental crisis. Just as importantly, by considering the conditions of possibility for these successful fictional projects—not only their financing sources, but the complex, transnational apparatus of contracts, prizes, fellowships, and small armies of praise-dispensing critics—we can at least produce a clearer image of how power operates through these narratives, making them in some cases instruments to preserve the *status quo* more so than weapons to denounce it. But the most intriguing aspect of a class-based material analyses of the work of Gerber Bicecci, again, reading this project against its seductive grain, is the appearance of the inhuman, a symptomatic epochal figure that exposes the effects of environmental violence on the worker. The inhuman in *La compañía* appears mainly in the form of a character—*la máquina*—who has been de-humanized both by environmental degradation and by the bourgeois gaze with which Gerber Bicecci introduces it to the reader; the inhuman, however, also possesses powers whose meaning and reach are only perceptible to that same bourgeois gaze as a vague, ineffable dread, which in itself might be the clearest sign of its emancipatory potential.

***La compañía*, Materially**

La compañía is a complex publishing project where the visual is as important as the text, as befits Gerber Bicecci's self-description as an "artist who writes"; starkly printed with black ink on heavy white bond paper, words and images appear lavish and bold on each page, giving the book the feel of a lovingly designed experimental art catalogue. The composition of its pages and its non-traditional landscape format offer the reader a sense of novelty that only increases when the reading starts—after flipping the pages and peeking at the intriguing trove of images that are evident even by looking at the sides of the closed book. The graphic-textual information is divided in two parts: the first one, succinctly titled "a.," is an appropriation—with few but significant alterations— of Amparo Dávila's 1959 horror classic short story, "El huésped" ("The Houseguest"), whose full text appears in short snippets of two to three lines at the bottom of each page in Gerber Bicecci's book, pages which otherwise are covered by intervened photographs of the site of an abandoned mercury mine and the ruins of the town built around it. Gerber Bicecci altered the images by printing them in stark black ink over the white paper, increasing the contrast of the original image and therefore losing some detail while making them more striking. There are also some added graphic details on certain pages, for instance, whenever the character named "la máquina" appears in the text, the page also includes a geometric drawing in the style of Manuel Felguérez' "ideogramas," which were geometric drawings produced by a computer program designed by the Zacatecan artist using the basic graphic elements of his own previous works and an aleatory program to output random, automatic drawings that were at once the artist's and the machine's (Felguérez) These "ideogramas" appear superposed onto a photographic image of the mine, therefore adding another dimension of reality, another reference to yet another canonical Mexican artist, and another layer of complexity to the creative composite of appropriated materials that make up the book.

The second part, "b.," is a selection of texts from different disciplines and registers ordered so as to stitch together a possible history of the region in Zacatecas, where a mercury mine, active from 1943 to the early 1980s, created and then ruined a small town called San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio. This structure suggests a significant connection between the stories from the two sections; it forces a re-signification of Dávila's short story, where a monstrous houseguest is brought into a household by the husband, to be later killed by the housewife and her domestic worker when the unspecified entity threatens the life of one of the children; the reader is invited to find correspondences between Dávila's characters and events in Gerber Bicecci's story of the mine and its neglectful administration.

Nicolás Campisi, in a blog post "Ruinas contemporáneas: ficciones del eco horror en América Latina," builds a list to offer a bird's-eye view of contemporary Latin American eco fiction that includes Gerber Bicecci's book, locating it within the register of Latin American apocalyptic and dystopic literature that narrates the ruins left in the wake of neo-extractivist projects in the region. The apocalyptic perspective of *La compañía*, Campisi postulates, serves to bridge the realms of literature and politics by attempting to "immerse the reader in a process of environmental consciousness-raising". This is a common refrain in eco fiction criticism; according to critics like Campisi, we should assume the eco fiction writer possesses a knowledge that her readers lack, so, when she spins her tale of horror, she makes the unapparent appear and induces in her readers a moment of classic *anagnorisis*, revealing the true nature of our environmental crisis.

To an important extent, this has actually been my experience reading *La compañía*, though I have not arrived at the same conclusions as Campisi, who claims that the main achievements of the book are, first, equating human beings with parasites—like the monster in the central story—against which

nature as a motherly figure is now defending her progeny. And second, quoting Cristina Rivera Garza, Campisi claims that an important achievement of *La compañía* as an example of "necro-writing" lies in its "decentering the stable notion of the author and mobilizing a collective matrix to [...] resist hegemonic power," never mind that Gerber Bicecci does this by appropriating and radically altering the meaning of the work of one of the very few Latin American female writers within the tradition of horror literature, a contradiction that Campisi chooses not to address. Instead, in Gerber Bicecci's appropriated version, I read not a liberal accomplishment against "hegemonic power" as Campisi would have it, but a neoliberal violent re-signification that includes a virtual erasure of the power dynamics and class antagonism of Dávila's original. And by following the further de-humanization of the figure of the worker in the appropriated text, I did indeed gain a series of insights I didn't previously possess about the nature of this book and the politics around which it is organized.

My first insight has to do with the hauntological temporality that circumscribes *La compañía* as a labor of re-cycling, re-mixing, re-arranging, as the book contains virtually no new material and the vast majority of its hypotexts come from the twentieth century. In an important way, this is a project about the spectral, fragmented presence and revaluation of a series of events from twentieth century Mexico that have not stopped haunting our present. Gerber Bicecci began the work that would become the book *La compañía* in 2018 with a visual exhibit—a *fotonovela*—at the Museo de Arte Abstracto Manuel Felguérez in Zacatecas, Mexico, commissioned by FEMSA (Fomento Económico Mexicano Sociedad Anónima) through the FEMSA Art Biennial, which acts as part of the hefty PR machine of one of the most profitable, neoliberal Latin American companies. The Biennial, whose XIII edition, titled *Nunca fuimos contemporáneos (We Have Never Been Contemporary)*, was curated by Daniel Garza Usabiaga and Willy Kautz, works as a series of exhibitions, art commissions, pedagogical workshops, and publishing projects centered around a theme and tied to a particular geographical region of Mexico: in this instance, Zacatecas. As stated in their official press release, the curatorial line of this edition took its central argument and title from Bruno Latour's book *We Have Never Been Modern* and invited creators to propose art works and interventions that questioned the assumed mandate of Biennials to showcase "the contemporary," given that these type of art exhibit are in general aimed at offering a curated selection of works produced in the previous two years—the most contemporary— following the specific thematic direction the curatorial theme agrees on. In this case, the hope of Usabiaga and Kautz was to gather artists whose work would, instead, acknowledge that "the contemporary" in Mexico today might be best captured by the collaborative work of "very diverse local actors", which would produce a "narrative model of superpositions [that engages in] a profound historical reflection based on the concept of a 'multiple space,' [a term] coined by Zacatecan artist Manuel Felguérez in the 1960s" (Esquivel).

Gerber Bicecci follows these curatorial instructions to the letter: she does not produce any new (contemporary) materials for this work, choosing instead to "remix" the literary texts, photographs, graphic work, interviews, reports, etc. created in different historical moments by artists and creators from Zacatecas. In this choice, we can see her abidance of the logic of superpositions and appropriations of the work of a whole host of "local actors" suggested by the Biennial curators. Federico Cantoni credits the book's palimpsestic, polifonic, hybrid, heterodox configuration—suggested by FEMSA and faithfully embraced by the artist-appropriator—for capturing a full, if horrific picture of a process of historical and environmental ruination that started in the colony and still persists in Mexico today, and which is felt more acutely in places like Zacatecas, an important mining center for the Spanish Crown during the three centuries of their colonial rule (Cantoni 403). However, what makes the temporality of *La compañía* hauntological is not just the symptomatic aesthetics of re-shuffling previously existing materials, but the periodization that it creates in order to frame its story of environmental ruination. In the Biennial press release, we find multiple references to the state's colonial history and its economic and artistic legacy, forged over the three centuries of Spanish rule (roughly from 1521 to 1821), as one of the layers of creative superpositions that the commissioned artists were invited to produce. Notwithstanding this curatorial nudge, Gerber Bicecci chooses a different periodization: one that starts in the early 1940s and continues up to today, but in which most of the events that define it took place between 1959 and 1982.

What Haunts *La Compañía*

If we are to agree with Campisi and read *La compañía* as a horror story, then we need to consider Gerber Bicecci's intervention in Amparo Dávila's text as the center of the project. The hypotext, "El huésped," was the second short story in Dávila's *Tiempo destrozado (Devastated Time)*, published in 1959 by the Fondo de Cultura Económica, and it remains one of the best-known stories by Zacatecas'

native Dávila. In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher notes the abundance of contemporary cultural products that "re-shuffle," "remix," "re-boot" the past, which he interprets as the failure of neoliberal contemporary culture to create the new, and the reason why sometimes it would seem like we are living in a loop of re-visitations of our recent past.

In agreement with Fredric Jameson, Fisher also sees in this phenomenon a "waining of historicity" that underlies the neoliberal *presentism* as its favored temporal mode, and a corollary to its fetishization of "innovation." *La compañía* invites a reading of the present as the moment of awareness and the past as the moment of the original sin of contamination and neglect, thus fending off any possibility of a positive recuperation of the past of the Mexican 60s and 70s. This periodization also frames environmental devastation as a problem that we inherit from the past, which must be *managed* in the present, but not necessarily one that is being reproduced and intensified today (by other *companies*). The past, as envisioned by the neoliberal gaze of *La compañía*, serves only as a fable, whose moral we can profit from in the present.

This strategic interest in the past—not to be confused with historical analysis—to justify neoliberal interventions in the present is evident in the Biennial press release as well, which states that their aim is to explore the contradictions in the traditions and legacy of artists and artisans in Zacatecas, "to get a glimpse at historical, social and economic latencies [of phenomena such as] migration or mineral extractivism" (Esquivel). So, according to the FEMSA Biennial, *latencies* of the present are as much as we can hope to find when we go looking at our past; put differently, FEMSA's curators postulate that our present, the contemporary, is a fuller realization of the desires and sins of our past. Fisher warns us about this precise periodizing strategy when he says that under neoliberalism, "we are induced by ubiquitous PR into falsely overestimating the present, and those who can't remember the past are condemned to have it resold to them forever" (*Ghosts of My Life* 25).

So, what lies "unremembered" in the past invoked by *La compañía*? What or who are the ghosts that haunt it? "El huésped" was published in the middle of the Mexican Miracle (1940-70), which, aside from a robust, sustained yearly economic growth, was marked by a strengthening of the system of social provisions that continued the socially progressive policy of the post-revolutionary governments of Álvaro Obregón and Lázaro Cárdenas. During the year of its publication, 1959, president Adolfo López Mateos nationalized electricity, and founded the ISSSTE system to provide health care and social security to federal workers, as well as the Mexican Academy for the Sciences. His government also continued the import-substitution program to incentivize the manufacturing and consumption of national products, and navigated a tense international-relations moment with the US, by allowing Mexico to stand its ground politically when its northern neighbor pressured his administration to join the blockade against Cuba, choosing instead to respect the Cuban people's right to self-determination.

Also "unremembered" is the fact that Dávila's *Tiempo devastado*—her first publication to garner significant attention from the critics— was published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica, which since its foundation in 1934, had served as a publishing organ in support of the efforts of the post-revolutionary government to create a public, national culture accessible to all Mexicans. The 1960s and 1970s in Mexico were a period when culture was not seen as a luxury that the developing nation should or could consider secondary to other more pressing material needs; indeed, at the time, cultural production relied on a system where a young writer did not need to show promise of commercial success to obtain material support to write or to get published. By 2019, when Gerber Bicecci publishes *La compañía* in book form, the politics of cultural production in Mexico had changed radically, to say the least.

Fisher explains that the sustained "ideological and practical attack on public services"—including those that support cultural production—"meant that one of the spaces where artists could be sheltered from the pressure to produce something that was immediately successful was severely circumscribed" (*Ghosts of My Life* 15). This attack, which has been ongoing since the 1980s in the UK as well as in Mexico, and the demands it makes of cultural producers, might also explain contemporary artists' and writers' over-reliance on stories, images, and styles that have proven successful in the recent past to create their own cultural products. The fact that "the most fascinating book of 2019" is a crafty appropriation and rearrangement of previously existing texts and images, commissioned by a company committed to a neoliberal agenda, shows that "[d]espite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new" (*Ghosts of My Life* 15).

The years of the Mexican Miracle prior to this attack, however, also included the violent repression of social protest and the massacre of students in Tlatelolco and were, therefore, no social utopia. We must not interpret the criticism of the neoliberal dismissal of any positive recuperation of the past as

uncritical nostalgia for that or any period, but rather as an attempt to revalidate and recover the future that was possible to envision then, and that we have since lost. I am not making a sort of "Make Mexico Miraculous Again" argument; that is not what is meant by the haunting of lost futures in the contemporary. Fisher clarifies that the longing in hauntology is for "the resumption of the processes of democratisation and pluralism." Adapting his argument to fit the case we are making, we can say that what haunts *La compañía* "is not the *no longer* of actually existing [revolutionary social democracy], but the *not yet* of the futures that [the Mexican Miracle] trained us to expect, but which were never materialised" (*Ghosts of My Life* 27).

Naming Violence

As we saw in the previous section, we can find the Mexican lost futures that haunt Gerber Bicecci's project in her strategy of un-remembrance, which is a combination of allusion and disavowal; her choice of the specific literary and artistic materials she appropriates point us to the moment of the Mexican Miracle but she disavows the promise of a better future that it entailed—by disregarding it completely—leaving it to the reader to tease out its spectral presence. In contrast, the image of those decades of general prosperity and new social provisions that we can find readily available in her book is a dark one, in which evil monsters and criminally negligent managers besiege a bourgeois family and a working-class town. With this choice, Gerber Bicecci seems to be privileging the telling of a history of violence whose effects continue affecting the town of San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio even today, which might be interpreted as evidence of her commitment to denouncing the root causes of the environmental devastation of that region. We could only arrive at that interpretation, however, if we don't pay attention to the actual strategy of naming and erasing that she uses to gesture at a denunciation that never fully arrives.

La compañía names and erases several extractivist companies at play in the telling of the story of the mine of Nuevo Mercurio: the first one, Mercurio Mexicano, S.A. de C.V., was founded in 1940 by Ignacio Martínez and sold in 1965 to Miguel Roca Cuéllar, who kept it open until 1972. In 1974, the mine reopened, operated by the Fideicomiso de Fomento Minero, the government branch in charge of the national mining industry, which shortly after ceded the rights for exploitation to US national John Nugent, who in turn operated the mine as Minera Rosicler until the early 1980s. Each of these iterations are alluded to, and their stories strung together in section b. of the book, but the text does so by merging these four management companies into a single entity simply called "la compañía," and in so doing, Gerber Bicecci erases the distinct moments of violence in the exploitation of the mine of San Felipe, their differentiated environmental impact, and the specificity of each company's role in the ruination of the town. With this decision, the author reifies a vague, but ominous polluting threat, losing historical and material specificity, muddling this history of environmental degradation. Some cursory online research into the case of San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio reveals that, though the first two companies operated the mine the longest—from 1940 to 1970—only its last iteration, John Nugent's Rosicler, is responsible for the illegal importing and negligent storing of highly polluting chemicals in the old galleries of the mine, which led to the environmental crisis that plagues that region to this day (Valadez Rodríguez; SEMARNAT). Of course, the other relevant company in this list should be FEMSA—possibly the biggest ghost haunting Gerber Bicecci's work—which is both unnamed and central to the whole project, having provided its conditions of possibility.

"*La compañía*" is therefore the name of an amalgamated entity of imprecise delimitations that connects the two halves of Gerber Bicecci's project, which works allegorically in the appropriated and altered version of Amparo Dávila's horror classic, and literally in the non-fictional second half. However, when we try to use the real stories in part b. as the key to interpreting the allegory of part a. we find that this leads to even further obfuscation of the distribution of agency and responsibility among fictional and non-fictional protagonists of the book's complex anecdote.

A possible interpretation of the correspondence between the allegorical and the non-fictional anecdotes from the two halves of Gerber Bicecci's book is as follows: "*La compañía*" in the first half is the aggregated figuration standing in for all four companies that operated the mine; foreign and menacing, this "company" terrifies the women and children of the house, who stand for... the workers of the mine? Or is it their families? Whichever it may be, an important obfuscation takes place with this transposition of the allegorical characters to the non-fictional actors, since the ghostly entity in Dávila's short story ostensibly has nothing to gain from its haunting of the women and children, which works well for a horror story where the monster's motives need not be clear, and the notion of "evil" suffices to explain the actions of such character. But applying the same logic to interpret the actions of commercial entities such as Rosicler mining company conveniently obfuscates the very pedestrian and

sadly simple motivation that companies have to exploit and abuse their workers: profits. Pedestrian and simple as it may be, however, such motivation is also the mightiest under capitalist conditions, and no amount of PR should lead us astray from the clarity and simplicity of the fact that a company, especially a neoliberal company, will never do anything that is not aimed at defending and increasing their bottom line, not even supporting art—much less commissioning work with a purported environmental consciousness-raising message. In the context of the FEMSA Biennial, of course, the convenience of characterizing *La compañía's* eponymous protagonist's motives as vaguely as possible should be obvious, lest the public/reader be tempted to wonder about *this* company's own motivations and extractivist practices in terms of the exploitation of the environment and their workers. Much more palatable is to assume that Gerber Bicecci's re-writes the story of *an evil company* with no clear history or current counterpart, which, having existed in a negligent past, produced the ruin of a town by poisoning it. This kind of negligence is not a "contemporary" problem, as the title of the Biennial reassures us, but rather just one more sin from Mexico's past, which is up to new companies to address and up to today's artists to unearth, to a point.

Layering the non-fictional story from the second part of the book on top of the fictional structure of the altered short story also forces a vicious recoding and re-orientation of the power dynamics in Amparo Dávila's original, all of which happens as an effect of a strategy of violent renaming. The fact that Dávila's story is deliberately empty of concrete historical or toponymic references makes the horror that the houseguest evokes more effective and broadly relatable, precisely because of its anodyne, *petit-bourgeois*, domestic setting. In Gerber Bicecci's version, however, we see the text of the story displayed as part of arresting visual compositions, the first of which offers the reader a black-and-white picture with an unambiguous toponymic reference: "Nuevo Mercurio," we read on a road sign that announces that we are precisely 90 km away from that ruined town. The rest of the story is told in snippets of two or three lines of the text per page, always at the bottom of photographic images of the town, the mine, or rocks containing mercury. Recoding the locus of the story, from a closed, *petit-bourgeois*, domestic setting to a public site of criminally negligent exploitation of the environment and a working-class community, and likening a town of poisoned miners and their families to a *petit-bourgeois* housewife frightened by an unspecified entity with vague evil intentions, violently re-writes and muddles the class antagonism at the core of most cases of environmental ruination like the one in San Felipe.

This violent recoding continues with the other two main alterations that Gerber Bicecci makes to Dávila's text. First, the rewriting artist changes the pronoun, tense, and diegetic position of the narrator's voice; where Dávila's housewife narrates the story in present tense and from an intra-diegetic first-person position, Gerber Bicecci changes the narrating voice to an extra-diegetic, seemingly omniscient position that makes the narrator sound like a Sybil, using the future tense and addressing the housewife as a "tú," while revealing what her future will have been like. The other significant change is the erasure of the name and human character of the domestic worker, who the narrator refers to as "máquina" (machine) instead of as "Guadalupe," as she was called in the original. These changes confirm the ideological orientation of Gerber Bicecci's project: namely, to erase, or at least bracket off the working-class characters, relegating them to the role of fragmentary voices of suspect humanity.

Signs of the Inhuman

The worker in *La compañía*, just like the unremembered futurity of democratic participation and working-class welfare that was possible to envision in the 1960s, becomes a haunting presence, lying in a space just on the other side of intelligibility from the liberal—*petit-bourgeois*—perspective; and it is this figure, which I call the inhuman, that represents the most fascinating, diagnostic contribution of contemporary eco fiction works like *La compañía*. The inhuman is at the very center of the revelatory powers of liberal environmental culture, which, through processes of partial erasure and mis-recognition, like in the case of *La compañía*, actually captures the core of the contradictions implicit in its own unexamined relation to power—the same power that will even put on a mask of environmental consciousness, if it means that it will be able to continue ravaging the working class and the environment for profit.

A closer look at the treatment of the Guadalupe/máquina character can explain more about the diagnostic capacity of the figure of the inhuman. Starting with the switch from the very significant Mexican name "Guadalupe" to the generic noun *machine*, reveals even more clearly the appropriator's choice to dehumanize this character, to turn it into an insentient machine, but one, as the story tells us, capable of simulating free will and feelings. It is in the interaction between the housewife/narrator and the worker that we see the core of the anxiety that tints the two versions of the story, more so, I argue, than in their interaction with the houseguest/company.

Behind the most evident horror of the menacing presence of the houseguest there is an equally disconcerting shadow story of exploitation and class tension between the narrating housewife and the worker, which peeks out at certain moments in Dávila's original story. The first-person narrator explains that from her perspective, the houseguest seems to ignore Guadalupe, but he hates the children of both women and stalks the housewife constantly. As the story unfolds, however, the houseguest only physically attacks one character, Guadalupe's child, Martín. This attack leads to further ineffectual pleading from the wife to the husband to rid the family of their houseguest but, seeing that nothing will come of this attempt to reason with the authority of the household, it is Guadalupe who, feeling enraged and vengeful, hatches a plan to kill the houseguest.

Aside from the evidence of the exploitative daily routine of the domestic worker, which is depicted as "business as usual," we see Guadalupe's rage, cunning intelligence, loyalty, and physical labor working to benefit her petit bourgeois mistress and their children. There is, of course, a collaboration among the two female characters, but the narrator is aware of the extent to which that alliance is dependent on Guadalupe's will and motivation, which the housewife cannot fully account for: "Temí que Guadalupe se fuera y me dejara sola. Si no lo hizo, fue porque era una mujer noble y valiente que sentía gran afecto por los niños y por mí. Pero ese día nació en ella un odio que clamaba venganza" (*I was afraid Guadalupe would go and leave me alone. If she didn't it was because she was a noble and brave woman who cared a great deal about the children and myself. But that day, a hatred that demanded vengeance was born in her*) (Dávila 22). Here, the protagonist points at the loyalty and rage felt by the worker after the attack on her child, acknowledging that the fact that Guadalupe chose to stay is not because the women's interests or problems are perfectly aligned, but because of her moral character, which is an expression of self-determination and makes Guadalupe a character with her own intentions and feelings. Another way to understand the ambivalent appreciation of Guadalupe by the narrator as loyal and dangerous at the same time is that there's an unresolvable contradiction in their relationship in terms of class; Guadalupe works for and with the housewife for the worker's her child's survival—a choice that the housewife reads as complemented by a personal affection—but the fact that this collaborative relation is contingent upon a contract that can be terminated by either side at any time, makes the narrator anxious about a moment in which the worker could decide to fight off the menace of the Houseguest on her own terms, from her own side of the indelible line of class antagonism. This schism of suspicion and unknowability opened between these characters by virtue of their class is evident later on when the housewife admits that she "felt fear and happiness" when the worker spoke of her hatred for the houseguest as they plan to kill him (23).

These tensions in the original are more sharply defined in Gerber Bicecci's appropriation of the text, where a further process of de-humanization of the worker takes place. Beyond the renaming of the character as "machine," which already points in the direction of the inhuman, Gerber Bicecci also decides to exclude from her appropriation a couple of lines that in the original refer to Guadalupe's feelings. The sentence "El dolor y el coraje que sintió fueron terribles" (*The pain and rage that she felt were terrible*) (Dávila 22) is plainly missing in *La compañía*, as are the last two words of Guadalupe's response to the complaint of her mistress about them being alone in taking out the houseguest: "Solás, es verdad, pero con un odio ..." (*Alone, it's true, but with such hatred ...*) (Dávila 23). Gerber Bicecci's worker-cum-machine takes on a new liminal aspect that makes it difficult to determine whether or not it operates as a human being or a machine; some of its feelings are erased, but it still produces an uneasiness in the character of the housewife. This inhuman figure is even more opaque than its counterpart in Dávila's version, since in Gerber Bicecci's version, the voice that speculates about the motivations and loyalties of the machine does not come from the subjective perspective of a diegetic narrator, but from the declarative impartiality we attribute to an omniscient narrator. In other words, the disembodied, future-knowing narrator in Gerber Bicecci's version inherits the blindspots of its predecessor, but it establishes the unknowability of the worker's character as fact, and not as the subjective faulty perception of a petit bourgeois character.

La compañía, of course, is not the only example of eco horror from the Global South where we can see the signs of the inhuman appear. Another very popular example that comes to mind when considering the emerging figure of the inhuman is Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate*, where the humanity of the character of David is eroded and questioned once he is affected by the unspecified form of contamination that gives him a new nature. In Schweblin's celebrated novel, class too appears unnamed and disavowed, though it haunts the text from beginning to end, and one can even imagine that the reason for the discomfort felt by David's *petit-bourgeois* family after his poisoning is that they suspect that he is possessed by a working-class spirit—he experiences his transformation inside of the only working-class household in the story, and after his "treatment," he starts performing acts of care

labor. Reading Gerber Bicecci and Schweblin and tracing the erasures and suppression of class antagonism as a central element in the environmental crisis, we can start building a characterization of the inhuman and its powers.

Powers of the Inhuman

The inhuman is a worker. Put differently, liberal eco fictions, just like liberal environmentalism in general, do not integrate class antagonism in their accounts of the reasons or consequences of capitalist planetary devastation; at most, they figure that *poor people* are affected by environmental violence at a different rate and magnitude than others. And just like an undigested clump of material reality, the worker resurfaces in its stories as a strange, alienated figure.

The inhuman is de-humanized by the petit bourgeois gaze. As an extension of the system of exploitation that has forced the working-class into the utterly precarious position with which they are synonymous today, the gaze that introduces the reader to the inhuman figure in eco fictions doubles down on the de-humanizing effect that other forms of material violence, such as environmental or economic violence, already have on the worker. In *La compañía*, for instance, the poisoned workers of San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio, who were virtually erased as a community by the mining company Rosicler, might find their counterpart in the only working-class character of the first part of the book: the machine formerly known as Guadalupe. And this transubstantiation is the choice and effect of the artist-appropriator's gaze.

The inhuman has agency. Both the machine in *La compañía* and David in *Distancia de rescate* have—in spite of their questionable humanity—more than a modicum of agency that cannot be controlled or even fully comprehended by the *petit-bourgeois* gaze, and which is the main cause of the sentiment of dread that the inhuman causes in the rest of the characters and/or narrators.

The inhuman is opaque. Because of their alien and threatening agency, the *petit-bourgeois* gaze cannot help but see the motivations and interests of the inhuman as not fully legible, which only increases the sense of dread. The housewife and the narrator in *La compañía* and David's mother in *Distancia de rescate* acknowledge the opacity of the worker and the child-turned-worker; there is only a partial collaboration or aligning of the interests of all of these characters, which draws a curtain of unintelligibility among them.

The inhuman reveals the anxieties of the petit-bourgeois character. This might be the most significant power of the inhuman: in conjuring this figure, the *petit-bourgeois* gaze projects its own anxieties under the semblance of eco anxiety. Eco anxiety, or the pervasive dread induced by the knowledge of the current and future consequences of climate change, is the purported affect that dominates works of eco fiction like Gerber Bicecci's and Schweblin's. Reading the anecdotes in these books, however, reveals that there might be another explanation for the dread felt by the protagonists. In *La compañía*, the emphasis is not on anxiety about what the company may do to the worker/machine, and the menacing entity never attacks the wife directly. Its only physically violent action is against the child of the worker/machine, and the "hysteria" (as the husband calls it) of the housewife reaches a fever pitch only as she imagines that her own children might be the next victims of the company (69). Equally, in Schweblin's novel, the greatest anxiety of the two women in the story is the threat that the "spirits" of their children might not be recognizable after they are affected by a problem that, as Rob Nixon taught us, tends to affect poor people the most. What we see here, therefore, is not an example of the anxiety produced by the awareness of the devastation of the environment, as much as it is a threat to class-reproduction: the fear that the children of the *petit bourgeoisie* will be touched by the catastrophe that so far has mostly affected the working class.

The inhuman is ineffable. The difficulty to determine the nature or proper name of the company, the uneasiness that Gerber Bicecci shows in avoiding the name of the worker or her child, and the undecidability of just what exactly has changed in David after his trance in Schweblin's novel, all point to yet another anxiety of the *petit-bourgeois* gaze, which has to do with the act of naming. Maybe we can understand this resistance on the part of the artists-writers as the disavowal of their own position in the chain of names and companies: an impossibility of reading-naming-acknowledging their own implication in the dynamics of violence.

In *La compañía*, the alterations to the class dynamic resulting from the superposition of the stories of parts a. and b. obfuscate the actual vectors of power and exploitation of workers that explain the case of Nuevo Mercurio, while they also leave unexamined the complicities that bind the artist-appropriator to that other ineffable company that commissioned her work. FEMSA has been cited, for instance, in several environmental cases in Mexico and Colombia for stealing the water from different regions to produce Coca-Cola, which it sells back to the affected communities (Henríquez; López et al.).

Hauntings and Lost Futures in Verónica Gerber Bicecci's *La Compañía*"

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.1 (2022): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/>>

Special Issue: *Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, the Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture*. Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray.

The biggest ineffable issue, thus, might be the complicity of the cultural production apparatus under predatory capitalism with the entities responsible for problems that their products seem to denounce, but cannot actually name.

Lastly, *the inhuman is not non-human*. Maybe the most significant contribution to the general discussion of environmentalism that the inhuman has to offer is that it guards us from the fallacy of the non-human as the "trouble" that we must solve or learn to relate to in order to find a way out of the environmental crisis. There is no non-human. In a world parceled by language and meaning, there is no humanly discernible non-human category to which we can contrast ourselves as a homogeneous, stable "other." Rather, nature—the planet, the environment, animals, ecosystems, forces, energy, etc.—are but proxies being used to reproduce and magnify our social/class structures at a planetary scale. Colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade institutionalized a system of exploitation and plundering of humans and land in tandem as the basis of capitalist value production. Ever since, land, water, and air, with all their inhabitants and resources, are but new frontiers of the commons to be enclosed and devastated for profit. Furthermore, there is no relation that we can establish to "nature" that does not affect the lives of human collectives conditioned by their class.

Works Cited

- Campisi, Nicolás. "Ruinas Contemporáneas: Ficciones Del Eco-Horror En América Latina." *Afuera: blog de crítica*, 16 Jun. 2020, afuerablog.com/2020/06/04/ruinas-contemporaneas-ficciones-del-eco-horror-en-america-latina/. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Cantoni, Federico. "Verónica Gerber Bicecci, *La Compañía* (Ciudad De México, Almadía, 2019, 199 Pp. ISBN 978-607-8667-10-9)." *Altre Modernità*, no. 24, 2020, pp. 400-03, doi:10.13130/2035-7680/14526.
- Carrión, Jorge. "Los mejores libros de 2019 han sido escritos por mujeres." *New York Times En Español*, 15 Dec. 2019, www.nytimes.com/es/2019/12/15/espanol/opinion/mejores-libros-2019.html. Accessed 25 July 2021.
- Dávila, Amparo. *Tiempo Destrozado*. Fondo de cultura económica, 1959.
- Esquivel, Araceli. "Inicia La Xiii Biental Femsa Titulada "Nunca Fuimos Contemporáneos"," 29 Jul. 2017, www.femsa.com/assets/2020/01/XIII_Biental_FEMSA-1.pdf. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Felguérez, Manuel, and Mayer Sasson. *La máquina estética*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1983.
- Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*. Zero books, 2014.
- . "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16-24. JSTOR, doi:10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16.
- Gerber Bicecci, Verónica. *La Compañía*. Almadía, 2019.
- Henríquez, Elio. "Piden revocar permiso de agua a FEMSA en Chiapas." *La Jornada*, 25 June 2020, p. 17.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
- López, Óscar and Andrew Jacob. "En una con poca agua, la Coca-Cola y la diabetes se multiplican." *New York Times En Español*, 16 Jul. 2018, www.nytimes.com/es/2018/07/16/espanol/america-latina/chiapas-coca-cola-diabetes-agua.html. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Schweblin, Samanta. *Distancia De Rescate*. Almadía, 2019.
- SEMARNAT. "Contención de residuos de bifenilos policlorados en la comunidad de San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio, Mazapil, Zacatecas." Environmental Report, SEMARNAT, 2002, www2.inecc.gob.mx/descargas/sqre/bifefinalzac.pdf. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Valadez Rodríguez, Alfredo. "Mina Zacatecana, convertida en un cementerio tóxico." *La Jornada*, 23 July 2010, p. 31.

Author's profile: Marcela Romero Rivera teaches Latin American Literature and Culture at Vassar College. Romero Rivera's interests in scholarship include Marxist materialism, Latin American cultural studies, histories of Latin American revolutions and counterrevolutions, as well as environmental humanities. Romero Rivera's publications include "'Un lugar común': The Master's Desire in the Discourse of the Slave in *Estilo* by Dolores Dorantes." *Hispanic Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2018 pp. 191-206; and "Fostering a Revolution: Reproductive Work and the Spanish Republican Exile in Mexico." *EuropeNow: a journal of research & art*, issue 36, 2020. **email:** <mromerorivera@vassar.edu>