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**TITLE:** The Force of Nature: Learning to Think Ecologically from Rubén Abella's *El libro del amor esquivo*

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**ABSTRACT:** Rubén Abella's *El libro del amor esquivo* narrates a series of love stories. This analysis suggests that the connections between characters are analogous to other more complex kinds of connections in a global ecology that involve the human and the more-than-human. The novel employs changes in focus, understood as the *zooming* of a camera lens, to help the reader expand her vision from the individual to the ecological. As a result, the novel proposes an ethical positioning that takes into account the unseen and unintended consequences of our actions.

**KEYWORDS:** Ruben Abella, Literature and Madrid, Ecological Fiction, Ecocriticism

**RESUMEN:** *El libro del amor esquivo*, novela escrita por Rubén Abella, narra una serie de cuentos amorosos. Este análisis sugiere que las conexiones entre los personajes son análogas a otros tipos de conexiones más complejas en una ecología que conlleva lo humano y lo más-que-humano. La novela emplea cambios de enfoque, entendidos como el *zoom* del lente de una cámara, para ayudar al lector a ensanchar su visión de lo individual a lo ecológico. Como resultado, la novela propone un posicionamiento ético que tiene en cuenta las consecuencias invisibles y no intencionales de nuestras acciones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Rubén Abella, literatura y Madrid, ficción ecológica, ecocrítica.

**BIOGRAPHY:** Colleen Culleton is an Associate Professor of Spanish and Catalan Studies at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), where she is also a Faculty Fellow in the Community of Excellence in Global Health Equity. Her first book, *Literary Labyrinths: Narrating Memory and Place in Franco-Era Barcelona* was published with Routledge in 2016. In that volume, she analyzes the role of place in the construction of memory-based narratives. The focus is on novels written in the 1960s and '70s that look back to the 1930s and '40s and that manifest disorientation in various ways. Dr. Culleton has two ongoing research projects: one studies water and symbolic landscapes in modern Catalonia, and the other examines notions of global citizenship in contemporary Spain. The article included here is part of the latter work.

# The Force of Nature: Learning to Think Ecologically from Rubén Abella's *El libro del amor esquivo*

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*El libro del amor esquivo*, by Spanish author Rubén Abella, was a finalist for the Premio Nadal in 2009. It is divided into three sections, each of which tells the story of two people who are romantically joined, and whose relationships play out with varying levels of success. While the novel was published in 2009, most of the action takes place between about 1980 and the narrative present of 2000. The novel simultaneously comments on two distinct periods—on the one hand, the end of the twentieth century (Spain's transition to democracy), and, on the other, the first decade of the new millennium, of which the novel is a product (with its focus on communications technology, the networks and flows of globalization, and the emergence of ecological thinking). It is the latter time period that will more fully occupy this analysis.

The novel's extradiegetic narrator maintains a benevolent distance, selectively focalizing the narrative through different characters as the story's emphasis shifts from one to another.<sup>1</sup> Although he is not a character in the story, the narrator has a distinct personality and treats all of the characters equally with a bemused affection. And while the narrator never explicitly addresses the reader, there is a sense of complicity between them. It is not uncommon for the narrator to gloss over months or even *years* of a relationship (for example, the time span between when characters realize that they love each other and when they get married) in broad brush strokes, as if suggesting to the reader with a nudge and a wink, 'Look, we all know how

these things go, right?' In short, the narrator and the reader are in on this together. The reader finds the narrator to be pleasant company, and is willing to follow along with him, even through complex narrative structures and an approach to the relationship between the human and the more-than-human worlds that might, at first, seem counterintuitive. In this way, the novel leads the reader into an exercise in ecological thinking.

In the analysis that follows I locate traces of ecology in the theme and performance of interconnectedness, and in how a privileged narrator manipulates the reader's point of view in order that she may perfect the practice of ecological thinking—perceiving the interactions between different systems—even about something as ordinary as modern love. Ecological thinking is to be alert to how causes can be separated from their (intended or unintended) effects by distance and complex networks, when considered on a global scale. The narrative strategies in *El libro del amor esquivo*, which lend natural events and human interactions the same significance, point to a scope of ethical action for the reader that extends well beyond the people, places, and things captured in her immediate line of sight.

## The Force of Nature

In his compellingly titled essay, "The Demon-Seed: Bioinvasion and the Unsettling of Environmental Cosmopolitanism," Nigel

Clark studies cases of biological interference exercised by European colonizers in temperate regions. By this Clark is referring to the purposeful introduction of plant and animal species from Europe into the environments of colonized places. But he is less interested in the purposeful transplantations of species than he is in their unintended consequences, because the undesired outcomes of these colonial manipulations are what proves Clark's central point: nature is not passive. Nature is an actor on the global stage, as much as human beings are.

Clark's "The Demon-Seed" proposes a model for environmental care that combines the best of two worlds: the cosmopolitanism of the contemporary global citizen who looks to enjoy all that a world without borders has to offer, with the ethical consciousness of those environmentalists whose reason for caring and scope of action are limited to the local. We find a similar critique of this tendency toward a naïve localism in environmental movements in Ursula Heise's seminal work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Clark proposes a model that understands the nature/culture binary to be a porous one, in which 'nature' ceases to be understood as a passive recipient of human damage or care, and is instead seen to be the actor that it in fact always has been. Seeds, animals, and environmental contaminants ignore political boundaries even more effectively than digital information and capital. That is to say that, in the age of globalization humans would do well to notice that we are not the only, or even the first, material objects to move broadly around the globe. Clark complicates cause-and-effect relationships by positing as "natural" anything that happens that is not instigated by human action in an immediate way, even if that event is a longer-range consequence of some human act. His two fundamental examples clarify this point. "The Demon-Seed" begins with the juxtaposition of two "natural disasters": one, the uncontrolled proliferation of weasels that were introduced into New Zealand in order to control the rat population, and the other, the potential contamination that

will occur should containment fail during the transport of nuclear waste. This choice of examples illustrates the historical scope of Clark's project: he aims to learn from the behaviors of European colonizers and from the *unintended effects* of those behaviors, to propose a rethinking of environmental threats in the contemporary world.

For, just as environmental problems are becoming manifest far from their source, or seemingly detaching themselves from specific origins altogether, so too are they being addressed by communities of concerned citizens who have come together from disparate locations. This resonance between the de-territorialization of environmental problems and the transnationalization of activism is providing a new focus for theorists of political culture and social change. (Clark 102)

In the context of Ulrich Beck's *World Risk Society* (1999)—a touchstone for those who work in ecocriticism—environmental risks are among the easiest examples to understand of the de-territorialization of causes, effects, threats, and potential solutions in the globalized world. More concretely, by virtue of the interconnectedness of things in the global ecology, given that water, air, and the contaminants they carry do not respect political borders or multilateral agreements, a choice that one makes in New York can have consequences for strangers, who may live in Mumbai, or Dar es Salaam, or Anchorage, Alaska. Each citizen of the world, then, is left with the decision of whether or not to develop an ethics that takes into account cause and effect beyond the bounds of familiar places.

Unlike some other recent Spanish novels that attack these issues head-on (Belén Gopegui's *El padre de Blancanieves* (2007) and Rosa Montero's *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008) are two examples), *El libro del amor esquivo* does not explicitly contemplate the ethical dilemmas presented by globalization,

or the dangers inherent in global climate change. My position is that of Stacy Alaimo who, in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, argues that ecocriticism should seek out the traces of ecology in *all* texts (8).

Like Clark, Stacy Alaimo also moves away from a portrayal of nature as a blank slate upon which culture is able to write (1-2). Alaimo goes further than Clark in setting aside the critical utility of the categories “nature” and “culture,” opting instead for “human” and “more-than-human.” Her project is to build the human *into* an imagination of the material world in such a way that we, human beings, are not hierarchically above or below the other living beings and non-living dynamics of the spaces we inhabit.

Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment.’ It makes it difficult to pose nature as mere background. (Alaimo 2)

As Nigel Clark puts it, “while the bioinvasion issue might be a cue to explore further culture’s global ‘traffic in nature,’ the more perturbing question might be what to make of the traffic which is nature’s own” (104). This proposition might be a radical departure from how many think about “nature” and “culture,” but it is a departure that defines the work of ecocriticism, and if Clark is correct, it should also inform how the world responds to the immanent disaster of climate change.

Alaimo acknowledges that an epistemological shift of this kind is no easy feat, since our thinking must operate as a system of systems in the same way that global ecology. It will never be enough *only* to understand the chemical, or the biological, or the mechanical. And, as we wade through the connectedness of

multiple ways of knowing and being, we do so while cognizant that the stakes are high:

If the material environment is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies, then we must somehow make political, regulatory, and even personal decisions within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay, intra-action, emergence, and risk. (Alaimo 21)

One of the benefits of reading fiction is that we can learn from social and intellectual experiments without the risk, since all consequences are contained between the covers of the book.

## Of Love and Ecology

*El libro del amor esquivo* is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on the story of how one couple comes together. Part I, “Cuando era otro,” tells the story of Félix and Luz. After an especially painful breakup on Félix’s side and a difficult childhood on Luz’s, the two meet in a way that seems like it could only have been designed by fate. Predictably, a complication emerges. The complication is Part II’s protagonist, Gabriel. In his job as fortune-teller at the Salammbô café in Madrid, he separately plants seeds of doubt in both Félix and Luz. His prophesies turn self-fulfilling for the untrusting pair, and each seeks solace in the novelty (remembering this is the late 1990s) of online dating. Luz and Félix are reunited at the end of Part I when they discover that under the guise of Internet dating usernames, they have in fact been communicating with each other.

Part II, “La niebla,” is occupied with the life story of Gabriel, which includes the evolution of his ill-fated relationship with Flor. Gabriel travels to Madrid from his home on the Galician coast after a series of tragedies leave nothing for him in his small hometown. Building on the gift of premonition that he

inherited from his mother, he finds work as an entertainer, telling stories and reading palms in a café. Gabriel's approach to love is more carnal than sentimental, and Flor was his partner in Gabriel's first (and failed) attempt at sex, when the two had barely reached puberty. Their young love fails, but they are reunited in Madrid, at the Salammbô, when Flor enters the café in search of work. She has come to Madrid with her ailing and abusive husband, the rich and powerful mayor of their small town. While he is hospitalized, she decides she needs to leave him. She and Gabriel are rejoined, but their relationship is short-lived. As Gabriel has foreseen, Flor's jealous husband murder Gabriel in an alley. Gabriel's death becomes an unintended consequence of Flor's trip to Madrid and their subsequent reunion, which, at first glance, makes it seem like fate.

Parts I and II both highlight the apparent influence of destiny (which is referred to by multiple terms in the text: "fate," "life," "the stars," etc.) in determining the success of romantic relationships. And, in some sense it would be logical for the novel to end with Gabriel's death: it would tell a symmetrical story of one successful relationship and a failed one, both of which center in the Café Salammbô. Gabriel turns out to be the "bad guy" of Part I, having purposefully tried to break up a marriage that was clearly meant to be, so his death, caused by his own romantic relationship with another man's wife, would represent poetic justice and offer the reader satisfaction. Part III is different, though, and this difference shows us that the novel is not *only* about finding love in modern times. It is about ecology and unintended consequences, and about the different kinds of connectedness that are at play in the contemporary world.

With Eva as its protagonist, Part III, "Momentos robados," tells the story of how she evolves from an amateur photographer to a *paparazza*, and via that line of work, she and Jesús get together. Between Parts I and II, the

overlaps are obvious, with the most significant one being that Félix and Luz meet Gabriel at the Salammbô. In Part III, however, a new set of human intersections comes to light, and they render this last section part of a coherent whole. As coincidences and curiosities, this new set of connections lends entertainment value to the text. More significantly, though, the connections that are revealed in Part III do *not* contribute to moving the plot forward. What they accomplish instead is to move the reader to think the dynamics that are at play in the world around us, to think differently about what ecology is and how it works.

For example, the title of the novel's part III, "Momentos robados," is the title that Eva gives to an album of her own photos. As an employee in a photo lab, Eva is a *voyeuse*, who spies on others via the photographs that she develops (the fact that people take photos with cameras and have them developed is one of the clear signs that we are not in the new millennium.) Eva comes to own a camera herself by chance, and she discovers that she has a talent for photographing the rich and famous when she captures a candid photo of a popular singer, Donovan, at a bar with a woman other than his girlfriend. Only it is not Donovan. It is Félix. An astute reader realizes that Eva took that photo on the night when Félix himself realized that he resembled a popular sex symbol. Félix's discovery comes at the beginning of a summer in which he is recovering from the breakup with his first love, Helena. He exploits the physical similarity as a way to get over her, spending the summer impersonating Donovan in bars and clubs, going home for a night with any of the many women who will have him. Together Eva and Jesús will meet with success as *paparazzi*, unknowingly taking photos of Félix's imitation of Donovan, rather than the singer himself. It is later revealed that Eva's future husband is Luz's ex-boyfriend and Luz was Jesús's "primera musa," although Eva and Luz never meet (217).

## Network and Ecology: Metaphors for a Globalized World

Given the interweaving of relationships that plays out in Abella's novel, it is easy to think of it in terms of a network. Once the novel's environment is woven in, it becomes just as easy to understand it in terms of ecology. On the matter of these competing metaphors, Luis I. Prádanos has observed the following:

[...] la cultura digital también afecta a la estructura de las novelas que van rompiendo con la linealidad narrativa unidireccional para transformarse en narrativas sistémicas que no se conforman con representar la fragmentación de la contemporaneidad [...], sino que, además enfatizan la conectividad de los yoes interconectados en forma de red. Esta concepción sistémica de la realidad se deriva de un nuevo paradigma epistemológico emergente en las últimas décadas y liderado por la teoría de sistemas y la ecología. Lo que no está tan claro es si la proliferación del uso de estructuras en forma de red en varias novelas españolas pretende imitar formas propias de la cultura digital (redes informáticas) o de la ecología (red de los sistemas vivos). (47-48)

I am not sure that there is one single clear response to Prádanos's last point. But I think it is as reasonable a description of Rubén Abella's novel as it is of the one that he is addressing, Rosa Montero's *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (published one year before *El libro del amor esquivo*, in 2008). For my purposes, while there are times when "network" will be a useful metaphor, my attention is more on ecology—a system of interacting systems. Narratives that reflect ecology or that call upon ecological thinking, as does *El libro del amor esquivo*, present the particular challenge of asserting relationships, or connections, without clarifying what kinds of connections

they are. Readers find themselves before narratives that, as Prádanos says, are not linear, but that do not mirror any other familiar geometry (like a love triangle, or a cyclical narrative, or one that comes full circle). Much like Guy Debord's characterization of the spectacle as "the historical moment in which we are caught" (n.p.), so is Abella's global ecology one from within which we operate, even as we strive to understand how it works.

While the author presents us with this challenge, he also provides a useful tool for helping us to think through it. It is one more metaphor: the camera lense. Abella's biography at the front of the book jacket says he combines his interests in writing and photography. It should come as no surprise then that the defining activity of the novel's third part is photography and that the characters who highlight the theme and performance of interconnectivity do so by taking pictures. As *paparazzi*, of course, Eva and Jesús are often forced to get the shots they want surreptitiously and from some distance. So, *zooming* is that feature of photography that will be useful to us here.

## Seeing the System

In *El libro del amor esquivo*, Madrid is the place where the characters come together, and where most of the significant action happens. But Félix's first girlfriend, Helena, moves to Catalonia for work. Luz's father moves to Galicia when he abandons his family, and ends up in the same town where Gabriel and Flor grow up (another connection). And Eva is from "un pueblo del páramo castellano" (184). The movement of characters in and out of the Spanish capital of course represents another network, but what is of more interest here is how center and periphery are represented. Madrid is not the only space in the novel, but it is the only one that receives detailed cartographic treatment. On almost every page of action that takes place

in Madrid, there are specific spatial markers, like street names and Metro stops, in such a way that one can map the characters' movements onto the city. On the contrary, when actions take place outside of Madrid, those places are referred to in generic terms that make it impossible to associate them with any real Iberian geography. And, when the novel's Galician characters depart for travel abroad, they do so on foggy mornings. Beyond the bounds of the Iberian Peninsula, we do not see anything at all. When Gabriel, delirious with grief, makes the trip from his unnamed Galician hometown to Madrid, he does so on foot. If walking were the deciding factor of when this narrator provides detailed descriptions of space and when he does not, then surely we would know Gabriel's route in the minutest of detail, but we do not. Only when he arrives in Madrid do places come into sharp view. One might conclude that while the narrator is highly privileged, with knowledge of the whole story before it starts, with access to the thoughts and feeling of characters, between the perspectives of whom he transitions at will, he does not seem to know much about geography beyond the bounds of Madrid. Narrators may be godlike, but they are not gods.<sup>2</sup> A more useful explanation, though, might be to think of the novel's narrative perspective as a camera lens that is centered on Madrid. We can zoom in and out, but regardless of the distance, the further we look from the center, the blurrier the image will be. The difference in sharpness and clarity between how Madrid is represented and how other places are makes it not only a node on a network—which it surely is—but also a focal point in a visual metaphor for how the world works. We can think of the narrator's functionality like that of a zoom lens; with the narrator, we do not only see up close through the eyes of different characters at different times, but we also can *zoom out* to see the big picture. This is how ecological thinking is made visible in *El libro del amor esquivo*, how the reader can see the global ecology from the

outside.

In *El libro del amor esquivo*, Abella gives the reader a chance to try out methods of ecological thinking and exercise the capacity to make connections across systems. But why should we? I would suggest that, rather than a biological or technological network, what motivates the reader to reconstruct the story from its disparate parts in this novel is a network of affect.

In "Intensities of Feeling: Toward a Spatial Politics of Affect," Nigel Thrift explores the affective register of cities. His objective is to refine our understanding of how affect is intentionally manipulated in order to bring about political outcomes within the environment of intensive communication and intensive human contact that characterizes contemporary urban spaces. Published in 2004, his work is especially relevant to the *post-truth* era in which we find ourselves today, wherein even the weightiest decisions are made based on easily manipulated emotional responses, rather than a measured consideration of data.

In contemplating the techniques of engineering affective responses that are commonplace on the urban landscape, Thrift is especially attentive to the experience of time.

Thus what was formerly invisible of imperceptible becomes constituted as visible and perceptible through a new structure of attention which is increasingly likely to pay more than lip service to those actions which go on in small spaces and times, actions which involve qualities like anticipation, improvisation and intuition, all the things which by drawing on the second-to-second resourcefulness of the body, make for artful conduct. (67)

If we think of this in relation to the temporal structure of *Amor esquivo*, we see that revisiting events over and over from different points of view, at different moments in the reader's

progress through the novel, slows time down, stretches it out, and creates something like the “structure of attention” to which Thrift alludes. This matters for the expression and processing of affect, which is quick, illusory, and hard to put into words. Thrift therefore wants to talk about a *microbiopolitics* that notices how an initial, instinctive physiological-emotional reaction can be slowed down, opened up, and made available to manipulation.

Cities may be seen as roiling maelstroms of affect. Particular affects, such as anger, fear, happiness, and joy are continually on the boil, rising here, subsiding there, and these affects continually manifest themselves in events which can take place either at a grand scale or simply as part of continuing everyday life. (57)

In *El libro del amor esquivo*, Abella explores affect on the scale of the everyday, but then deploys nature, by which Clark means events beyond the bounds of human control, to expand the reader’s vision to a global scale. Much like the operation of zooming out on a camera in order to see how the network of affect that evolves so readily in an urban environment is tied into an ecology of natural and unnatural material exchange, the movement, output, and contamination of bodies, and the expressions and consequences of human feeling, as Alaimo would have us see it.

In *Amor esquivo*, each love story begins, not with the moment in which the lovers meet, but at some earlier time, frequently with the circumstances of a character’s birth. One consequence of this is of course a series of anachronisms: as each character’s story and each love story end, the narrative backtracks analeptically to the beginning of the life of another character. So, for example, Part I begins with Félix’s birth and follows him together with Helena, who was born on the same day, at the same time, and in the same

hospital as him. She is his first love, and the story follows them as they grown up together, fall in love, but eventually break up. Part I continues to follow Félix until he meets Luz. Then the narrative abruptly interrupts itself, and moves back in time to Luz’s childhood, her father’s abandonment of her and her stepfather’s molestation of her, followed by her own predictably dysfunctional attempts at forming intimate relationships. The narrative then returns to the moment when the two meet and proceeds with them through their loss of trust and their ultimate second chance via their accidental online dating. The reader is allowed only a moment to celebrate their reunion before being met with a blank page and the title of Part II, “La niebla,” which will focus on Gabriel. The romantic end of Luz and Félix’s story is replaced by Gabriel’s awkward and unappealing first attempt at adolescent sex. The narrative jumps back in time again to begin *before* his birth, with the story of how his parents met, and here are revealed Gabriel’s mother’s psychic abilities, which she will pass on to her as-yet-unborn son.

The organization of Parts II and III follows the same general pattern, which is relevant for two reasons. First, the typical effect of narrative anachronisms is to force the reader to do the work of reconstructing a chronological story from information that is delivered piecemeal and out of order (Prádanos 47). That effect is all the more acute in the case of abrupt and complete disruptions of storylines like the ones that take place here, which effectively throw the reader out of the narrative, reminding her that she is reading a work of fiction and forcing the adoption of critical distance that is necessary for the exercise of ecological thought. Second, the repeated pattern trains the reader to expect origin stories to be built into this network of relationships. This expectation informs how the reader engages in the work of reconstructing stories and building a set of connections between them.

## The Sky Is Falling: Pouring Rain and a Meteor Shower

If we allow that the novel is contextually anchored not just in the social, but in the environmental realities of Madrid, then it is a meteor shower that really did occur there in 2000, as if nature reflected new-millennial angst, that gives us the definitive date for the present in *Amor esquivo*. On January 18 of that year, *El mundo* reported,

El aluvión de aerolitos continúa mientras los expertos tratan de explicarse el origen de esta lluvia. [...] En Madrid, un aerolito del tamaño de un balón de balonmano se ha precipitado sobre la calzada del Paseo de la Habana. (n.p.)

The corresponding episode in Part I of the novel begins, “La felicidad se hizo añicos una tarde de tormenta” (83). Luz arrives at the Salammbô in the midst of a rainstorm, which leaves her soaking wet before she enters the café. Gabriel reads her palm while she waits for Félix, and in her husband’s absence, the psychic “[...] le advirtió que tuviera cuidado, porque en alguna bocacalle de su vida acechaba la traición” (83). Given Luz’s abandonment issues—a consequence of her childhood—her mind immediately jumps to doubts about her husband’s fidelity, and the seeds of insecurity are sown. The correspondence between Luz’s sadness about the failure of her relationship with Félix (which she immediately believes to be true) and the pouring rain is an unsurprising trope. The more interesting event is the meteor shower that is reported in the news, which she and Gabriel talk about with Félix once he arrives:

Durante un rato los tres comentaron la noticia del día, un aerolito del tamaño de un balón de playa que se había estrellado a la puerta de unos grandes almacenes, en pleno centro de Madrid. Una parte quedó pulverizada en el asfalto. El resto se transformó en una metralla de hielo y piedra que, milagrosamente, no hizo daño a nadie. La gente que en ese momento salía de los grandes almacenes giró sobre sus talones e intentó entrar de nuevo, para guarecerse de lo que parecía ser la furia del Apocalipsis. (84)

At this point, we only know Luz’s point of view. She is devastated by the news that Félix is unfaithful, and we might be moved to read in the shattered meteor a materialization of the shattered happiness of the chapter’s opening lines. The impact of a meteorite certainly mirrors the affect—the sudden emotional impact—of learning that your spouse is not faithful. It can feel like the end of the world when you lose someone you love, and we might be reminded of Nigel Thrift, who (summarizing Spinoza) characterizes affect as being “firmly a part of ‘nature,’ of the same order as storms or floods” (62). The rain, the asteroids, the beginning of the end of a relationship, all seem like parts of a coherent event, in which the end of the relationship is in the foreground and the environmental events are the backdrop, connected by a combination of literary commonplaces (rain and bad news) and symbolic associations (shattered meteor and shattered happiness). Only in Part II, which tells Gabriel’s life story, will we come to understand our initial misreading. From Gabriel’s differing point of view, the episode plays out as follows:

A Luz y a Félix los conoció en plena cúspide de sus poderes. Ella le gustó nada más verla. [...]. Se ganó su amistad poco a poco, mediante charlas íntimas y predicciones genéricas que, con el tiempo, resultaron confirmarse. Luego, cuando ya sabía más de ellos que ellos mismos, consciente de que cada palabra suya repercutía en sus vidas con el peso de una sentencia, aprovechó un momento a solas con cada uno para inocularles con el virus que más daño podía hacerles: la desconfianza. (144)

Gabriel's take on events shows the reader that the coincidence between natural and human events is only that. The subsequent lack of confidence and communication between Luz and Félix are a self-fulfilling prophecy instigated by a man who has chosen to bury his own grief and loneliness in a series of casual sexual relationships. When the reader learns this in Part II, she is motivated to revisit what actually happened between Luz and Félix, but a closer look also invites her to rethink the lack of a literary connection between natural and human events and to look for a different kind of connection instead. One is reminded that in life things do not happen in orderly and meaningful ways; narrative lends them order and meaning. But in the case of this encounter between Luz, Gabriel, and Félix, subsequent narrativization actually *deprives* events of their initial meaning. By virtue of the meteor shower, the reader is helpfully led to *zoom out* in order to gain further perspective, beyond that of both Luz and Gabriel, away from the node that is Madrid and to the Earth's atmosphere itself.

Since the pattern of recounting characters' life stories has predisposed the reader to look for origin stories, she is now inclined to look for an origin story for atmospheric events as well. Like a camera zooming out, we back away from the Salammbô, away from Madrid and Spain, away from Earth, in order to see the falling of asteroids into the raining atmosphere, onto a commercial center in the

middle of Madrid, which is in turn the focal point of *El libro del amor esquivo*. This takes place so that they may be covered by the local media and commented upon in a café, where a relationship has begun to disintegrate. This work of narrative reconstruction invites us to rethink how we understand the connection between human and more-than-human events. By jumping to conclusions about the symbolic connections between the weather and a romantic relationship, and failing to see the bigger picture, the reader in fact makes the same mistake that Luz and Félix make by immediately weaving Gabriel's predictions into their own life stories, in a way that *makes* those predictions make sense by confirming their own worst fears.

Once we have bought into the broader narrative project and adopted critical distance, and we understand Luz and Félix's relationship better—better than they do themselves—we are perhaps even more relieved that “fate” brought them back together via online dating, but more than that, we are now able to look upon Madrid with a bird's eye view. As we gain perspective on Luz and Félix, we also perceive a broader human and more-than-human ecology. We can see the standard network of urban life, which includes infrastructure, communications media, commercial relations, and mechanisms of control, overlapping with climatic and even celestial events, also interwoven with the affective network of known (Félix and Luz's love for each other) and hidden (Gabriel's interest in Luz) sentiments and motivations.

The text thereby opens up a new way of envisioning Madrid (and arguably any place)—one in which the natural (in Nigel Clark's terms) and the technological occupy the same plane as human actors. In fact, Luz, Félix, and Gabriel talk about how the police at first did not know how to respond to the meteor shower. Gabriel observes that “La policía está preparada para poner orden aquí abajo, no para combatir los ataques del firmamento” (84-85). His pithy comment calls attention to that defining feature of “the natural”—those

events which are out of human control. Instead of acting before the environment as passive backdrop, human beings—human bodies, Alaimo would say—are integrated into a network of materialities that coexist in a set of relations more complex than those we are accustomed to capturing with narrative. Thus, Stacy Alaimo argues, “[...] trans-corporeality, as a descendant of Darwinism, insists that the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world” (11). Reading *El libro del amor esquivo* in this way, one might argue that the characters *are* a part of something bigger than themselves, but it is not destiny or a divine plan. The accidents of their lives are part of a much broader ecology of accidents in which the boundary between the human and the more-than-human is difficult to discern. The reading strategies deployed to reconstruct relationships as they evolve between characters in the novel are equally useful in understanding connections between the human and the more-than-human.

## Blackout on a Moonless Night

As I have argued, the plot’s networked structure shows that the narrator has a godlike perspective that extends beyond the actions and thoughts of the characters to climatic and even extraterrestrial (in the literal sense of the term) matters, of which the reader is largely deprived. We are left instead to reconstruct these connections, a knowledge which allows the narrator to relate to this tale of difficult love in the first place. We are lead to think of amorous relationships, as well as matters of life and death, in terms of causes, effects, contingencies, and harder to define connections. As the reader becomes accustomed to the narrative’s patterns, she begins to seek out these causal relationships. She becomes accustomed to thinking of the workings of life and love in terms of a cascade effect. It is right

and proper that the novel’s three climaxes (one for each love story) should take place under the darkness induced by a power outage. So significant is this moment, in fact, that it is retold not three times, but four—the final relation being the explanation for the blackout as offered by the news media the next day.

Most of the predictions that Gabriel offers to clients in the *Salammbó* are of his own invention and sometimes for his own convenience. But he does have real powers of premonition, which he inherited from his mother, and which include him having foreseen the circumstances of his own death. It comes to pass, as predicted, during the power outage. The first version of the blackout story is narrated from Félix’s point of view. Nervous, as he heads out to meet Emma, the woman with whom he has been chatting online, Félix runs into Gabriel. They have not seen each other since the rainy evening, when Gabriel planted the seeds of distrust between husband and wife, because, contrary to the palm reader’s hopes, Luz never went to him for comfort and guidance as her marriage disintegrated. From Félix’s perspective,

Tras estrecharse la mano, se dieron cuenta de que los dos caminaban en la misma dirección. Félix sintió entonces la necesidad imperiosa de aclarar adónde iba. Se enredó en una explicación tan gratuita como confusa, un batiburrillo sin sentido que habría bastado para desconcertar a cualquiera. Pero Gabriel no se inmutó. Escuchó la justificación no pedida con aire distraído, asintiendo en las pausas con una expresión cansina. (96)

When we re-read this episode again in Part II, from Gabriel’s perspective, we realize that his air of distraction is a consequence of his own prescient knowledge of his imminent death. In fact, he barely hears what Félix is saying, until Félix tells him that his premonitions were accurate, that Luz was cheating on him. And in Gabriel’s version,

Era evidente que Félix y Luz se que-  
rían. Ablandado por la inminencia  
del fin, no le pareció de recibo arrui-  
nar su matrimonio en balde. —¡No  
creas nada de lo que oigas, ni la mitad  
de lo que veas! (174)

Gabriel hopes that this will be enough to let Félix know that Gabriel's "reading" of their fates was a hoax. But Félix continues on to his date with Emma, where he discovers that "Emma" is Luz, and that is where their story ends.

Meanwhile, as Part III nears its conclu-  
sion, the blackout is the reason why Eva loses  
her camera.

Ocurrió una noche de luna nueva.  
Eva se había detenido a fotografiar a  
una anciana que avanzaba a pasitos  
lentos, apoyada en un bastón temblo-  
roso, al otro lado de la calle Atocha.  
De repente las luces de las casas, las  
farolas, los carteles luminosos se apa-  
garon, sumiendo la ciudad en una  
profunda negrura, sólo rasgada por  
los brillos del tráfico. (248)

The sudden darkness startles the elderly lady, whom Eva has been photographing, and falls. Eva runs to her aid and puts down her camera. In the confusion that follows, she forgets about it, and when she finally goes back for it, it is gone. If one were to read this as a self-reflexive moment in the text, one might see that in a novel that consists of *momentos robados* it makes sense that Eva should lose the apparatus that allowed her to compile a series of photos with that title as the narrative draws to a close. It also seems significant, since that camera—and the *Momentos robados* series—led to Eva meeting Jesús. As the novel concludes, there is an ambivalence between them: "Llevaban dos años casados y su corazón seguía tibio. Jesús [...] lo intuía pero había aprendido a conformarse con tenerla a su lado" (252).

Of the three parts, this last one is the only one in which the blackout actually has a causal connection with the events that transpire in the darkness. In Parts I and II, the lack of light

adds to the affect of the moment—romantic excitement for Luz and Félix as they literally see each other in a new light, and fear for Gabriel as he is pursued by his killer. In Part III, a reasonable logic to follow is that if the black-out had not occurred, the woman would not have been startled. If she had not been startled, she would not have fallen. If she had not fallen, Luz would not have run to help her. And, if she had not helped the woman, she would not have lost her camera. It may seem tedious to follow this line of reasoning, but it is in fact this sort of logic—the ecology of unintended consequences—that the reader is trained to look for as each couple's storyline is broken up into the life story of each character, and character's lives are shown to consist of a series of events—some choices, some accidents, sometimes over the course of more than one generation—that build on one another until they bring two people together. Romantic relationships become analogies for a global ecology of the human and more-than-human combined.

While in the case of the meteor shower, an extra-earthly event shifts the reader's perspective to the big picture, here the use of communications media does the same thing. The power outage is narrated one more time, as it is described in the papers. According to reports, the blackout was caused by "una avería en una subestación eléctrica" (250). Reports tell of public mischief, vandalism, and theft, and the murder of someone named Gabriel Freire by someone named Orestes Mariño—the use of the characters' last names in and of itself has a distancing effect, since this is the first time we are reading them. Papers report that Mr. Mariño killed Mr. Freire by stabbing him repeatedly with a fork, and this explains the "pinchazos" that Gabriel feels but the reader cannot fully understand when the murder is described from his perspective, as he experiences it, in Part II (175).

With the early juxtaposition of import-  
ed weasels overtaking an island and the threat  
of a nuclear contamination, Nigel Clark re-  
minds us that disasters do not have to be ini-  
tiated in or by nature to be "natural." Humans

made the power station, but they probably did not directly cause the power outage itself. We are again challenged to perceive an ecology, a system of interconnected systems in which all connections matter. As Clark points out,

[...] other eras and other places, from a mid-Pleistocene Africa inhabited by fire-wielding hominids onwards, have witnessed their own versions of the runaway, self-propagating ‘disaster,’ for better or worse. Far from negating nature, such events are possible only because the physical world is itself, in part, constituted by non-linear events, by upheavals, outbreaks, and contagions. And this means, as the settlers of the colonial periphery (re)discovered, that a relatively minor intervention could quickly irrupt into a ‘catastrophic’ change of state, one which could be generative or destructive depending on circumstances. (114)

In the upheaval that is a power outage in a city, three couples experience a change of state, but no *single* explanation accounts for the connection between the power outage and that change of state in all three cases. Luz (the significance of her name is not accidental) and Félix find each other again. Gabriel and Flor, who have only just re-encountered each other, will be separated, as the blackout has catastrophic consequences for Gabriel. Eva loses the technology that was the original point of contact for her and Jesús, in a relationship that was already on shaky ground.

To conclude, the dynamic at play in *El libro del amor esquivo* is not merely that of a network, but one of a network of networks, with Madrid being a significant node. The narrator’s position of sympathetic but critical distance is one that is easy for the reader to adopt. In doing so we are invited to think through relationships of causality, sequence, and coincidence. But this being a network, rather than a straight line, those relationships are hard to track. The different points of contact on the network stand out. By nudging the reader toward actively connection the dots—

between different characters, different plot lines, and different moments in time, as well as between the geographical, the technological, the environmental, and the affective—the novel encourages her to engage in a sort of ecological thinking, even without explicitly taking on issues of environmental care.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On this point I differ with Jorge González del Pozo who characterizes *El libro del amor esquivo* as a choral novel due to its multiple focalizations. Gerard Genette’s inclusion of focalization under the category of voice may cause some unfortunate confusion here. I would argue that, while the shifting focalization allows us to see events from different character’s points of view at different times, there is only ever one voice in the novel, and it is the narrator’s.

<sup>2</sup> For an astute analysis of the geographic limitations of narrative omniscience, see William Nelles’s article, “Omniscience for Atheists” (2013). In it he characterizes the limits of omniscience in Jane Austen’s narrators as being measured in physical distance, and connects that to the limitations placed on women of a certain class in Austen’s England.

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