

Toward a Euro-Mediterranean Socioenvironmental Perspective: The Case for a Spanish Ecocriticism

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Abstract

This essay analyzes two ecological movements that emerged and developed in Southern European Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, and Spain) during the last couple of decades. Both the de-growth and the “slow” movement challenge the “illogical logic” of constant economic growth in the context of a limited biosphere and denounce the social and ecological degradation generated by global capitalism. Both articulate a redefinition of European environmentalism by opposing the environmental thinking of strong Euro-American tradition—very rooted in the official discourse of the European Union, such as the “gospel of eco-efficiency” (Martínez Alier, *El Ecologismo* 31)—that try to solve the ecological problems with the same logic that causes and perpetuates them (green capitalism, sustainable development). The de-growth and the slow movement propose instead sustainable, systemic alternatives which are socially and ecologically possible. These alternatives are based on conviviality, voluntary simplicity, slowness, and the reduction of the socioeconomic metabolism. They point out the necessity of an epistemological change and question the tyranny of industrial time (to augment constantly the production and consumption pace) to conclude that we can and need to live better with less, since it is more desirable, sustainable, and just. Since the 2008 financial crisis the de-growth and slow movement have acquired certain popularity and visibility beyond their Euro-Mediterranean context, which makes them relevant actors on the global movement for environmental justice and the critique of global capitalism.

Finally, this essay explores one of the many ways in which these Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental insights can be translated into ecocriticism in the specific case of recent Spanish novels. In the last decade, there have been a number of Spanish novels that use complex and sophisticated narrative strategies to focus on aspects related to neoliberal globalization. While some of them perpetuate the mainstream discourse of the European Union by privileging the uncritical celebration of digital culture, progress, and globalization, others challenge this by questioning our society’s blind faith in technological progress and economic growth—such texts advocate instead for a change of logic and lifestyle. The latter narratives seem to be more in-tune with the Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental movements mentioned previously and are therefore able to articulate a meaningful critique of the myths of progress, development, and economic growth by exposing the ecological and social degradation that is often generated by global capitalism. On the contrary, the kind of novel that reproduces mainstream European discourse—and, more importantly, the critics that celebrate it—tends to overtly and abundantly represent digital culture while failing to acknowledge its relation to the culture of new capitalism and its environmental and social impact.

Keywords: de-growth, recent Spanish novels, Euro-Mediterranean ecocriticism.

Resumen

El presente ensayo analiza dos movimientos de raigambre ecologista que emergen y se desarrollan en las dos últimas décadas en los países mediterráneos del sur de Europa (Francia, Italia y España). Ambos, decrecimiento y movimiento lento, cuestionan la ilógica del crecimiento económico constante en el marco de una biosfera limitada y denuncian la degradación ecológica y social generada por el capitalismo global. Tanto uno como otro suponen una redefinición del ecologismo Europeo al oponerse a ciertos ecologismos de tradición Euroamericana—muy arraigados en el discurso oficial de la Unión Europea, como el “evangelio de la ecoeficiencia” (Martínez Alier, *El Ecologismo* 31)—sospechosos de querer solucionar el problema ecológico con la misma lógica que lo genera y perpetúa (desarrollo sostenible, capitalismo verde). El decrecimiento y el movimiento lento, en cambio, proponen alternativas sostenibles, sistémicas y viables económica y socialmente, basadas en la convivialidad, la simplicidad voluntaria, la desaceleración, la descomplejización y la reducción del metabolismo económico y social. Abogan, entonces, por un cambio de lógica, epistemológico, y cuestionan la tiranía del tiempo industrial (aumentar constantemente la velocidad de producción y consumo) para concluir que se puede y se debe vivir mejor con menos por ser más justo, deseable y sostenible. Desde la crisis financiera del 2008 el decrecimiento y el movimiento lento están adquiriendo cierta popularidad y visibilidad más allá del ámbito euro-mediterráneo, lo que les transforma en actores relevantes en el movimiento global por la justicia ecológica y la crítica altermundista al capitalismo global.

En los últimos años se están publicando numerosas novelas españolas con estructuras narrativas complejas en las que el tema de la globalización está muy presente. Algunas de estas novelas celebran la cultura digital y la globalización de manera acrítica, coincidiendo con la corriente tecnófila hegemónica del discurso oficial europeo, mientras que otras cuestionan el modelo de crecimiento económico y la aceleración industrial, siendo más afines a las nuevas tendencias socioecológicas euro-mediterráneas. Son estas últimas narraciones las que mejor articulan una crítica coherente a la degradación ecológica y social generada por el capitalismo global al deconstruir los mitos sobre crecimiento económico y progreso tecnológico. En cambio, el otro tipo de novelas suele perpetuar en su discurso la ilógica del crecimiento económico por ser incapaces de relacionar las conexiones entre la cultura digital, la degradación ecológica y la lógica del nuevo capitalismo.

Palabras clave: decrecimiento, novela española reciente, ecocrítica euromediterránea.

The time has come to discuss the properties and possibilities of an emerging Euro-Mediterranean ecocriticism; we must examine the implications of this form of ecocriticism for a more established transnational ecocritical theory. The Euro-Mediterranean region is positioned in a complex and undefined economical and political state in relation to the dynamics of neoliberal globalization. The region’s participation in European capitalism is both central and peripheral. Apart from the Euro-Mediterranean region’s position ideologically, its geographic position is also a factor in ecocritical thought—given its physical location, the region is particularly exposed to the many risks presented by climate change and foreign energetic dependency. Therefore, Euro-Mediterranean focused ecocriticism has the potential to challenge the mainstream Euro-American environmental imagination and connect it to more social theories like the postcolonial and environmental justice approaches that have proliferated in the last decade. In addition, there is an obvious asymmetry on the European ecocritical map,

since most of Europe's ecocritical theory is produced in United Kingdom and Northern Europe. The recent and important volume, titled *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, reflects the lack of any meaningful Southern European contributions. This is not indicative of an absence of ecological concerns in that region, but is rather a sign of the fact that most of the ecological activism and thought that exists in Euro-Mediterranean countries has yet to be translated into ecocritical theory and practice. This article intends to do its part in filling that gap.

The first part of this essay focuses on de-growth and the "slow" movement (and the second part will focus on the review of some contemporary Spanish novels as a reflection of such movements), two socioecological movements that emerged in European-Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, and Spain) during the last couple of decades. Both movements challenge the "illogical logic" of constant economic growth in the context of a limited biosphere and denounce the social and ecological degradation generated by unchecked global capitalism. They also articulate a redefinition of European environmentalism by opposing the hegemonic environmental thinking of the strong Euro-American tradition—a tradition deeply ingrained in the official discourse of the European Union, such as the "gospel of eco-efficiency" (Martínez Alier, *El ecologismo* 31)—that tries to solve ecological problems with the same logic that causes and perpetuates them (green capitalism, sustainable development, economic growth, industrial ecology, etc.). Rather than offer an alternative form of growth, the de-growth and slow movements propose systemic and sustainable alternatives to growth that are socially and ecologically possible.¹

These alternatives are based on conviviality, voluntary simplicity, slowness, communitarian ethics, and the reduction of the social metabolism of some regions. They point out the necessity of an epistemological change and question the tyranny of industrial time (which is designed to constantly augment the production and consumption pace). The movements conclude that in some regions we can and need to live better with less, since it is more desirable, sustainable, and just.² Since the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, the de-growth and slow movements are acquiring a certain popularity and visibility beyond their Euro-Mediterranean context. This makes them relevant actors in the fast-emerging global movement for an environmental justice that critiques neoliberal globalization.³ Thus, these Euro-Mediterranean movements

¹ This coincides with the critiques of development articulated from postcolonial regions. This so-called "post-development" is especially relevant in Latin America. Many of these critiques emphasize the fact that post-development is not looking for alternative developments, but for alternatives to development, since development seems to be a neocolonial ideology that is socially and environmentally devastating (Agostino 15). See all articles included in *América Latina en movimiento* 445.

² For most authors of the de-growth and slow movements, reducing our social metabolism is not only an ecological mandate (it is impossible to ignore without destroying most living systems and, eventually, ourselves), but also a possibility for bettering our quality of life. De-growing does not have to be a sacrifice if we do it by privileging social equity. Maurizio Pallante makes this point very clearly in his books.

³ In the last few years, an increased international interest in ecological economics and de-growth has been noted, as marked by the proliferation of publications in English dealing with such topics. Some examples include *The End of Growth* (2011) by Richard Heinberg, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2009) by Tim Jackson, and *Deep Economy: Economics as if the World Mattered* (2007) by Bill

advance a political ecology that is more likely to form an alliance with the postcolonial environmental movements related to post-development and/or the Indigenous Environmental Network than with the technocrat elitists of the European Union—who are obsessed with “solutions” that worsen the problem due to their focus on technology, economic neoliberal development, and growth.⁴

Finally, I explore one of the many ways in which these Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental insights can be translated into ecocriticism in the specific case of recent Spanish novels; I encourage other ecocritics to try the same with the cultural manifestations produced in other Southern European regions. In the last decade, there have been a number of Spanish novels that use complex and sophisticated narrative strategies to focus on aspects related to neoliberal globalization. While some of them perpetuate the mainstream discourse of the European Union by privileging the uncritical celebration of digital culture, progress, and globalization, others challenge this by questioning our society’s blind faith in technological progress and economic growth—such texts advocate instead for a change of logic and lifestyle. The latter narratives seem to be more in-tune with the Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental movements mentioned previously and are therefore able to articulate a meaningful critique of the myths of progress, development, and economic growth by exposing the ecological and social degradation that is often generated by global capitalism. On the contrary, the kind of novel that reproduces mainstream European discourse—and, more importantly, the critics that celebrate it—tends to overtly and abundantly represent digital culture while failing to acknowledge its relation to the culture of new capitalism and its environmental and social impact.⁵

The European Union’s reaction to the 2008 global financial crisis, inspired by neoliberal formulas, has proven to be not only wrong, but also highly counter-productive and obsolete. On the other hand, many of the critiques of that reaction propose neo-Keynesian strategies to return to the path of economic growth in order to reconstruct the signature welfare state that used to identify many of the Western European countries before its recent dismantling (especially in Southern European countries). In other words, no mainstream discourse within the European Union questions the model of growth and its socioenvironmental consequences at a regional and global scale. For that reason, their environmental discourse constantly targets the symptoms and never the root causes of the ecological crisis. As Joan Martínez Alier

McKibben. The growing visibility of some independent organizations and think tanks, such as the New Economics Foundation, Zero Growth, and the Post Carbon Institute, also point in that direction.

⁴ Joan Martínez Alier makes this point explicit in his recent article “Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth: An Alliance between Two Movements.”

⁵ For an overview of different critiques to the claim of an “information and communication age” and the relation between new technology and neoliberal globalization, see Gonçal Mayos and Antoni Brey’s *La sociedad de la ignorancia*. To understand its socioenvironmental implications, see *Tercera Piel* and *El antropoceno* by Ramón Fernández Durán. One of the most disturbing points about the digital age is its capacity to make invisible the ecological impact of neoliberal globalization: “la capacidad de crear una realidad virtual separada de su sustrato material ocultaba el carácter cada día más extractivista del actual sistema urbano-agro-industrial, sus crecientes impactos y la absoluta imposibilidad del crecimiento económico ilimitado en un planeta finito” (Fernández Durán, *El antropoceno* 92).

confirms, the discourse of the “gospel of eco-efficiency” dominates social and political environmental debates in Europe. Words like “sustainable development” or “ecological modernization” are constantly repeated by economists and engineers working in fields such as environmental economics and industrial ecology (20-21). Although these disciplines are finally considering the environment within their management, they do not question the system that has generated the ecological and social crisis, let alone its anthropocentric, productive, and utilitarian epistemology. They believe that Western corporate science and an asymmetrical global market economy based on Eurocentric logic can solve the planetary ecological and social degradation caused, precisely, by their own neocolonial global expansion.⁶ This is being challenged in a consistent and powerful way by grassroots socioenvironmental movements discussed below, as well as by the global movement for environmental justice.

Both the de-growth and the slow movements are reactions to the planetary expansion of neoliberal political economy and its massive destruction of biological and epistemological diversity. Hence, the two movements can be considered together since they suggest similar responses to common problems by proposing alternative solutions to global issues. These solutions are based on ecological economics and political ecology and focus on participatory democracy, the relocalization and reduction of working hours and certain economic activities, redistribution, the elimination of publicity and superfluous consumption, communitarian ethics, sustainability, social justice, and conviviality. They urge us to escape from the dominant imagery of economic growth and cultural consumerism.⁷ These movements emphasize the incompatibility of current neocapitalism with participatory democracy, and also highlight the catastrophic, increasing asymmetrical interdependence of economic, social, and environmental issues in the current global scenario. In addition, the de-growth and slow movements point to the necessity of developing global ethical concerns, active social engagement, and communitarian lifestyles.

Such solutions are relevant not only to Mediterranean Europe, but to all consumerist unsustainable societies, which are the main economic and cultural model for current globalization. This model, based on consumerism and the massive degradation of all living systems on the planet, is unsustainable since it is tied to economic growth and has a huge negative social and environmental impact. Furthermore, it cannot be realistically globalized due to the fact that, if all people of the planet are to consume the average amount of energy and materials used by “developed”

⁶ As clearly explained by Timothy Clark, these two approaches are part of the “deep schisms [that] divide and energise modern environmental politics” (1). The European Union embraces the dominant “reform environmentalism.” This environmentalism “holds to the mainstream assumption that the natural world be seen primarily as a resource for human beings... and advocate[s] measures within the given terms of capitalist industrial society” (2). In contrast, de-growth and slow movements represent more radical stances coming from social ecology. “Ecological problems are seen to result from structures of hierarchy and elitism in human society, geared to exploit both other people and the natural world as a source of profit” (2).

⁷ For a brief overview of the policies for a sustainable de-growth suggested by most authors, see Kallis’ article.

regions, the ecological services of several Earths will be needed (Fernández Durán, *Tercera Piel* 70). Therefore, the hegemonic discourse of planetary development that is spread by neoliberal globalization is an ideology based on a biophysical impossibility. Such discourse argues that although, the more a region develops, the more it pollutes, this development eventually leads to a reduction on environmental degradation (Environmental Kuznets Curves) thanks to ecological modernization and the dematerialization of the economy. However, the few countries that are dematerializing their economy (in theory) are doing so by externalizing and de-localizing their dirty industrial production—and the environmental degradation associated with it—to other regions (Folch 37). In other words, these countries did not really decrease their usage of energy and materials (most of the time they increase it because of the rebound effect or Jevons' paradox), but are instead forcing others to deal with the social and environmental mess generated by their lifestyle (ecological debt) by expanding their social metabolism to the whole planet (Latouche, *La apuesta* 45-47). The celebratory dematerialization discourse is only possible if the material economy is hidden under the carpets of others (or at the expense of human and non-human future generations), and if most of the impact on the life cycle of consumed products is kept out of the equation. Most of the time, the socioenvironmental costs related to the extraction, production, transportation, and disposal of consumer goods are socially or ecologically externalized and, therefore, fail to be calculated into mainstream economic analysis. Both the de-growth and the slow movements illuminate these blind spots by showing the material effects of a neoliberal global economy on our environment, communities, and human health. In this regard, these movements attempt to re-materialize the economy by accounting for its "social metabolism," that is, "the entire flow of materials and energy that are required to sustain all human economic activities" (Haberl et al 3), and also try to make visible the economy's hidden violence (what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"). This fact, interestingly enough, coincides with the "material turn" currently going on in environmental philosophy and ecological humanities, as well as with the recent emergence of postcolonial environmental approaches (DeLoughrey and Handley 3-39). In ecocritical theory, this translates as material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 448-475).

The Slow Food movement started in Northern Italy as a counterpart to fast food and strives to maintain traditional and regional cuisine. "Slow Food seeks to catalyze a broad cultural shift away from the destructive effects of an industrial food system and fast life; toward the regenerative cultural, ecological, social, and economic benefits of sustainable food system, regional food traditions, the pleasures of the table, and a slower and more harmonious rhythm of life" (Petrini, *Slow Food Nation* back cover). It encourages biodiversity through the organic farming of seeds and livestock characteristic of local ecosystems or bioregions. It promotes food communities that practice a sustainable production, transportation, and consumption (Petrini, *Terra Madre* 27-30). There are now Slow Food chapters in many countries, and the movement has increased constantly since its origin in 1989. The Slow Food Movement suggests an

approach based on local, sustainable, healthy habits, and conviviality as a way of life. A broader Slow Movement now encompasses multiple aspects of life: slow cities, slow travel, slow education, slow money, and so on. Slow cities, for instance, imply the practice of a slow movement philosophy in all aspects of city life. The goal is to preserve the quality of life of their residents and the biodiversity that shapes their cultural traditions by reducing noise, pollution, stress and investment in community, public spaces, cooking and gardening, or healthy habits like walking and biking. Slow cities reject the unhealthy ways of life imposed by a consumerist, fast, unsustainable, and globalized urban model.

De-growth, on the other hand, is a political, economic, and social movement based on political ecology and ecological economics. At an individual level, it promotes simplicity as a way of life, but recognizes that this is not enough because of the systemic and structural nature of the society of economic growth (Latouche, *La apuesta* 97; Sempere 205). Therefore, at the collective level, we need a change of logic and a cultural revolution (Latouche, *Farewell* 32). From the point of view of global solutions, de-growth encourages the simplification and relocalization of economic activities in order to diminish our ecological footprint, enhance human communities, enrich social relations, and support biodiversity (Taibo 50-53). De-growth articulates a very convincing critique to the dominant model of global capitalism and considers that the current ecological and social crises are generated by a Western consumerist culture that is based on constant economic growth in a limited biosphere. De-growth exposes the pathologies behind a system that separates the economy from the ecological system in which it is embedded (Campiglio 13-14, Sempere 70, Folch 77-78). Like the Slow movement, de-growth also emphasizes the correlation between fast production and consumption, and fast environmental and social degradation. Both movements argue that “consumerism is an ideology that pillages and wastes resources, but ultimately fails to satisfy needs” (Petrini, *Terra Madre* 43). Both expose the reductionism of a global capitalist system that only takes into account economic growth (what has been called the dictatorship of the GDP) as an indicator of human well-being, without considering other more holistic factors such as happiness; human, social, and environmental health; safety; biodiversity; access to clean food, water, and air; conviviality and so on. In most cases, an increase in the GDP actually results in a decrease in quality of life and an acceleration of environmental destruction and social fragmentation (Cembranos 169-181; Pallante, *La decrescita* 23; Latouche, *La apuesta* 52-53).

De-growth also proposes that the hegemonic neoliberal discourse, in order to keep the destructive system going and not to question this unsustainable consumerist model, disseminates a blind and arrogant faith in modern technology and science (Herrero et al 97-112). Technology is presented as the future savior and the remedy for all our present excess and abuse (Latouche, *La apuesta* 48). This is a simplistic and erroneous approach that: 1) ignores a number of studies that contradict such an argument, 2) disregards the unintended and uncontrollable consequences resulting from the dramatic modification of a complex system, 3) does not deploy the

commonsense principle of prevention, and 4) paradoxically, although it expresses a blind faith in science, this discourse ignores and/or rejects what the vast majority of the scientific community really says (Folch 244). In the specific case of the introduction of higher technology in the food system, the Slow Food movement explores both the negative social and environmental impact and the low efficiency of a centralized industrial and technological food production, since it depends on a huge amount of energy, erodes the soil, pollutes the water and the air, reduces biodiversity, impoverishes local rural communities and creates massive immigration, provokes food insecurity and price volatility, spreads diseases, and is unsustainable (Petrini, *Slow Food Nation* 23-27). Another problem is that modern technological and scientific research, unlike most of the indigenous sciences, depends on and is guided by corporate funding (Herrero et al 93); a corporation's main motivation is profit, not necessarily the well-being of communities and ecosystems. Consequently, much research exists on inefficient means of transportation like individual motor vehicles, and not much examines alternative ways of transportation (Ivan Illich's concept of radical monopoly). In addition, we see much research on risky biotechnology and marginal research on ecological farming and permaculture.

De-growth and the Slow movement both require "decolonized minds" (and demystified economicism), and explore alternatives that challenge the official discourse on how "more and faster is better" (Pallante, *Meno e meglio* 6) by questioning the capitalistic logic of quantity: faster transportation, more production, more technology, more materials, more hours of work, more consumption, more money, and so on. According to these movements, this "logic of quantity" should be substituted for the logic of quality by encouraging a more regenerative pace in which lower consumption and a slower lifestyle are not only more sustainable, but also better for health, happiness, conviviality, social justice, communitarian participation, love, taste, and pleasure. A more sustainable culture is a culture that does not surpass the limits of the Earth, a culture that does not try to go faster than the regenerative cycle of the ecological system in which it is embedded.⁸ A sustainable culture will need to slow down and learn how to live better with less, which nowadays is a very subversive claim—almost a blasphemous one—since it contradicts all the principles of global capitalism.

In the following pages, I will deploy these ideas to illuminate and interpret some aspects of recent Spanish novels that tend to be neglected by literary critics. This essay does not intend to engage in specific close readings, but rather to provide a starting point for an ecocritical typology of recent Spanish novels—a typology based on the diverse literary representations of technological progress and economic development in

⁸ Actually, many Andean indigenous perspectives would agree with the necessity to slow down, since some pointed out that the current multi-crisis panorama is due to a crisis of time. The linear mechanistic industrial time collides with the cyclical ecological time of life and regeneration. This industrial time has been constantly accelerating and expanding spatially in the last few decades thanks to neoliberal globalization. Therefore, from this vantage point, neoliberal globalization and development is an ideology of death. See the communal work entitled *El Vivir Bien como respuesta a la crisis global* or *Original Instructions*.

relation to current social and environmental degradation. The approach to these novels should address some of the following questions: Do their discourse perpetuate or challenge the mainstream Euro-American environmental imagination? Do they simplistically celebrate globalization, speed, and digital culture, or emphasize the dark side of economic growth by showing its socioenvironmental consequences? How do these novels conceive of and articulate biological and technological environments? How do they deal with posthumanist representations and discourses? First, I will review a group of novels that seem more in tune with the socioenvironmental perspective advanced by the de-growth and Slow movements, but that have not been considered on these terms. Afterwards, I will mention a few authors and critics that appear to be more empathetic with the hegemonic European techno-environmental discourse. Needless to say this essay does not intend to be exhaustive and, therefore, many novels that are not included here are still suitable to be illuminated by this theoretical frame. All the novels examined here, nevertheless, deal with current issues related to neoliberal globalization and represent either the present or the future time.

El mar en llamas (2011) by Alberto Vázquez-Figueroa explores a topic that has been widely neglected by Spanish literature, namely the inseparability of economic growth and fossil fuel dependency and its responsibility for “petroleum incendiary geopolitics” (Nixon 69). The book reveals the relationship between economic development and industrialization in some parts of the planet and the polluting and destructive extraction in others (as well as the resulting global socioenvironmental injustices). As Rob Nixon points out, “our appetite for fossil fuels has created a long history of unsavory marriages of convenience with petro-despots, generalissimos, presidents for life, and fomenters of terrorism” (72-73).

There are two main characters in this novel: a seasoned Colombian writer, Asdrúbal Valladares, and an Iranian woman, Salima Alzaidieri. Salima offers Asdrúbal a fortune to write a book about the political, economic, and ecological entanglement involved in an explosion on an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. Salima tells Asdrúbal about some of the intrigue related to the accident (which she knows of due to her relationship with one of the persons involved, who is now dead). One of the conditions of the book contract that she requires is that it should be printed in vertical lines (109). Apparently, this new printing technique—which is used in the actual book—saves one third of the paper, reducing the associated environmental impact. The novel exposes the international system of economics and political interests behind the “transnational petro-modernity” (Nixon 74) and its horrible social and environmental consequences. As one character notes: “There are so many iniquities and massacres that we commit during the search for that disgusting ‘black gold’ that sometimes I get the impression that cars are vampires that feed on human beings and that each time we fill the tank we are doing it with innocent lives” (110-111).⁹ This quote is representative of the novel’s

⁹ “Son tantas las iniquidades y matanzas que solemos cometer durante la búsqueda de ese asqueroso ‘oro negro’ que a veces tengo la impresión de que los automóviles son vampiros que se alimentan de seres

overall message. The global interrelation among ecological degradation, economic growth, oil addiction, and social injustice are made explicit throughout the novel. The inseparable yet problematic link between economic growth, massive energy dependency, and consumption—in the context of peak oil and climate change—could be broken by shrinking the social metabolism of some regions. However, the mainstream logic prefers to take bigger risks by looking for more oil that is increasingly more ecologically devastating, dangerous, and difficult to extract. In this scenario, technological development seems to be more reckless than helpful. *El mar en llamas* makes visible the illogical and suicidal behavior of a global capitalism that has lost any sense of its limits. The moral could be that without a change—of both our logic and our energy system—there is nothing that technology can do to solve these socioenvironmental issues, but it can only make them worse.

José Luis Sampedro and Olga Lucas' *Cuarteto para un solista* (2011) is a philosophical novel in which a retired economics professor—like Sampedro himself—lives in a mental institution. There, he is visited by the personified four elements (Fire, Water, Air, and Earth) and has conversations with them about many of the pressing contemporary issues related to human civilization and life. Some repeated topics are over the current ecologically and socially unsustainable situation and the necessity to recover a sense of limits (49). Also discussed is the urgent need to stop inadequately using and arrogantly deploying technology, and to instead ethically, cautiously, and harmonically utilize innovations (167). The characters/elements critique the present meaningless production, technological speed, overconsumption, and constant economic growth that accelerate entropy (186-187), and question the blind spots of an economic system that is conceived to be independent from the biosphere: “The question is not being in favor of or against progress, but how to progress. And what the four agree upon is that the current pace of the process tramples them, that the purpose of the mere progress of the economy destroys them” (70).¹⁰ It is important to try not to go faster than life can regenerate, and to redefine what we see as progress in the context of a limited and degraded biosphere. Therefore, many of the issues that concern the de-growth and slow movements are addressed here, including environmental justice and the deep connection between the expansion of neoliberal globalization and the ecological and social degradation caused by it (144-145). The novel also emphasizes the connectivity, inseparability, and interdependency of ecological and cultural systems. It focuses on the destructive global consequence of a modern Western logic that disseminates a very unbalanced and reductionist conception of progress, one based merely on the material accumulation and commodification of life (68-69).

Instrucciones para salvar el mundo (2008) by Rosa Montero is a systemic narrative since it is a story that emerges from the interaction among several smaller

humanos y que cada vez que llenamos el depósito lo estamos haciendo con vidas inocentes” (110-111, my translation).

¹⁰ “La cuestión no es estar a favor o en contra del progreso, sino cómo progresar. Y en lo que están de acuerdo los Cuatro es en que el ritmo actual del progreso los arrolla, que la finalidad meramente economicista del progreso los destruye” (70, my translation).

stories or subsystems. There are four main characters: Matías, a middle-aged taxi driver who cannot overcome the absence of his dead wife; Daniel, a medical doctor with no motivation in life apart from devoting his free time to the virtual world of the popular internet game, *Second Life*; Fatma, an optimistic prostitute from Sierra Leone who, despite having a scarred past, maintains a positive spirit; and, finally, Cerebro, a once-accomplished scientist whose successful career was torn away by Franco's regime when she was imprisoned because of her sexual orientation. This tragedy resulted in Cerebro leading a life of severe depression and alcoholism. An external narrator, who constantly changes focus on the four characters, presents all of these lives in an alternating manner. All the characters' lives intersect with each other at some point, and the urban space of contemporary Madrid frames these stories, making room for references to topics of current interest (like international terrorism, global warming, precarious human relations, and immigration). Most of these motifs are directly related to the visible effects of contemporary globalization and the culture of new capitalism. Like many recent Spanish novels, Montero's characters use of the Internet has become a dominant element; these novels (including *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*) not only use the Internet as part of their content, but also as a metaleptic construction. Thus, parts of the current novel, for instance, comprise fragments of the avatar's narratives within the computer game *Second Life*. This novel does a very good job of showing the social and ecological degradation of the urban space of Madrid that is caused by neocapitalism, and of exploring how its characters are affected by it.

Although in the last few years literary critics are paying increased attention to urban representations of different Spanish cultural manifestations, the relation between planetary urbanization and ecological degradation has been widely ignored. In Montero's novel, there are numerous allusions to climate change (29, 46, 79, 99, 102, 106, 122, 191) and to how some companies are trying to capitalize on the risks and disasters associated with it (91, 92, 97). There are also some representations of the naïve faith in eco-technology as a solution to all these problems, while the logic of economic growth and consumerism is unchallenged (88, 90, 93). It is also a fact worth mentioning that Daniel is obsessed with *Second Life*, and the more he engages on the virtual reality of the infosphere, the more his real territory and social relations degrade. Other symptoms of the socioenvironmental degradation of the city are exposed through the solitude and meaningless lives of some characters (regardless of their social status). This is evident in the deterioration of public spaces and services while commercial and private spaces proliferate, the marginalization and commodification of some characters, the dirt that invades Madrid as a result of superfluous consumption and a wasteful generation, the abandonment of elders, and more. In the end, human and communitarian relations are what make most of the characters' lives meaningful—despite the growing problems derived from uncontrolled global capitalism (Prádanos, “La degradación ecológica y social”).

Apart from those that examine society's present state, a number of Spanish futuristic novels published in 2011 predict scenarios in which the current social and

ecological crises have risen to unsustainable extremes. The novels are critical dystopias that present the negative outcomes of continuing with the logic of constant economic growth in the context of a limited biosphere. Thus, these novels imply a criticism of the unsustainable global capitalism and provide an invitation to the reader to question its legitimacy. I will not elaborate more on these novels since I have already studied this aspect in some depth in a previous publication (Prádanos, "Decrecimiento o Barbarie" 74-92).

Finally, there are also some novels that question the celebratory discourse of economic growth and technological progress by showing the human alienation and dependency caused by it. For instance, Isaac Rosa's *La mano invisible* (2011) exposes the absurdity of a productivist system that prioritizes the market over human dignity and social well-being. According to Rosa's novel, the market is not the servant of humans, but the cruel and implacable master to which human slaves need to be sacrificed. In this context, technology becomes the means of social control and repression. This Foucauldian novel takes place almost entirely in the TV scenario of a "Big Brother" type reality show where all participants spend hours working under the observation of an audience. There is a mechanic, a painter, a secretary, a programmer, a housekeeper, a butcher, a construction worker, and so forth. The participants become pieces of a meaningless machine in which the edges between working and acting are blurred. Working is a simulacrum, but that does not prevent the workers from being alienated by the repetitive and mechanical movements that are constantly being observed by the TV camera and the live audience. The neocapitalist spectacle of a society dehumanizes and removes meaning from human existence and action. Everybody is unhappy and repressed by the socioeconomic machine that they continue to contribute to and perpetuate. Similarly, *Acceso no autorizado* (2011) by Belén Gopegui reveals the relation between the digital culture and the logic of global capitalism. A significant part of the diegetic action is motivated by the characters' engagement in new communication and information technologies. The novel shows how a powerful and corrupt minority uses digital technology to accumulate still more political and economic power, and to reinforce the already immense global asymmetry of power relations. However, the same technology is effectively deployed by other characters in order to resist that very power system. Democracy is seriously compromised by the marriage of the financial and political elite, who take advantage of digital technology in order to exacerbate social injustice. Again, technology cannot be the solution to this problem if it is embedded in an unfair system based on economic growth and global market asymmetries. A change of logic is required for humans to be able to use high technology in a positively transformative way. These two novels present disturbing techno-social ecologies from a politically engaged critical perspective.

As I have shown, although ecocritical approaches to Spanish texts are still rare, they have the potential to contribute substantially to the interpretation of recent narratives that deal with current global issues. The socioenvironmental perspectives advanced by the de-growth and slow movements can be fruitfully translated into

ecocritical practices in order to illuminate the narrative discourses and cultural representations that challenge the commonplaces and official discourses related to technological progress, development, and economic growth. On the other hand, in the last few years, additional novels and an emergent number of critics seem to celebrate and embrace the new digital environment of the information age by emphasizing its multiple creative possibilities, and claiming the need to adapt to its mutations and speed.¹¹ They perpetuate an unjustified technological optimism that appears to be very similar to the official Western hegemonic discourse ingrained in the European Union's environmental imaginary. These authors and critics are notably oblivious to the material and biological implications, and the resulting socioenvironmental global injustice, of the techno-social changes they celebrate. The more they talk about the digital environment and its network of connections, the less they mention the biological environment and its living interconnectivity. The more they talk about new virtual territories and innovative collective knowledge, the more they reinforce the mainstream consumerist dynamic that destroys cultural and biological diversity (the real collective knowledge related to real territories) at a frenetic pace. They claim that we should adapt to technological speed as well as global market dynamics, which seems to be very much in line with neoliberal/transhumanist aspirations. In their techno-market-evolutionary discourse, they widely cover some of the Western technological implications of human/machine co-evolution, but ignore or minimize the ecological coordinates of that process and the global social asymmetries generated by it.

Some of these novels are attributed to the so-called "Nocilla" or "Mutantes" generation. Most authors of this generation started publishing in the 21st century. Their novels present some commonalities, such as the huge relevance of new communication and information technologies, the integration of many interdisciplinary Western concepts, the use of multimedia, and a fluent dialogue with the globalizing consumerist culture and its mass media vehicle. Some of the most active members of this generation, just to mention a few, are Agustín Fernández Mallo, Manuel Vilas, and Vicente Luis Mora. Although their works have the potential to be illuminated by an ecocritical and/or posthumanist approach, some of their critics tend to accept consumerist globalization

¹¹ I do not mean that new media studies and literary studies should not converge. This is actually crucial to understanding current ecological and cultural representations, as Ursula K. Heise has argued in some depth in her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. However, this convergence needs to be done in a critical way in order not to throw a shadow on its possible socioenvironmental implications. It is my impression that while many ecocritics are familiar with new media studies, the other way around is much less frequent. Anyhow, it is fair to mention that not all critics who deal with digital technology and Hispanism are embracing and celebrating digital culture unquestionably. In fact, one of the earliest and more complete panoramas of the relation between cyberculture and Hispanic studies was offered by María Soledad Fernández Utrera in 2006 as an introduction to the monographic issue "Cibercultura, hispanismos y tecnología digital en el Nuevo milenio" within *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*. This is a brilliant survey that adeptly deals with the matter in all its complexity. *Ometeca Journal* also does a good job of maintaining the difficult balance between the inclusion of digital and ecocritical issues. Unfortunately, some of the more recent special numbers in other journals that deal with this topic do not follow this example and, instead, appear to be very attracted by the digital culture while widely ignoring and/or avoiding its socioenvironmental risks/dark sides.

and Western techno-science without questioning its logic in any profound way. Even if some of these texts could also be interpreted as social critiques due to their cynic and ironic tone, their ambiguity seems to be playing the postmodern game of satirizing while perpetuating hegemonic discourses. This is the case of Vicente Luis Mora's *Alba Cromm* (2010) and Manuel Vilas' *Aire Nuestro* (2009). The final part of this essay deconstructs one of the aforementioned critical celebrations of these authors from an ecocritical perspective. Thus, I will show the blind spots that these critics perpetuate for the advantage of the hegemonic economic and political discourse as well as the capacity of the emerging Euro-Mediterranean ecocriticism to enlighten and enrich the reading of such texts from a completely different vantage point. I selected a recent literary critical article by one of the most visible advocates of this generation: Christine Henseler. The article, "Spanish Mutant Fictioneers: Of Mutants, Mutant Fiction and Media Mutations," is one of the most illustrative examples since it offers an acclamatory overview of this kind of narrative. We must now survey some of the recurrent ideas of Henseler's article in order to put them under the magnifying glass of ecocritical theory.

According to Henseler, these authors acknowledge and try to translate into their works a "breakdown of traditional hierarchical structures" that perceives "contemporary society not as a vertical, but as a horizontal web." They also remark on a "dissolution of linear time for a more absolute presence and circularity, virtual identity, a return of a totality understood in terms of a multiple and instantaneous globality, a non-existence of locals, and a non-existence of truth concepts." In addition, these authors "are global nomadic citizens with backgrounds in a host of disciplines." They celebrate their lack of roots and the convergence of old and new media in a consumerist global culture as well as in the rise of intercultural and transcultural connections. They are self-critical and self-promotional through social digital networks and multimedia platforms. Finally, they perpetuate the idea of dematerialization in the information age. An ecocritical response to all this, based on a socioenvironmental perspective, will notice immediately the similarities between the aforementioned statements and the neoliberal discourse related to the "gospel of eco-efficiency;" the novels and critics in question promote the necessity of technologically and mentally adapting to the culture of the global market economy rather than the limits of the biosphere. Paradoxically, the celebration of digital convergence and social horizontality ignores the ecological unity of Gaia (the actual systemic convergence of all networks) and its degradation by the asymmetrical and highly hierarchical global economic powers that are facilitated, precisely, by digital innovations. Additionally, the dissolution of linear time associated with network technologies does not translate into the appreciation of and adjustment to ecologically regenerative, communitarian, and cyclical time (a necessary condition for sustainability). On the contrary, it embraces the consumerist speed and the acceleration of market dynamics that are causing the collapse of most living systems of the planet. Furthermore, these novels and critics are reinforcing the ideology of progress and development that is sustained by the illusion of the possibility of constant economic

growth and technological innovation—concepts associated with and created by linear modes of thinking.

When these authors and critics talk about transcultural connections, global citizenship, and the non-existence of locals, they do not see the global picture from the vantage point of non-Western epistemologies. It is well known in postcolonial and indigenous studies that neoliberal globalization is rapidly destroying not only biodiversity, but cultural and epistemological diversity as well, since biological and cultural diversity go hand-in-hand. When Henseler mentions the lack of roots and global nomadism, it is obvious that she does not refer to ecocosmopolitanism (Heise 205-210) or a transnational ethic of place (Nixon 143), but rather to the cosmopolitan elite that moves through what Marc Augé calls “nonplaces” (airports, gas stations, malls, taxis, global hotel chains, etc.). She avoids the fact that most people live in a real territory and their cultural survival and livelihood depend on it. The fact that some privileged groups can have no roots comes with a huge socioenvironmental cost (externalizations), since such groups depend on the consumption of huge amounts of energy. Furthermore, as Rob Nixon explains using the distinction between the nomadic and the rootless as articulated by Abdelrahman Munif, nomadic cultures are not rootless, since they are inscribed to the land through movement (belonging-in-motion). “But the deracinations of the oil age plummeted them into a rootlessness that was nomadism’s opposite. Driven from their lands, increasingly urbanized, repressed and exploited by a corrupt sepyo class in cahoots with American oil interests, many lower class Bedouin found themselves culturally humiliated and politically estranged” (Nixon 76). Therefore, it seems urgent to revisit (from a more critical perspective) the way in which this generation of writers and their critics use the terms “nomadism” and “rootlessness.”

These *mutantes* artists’ acclaimed interdisciplinarity and fascination with science and technology is highly ethnocentric, since their approach embraces exclusively modern Western disciplines, science, and technology. They tend to avoid any reference to the imperial and neocolonial logic behind the global expansion of modern Western epistemology (and its technology). This point becomes obvious when attention is paid to what indigenous epistemologies, ecofeminism, and/or decolonial thinking say about modern Western culture.¹² Some of these writers and critics seem more attracted to the networked and connected individualism promoted by global capitalism than to a more sustainable and just posthumanist environmental ethic. When they play with commercial and hyper-consumerist discourses, they appear to be more interested in how this game can enhance and/or sell their artistic expressions than in how their work may negatively affect human and non-human communities around the globe. Finally, as Ramón Fernández Durán points out: “The society of image and information helps to hide even more the very serious ecological crisis we face, especially because it encourages a

¹² For some insights on a non-Western science, see *Native Science. Natural Laws of Interdependence* by Gregory Cajete. For a detailed critique of the imperial and colonial/neocolonial impetus of Western epistemology, see the works by Mignolo and Santos. For an ecofeminist critique to the technofeminism of Donna Haraway, see Alicia H. Puleo (240-205); this debate has many points in common with the discussion in the last part of my essay.

shift in focus from the biosphere to the infosphere (cyberspace, virtual reality), making more invisible the deterioration of the First Skin, of Mother Nature” (*El antropoceno* 90).¹³ The acclaimed information society is an illusion that hides the rapid loss of real information (genetic, biological, cultural); the more colorful and defined the virtual images become in our computer screens, the faster real information disappears due to the ecological degradation and massive extinction provoked by the urban-agro-industrial system (Herrero et al 233-261).

Some of these authors and critics seem to be more conventional than they want to acknowledge. While they believe they are subverting or questioning the official discourse, they instead perpetuate and enhance it. The point is that global capitalism and its digital culture allows (and sometimes encourages for commercial reasons) the subversion and transgression of norms, but never tolerates the epistemological transformation of the establishment. Therefore, transgressing without transforming only reinforces the hegemonic system. This coincides with the critique of some tendencies in North American cultural studies made by Cary Wolfe, following Tiltottama Rajan and Gayatri Spivak. The problem seems to be the cultural studies evolution “from a site of ‘decentering innovation’ into ‘a symbiosis with globalization’ and the New World Order, in which ‘its dereferencialization is what makes it dangerous to some of its original components’” (Wolfe 104). In other words, “the effect of academically mainstreamed cultural studies is, Rajan suggests, ‘to simulate the preservation of civil society after the permutation of the classical public sphere’ into an essentially market and consumerist logic of ‘representation’” (104). Therefore, I see the obsession of the “Mutantes” (critics and authors) with hybridification, evolution, adaptation, convergence, integration, and mutation, not as a posthumanist understanding of social and political ecology, but rather as an unintended promotion of “the liberal project of incorporation and ‘recognition’ that is an expression of, not a critique of, globalization” (Wolfe 105). Thus, to Henseler’s claim that “to read the texts of the Mutantes 2.0 demands a 2.0 Literary Critic,” I add that to see the blind spots of both Mutantes 2.0 and 2.0 Literary Critic demands an ecocritical approach. This approach, however, must not come from the Euro-American hegemonic tradition, but stem from the Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental perspective and its dialogue with the globally emergent decolonial environmental justice movement.

In conclusion, we need more narratives that contribute to decolonizing our minds from the destructive epistemological pest of neoliberal globalization and its ideology of cultural consumerism, technological progress, and economic growth. We also need more critics to participate in the global ecology of knowledge that reacts to and resists the imposed and persistent monoculture of the neoliberal discourse. As shown in this article, the contribution of a Euro-Mediterranean ecocriticism stemming from recent

¹³ “la sociedad de la imagen y la información ayuda a ocultar aún más la gravísima crisis ecológica que enfrentamos, sobre todo porque incentiva el desplazamiento de la atención de la biosfera a la infosfera (ciberspacio, realidad virtual), invisibilizando todavía más el deterioro de la Primera Piel, de la Madre Naturaleza” (90, my translation).

socioenvironmental movements such as the de-growth and slow movements can make a significant difference. In this regard, new media studies could help understand the new media dynamics involved in neoliberal globalization and provide creative options for decolonizing it, rather than reducing all life to a colonized ecology of new media.

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