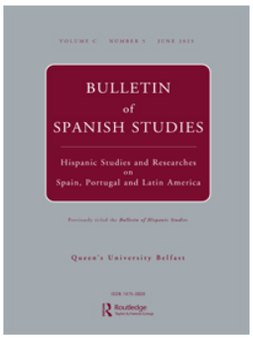

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Bulletin of Spanish Studies

Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cbhs20

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To cite this article: Olivia Vázquez-Medina (2023) Vibrancy and Desolation in Fernanda Trías' *Mugre rosa* (2020), Bulletin of Spanish Studies, 100:5, 735-762, DOI: 10.1080/14753820.2023.2262863

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2023.2262863

Published online: 21 Nov 2023.

Vibrancy and Desolation in Fernanda Trías' *Mugre rosa* (2020)

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> Books are the place in the world
> where both the thing and the loss of it can coexist.[1]

Mugre rosa, the fourth novel by Uruguayan author Fernanda Trías, has many elements of a dystopia, but the timing of its publication in 2020 added an uncanny layer of realism to the diegesis.[2] Set in a fictionalised Montevideo, the novel portrays a city devastated by environmental catastrophe: an epidemic, caused by ecological damage, leads to widespread panic, meltdown of services and authoritarianism. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, some situations presented in the novel—lockdowns, collapsing hospitals, continuous rounds of experts on TV, conspiracy theories and fear of airborne infection—seemed all too familiar. Others might have felt one step removed from the reader's 'new normality' (the extent of that distance is the unnerving question that remains throughout): birds have vanished; fish have either died or mutated in the polluted river brimming with noxious algae; toxicity is inescapable; food is scarce; and both the economy and the contours of

1 David Meir Grossman, 'Books That Have Read Me: The Works That Shaped My Imagination', *Tablet*, 23 October 2008, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/books-that-have-read-me> (accessed 15 November 2022).

2 Fernanda Trías, *Mugre rosa* (México D. F.: Random House, 2020). All subsequent references are to this edition; page numbers will be given parenthetically.

ISSN 1475-3820 print/ISSN 1478-3428 online/23/05/000735-28

https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2023.2262863

established social life have broken down. Toxic winds cause human skin to tear off progressively until people are left 'en carne viva' (31). Basic products and fresh food are limited or non-existent, and the main diet available for human consumption is one of ultra-processed animal matter —a 'subproducto cárnico' called *mugre rosa*—made from animal remains and packaged in plastic containers.[3] By her own admission, Trías was not a foreteller who predicted the COVID-19 pandemic—having finished the novel in late 2019—but rather a keen observer of the present: she was not writing 'un centímetro más adelante del presente', but looking at it 'de costado'.[4]

The novel is told in the first person by an unnamed female narrator whose affective world is also marked by personal catastrophe.[5] Her closest relationships—with her ex-husband, Max and her mother—are dominated by resentment, low-level aggression and co-dependency. She has left her job as a writer for a magazine to become a paid carer for a boy called Mauro, who suffers from Prader-Willi Syndrome (unnamed in the novel), a 'rare genetic condition that causes a wide range of physical symptoms, learning difficulties and behavioural challenges', the most salient being insatiable hunger.[6] The narrative is made up of twenty-six sections that advance the plot; interspersed between them are short dialogues that defy generic definition, at times resembling poems, but also reminiscent of a

3 In her speech upon being awarded the 'Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz', Trías explains: 'La mugre rosa es un subproducto cárnico que la industria prefiere llamar recortes finamente texturizados, y cuya premisa es abaratar costos y hacer que todo, hasta lo indigesto, sea rentable. Se trata de un aditivo, una mezcla de grasa, pellejos, cartílagos, vísceras, huesos, cabezas y patas que luego se recalienta, se centrifuga y se desinfecta con amoníaco para rellenar hamburguesas, nuggets y otros productos. El amoníaco elimina las bacterias y ayuda a aglutinar lo que, por impulso del desecho, se resiste a aglutinarse' ('Fernanda Trías advierte del "terror climático" y denuncia la marginación que hace la sociedad de algunas personas', *WMagazín*, 4 December 2021, <https://wmagazin.com/relatos/fernanda-trias-advierte-del-terror-climatico-y-denuncia-la-marginacion-que-hace-la-sociedad-de-algunas-persona> [accessed 15 November 2022]).

4 See Fernanda Trías, in Facultad de Artes y Humanidades Uniandes, 'Conversatorio sobre *Mugre rosa* de Fernanda Trías con Piedad Bonett', YouTube video, 16 April 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAfwVDC8Q3g> (accessed 15 November 2022).

5 Unless specified, in this essay I employ the word 'affective' in the capacious, everyday sense of the term, where affect is broadly synonymous with emotion. A distinction between 'affect' and 'emotion' is often made in recent theory, particularly in those approaches influenced by Brian Massumi. Following thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, Massumi understands affect as pre-conscious, pre-personal intensity, while emotion comprises a degree of codification or interpretation of that affect, thus denoting 'a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal' (Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* [Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2002], 28).

6 See 'Prader-Willi Syndrome', NHS <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/prader-willi-syndrome> (accessed 15 November 2022).

play. Although we may plausibly read them as fragments of conversations between Max and the narrator—whether real, dreamed or imagined—there is no clear indication of their place in the plot. Rather, they contribute to the novel's elegiac tone and to developing a series of images, themes and motifs that further what I see as *Mugre rosa*'s most salient aspect: Trías' dazzling exploration of the expressive capabilities of language.

Thematically, *Mugre rosa* engages with a kaleidoscope of interrelated questions. Its environmental and ethical concerns are wide-ranging: a visibilization and denunciation of what Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence'.[7] The novel shares the apprehensions expressed in many 'Anthropocene fictions' and other environmentally motivated writing about human-induced toxicity and ecological damage, delving into 'the connection between environmental toxification and human illness' which lies at the heart of what Heather Houser calls 'ecosickness fiction'.[8] Other issues resonate with particular relevance in the Latin-American context, considering both the impact of climate change and the history of extractivism in the region and its ugly corollaries, such as economic inequality.[9] Yet another cluster of concerns gathers around the individual:

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7 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2011). Nixon's term designates 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2). He refers to 'the long-dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change' (2–3), in words that seem apposite for *Mugre rosa*. Nixon and other authors with whom I converse in this essay are mentioned by Allison Mackey in her article on Trías' novel ('Aguas ambiguas: encarnando una conciencia antropocénica a través del ecogótico rioplatense', in *Genealogías latinoamericanas de las Humanidades Ambientales: derivas, cruces y caminos*, ed. Alejandro Ponce de León, Sofía Rosa & Jesús Alejandro García, *Revista CS*, 36, [2022], 247–87). Although we depart from similar theoretical standpoints (in particular those arising from ecocriticism and feminist materialism), Mackey reads *Mugre rosa* as part of a tradition she terms 'ecogótico rioplatense' and frames her discussion within these parameters. While I largely concur with her reading of Trías' environmental agenda, the scope of our studies varies considerably; one important difference is that Mackey pays scant attention to aspects of form and style, which are fundamental to my own approach.

8 See Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2015); and Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2014), 1.

9 Regarding the impact of climate change on the coastal areas of Uruguay, see Bárbara C. Franco *et al.*, 'Climate Change Impacts on the Atmospheric Circulation, Ocean, and Fisheries in the Southwest South Atlantic Ocean: A Review', *Climatic Change*, 162 (2020), 2359–77. Specific incidents to which Trías' novel might allude include the increased frequency and duration of harmful algal blooms (HABs), 'a climate-driven stressor', as well as 'the most intense marine heatwave in the SWAO shelf over the past 30 years [which] left tons of dead fish and HABs on the Uruguayan coast during the austral summer of 2017' (Franco *et al.*, 'Climate Change Impacts', 2370–71). For critical perspectives on slow violence in Latin-American culture, see *Ecofictions, Ecorealities and Slow Violence in Latin America*

the narrator takes us through a painstaking exploration of loss, destructive emotional attachments, memory, nostalgia and motherhood. Indeed, Trías undertakes the monumental task of detailing a world in the process of dying, and the grief that accompanies this process, from the personal to the planetary: 'Hay un duelo personal pero también hay un duelo colectivo: un duelo por este mundo completamente destruido'.[10] In view of this multilayered texture, my choice of the term 'desolation' in this essay's title designates utter devastation at an environmental level, the narrator's loneliness and grief, and the mood that dominates the plot.[11]

In the extensive press coverage that *Mugre rosa* has received in the Spanish-speaking world since its publication, most readings have stressed the novel's environmental agenda and dystopian traits, as well its apparent prefiguring of the pandemic (although illness is not caused by a virus in Trías' novel). Equally, Mauro's ravenous hunger, which puts him at risk of self-destruction, has been correctly identified as an emblem of an insatiable humanity devouring itself in the times of climate-changing capitalism (though, irrespective of any allegorical connotations, it is also presented in the novel as the result of a genetic condition). While engaging with these issues, my discussion follows a different path. It explores the premise that, for all the devastation it recounts, *Mugre rosa* is a work of extraordinary vividness. I examine Trías' style of writing the multi-scalar entanglements outlined above, and contend that *Mugre rosa* is a carefully crafted fiction that reveals a concern about literary form and language, in general, and about the agency of literature in the Anthropocene.[12] My argument is that

and the Latinx World, ed. Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis & Elizabeth Pettinaroli (London/New York: Routledge, 2020).

10 See Trías, in 'Conversatorio sobre *Mugre rosa*'.

11 I agree with Emmett & Nye that as 'a cultural idea', the Anthropocene 'evokes complex emotions'. See Robert S. Emmett & David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2017), 108. The most commonly cited are, in the words of Timothy Clark, 'ecological grief and Anthropocene horror', and what the philosopher Glenn Albrecht calls 'psychoterratic dis-eases'—an umbrella term that comprises ailments such as 'ecoanxiety, nature deficit disorder, ecoparalysis, solastalgia, eco-nostalgia, and global dread'. See Timothy Clark, 'Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror', *American Imago*, 77:1 (2020), 61–80; TEDxTalks, 'TEDxSydney—Glenn Albrecht—Environment Change, Distress & Human Emotion Solastalgia', YouTube video, 2 June 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GUGW8rOpLY> (accessed 15 November 2022).

12 For reasons of scope and space, I use the generalizing term 'Anthropocene' in this article, mindful of the problems this entails; chiefly, that in its apparent neutrality, the word erases myriad forms of systemic inequality and masks the uneven distributions of resources, impacts and vulnerabilities *vis-à-vis* the current environmental crises. For compelling critiques of this notion, see, among others: Rob Nixon, 'The Great Acceleration and the Great Divergence: Vulnerability in the Anthropocene', *Profession* (2014), <https://profession.mla.org/the-great-acceleration-and-the-great-divergence-vulnerability-in-the-anthropocene/> (accessed 31 August 2023); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or*

Trías' style—her intricate use of sensory detail, vivid description, poignant and precise similes, formal and structural innovations, and organizing metaphors—possesses a vibrancy that contrasts with and counters the desolation enfolding through the diegesis.[13] With the term 'vibrancy', I echo Jane Bennett's concern for the agency of the nonhuman, a concern that is certainly present in *Mugre rosa*, as will be explored below[14]—but I also seek to illuminate how the novel thinks of itself as exerting agency *qua* literary text. In Bennett's quasi-chiasmic formulation, 'vibrant matter' possesses 'material vitality', by which she means 'the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'.[15] Throughout *Vibrant Matter*, she refers to vital materiality as a flow: this vitality is active and moving. Building on Bennett, I explore how nonhuman agencies produce effects in *Mugre rosa*'s diegetic world, but I also probe how 'vibrancy', 'vitality' and a slippage between these terms and others also associated with life in their etymology, and commonly used to describe aesthetic qualities—such as vivacity and vividness—, allow us to capture a sense of agency in Trías' style.[16]

The following discussion stems from two overarching premises. Firstly, I build on Héctor Hoyos' proposition that contemporary Latin-American fiction 'serves as the conduit for a reassessment of our place [in the world]—not merely by representing it, as in a realist novel, but by interrogating the underexamined scaffoldings that determine our relation to nonhumans'.[17] Central to Hoyos' argument, and salient in Trías, is literature's potential for estrangement, or defamiliarization, as a way of effecting such questioning. The titular pink slime is one prominent example:

None (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2018); the special issue *Gender and the Anthropocene*, ed. Deirdre Byrne, Azille Coetzee & Amanda Gouws, *Feminist Encounters. A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5:1 (2021), <https://www.lectitopublishing.nl/feminist-encounters/volume-5/issue-1> (accessed 15 April 2023); and Francisco Serratos, *El capitaloceno: una historia radical de la crisis climática* (México D. F.: UNAM/Festina Publicaciones, 2020).

13 A key catalyst for my thinking was David James' work on the affective agency of description and other elements of form, which can often be discrepant with respect to plot. See his *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2019).

14 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2010).

15 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

16 James refers to description's 'vivacity' and 'its own insurgent tendency to kick against plot' (James, *Discrepant Solace*, 67).

17 Héctor Hoyos, *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2019), 49.

> […] la gigantesca pasta de dientes hecha de carne. […] Le llamaban mugre rosa y olía a sangre coagulada y al líquido que Delfa usaba para lavar el baño. […]—Un alimento seguro, completo y nutritivo—dijo el hombre en la tele. Simplemente otra forma de aprovechamiento. (48–49)

What is the difference between this 'alimento', and that which the reader might consider food? Indeed, this is one of the questions raised by the novel: what are the 'underexamined scaffoldings' that lead us to conceptualize food as food? Famously, in the real-world controversy around pink slime, the meat processing lobby pushed against the use of this term and insisted on its redesignation as 'ground beef', which shows the power that language can have in our understanding of and subsequent attitude towards the nonhuman.[18] Trías defamiliarizes food by appealing to the reader's disgust in the descriptions of pink slime, but also through Mauro's condition: he does not *understand* what food is, to the extent of being unable to distinguish between himself and the other, between '[su propio] dedo y una morcilla' (58). Pink slime is presented in the novel as the industry's response to the imperative that '[n]o había por qué desperdiciar nada' (49). How far, the reader might ask herself, is the scale of scarcity portrayed in *Mugre rosa* removed from the staggering food insecurity faced by some populations in today's world? What if pink slime turned out to be the only way to feed a hungry, over-populated planet? The effects of challenging, through defamiliarization, the 'underexamined scaffoldings' that determine our relation to food and consumption are far-reaching.

The second premise on which my reading is predicated relates to the agency of formal elements in fiction. First, I discuss how Trías manipulates narrative time and structure to problematize questions of scale and linearity. Second, I consider how her emphasis on materiality, rich use of description and figurative language, all add to a sense of stylistic agency. A sense of *vitality* in her writing is evident also in metaphors that are repeated though slightly transformed at every stage, thus creating a cadence, an ebb and flow of resonances that evoke the river central to the setting: a 'naturecultural' space, a body of water and of vibrant materiality whose scale transcends the anthropocentric plot and is conjured not only through diegesis but also through form.[19] Finally, I discuss how this quality of vibrancy is also reflected in how Trías zooms in and lingers on small 'things' usually perceived as nothing more than ephemeral

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18 Sarah Harvard, 'US Government Says "Pink Slime" Can Now Be Called Ground Beef', *The Independent*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/us-govt-pink-slime-called-ground-beef-usda-a8779521.html> (accessed 19 November 2022).

19 Donna Haraway introduced the concept of 'natureculture', in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

consumables (a tiny fish, a scone, a can of tuna), registering them briefly but potently on the page. Considering the critique of industrial-scale production and consumption evident in the novel, I see in this aspect of Trías' style an ethical statement. In short, I explore how *Mugre rosa* imagines devastation but goes beyond *portraying* catastrophe: through both diegesis and form, it invites the reader to apprehend the material, affective, human and nonhuman relationships and interactions that make up the 'mesh' in our troubling times.[20]

For methodological reasons, this essay is divided into two sections. The first addresses the novel's main environmental concerns and discusses how they intersect with questions explored in fields such as ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. Most of this discussion deals with elements of diegesis. The second, and longer, section of the article scrutinizes the particularities of Trías' style, parsing the implications of her use of language and form, which alternately expand, nuance, transform and collide with premises established at a diegetic level. The conclusion brings both sections together, reflecting on what *Mugre rosa* tells us about the agency of literature in the present.

Writing Environmental Catastrophe

Even though the narrative is enveloped in an air of ambiguity, the reader is invited to infer that the interrelated environmental crises in *Mugre rosa* (food scarcity, toxic winds and algae, searing illness in humans and mutations or extinction of nonhuman animals), are all a product of incremental and long-standing forms of harm inflicted by humans. Somewhat ironically, however, the scale of the damage is such that human agency is now no more than an illusion, as the characters progressively realize. The plot vibrates with an emotion that Timothy Clark terms 'Anthropocene horror': 'a felt response to an understanding that human impacts have passed a threshold at which what was once just taken for granted in daily life has crossed over from the normal to the destructive'.[21] From the first pages, 'normal' elements such as algae appear as menacing (14), and beaches are off-limits, their toxic waters causing 'enfermedades sin nombre que tampoco aseguraban una muerte rápida' (15). The novel connects the human and the nonhuman in an expansive sea of decay: 'Todo se pudría,

20 The 'mesh' is Timothy Morton's concept to designate the quality of ecological interconnectedness. See his *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2010).

21 Clark, 'Ecological Grief', 66. As he points out, 'the global environmental crisis is also a crisis of human agency. For, despite the "Anthropocene" nickname, the supposed emergence of humanity as a pseudo-geological force is not the manifestation of deliberate human agency, but of a realm of unintended consequences in the Earth System, one in which "humanity" is felt to become weirdly impersonalized' (70).

también nosotros. […] No sé de dónde salía tanta basura. Era como si se digiriera y se excretara a sí misma. ¿Y quién te dice que los desechos no seamos nosotros?' (13–14). The irony is, of course, that rubbish is not producing itself. *Digerir* and *excretar* are connected to eating, one of the novel's organizing metaphors, which is explored in myriad ways, some of which will be touched upon in this article. Whatever 'nosotros' designates (presumably a human 'we'), it is subsumed in the wreckage of human and nonhuman assemblages presented in *Mugre rosa* from the outset.

Trías employs vivid description to illustrate the material manifestations that accompany 'el viento rojo':

> Porque mientras no lo hubieras vivido no podías imaginar el olor nauseabundo, el calor repentino, el agua del río que se hinchaba como un pulpo y la espuma ocre, teñida por las algas. En un solo momento el paisaje se transformaba: la alarma rugía ensordecedora, se veían manos emerger de los edificios y cerrar rápido las ventanas, los pescadores levantaban campamento. (29–30)

The stench, the heat, the toxic algae and the general animation in the water are visible and tangible indicators of the 'nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies'.[22] 'Nature' is described as throbbing with a force that is concomitant with the anxiety felt by the population, their panic implied in the sound of the alarm and the hands shutting windows—metonyms that index (but do not mention) the terrified humans behind these actions. This adds to the novel's exploration of the unsettling affects that characterize the Anthropocene, but should not be read as an instance of pathetic fallacy. Climatic, biospheric forces are 'agentic' in *Mugre rosa*, affective in the sense of their 'capacity for activity and responsiveness'.[23] This imbues matter with ominous tones in the novel: there is something profoundly wrong with 'natural' elements that have been altered as a response to human-induced harm. The following are examples of such situations: 'Lo dije así, con toda naturalidad, aunque sabía que era imposible, que cualquier cosa que descargaran esas nubes no sería agua acumulada en el cielo' (121); '—No te duermas con las ventanas abiertas—dije—. ¿No ves que esta oscuridad no es normal?' (137). Animalized descriptions of human beings (especially Mauro) create a crossover between the human and nonhuman, while inanimate objects appear as alive on occasion: 'La miré un momento: juro que me pareció que la tarjeta latía en mi mano como un brote vivo' (188). All this contributes to the uncanny undertones that percolate through the narrative.

22 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.
23 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.

The wind's agency is reflected in the descriptions of the epidemic's multi-scalar effects, which range from individual bodies to the social, economic and ecological spheres, ending up in the apocalyptic scenes that populate the later parts of the narrative: 'El viento podía colarse hasta por la rendija más angosta y algunos despertaban en medio de un remolino picante y ácido. La piel se descamaba al cuarto o quinto día' (81). Not all patients die: in fact, sickness leads to separation between 'crónicos' and 'terminales', clearly demarcated in the different areas of the hospital which they occupy—a variation on Susan Sontag's famous distinction between 'the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick'.[24] Both terminally ill people and *crónicos*, who 'guardaban en ellos el secreto de las algas' (38), are tangible examples of transcorporeality—Stacy Alaimo's concept to signal that 'the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world', and 'the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment" '.[25] In *Mugre rosa*, these transcorporeal interconnections are evident in the toxicity that has caused fish to either die or mutate, birds to vanish and people to become chronic patients—effectively life prisoners confined to a hospital bed—or to die a slow and painful death.

'[T]raffic in toxins', states Alaimo, renders it 'impossible for humans to imagine that their own health and welfare is disconnected from that of the rest of the planet or to imagine that it is possible to protect "nature" by merely creating separate, distinct areas in which "it" is "preserved" '.[26] Invisible toxins in the air and water interact (and 'intra-act', in Karen Barad's and Alaimo's idiom) with/in characters' bodies; in the fish, the algae and the totality of the ecosystem. Yet in *Mugre rosa* both the authorities and private individuals strive to create such 'separate, distinct areas', with their persistent but ultimately futile efforts to contain the disease shaping everyday life: 'esta vida plagada de medidas de seguridad, las ventanas cerradas, los filtros de aire, el agua que debía romper hervor dos veces antes de tomarla y la alarma que anunciaba el viento' (59). The alternation between wind (which forces people indoors) and mist, which briefly enables them to step outside, determines the rhythms of life. Characters are made to stay indoors by official mandate for days on end (which the narrator defies on occasion to roam around the city), but the very notion of a space *outside* the toxic atmosphere progressively shrinks. If, early on, there is mention of 'ciudades limpias y seguras' elsewhere in the country, halfway through the novel we are told, '[P]or primera vez el

24 Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 2002), 3.

25 Stacy Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature', in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo & Susan J. Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2008), 237–64 (p. 238).

26 Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms', 260.

viento se insinuaba en una ciudad profunda' (112). By the end, the narrator acknowledges that her plan to flee to Brazil—floated repeatedly (e.g., 124 & 161)—is no more than self-delusion: 'Era tonto […] porque ¿cuánto faltaba para que las algas llegaran hasta allá también? Incluso si lograba conseguir los certificados de salud para sacarnos del país. Nos unía el mismo mar envenenado' (230). With the realization that there is no escape from an environmentally degraded world, the narrator of *Mugre rosa* eventually registers 'que no había un piso bajo nuestros pies' (229). All this accentuates an atmosphere of entrapment, another feature of 'Anthropocene horror': if one function of the traditional concept of nature 'was to name a space of supposed externality', in *Mugre rosa* there is no such space to escape to.[27] Characters are asphyxiated: literally, as breathing when 'el viento rojo' strikes comes at a high risk, but also figuratively, oppressed by official regulations dictating what they are allowed to eat, do and believe. All this in a world where there is no externality because 'the consequences of [previous] human action do not go away any more',[28] and at the same time humans have no space left to act: '—Vendimos todo para venir acá—lloraba una mujer frente a la cámara—. Y ahora esto. —Nos van a empujar hacia el norte hasta que nos caigamos del país—dijo otro' (112–13).

In his study of Anthropocene fiction, Adam Trexler argues that 'climate fiction has increasingly allowed nonhuman things to shape narrative'.[29] *Mugre rosa* shares a number of features with Trexler's corpus, meticulously exploring how 'things'—from red winds to grey mist, and from pink slime to the fire that consumes the meat processing plant—'relentlessly shape all aspects of human experience'.[30] This is reflected in the remarkably limited range of action afforded to the characters; all descriptions from inside the narrator's flat are claustrophobic, while those of the city become increasingly dystopian as the narrative progresses.[31] The genetic malfunction in Mauro, which controls all aspects of his personality and experience, can also be seen as an instance of the nonhuman shaping a character's life: 'Dominado por la genética, inocente como un conejo. El impulso para él era ese agujero sin fondo, esa fuerza centrífuga que lo absorbía todo, incluido él mismo' (197).

27 Clark, 'Ecological Grief', 68.

28 Clark, 'Ecological Grief', 69.

29 Trexler, *Anthropocene Fiction*, 26.

30 Trexler, *Anthropocene Fiction*, 26. I agree with Mackey that *Mugre rosa* defies generic constraints: 'por momentos demuestra características de la literatura fantástica, de la ficción distópica o apocalíptica, e inclusive de la ficción climática' (Mackey, 'Aguas ambiguas', 269).

31 The atmosphere of claustrophobia inside the narrator's flat is enhanced as she mirrors, in her close observation and containment of Mauro's impulses, the State's surveillance of the population. The apocalyptic tone and idiom intensify towards the end of the novel, after the burning down of the meat processing plant (196).

The novel, therefore, illustrates the sense of not being in control 'of the many worlds—the worlds of electricity, toxins, fungi, climate patterns—inhabiting our world', and of how it can be 'deeply disturbing to apprehend the way that human tissues are permeable, inhabited, and vulnerable'.[32] The narrator uses irony to indicate that the illusion of control is a fiction on the part of the government: 'El nuevo ministerio tomó las riendas del asunto, las riendas del río con peces mutantes y algas color borra de vino que estaban acabando con el ecosistema' (47). By narrating both the devastation of the 'ecosistema' and the monumental scale of human illness that accompanies such destruction, the novel shows how 'the category of the human […] is endangered at the macro and micro levels'.[33] Through the affected 'peces mutantes' and 'algas color borra de vino', which appear in tandem with an epidemic that afflicts the human population, *Mugre rosa* shows 'how human bodies participate in global networks of harm'.[34]

Mugre rosa converses with the tradition that Lawrence Buell termed 'toxic discourse', or the 'expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency'.[35] In fact, Trías engages with the seminal text in this respect, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* through the image of the vanishing birds:

> Todos esperamos que con los pájaros pasara lo mismo que con los peces, que un día empezaran a caer del cielo, como frutos maduros. Todos creímos que un día, sin más, los veríamos estrellarse contra el piso. Pero no. Los pájaros dejaron de verse. […] [Y] un día *se sintió el silencio* en los parques, en las mañanas, y alguien dijo en la televisión: las aves migraron, y fue como si nos hubieran dado permiso de notarlo. […] Se habló mucho, pero *el silencio ya se había apoderado del cielo*. […] Los pájaros nos dejaron solos con el viento rojo. (95; my emphasis)

This description echoes Carson's opening parable: 'There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen around were moribund; they trembled

32 Serenella Iovino & Serpil Oppermann, 'Introduction: Stories Come to Matter', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino & Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2014), 1–17 (p. 3); Emmett & Nye, *The Environmental Humanities*, 109.

33 Emmett & Nye, *The Environmental Humanities*, 109.

34 Stacy Alaimo, 'Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Iovino & Oppermann, 186–203 (p. 189).

35 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2009), 31.

violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices'.[36] In the passage from *Mugre rosa*, the use of anaphora and first-person plural ('Todos esperamos'/'Todos creímos') gives it a chorus-like quality that captures the feeling of collective loss. The birds' disappearance is not quite presented as extinction but as an enigmatic flight from catastrophe. This passage also evokes the silence ensuing from the vanishing of bees and maggots after the disaster in Chernobyl, according to accounts included in Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*, a book that Trías has acknowledged as an important antecedent for *Mugre rosa*.[37] There is a profound sense of estrangement introduced by the disappearance of birds in the novel, which is enhanced at the end, in the scene of the caged bird found moribund by the narrator, described in terms that are similar to those used by Carson in the previous quotation: 'el pájaro estaba moribundo, con unas malformaciones blancas en el pico y en los ojos. […] Tenía las alas cortadas, muertas' (215–16).[38]

Where all the birds might have migrated to is a mystery, but we fear that, if not extinct, they will have suffered from the 'malformaciones' found in this, the last bird. Yet for humans there is nowhere to go, and the closing image of the novel conveys a post-apocalyptic atmosphere:

> La niebla presiona con su puño gris y ni un solo reflejo rosado perturba el cielo. El olor de las algas se siente denso y ácido, como miles de frutas fermentándose al tiempo. […]
>
> Pasarán horas antes de ver al camión, un Ford viejo con la caja llena de fierros, muebles rotos y botellas reciclables. Junto a él, una sombra. Una silueta quebrada: la mitad superior del cuerpo oculta dentro del contenedor de basura, la otra mitad una plomada que lo mantiene a salvo. No puedo detener un futuro que ya está aquí.
>
> Lento, se irá cerrando todo. Nos alejaremos despacio, con los focos fantasmales perforando la noche. La ciudad también quedará vaciada, como un cuerpo sin entrañas, una carcasa limpia que a lo lejos brillará con su luz mala. Eso será la ciudad, un fuego fatuo en el horizonte. (276)

Mist and algae are potent 'vibrant matter' here: in comparison to these material elements, the human figures are spectral, almost not fully human,

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36 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Books, 1999 [1st ed. 1962]), 22.

37 'In the morning, I went out into the garden and something was missing, the usual sound was gone. Couldn't hear a single bee […] Later, they told us there was an accident at the power plant, which wasn't far off. But for a good while we didn't know. *The bees knew, but we didn't*' (Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer: Voices from Chernobyl*, trans. Anna Gunin & Arch Tait [London: Penguin Books, 2016 (1st ed. in Russian 1997)], 31; my emphasis).

38 This bird also recalls the caged bird kept by the narrator's father in Fernanda Trías' first novel, *La azotea* (Edinburgh: Charco Press, 2021 [1st ed. 2001]).

enmeshed in assemblages of rubble and surrounded by smoke and ruin. Entrapment reaches a climax: the mist's asphyxiating power is anthropomorphized as a 'puño cerrado', and even outdoors, 'se irá cerrando todo'. The city (a metonym for human activity) is unsurprisingly compared to a carcass, neatly recalling the animal remains constitutive of the titular pink slime. The language used to describe the algae's smell is a painful reminder that there are no 'frutas' left, while 'denso y ácido' bring to mind the ammonia used in the production of pink slime. Both city and landscape are wrecked, while the use of the present and future tense is striking as it underscores the ambiguity of the place and time of enunciation.

This passage is steeped in gloom and apprehension about the ultimate costs and consequences of irreversible ecological damage: the 'end-of-the-world' register and imagery that has been building up throughout *Mugre rosa* reaches a climatic point. As Houser asserts, apocalyptic discourse solicits anxiety in the reader: 'It is difficult to imagine an apocalyptic narrative that does not aim to generate anxiety […]. [A]pocalypse puts the reader on edge along with the characters living through the havoc of a ruined world'.[39] A genre often ripe with apocalyptic discourse, dystopia has been understood as a story involving 'an imagined society or state of affairs in which conditions are extremely bad, especially in which these conditions result from the continuation of some current trend to an extreme'.[40] Clearly, the state of the world presented in *Mugre rosa* is a continuation of the 'slow violence' associated with our era: relentless extractivism, over-consumption, climate change, pollution and anthropogenic environmental harm. Whether the corollaries of the current *status quo* are depicted 'to an extreme' is debatable; arguably, as Clark asserts, 'an ecological overview of the current state of the planet shows a huge bubble of population and consumption in one species intensifying exponentially and expanding at a rate that cannot be supported by the planet's resources for long'.[41]

In her address upon receiving the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Trías stated:

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39 Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction*, 170.

40 Jeff Prucher, 'Dystopia', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*, 2017 (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2007 [online version]), < https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305678.001.0001/acref-9780195305678-e-131> (accessed 13 September 2023).

41 Timothy Clark, 'Scale. Derangements of Scale', in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Vol. 1, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press/MPublishing, 2012), 148–66 (p. 159). As I was finalizing this article, I read the following headline in *The Guardian*: 'Cop27 Climate Summit: Window for Avoiding Catastrophe Is Closing Fast', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2023; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/30/cop27-climate-summit-window-for-avoiding-catastrophe-is-closing-fast> (accessed 6 September 2023)

> Si cada generación piensa su propio apocalipsis, yo pertenezco a la que está protagonizando el terror climático, un terror que asume la forma de un punto difuso en el tiempo después del cual no habrá retorno. […] De ahí a imaginar las migraciones masivas, las crisis de refugiados, la escasez de alimentos, y las ciudades vaciadas, hay solo un paso. El *tic tac* de ese reloj es ensordecedor. La pregunta, entonces, no debería ser por qué escribir una distopía, una ciencia ficción climática, sino cómo no escribirla.[42]

The narrator of *Mugre rosa* drives this point home with the reference to 'un futuro que ya está aquí' (another echo of Alexievich, as will be discussed below). The projection of the future into the present evokes what Nicole M. Merola calls 'Anthropocene anxiety', or 'a temporally doubled affect of nervousness and unease that infects both present and future'.[43] As Ursula K. Heise has noted, the power of the Anthropocene as a notion 'resides not in its scientific definition as a geological epoch, but in its capacity to cast the present as a *future that has already arrived*—one of the quintessential functions of contemporary science fiction'.[44] Building on Heise, Alexa Weik von Mossner discusses literary fictions that align us 'with the emotional experience of characters who live in an imaginary future that is marked by the negative consequences of anthropogenic environmental change and who cue us to share their helpless longing for a bygone world—the world in which we *currently* live'.[45] These insights can accurately be put into dialogue with *Mugre rosa*. That said, while the novel delivers a clear and urgent environmental message that solicits the reader's affective involvement, the text is not reducible to this aspect, nor does it explore these issues only at the level of diegesis and theme. In the next section, I consider how form and style evince a concern on Trías' part to probe the agency of literary texts in the Anthropocene in other ways and at other levels.

42 Trías, 'Fernanda Trías advierte del "terror climático" '.

43 Nicole M. Merola, ' "What Do We Do But Keep Breathing As Best We Can This / Minute Atmosphere": Juliana Spahr and Anthropocene Anxiety', in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow & Jennifer Ladino (Lincoln, NE/ London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2018), 25–49 (p. 33).

44 Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), 203; my emphasis.

45 Alexa Weik von Mossner, 'From Nostalgic Longing to Solastalgic Distress: A Cognitive Approach to *Love in the Anthropocene*', in *Affective Ecocriticism*, ed. Bladow & Ladino, 51–69 (p. 65; my emphasis).

'El mundo se cae a pedazos, pero solo con pedazos se construye algo'.[46]

> We—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times.[47]

This section looks at formal elements in Trías' novel to interrogate how form and style deepen, nuance, complicate or collide with aspects of diegesis and plot in addressing the concerns explored above. I discuss the following aspects: Trías' manipulation of literary form to probe notions of temporality; her use of figurative language; the emphasis placed on the sensorial and bodily as a means to elicit the reader's embodied response (and the reader's affective engagement with the novel's environmental agenda); and the attention afforded to the minuscule object or detail. Through a consideration of these aspects, which I posit as key to the 'vibrancy' of Trías' prose, I engage with the ethics and aesthetics of Trías' remarkable writing practice in *Mugre rosa*.

The scale of environmental and personal devastation in *Mugre rosa* problematizes traditional notions of time. I take the above quote from Haraway as encapsulating several aspects (emotional, conceptual, material) that impinge on time as an experience and as a concept in our perilous era. Several interrelated questions around temporality emerge from *Mugre rosa*: How are the articulations of collective history and individual life stories affected by the prospect of irreversible destruction on a planetary scale? What are the spatial and temporal scales necessary to comprehend the latter? On the one hand, Trías appears to concur with the approach proposed by Bethany Wiggin, Carolyn Fornoff and Patricia Eunji Kim, who suggest that to represent and respond to 'the disjunctive temporalities of our era's—the Anthropocene's—ecological crises […] (i.e., climate change, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, species extinction, and biodiversity loss) requires reframing time itself'.[48] On the other, *Mugre rosa* is not embedded in a post-human frame of reference, but still concerned with the human drama around the narrator's memory and life story. This tension contributes to the temporal entanglements that make up the narrative of *Mugre rosa*.

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46 See Fernanda Trías, 'En nombre propio: violencia de género y escritura', in Facultad Comunicación y Letras UDP, 'Cátedra Abierta en homenaje a Roberto Bolaño—Fernanda Trías', YouTube video, 14 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blpkxFSfT2s> (accessed 16 November 2022).

47 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2016), 1.

48 *Timescales: Thinking across Ecological Temporalities*, ed. Bethany Wiggin, Carolyn Fornoff & Patricia Eunji Kim (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2020); quoted from book description available on the publisher's website at <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/timescales> (accessed 18 October 2023).

Among the many aspects that Trías' engagement with Alexievich brings up—a discussion that deserves a separate study—one common thread is the sense of distorted time faced by a narrator who bears witness to utter destruction:

> What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl is life afterwards: the possessions without owners, the landscapes without people. The roads going nowhere, the cables leading nowhere. You find yourself wondering just what this is: the past or the future. It sometimes felt to me as if I was recording the future.[49]

Such tangles of past, present and future are exacerbated in Trías' dystopia, where both diegetic time (as experienced by the characters) and narrative time (as conveyed to the reader through formal and structural means) are rendered strange, whilst narrative tempo is at times excruciatingly slow. From a representational point of view, the novel invites the reader to ask herself: is this a fiction *about* the future? Why, then, do the social and material circumstances portrayed in the diegesis recall the reader's present, or perhaps recent past? We might wish to read the novel as a cautionary tale about the future, but there are no references to futuristic technologies in *Mugre rosa*. The narrative stays close enough to the mimetic contract for the diegetic world to be recognizable as a version of our present, with one exception: everyday items such as mobile phones or social media are absent from the characters' world. The TV is the narrator's main source of news and information, and she uses a landline to call her mother. These details have the effect of inserting the past into the present, all while the story is somehow projected towards the future. The disorienting effect of prolonged lockdowns (which would have been particularly poignant for readers immediately after the novel's publication, and paradoxically add to an uncanny reality effect) further contribute to a turbid sense of time. I see this *weirding* of time as enhancing the novel's environmental message in two ways: first, it embeds an alarming future into the present, stressing the sense that this 'futuro ya está aquí', especially if we consider the setting of the novel in a fictionalized city of the Global South.[50] When it comes to imminent ecocide, time and place are not abstract categories, but inhabited material realities. Second, a distorted,

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49 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, trans. Gunin & Tait, 33.

50 As Nixon reminds us, the unequal distribution of resources and vulnerabilities across the globe means that some communities experience environmental degradation 'not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of *inhabited* risks' (Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 4; my emphasis). Depending on the specificity of the material place that 'aquí' designates, irreversible environmental damage might be a present, lived reality, rather than some future threat. I am grateful to Manuela Crivelli for this insight.

uncanny image of the present renders it strange: Trías' novel defamiliarizes our own understanding of what it means to live in our time. If, as Clark suggests, 'it is the transitory world of this bizarre, destructive and temporary energy imbalance [given by over-consumption and over-population] that Western populations currently inhabit and *take for a stable and familiar* reality', [51] *Mugre rosa* forces us to take a step back and look again at the unexamined assumptions that make us take such a situation as normal.

Both in Alexievich and in Trías, it is not only time that is distorted, but also the sense of scale and the space-time axis through which we apprehend the world:

> I see Chernobyl as *the beginning of a new history*: it offers not only knowledge but also prescience, because it challenges our old ideas about ourselves and the world. When we talk about the past or the future, we read our ideas about time into those words; but Chernobyl is, above all, a catastrophe of time. The radionuclides strewn across our earth will live for 50,000, 100,000, 200,000 years. *What are we capable of comprehending*? Is it in our power to extract and decipher the meaning of this still unfamiliar horror?[52]

Similar questions arise in *Mugre rosa*, where the tone of the narrator resembles that in Alexievich's testimony. The narrator presents her discourse as that of a witness of 'the beginning of a new history':

> El primer viento rojo, feroz, eléctrico, arruinó las exequias de los buzos. Al otro día, el presidente decretó la evacuación de las zonas costeras. […] Así fue que empezó la nueva historia oficial.
>
> Cuando uno lee libros de historia tiende a olvidar que alguien estuvo ahí. Alguien de carne y hueso, y en esta historia ese alguien soy yo. Yo estuve ahí cuando aparecieron los peces; fui hasta la playa Martínez y vi la arena cubierta de pescados que parecían basura resplandeciente, trocitos de lata y de vidrio arrojados por la marea. […] [Y]o vi al presidente en cadena nacional anunciando la evacuación de los barrios costeros. […] [Y] luego la ciudad colapsó, los autos quedaron atascados en el único y monstruoso embotellamiento de la historia del país. Yo lo vi. (204–06)

The traditional formula of the witness—'I saw it; I was there'—is strengthened rhetorically by the use of anaphora and epanadiplosis, and by the long enumerations which add an incantatory cadence and solemnity to the passage. Trías' narrator documents the beginning of a new 'historia

51 Clark, 'Scale. Derangements of Scale', 159.

52 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, trans. Gunin & Tait, 24; emphasis in the original.

oficial' which is also a new history in the sense suggested by Alexievich: 'challenging our old ideas about ourselves and the world'. The passage above interweaves at least three timescales: that of the nonhuman, involving both the wind and the lifespans of the dead fish; that of the country's 'historia' (both official and unofficial, the latter signalled by an 'embotellamiento' that also records the role of things—cars—in a country's history); and that of the narrator's own life story. This passage is a powerful reminder that, as Iovino and Oppermann assert apropos a different context, 'humans, nonhumans, and their stories are tied together'.[53] Wiggin, Fornoff and Kim also help us elucidate the implications of such entanglements:

> The ongoing ecological crisis brings the longer timescales of the planet into view, a history that began without us and will long outlast us. […] The ecological crisis thus scrambles twin assumptions at the heart of Western positivism: (1) time is a linear, uninterrupted march toward progress; and (2) nature is an atemporal, boundless resource underpinning, but largely separate from, the human historical experience.[54]

The novel's destabilization of the first point is shown in its very structure, whose overarching linear narrative is interrupted both by frequent analepsis and by the 'no-time' of the twenty-seven fragments that are interspersed between the narrative sections. The sense of estrangement with respect to traditional notions of time is also explicitly stressed by the narrator on many occasions: 'Ahora, por ejemplo, ¿estoy en un comienzo o en un final? Estoy como en una larga pausa, en un tiempo suspendido' (80); 'cuando hablo de días, semanas y horas lo hago para encontrar una manera de organizar el pensamiento, de darle un sentido al recuerdo estancado' (256). It is clear that the extreme circumstances portrayed in the diegesis require a different way to measure time and space: '¿Cuánto espacio quedaría en mi vía de escape? Las algas me acorralaban, pero ni siquiera sabía en qué unidades se medía ese espacio. ¿En meses? ¿En vientos? ¿En visitas a Max?' (82). The novel also erases the separation between nature and human time, in that the cadences of the narrator's daily life are dictated by the agencies of wind and mist.

A high degree of self-reflexivity is evident throughout the narrative, with the narrator struggling to find the precise moment when things changed irreversibly. This is, of course, an unanswerable question, which is none

53 Iovino & Oppermann, 'Introduction: Stories Come to Matter', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Iovino & Oppermann, 5.

54 Carolyn Fornoff, Patricia Eunji Kim & Bethany Wiggin, 'Introduction: Environmental Humanities across Times, Disciplines, and Research Practices', in *Timescales*, ed. Wiggin, Fornoff & Kim, vii–xxviii (p. xiii).

the less raised repeatedly. The narrator's first attempt at answering it opens the novel, in the episode of the 'pez diminuto', to which she returns at other points, most notably when she reminisces about losing Mauro forever:

> Pero él no se asomó, y las dos nos quedamos en silencio, midiéndonos, esperando el sonido de sus pasos o alguna respuesta, y en este momento que lo cuento … en este momento que lo cuento vuelvo a pensar en aquel pez diminuto que se alzó en el aire, atado a la caña del pescador, y vibró apenas, ofreciéndonos su brillo plateado, su diminuta vida. (258)

The intermingling of 'nature' and human, and personal and historical experience, is shown through these interwoven timescales. I will comment below on the significance of the 'pez diminuto'. For now, I note that this last quotation combines the two scales of destruction that shape the diegesis of *Mugre rosa*: the personal and the planetary. Trías' narrator mourns the loss of her past as much as the loss of life in general, showing them as connected; hence, the rethinking of time—including the sense of history—arising from catastrophe also branches into a reflection on individual human memory. The novel's central concern with memory—and with how to verbalize the past—is stated for the first time in the paratext, in the first epigraph, a quote from Vilém Flusser's *La línea y la superficie*. Later on, the narrator alludes to a conception of remembering as the apparently unproblematic tracing of a line between two points, which is, in her view, naïve at best (169). A formal strategy that she employs instead is to mix up tenses, which scrambles linearity.[55]

But the language employed to reflect on memory is also striking for other reasons:

> Mi línea recta se enreda, siento que me falla el trazo, y el dibujo es ahora una cuerda que yo misma me ato alrededor del cuello. El pasado, el presente y el futuro, todo revuelto en la misma máquina apachurradora de la memoria, en la misma batea desinfectante. Hay que rociar el recuerdo con amoníaco para que se convierta en una sola masa y cobre alguna consistencia. (170)

This passage exemplifies a number of arresting features in Trías' writing: one is her use of metaphor at several levels. Here, the conceptual blending of remembering with the food processing plant crushes the personal and environmental catastrophes that make up the diegetic substance of the novel into 'una sola masa'. Also striking is the distressing metamorphosis of the 'línea de la memoria' into a suicidal rope, and the uncomfortable

55 The use of tense in *Mugre rosa* is a carefully curated choice, with the present and future being employed at moments of heightened tension.

resonances—tinted by disgust—which words such as 'máquina apachurradora', 'batea desinfectante' and 'amoníaco', have acquired for the reader at this point. The passage underscores Trías' extensive probing and expansion of a material, bodily register that infuses *Mugre rosa* with much of its vibrancy: the novel's 'b[úsqueda] [d]el misterio […] en la parte física de las cosas'. Such delving into materiality is vital to both personal memory (the exploration of physical sensations anchored in specific memories) and to the overarching themes of toxicity and environmental devastation. But the notion of a 'búsqueda del misterio en la parte física de las cosas' can also be taken as an *ars poetica*, a self-referential nod to a style of writing that endlessly interrogates the poetic potentialities of language through an engagement with the material.

Trías' Poetic Style

Commenting on the influence of Alexievich's book upon *Mugre rosa*, Trías declared: 'Es un libro muy poético y yo quería recuperar lo poético en el horror'.[56] The Uruguayan author undertakes this apparently paradoxical project in ways that surpass the scope of this essay, but here I engage with one particular aspect of it: the vibrancy that animates *Mugre rosa* arises in great part from Trías' use of figurative language at several levels, from conceits that function as overarching premises to similes that act in discrete syntactical units. This imbues Trías' prose with a sense of vitality or aliveness that contrasts with the destruction occurring at a diegetic level. Another opposition occurs in parallel, that between stasis and movement. With the later term, I refer to the recurring appearance of key images, objects and concepts, which give the narrative a certain cadence, a tide of reverberations that evokes the river central to the setting.

Constellations of meaning arise around key notions in *Mugre rosa*. For instance, eating—and its derivatives, such as food and its production, as well as hunger—are presented both as literal phenomena and as a rich source of figurative resonances. They are at the root of crucial diegetic situations—Mauro's insatiable hunger, general food scarcity, the manufacturing of pink slime, the narrator's discovery of canned tuna towards the end of the novel—as well as smaller but significant details, such as the flavours associated with the memories from the narrator's childhood. Feeding is linked to motherhood: Delfa, the woman who does the *actual* mothering of the young narrator would prefer to give her 'un churrasco *de verdad*', instead of the 'jamones artificiales' that 'le

56 Silvana Tanzi, ' "Quería recuperar lo poético en el horror". La escritora uruguaya Fernanda Trías habla desde Bogotá de su última novela, *Mugre rosa*', [entrevista] *Semanario Búsqueda*, 2094, 22 al 28 de octubre de 2020, <https://www.busqueda.com.uy/Secciones/-Queria-recuperar-lo-poetico-en-el-horror–uc2079> (accessed 16 November 2022).

gustaban a mi madre' (50; my emphasis), and the 'planta procesadora' is likened to a 'madre proveedora' (113). Eating can also have connotations of harm, as in Mauro's hunger, and in the confusion between Max and the 'pacú' biting the narrator (52–53). But the semantic field of eating comes up periodically, and in unexpected ways, as in the following example:

> Una cuadrilla de buzos había entrado al río a investigar el asunto de los peces, expulsados por el agua como por un gigantesco estómago […]. Llevaban órdenes del Ministerio de Salud. Llevaban instrumentos y mapas. Debían tomar muestras del suelo, de las algas, del misterio que dormía en el fondo del río. Pero el estómago también expulsó a los buzos, untados en su ácido. (203)

The river is likened to a live organism: not an object for human investigation, measurement and extraction, but as itself consuming, digesting and excreting human and nonhuman animals, while the word 'ácido' conflates the notions of gastric acid and toxicity.

Towards the end of *Mugre rosa*, we read about 'el muelle que se metía como *una lengua en una boca enferma*' (274; my emphasis), a simile blending the novel's central theme of disease and the imagery of the digestive system. Eating and hunger appear again, amidst the prevailing post-apocalyptic feel and the eerie absence of life that surrounds the narrator:

> Después distinguí los tonos del agua, secciones rojas, islotes de algas mecidos apenas por la respiración del río. La humedad trepaba por la piedra. Podía sentir la niebla encima, pegándose a mí, como si yo fuera una estatua y ella el musgo que acabaría por erosionarme. El sol intentaba penetrar en el cielo. No lo lograría. Se quedaría lejano, tenue, perdido detrás de anillos y anillos de nubes. […] El hambre me dolía en los huesos y en la cabeza, y había acallado cualquier pensamiento. […] Me quedé dormida, mientras el agua lamía el muro con *la lengua de un gato* y me mecía en su arrullo. (275; my emphasis)

Nonhuman agencies are again underscored, this time through the animalistic vitality of the river's 'breathing'; the reversal of the animate/inanimate positions between the narrator and the fog; the adscription of intentionality to the sun and of palpable materiality to the mist; and the celestial imagery of the 'anillos y anillos de nubes', which vastly expands the scene's spatial scale. The presence of these elements in and around the river points at a story beyond the human plot, a story that will by far outlast the narrator's lifespan (with the added important detail that, by this point, she appears as one of the last people left in the city). The end-of-the-world atmosphere conveyed most prominently in the last pages of the novel is pierced by the all-consuming

sensation of hunger, followed by its much-delayed satiety.[57] 'Lengua' appears again at the end, but slightly modified ('lengua de gato', as opposed to 'lengua en una boca enferma') as is the case with most key imagery throughout the novel. The periodical reappearance and transformation of motifs accords the narrative the cadence mentioned before. There is enough similarity for the motif to be recognizable for the reader, but also slight variation and alteration —movement within constraints—hence my likening of this stylistic feature to the ebb and flow of the river. This trait of the novel's formal configuration also counters the prevalent sense of stasis that emerges otherwise, and further expands the dynamism permeating through language amidst the devastation recounted in the plot. Here I give just one example, but this is a constant feature across *Mugre rosa*, through which the vibrancy of form asserts itself.

Two further corollaries of Trías' use of figurative language are worth highlighting. One is that, through simile, metaphor and conceit, the novel prolongs the effect of defamiliarization by which it invites us to conceptualize things otherwise. The second is that, in her exploration of literature's affective capabilities, Trías dwells on the bodily and the sensorial aspects of much of the lexis and imagery employed in the novel.

Eschewing a denotative style, Trías probes both the conceptual scope and the sensory and emotional resonances afforded by figurative language. Her constant metaphors provide richly imaginative propositions, of which examples abound: 'La ciudad convertida en una flor terrible, un capullo que se abría a la violencia y la recibía con gusto, con goce. Tuve miedo' (223). Simile functions in an analogous way; the adverb *como* crops up persistently, effecting comparisons that invite the reader to apprehend the situations presented in the novel in unusual terms, often drawing on embodied imagery and sensation. Thus, the hospital, El Clínicas, '[e]ra como un gran panal y quienes entraban corrían el riesgo de quedar para siempre atrapados en su sustancia pegajosa' (143); 'Cada sonido se distinguía, filoso y nítido, como un paisaje' (212). Such proliferating use of non-literal expression creates striking images whose resonances are affective, conceptual and aesthetic. It is Trías' stylistic signature in *Mugre rosa*, encapsulating much of the vibrancy which this essay identifies: for all the devastation that the novel recounts, language is probed incessantly to reveal its boundless potentiality.

Furthering this vibrancy is Trías' extraordinary engagement with the bodily and the material; her prose effects a rich and textured exploration of sensation, affect and emotion through figurative language grounded on materiality. The narrator's attachment to Max, for example, is repeatedly described in terms reminiscent of the 'hilo' that ties Amanda and Nina in Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014): 'me alejé, temblando,

57 I agree with Mackey that 'la pregunta "¿Cómo sería sentir hambre constante" tiene su respuesta en la visión del futuro distópico que plantea la novela' (Mackey, 'Aguas ambiguas', 271).

decidida a cinchar del elástico hasta romperlo, anticipando el dolor del latigazo' (159).[58] The narrator's tense relationship with her mother is also described in physical terms, as a painful tug-of-war (83). In the multi-scalar affective texture of *Mugre rosa,* the granular exploration of non-cathartic emotions such as tedium and despondency is as important as the portrayal of much grander passions, namely fear. Tiredness—physical and emotional—becomes overwhelming, a *leitmotif* in the novel, with its periodical description constituting yet another instance of the ebb-and-flow cadence of the text (e.g., 120, 141, 142 & 155). Towards the end, after Mauro's parents appear to have abandoned him, the narrator describes '[l]a vida enfocada como un embudo en Mauro, en su estómago, en sus quejidos nocturnos. Ahora sentía el cansancio como un absceso, un dolor encapsulado y lleno de pus que no encontraría alivio excepto mediante un tajo' (207). The narrative thus appeals to the reader's body, implicating it as a 'sounding board' for our mental simulations of the narrator's sensations and emotions.[59] What is striking in these examples is the use of simile, the material imagery employed, and the call to the reader's embodied imagination to apprehend both the scale of the narrator's tiredness and the qualia of the experience. In this way, the vibrancy of Trías' prose can also be understood as oriented towards seeking to affect the reader's body.

Stories of the Nonhuman

In his discussion of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)—another work well-known by Trías—David James demonstrates how granular aspects of description 'can reroute the negative affects we expect them to affirm'.[60]

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58 Schweblin's novella is a clear antecedent of *Mugre rosa*. Lack of space prohibits a discussion of the many links between both texts, especially at the level of theme and motif (most notably toxicity, ecocide, motherhood, 'monstrous' children and ecosickness). Both David in *Distancia de rescate* and the narrator of *Mugre rosa* return to storytelling insistently in an attempt to identify the starting point of the irreversible and mysterious harm that spreads through the diegetic world. Schweblin's novel has been widely read as an instance of the gothic, a category through which Mackey approaches *Mugre rosa,* specifically as an example of the 'ecogótico rioplatense' (Mackey, 'Aguas ambiguas' PAGE). Despite these points of contact, I see differences in tone and affective resonances; while fear is the dominant emotion in *Distancia de rescate*, Trías explores a wider constellation of uneasy affects. They also differ stylistically, with Schweblin's economy of expressive means contrasting with Trías' lyrical and figurative approach. See Samanta Schweblin, *Distancia de rescate* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2014).

59 See Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State U. P., 2017), 3. A compelling model of embodied simulation in fiction is put forward by Marco Caracciolo, in his *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin/Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2014).

60 James, *Discrepant Solace*, 67.

The discussion in the previous section started to explore the 'sense of potential' that language, in particular figurative language, opens up in *Mugre rosa*, against the 'horrors that ostensibly structure it'.[61] Another aspect of Trías' style that works in a similar way is the careful description of certain *things* and nonhuman animals, which presents them as precious, unique and unusually alive. Against the background of ruin and destruction, the choice of object, and the particularities of the language employed to craft such descriptions, are significant. Though the examples are numerous, the two passages I discuss here centre on fish: a live fish and canned tuna, respectively. Their placement at the tipping points of the narrative creates a certain symmetry: they are both 'the last fish', the last fish alive and the last non-mutant fish available for human consumption, respectively:

> La línea se tensó de golpe y vi al pescador cinchar y enrollar el *reel* hasta que un pez diminuto se alzó en el aire. Se curvaba sin fuerza, pero el breve brillo de las escamas plateadas despertó en el hombre una sonrisa. Lo agarró con la mano sin guante y le quitó el anzuelo. Quién sabe qué muerte y qué milagro contenía ese animal, y así lo miramos, el hombre y yo. Esperé que lo pusiera en el balde, aunque fuera por un rato, pero él lo devolvió enseguida al agua. Era tan liviano que entró sin hacer ruido. El último pez. Un minuto más tarde ya estaría lejos, inmune a la espesura de raíces, a la trampa mortal de algas y desechos. El hombre giró para mirarme y me hizo un gesto con la mano. Este es el punto de mi relato, el falso comienzo. Aquí podría inventarme un augurio o una señal de todo lo que vendría después, pero no. Eso fue todo: un día cualquiera a una hora cualquiera, excepto por ese pez que se elevó en el aire y volvió a caer al agua. (16–17)

The tiny fish glides through the passage, its delicate, agile body shimmering, vibrating with life for a moment, before disappearing amidst the deadly 'algas y desechos'. The preciousness of this life on the brink of extinction is captured in the fleeting quality of its movement through water, its fragility enhanced by the lexis employed to describe it ('diminuto', 'breve', 'liviano'). The phonic and rhythmic elements of the sentences included before 'el último pez', with the profusion of sibilance and the soft murmuring given by 'm' alliteration in 'qué muerte y qué milagro contenía ese animal', all contribute to creating a sense of delicate harmony on the page. I am reminded here of James' words apropos McCarthy: 'Against the weight of biospheric ruin and physiological decline, description phonically and rhythmically asserts itself, redressing the diminishment *The Road* so shockingly catalogues'.[62] Trías' engrossing

61 James, *Discrepant Solace*, 67.
62 James, *Discrepant Solace*, 67.

use of language and the careful cadence of the sentences invite us to follow the movements of the fish, and the mesmerized gaze of the fisherman and the narrator (an act of seeing in which we are also immersed) until we abruptly realize that this is 'el último pez'. The magnitude of this revelation is reflected in the grammatical and syntactical particularities of the only nominal sentence in the passage, which breaks the instant of the fish's ephemeral presence, far away already in the sentence that follows. The last few sentences underscore the narrator's preoccupation with the construction of her 'relato', with the final clauses bringing back the ordinary yet (in hindsight) most extraordinary apparition of the *pez*: a presence that glides through the last sentence, evanescently, once more, before disappearing again. A movement of ebb and flow is thus perceptible within a single paragraph. I detect hesitation in the narrator's desire to utilize the fish for narrative purposes—to turn its appearance into a narratively significant moment in her own account, thus domesticating the timescale of the nonhuman and imposing an anthropocentric causality to it, in order to make it fit her own individual story. But the fish slips away. The narrator appears to do, with her words, what the fisherman has just performed with his actions: capturing the fish for a moment, contemplating it in awe, and letting it go. The self-referentiality in the narrator's account leaves no doubt about the intentionality of her gesture.

A different type of fish appears towards the end of the novel, after the fire at the processing plant has caused an overwhelming degree of devastation, especially as food scarcity skyrockets from this point on. Persistent hunger has punctuated the narrative throughout; yet the evocation of disgust has marked the narrator's description of the pink slime used to fabricate 'Carnemás', the main source of nourishment readily available (87). In the dystopian society imagined by Trías, protein is almost exclusively a manufactured product, purported to provide the necessary nutrients and conceived to yield maximum profit. Food is therefore stripped from all its sensorial, psychological, emotional, social and ritual dimensions. By the end, however, even 'Carnemás' might not be available for long. In this context, roaming through the wrecked city, the narrator breaks into an old *almacén*, desperately searching through the shelves, until she finds some tins:

> […] vi el dibujo y las letras azules: *Atún en aceite*. Dios mío. Y por un momento eso es lo único que pensé: Dios mío. Estaba eufórica, casi mareada; no podía recordar la última vez que había visto una de esas. […] La adrenalina se sentía como un ardor, una sustancia ajena a mi cuerpo. […]Adentro estaba la carne imposible, la carne prohibida de un animal extinto. […]
>
> Tiré de la presilla y la lata se abrió. Enseguida subió el perfume marino. Lo olí; acerqué la carne rosada a la nariz y me quedé con los ojos

> entrecerrados, disparada hacia los recuerdos como una bala. Veloz, dolorosa. […] Apreté la lengua contra el paladar hasta que soltó el aceite. La bala seguía horadando la memoria y ya no pude saber si lo que *mordía* era una fruta, el durazno que soltaba su jugo almibarado y que debía lamer antes de que se precipitara entre los dedos y me pegoteara el brazo, o si lo que *oía* eran las moscas revoloteando sobre las peras, que se habían ido machucando en algunas zonas, como parches de una piel más blanda, o si *veía* a Delfa quitándole las semillas a la sandía, con paciencia, escarbando la pulpa roja, porosa y crujiente. (234–36; my emphasis in second paragraph)

The description of the narrator's discovery and exhilaration is vividly rendered in the first paragraph, her excitement and urgency stressed rhetorically by the repetition of 'Dios mío'. Trías' language compels our embodied simulation of the narrator's euphoric state; we share not only her perspective but also her excitement, with the narrative inviting us to simulate the rush of pounding adrenaline, and her desperate hunger, in our bodies. The listing of actions in the preterite, which opens the second paragraph, establishes a controlled tempo that then gives way to the potent 'experiential feel' (in Caracciolo's idiom) of the tuna's smell and, later, the oil inside our mouth. The long sentence opening with 'la bala' presents a succession of rich sensorial images that continue to engage the reader in the feast of the narrator's embodied memories, all the more precious given the immense desolation in which they are inserted. The well-established links between food and memory, food and nostalgia, explode in a long sentence of astounding vividness and sensuality. The intensity of the narrator's embodied memories is heightened by *synaesthesia*—movement and transformation again, confounding the physical experiences introduced by the verbs in italics, which fluidly succeed each other—and by the precision and lavishness of detail. Style redoubles the sense of abundance in this long, expansive and euphonic sentence, rendering the physical sensations attached to the enjoyment of the now-disappeared fruits present, momentarily, in the passage.

In several ways, style is working against plot here. As James asserts about *The Road*, 'description counteracts—only for a moment, but vividly *through* that moment nonetheless—the annihilation it conjures and never pretends to heal'.[63] A similar point can be made about *Mugre rosa*, especially in certain moments when the nonhuman prominently takes centre stage. Trías 'rescues' the living fish, the canned tuna, the fruits, and the fly through the vividness of her prose, briefly but powerfully on the page. Given *Mugre rosa*'s challenges to linearity (concomitant to ideologies of progress), in such fleeting but profoundly affecting apparitions, a

63 James, *Discrepant Solace*, 66–67.

foodstuff like canned tuna radiates beyond this diegetic moment, telling a story that transcends the anthropocentric plot. In the exhilarating presence of 'la carne prohibida de un animal extinto', Trías is pointing to a story of oceanic destruction—unfolding in our own world—that 'is painful to contemplate and tempting to ignore'.[64] Through the introduction of *things* that were once alive but have now disappeared, the novel reminds us that 'every living creature, from humans to fungi, tells evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization, extinctions and survivals'.[65] The cans of tuna that the narrator finds at this critical moment are a reminder that all matter is 'storied matter': 'a material "mesh" of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked'.[66]

One further effect of the above—and of the many aspects of Trías' style discussed here—is that the novel's thrust is to go against an economical use of language. The diegetic world of *Mugre rosa* is one of crushing scarcity but, stylistically, the novel is an assertion of abundance and a performative rebuttal of profit. Unlike 'Carnemás', language in *Mugre rosa* is not 'pensado para rendir' (87). I see in this a possible parallel of the narrator's relationship with Mauro, which goes well beyond the strictures of paid labour and (just like Delfa's relationship to her) becomes another form of mothering.[67] The 'excess' that intervenes in the narrator's bond with Mauro is emotional; the 'excess' that the novel evinces in its orientation towards its reader is aesthetic. In the first case, the novel shows the inadequacy of a commercial logic to account for and fairly compensate for outsourced parental care. In the second, it openly rebels against the neoliberal imperatives of efficiency, commodification and instrumentalism.

Conclusions

Apropos the novel as a form, Trexler has underscored its 'capacity to interrogate the emotional, aesthetic and living experience of the Anthropocene', positing it as a vital site for the latter's articulation.[68] *Mugre rosa* would serve as a case in point. Moreover, the text displays a keen

64 Alaimo, 'Oceanic Origins', 186.

65 Iovino & Oppermann, 'Introduction', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Iovino & Oppermann, 7.

66 Iovino & Oppermann, 'Introduction', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Iovino & Oppermann, 1–2.

67 See Lorena Amaro, 'Infancias monstruosas: *Debimos ser felices*, de Rafaela Lahore, y *Mugre rosa*, de Fernanda Trías', in *Infancias queer/cuir: nuevas miradas sobre la infancia desde el sur*, ed. Alejandra Josiowicz, Cynthia Francica & María José Punte, *Mistral. Journal of Latin American Women's Intellectual History*, 1:2 (2021), 20–34; available at < https://doi.org/10.21827/mistral.2.38026> (accessed 19 November 2022).

68 Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 6, 23.

interest in language's capacities for conceptual world-making but also for interrogating that very process. This is not only apparent in the narrator's comments about the construction of her own narrative, but also in her dissection of the official versions of events propagated through the TV, a critical activity that challenges the authorities' sustained efforts to mould society's relationship to the nonhuman in the diegetic world. As one of many meta-literary gestures in the novel, this invites a similar critical attitude on the reader's part. In *Mugre rosa*, Trías engages with the 'pressure the Anthropocene puts on how to conceptualize humans and our relationships to other humans, other nonhumans, and other things'.[69] The novel denaturalizes solidified assumptions underpinning a state of affairs that has led to the current environmental crises; explores our material and affective connections with the more-than-human; glimpses into the entanglements that make up the 'mesh' (including the histories of the nonhuman); and offers a sideway gaze into our present and potential future. Trías, furthermore, effects the relentless defamilarization of some of our most treasured—and affectively charged—notions (What is a mother? What is food? What is a habitable city? What is love? What is a human being?). Ecocritics such as Houser and Weik von Mossner have argued that, in cultural objects like fiction, affect has a capacity to influence our ethical and environmental orientations; whilst concurring with their views, I am far from suggesting that Trías simply feeds us a spoonful of bad affects in the pursuit of an environmental agenda. *Mugre rosa* probes a conception of fiction as a form of understanding, and as a challenge to the *status quo*, while undertaking an aesthetic search that interrogates the potentialities of the novel as form, and of literary language more generally.[70] Through poetic and formal patterns, the narrative also explores ways of apprehending that point towards the non-linear and the non-anthropocentric. Admittedly, this aspect does not mean we read a post-anthropocentric novel, but it does imply a dynamism and a sense of vitality that acts over and against the desolation prevailing in the story—a vitality at work in the material and affective reverberations of both the small (the tiny fish) and the vast entities (a river) that populate Trías' enthralling world.*

69 Merola, ' "What Do We Do But Keep Breathing" ', 26.

70 While partaking in many of the traits of Trexler's 'climate fiction', *Mugre rosa* transcends the common places of 'cli lit' discussed by Heather Houser in 'Is Climate Writing Stuck?', *Literary Hub*, 3 January 2022 <https://lithub.com/is-climate-writing-stuck/> (accessed 6 September 2023)

* Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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