

Fornoff, Carolyn. *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2024. 264 pp.

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Much of recent scholarship in the environmental humanities has focused on what environmental historian Jason W. Moore, in his influential 2011 essay “Ecology, Capitalism, and the Nature of our Times,” terms the “analysis of impacts,” that is, an approach limited primarily to documenting the effects of extractive industries on local environments and public health (116). While he acknowledges the importance of drawing attention to socioecological degradation, he calls for a more comprehensive analytical methodology for understanding the co-constitutive relations between cultural regimes, ideologies, economic practices, and environmental transformations, a proposal he encapsulates within the term “capitalist world-ecology.” This concept aims to capture the material relations between culture-specific worldviews and their implementation through the manipulation of energy regimes that include natural ecological cycles as well as fossil fuels and human labor. In this way, he disrupts the nature/culture binomial opposition, acknowledging how environments are co-constructions orchestrated by overarching ideologies and technological interventions; in this particular case, those of globalized capitalism. The reverse of this project would necessarily entail the examination of alternative world-ecologies, not only those seemingly existing prior to or beyond capitalism, but also those that arise from within it, in opposition, as collective forms of resistance and re-imagining both our places within environments and what modernity itself could become.

Carolyn Fornoff’s *Subjunctive Aesthetics* carries this project into the artistic sphere. Going beyond but also complementing what she describes as a “forensic aesthetics” in works representing the socioecological impacts of extractivism, which she associates with tropes of inevitability and hopelessness, she analyzes art, film, and literature that “contest the definitiveness of foreclosure and instead mobilize desire, emotion, and the imagination to invoke the potential of a postextractivist future” (2). Fornoff’s book is inspirational in several ways. On the one hand, Fornoff offers innovative ways of reading for climate change, even in works in which the theme seems tangential or beyond their scope. This methodology is particularly important due to the challenges inherent in representing concrete, localized socioecological crises as unambiguously linked to anthropogenic climate change. Furthermore, it helps to address the temporal lag in cultural production relating to climate change,

which has only recently become a mainstream discourse in most of Latin America. At the same time, Fornoff's book is the first ecocritical study to dedicate itself entirely to Mexican cultural production, acknowledging Indigenous Mexican contributions to rethinking our relations with our environments, but also those that emerge as counterdiscourses within modernizing projects or from the ruins of modernity itself. Finally, her methodology for drawing out structures of hope, even within works depicting seemingly apocalyptic scenarios, has much to offer scholars looking to combat the sense of apathy and helplessness infecting much of the current discourse on environmental issues and climate change.

As her title indicates, Fornoff roots her study in what she diagnoses as a "subjunctive turn" in Mexican cultural production relating to environmental topics. Extrapolating from standard Spanish language teaching, she defines the subjunctive mood as the "realm of the potential and the uncertain," in contrast to the indicative as the "grammar of *what is*" (2). In cultural production, subjunctive modes of representation would thus move beyond didacticism and what in Spanish is often called "concientización," or raising awareness, towards imagining alternatives and counterdiscursive practices. She links the subjunctive mode to the unreal and the speculative, but insists that these are only one manifestation among many possibilities (3). She emphasizes that subjunctive aesthetics can also appear within realistic representation and the documentary mode, since the subjunctive is syntactically linked to relations of contingency and dependency: "the subjunctive always points away from itself and toward another relation, indexing grammar's structure as an assemblage, a web of coordinates harnessed together" (5). In that sense, subjunctive aesthetics in environmental representations communicate human dependency on the planet, on the environments we inhabit, never in isolation, but always together with other species (6). It is precisely this interplay between the real and the possible in artistic production that dismantles the neoliberal capitalist discourse of development's foreclosure of alternatives, not only questioning the inevitability of extractivism as the primary mode of economic development in Latin America, but also opening the discourse of modernity to post-extractivist, "alternative narratives, values, and grammars of territorial belonging" (4).

The corpus of works Fornoff analyzes is temporally framed between 2012 and 2022, a time period when climate change became a salient theme in Mexican cultural and political debate, but during which little concrete action was taken due to Mexico's economic reliance on oil and mineral extraction. The body of the book is comprised of five chapters, each linked to a specific environmental topic and an attendant "subjunctive strategy" designed to disrupt the sense of foreclosure that often

accompanies them: rewriting, counterfactual mourning, contiguity, sensorial immersion, and sustainable cultural technologies. At the same time, she is careful to link her ecocritical perspective to established areas within Mexican cultural studies, including neocolonialism, violence, Indigenous rights, critiques of the state, and migration.

The first chapter, “Environmental Rewriting,” analyzes how a series of contemporary authors revise canonical, nationalistic portrayals (by authors like Alfonso Reyes and Juan Rulfo) of the Mexican *campo* as static and essential, looking to reinscribe it with specificity, temporal change, and environmental history. The bulk of the chapter focuses on Verónica Gerber Bicecci’s *Otro día . . . (poemas sintéticos)* and *La compañía*, books published in 2019 that document her museum installations of the same titles. In the first work, Gerber Bicecci reworks several of José Juan Tablada’s haikus, themselves rewritings of Japanese classics, for modern, industrialized environments, thereby disrupting the humanistic sense of timeless, immutable nature. Similarly, *La compañía* rewrites almost word for word Amparo Dávila’s horrific portrayal of patriarchy in the short story “El huésped,” replacing the titular monster with Minera Rosicler, a US-owned mining corporation that polluted local town San Felipe Nuevo Mercurio with mercury tailings and industrial waste imported from the US. The story is accompanied by a montage of photographic and cartographic materials documenting the mine’s pollution, as well as snippets of interviews with affected local people. In this way, Gerber Bicecci captures the horrors of living with extractive industries, as well as the haunting legacy they leave behind upon abandoning the site. As Fornoff summarizes, “Gerber Bicecci uses rewriting to approximate the expansive, sedimented temporalities of the Anthropocene—processes that are long in the making and collectively produced” (28). Nevertheless, the act of rewriting itself allegorizes the possibility of change and revision to environments and art.

The second chapter, “Land Defense and Counterfactual Mourning,” examines the problem of the targeted assassinations of environmental activists in Mexico, as well as artistic strategies designed to keep their memory and political projects alive without transforming them into reified symbols. Taking as her point of departure the slogan “Samir vive” (referring to murdered Indigenous and environmental activist Samir Flores Soberanes), Fornoff argues that “visual and discursive acts of counterfactual mourning refer to death but deny it as such, rerouting back to life in a subjunctive expression of desire for how the world *could have been* or *could still be*” (59). Examining films, poetry, and street art, Fornoff shows how reanimating murdered activists brings them back into presence in a space of communality, effectively “negat(ing) terror’s intended eradication of space” (72). The second part of the chapter focuses on Naomí Rincón Gallardo’s multimedia series *Una trilogía de cuevas*,

which engages queer aesthetics and references to women ranging from Mesoamerican goddess Coyolxauhqui to antimining activist Rosalinda Dionicio to “articulate a transtemporal lineage of women murdered for pursuing goals that flew in the face of patriarchy” (86). As Fornoff argues, these works use irreverence rather than factual evidence to foreground the inextricable relation between the slow violence of environmental degradation and the “bare violence” of repression, while simultaneously rejecting justice and closure as the goals of representation in favor of reanimating ongoing communal activism.

Chapter three, “Extinction poetics,” uses a similar approach to discuss representations of extinction in the work of three poets: Karen Villeda, Xitlátl “Sisi” Rodríguez Mendoza, and Maricela Guerrero. Contrasting these poets’ reinvention of endangered life with the reification of endangered species on Mexican currency, which places them on the reverse of dead, canonical historical figures, as well as José Emilio Pacheco and Homero Aridjis’s fatalistic representations of environmental ruin and species extinctions, Fornoff argues that “poetry, more than any other artistic form, facilitates interspecies contiguity, or proximity that does not consolidate ontological difference into anthropocentric recognition” (93). She thus views poetry as an artistic practice that inherently draws difference into contiguous relation within the text. The first poem she analyzes in depth, Karen Villeda’s *Dodo*, approximates Jason W. Moore’s proposal for an ecology of relations, showcasing the ideological and economic forces at work in the first celebratized extinction, that of the dodo bird. Fornoff argues that the poet’s use of the present tense and representation of human settlers using fragmentation captures the “imperial desires and drives that bring about extinction—a system that takes on a life of its own, propelled forward in the present tense” (104). In a similar vein but with a distinct focus, her analysis of Xóchitl Rodríguez Mendoza’s *Jaws* analyzes the poem’s interplay between identification and disidentification with a shark, carried out in part by alternating between first-person and third-person points of view in representations of both the shark and the poetic voice. In this way, the poet creates a sense of material proximity and cohabitation that generates a structure of shared feeling that exceeds scientific knowledge (106). Finally, Fornoff argues that Maricela Guerrero’s *El sueño de toda célula* moves toward an ethics of mutual care and worldbuilding through the poetic voice’s proximity and distance from a pack of Mexican grey wolves, using the shared biology of cells as an extended metaphor. Contrasting the sense of conviviality with the scientific discourse of wildlife management, the poem generates a “subjunctive, unrealized desire for a space where everything enters, metonymic of the planet itself, composing of contiguous material assemblages” (119).

The fourth chapter, “The Rural Resilience Film,” examines three documentaries that deal with climate-related water scarcity and flooding, foregrounding the ways in which rural communities adapt to climate change and simultaneously resist the neoliberal foreclosure of alternatives. The chapter begins by problematizing the discourses of resilience and adaptation in neoliberal ideology—that is, the arguments that climate change is irreversible and that systematic change is impossible; therefore, people can only adapt to it. It then discusses the international boom in environmental documentaries and film festivals, showing how market dynamics influence film production designed to appeal to broad audiences, particularly in the use of ideological ambiguity, sensorial ethnography, and minimal dialogue to avoid overpopulating the screen with subtitles. As she discusses in her analysis of the first film, Everardo González’s *Cuates de Australia*, a documentary about cyclical drought in a cattle-ranching town in Coahuila, this purposeful ambiguity is both problematic and fruitful: “subjunctive aesthetics can, at times, perform a sort of wish-fulfillment that dilutes the audience’s understanding of changing climactic patterns and shores up the belief in the resilience of communities to weather drought through the reassuring narrative closure brought by rain” (131). On the other hand, she argues, this nostalgic return to the *campo* and its cattle ranching culture belies the contemporary narrative of rural, Northern Mexico as an essentialized site of primordial violence and criminality. Somewhat in contrast, her analysis of Betzabé García’s *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* counters the nationalistic narrative of the *campo* as the center of Mexican identity by foregrounding a town in Sinaloa whose residents were forcibly displaced by the state government to create a water reservoir supplying Mazatlán’s tourist resorts. The film focuses on the town’s residents who refused to evacuate, continuing to live in the town’s flooded ruins. However, the film provides no explanation of the history of political conflict behind the town’s flooding until the conclusion; Fornoff argues that this ambiguity consists in a subjunctive aesthetics that allows the non-local viewer to imagine similar effects worldwide, given the future of planetary sea-rise. The final film she analyzes, Laura Herrero Galvín’s *El Remolino*, focuses on flooding caused by deforestation in the municipality of Catzajá, Chiapas. Fornoff argues that the gender non-conformity of the children of the sole family that refuses to abandon the town foregrounds an ethics of care that requires breaking with inherited, familiar legacies and cultivating “risky attachments” (144). While avoiding sensationalism, fatalism, and foreclosure and “promoting ethical engagement between spectator and subject,” Fornoff nonetheless warns that “the genre of rural resilience runs the risk of romanticizing deprivation and slipping into the sublime in its aesthetic treatment of ruined, dystopian, or increasingly hostile rural environments” (147).

Addressing the reality that the majority of spectators of Mexican films are not Mexican due to the corporate structure of the film distribution industry in Mexico, Fornoff's fifth chapter looks at how subjunctive aesthetics can seep into and transform the structure of the film industry itself. She discusses the relations between oil and film in Mexico, not only in the use of petroleum products and carbon emissions in film-making, but also in the state sponsorship of the film industry in boom-and-bust cycles corresponding to the expansion and contraction of the oil industry. She theorizes "postcarbon cinema," as "both a modality of cultural expression and critique as well as a space of active experimentation in storytelling practices that can be aligned with precepts of degrowth" (152). She discusses three alternatives to the traditional, carbon-intensive, Hollywood-dominated film industry, which has also limited the distribution of independent films and documentaries and excluded rural areas and smaller towns from viewership. The first is the use of alternative platforms such as YouTube; she takes as a case study a YouTube series focused on climate change called *El tema* and cohosted by actor Gael García Bernal and Mixe public intellectual Yásnaya Elena Aguilar. She centers her analysis on the fourth episode, which draws to the forefront problems with sea level rise and oil pollution in Tabasco, a Gulf state whose primary source of revenue is oil extraction, and proposes a post-oil future for the state. The second part of the chapter discusses Cine Móvil ToTo—an NGO that travels throughout rural Mexico showing public films powered by local people pedaling four stationary bicycles—as an alternative to commercial distribution. Finally, she proposes localized, low-impact film production techniques as a counter to the environmental disaster caused by Baja Studios, where 1997 Hollywood blockbuster *Titanic* was filmed, when it released millions of gallons of chlorinated water directly into the sea, killing much of the marine life in the area. These alternative filmmaking strategies relate to subjunctive aesthetics in imagining "film as it could be," as a "subjunctive reinvention of infrastructures that serve the commons, a commons that is collaboratively conceived, equitable, and durable in the long term" (172-73).

The book's conclusion ties all the chapters together in a coherent line of argumentation regarding how post-extractivist imaginaries can be both conceived of and implemented through subjunctive aesthetics. Overall, I believe that this book constitutes a valuable and innovative contribution to both Mexican cultural studies and the Latin American environmental humanities, and I think it will be of great use not only in pedagogy on ecological topics and art in Latin America, but also in pointing toward future lines of inquiry for ecocritics in a field that has become somewhat saturated with the analysis of impacts and "forensic aesthetics."