

Victoria Samarago, *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021. 276p.

What do herds of horses in Brazil, oil fields in Venezuela, and slash-and-burn practices in Mexico have in common? In one way or another, they all relate to the literary universes created by Latin American authors throughout the 20th century. More importantly, they point towards the rich, layered, and vastly under researched relationship between fiction and the environment in South and Central America. Victoria Saramago's *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America* brings together these and other entities to cast new light on the connections between literature, land stewardship, and deforestation across Latin America. This work constitutes a timely and necessary intervention in a field — environmental humanities in Spanish and Portuguese contexts — that has recently been enriched by a number of publications expanding what it means, ultimately, to write environment-oriented literary criticism. Throughout five densely researched chapters that can be read like stand-alone essays, the author presents clearly articulated and well-argued approaches to the work of five Latin American authors whose publications have not, for the most part, yet been the object of ecological readings.

Chapter 1, “The Sertão Reconstructed,” investigates the connections between literary representations of the *sertão*, focusing on the work of Brazilian author João Guimarães Rosa and the environmental transformations of the space of the *sertão*. Saramago persuasively shows how literary imaginaries produce an impact upon the “real world.” Moreover, her work effectively contributes to questioning the divide between real landscapes and the imaginary of fictionalized environments, by demonstrating how these

are not only related, but actively participate in processes of co-production and ecological transformation. Chapter 2, “Narrative Conservation and Conservationist Narratives: Alejo Carpentier’s Gran Sabana” looks at *Los Pasos Perdidos* (1953), the primary source in this chapter where the author tries to understand “how does the novel participate in and contribute to an environmental memory of the Venezuelan Guiana, more specifically, of the Gran Sabana” (63). Chapter 3, the first of Part II of the book (centered on the notion of *development*) is titled “Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* and the Green Revolution,” and promotes a dialogue between the Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) and the representations of Jalisco in Rulfo’s work, linking the aestheticization of space, agricultural transformations, and the aesthetics of *novelas de revolución*. Chapter 4, “Besieged Plots: Nonhuman Agency in Clarice Lispector’s *A Cidade Sitiada*,” addresses the entanglements between human and non-human in the Ukrainian-born Brazilian author, with a focus on her earlier works. Finally, in “Against Wind and Tide: Fiction, Ecology, and the Politics in Mario Vargas Llosa’s Amazon,” the last chapter and constituting the third section of the book (“The Rights of Nature, the Rights of Fiction”), Saramago problematizes Vargas Llosa’s approach to the Amazon and to indigenous communities, and analyses the ambiguities and tensions across the author’s literary, political, and ethical commitments.

In the first chapter, in many respects a pivot that sets the tone for the book, Saramago shows that land conservancy reforms in Brazil throughout the second half of the 20th century took into account the imaginaries projected by Guimarães Rosa. To do so, she argues that ecotourism in the *sertão* was fueled by the curiosity of the readers of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. But even more important is how *Fictional Environments* points toward the inconsistencies in the managerial approach to the landscape of the *sertão*, and how the environment tells us a different story from that recreated by Guimarães Rosa’s works. Saramago draws our attention to how the tourist will find recently planted soy fields, eucalyptus, and orange trees, and how these recent farming and developmental projects are meticulously removed from the map of the “literary *sertão*”: “Instead, the circuit is based on the traveler’s willingness to ignore the elements of today’s *sertão* that do not fit into the Rosian universe," 42).

Here, Saramago explores at length the tensions between “universal” claims in Guimarães Rosa’s work and local environmental effects. But probably the most salient idea proposed in this chapter comes in the concept of “reversed mimesis,” which allows Saramago to analyze the reproduction of literary universes upon the local ecosystems, thus inverting the vector of the Aristotelian mimetic process. As she demonstrates, it is not literature that imitates the world in this instance, but land stewardship practices that take fiction as an orienting blueprint for action: here, “it is this area that represents the Rosian *sertão*, and not the other way around” (44). In order to do so, however, the institutions and entities in charge of land management had to domesticate the novel (another poignant concept deployed in the chapter).

The second example of environmental projects entangled with the literature of Guimarães Rosa takes us to the Manuelzão project, a water management and health improvement plan in the Rio das Velhas basin endowed with environmental education objectives. After thinking through literature imitating environmental realities and land management imitating literary representations, Victoria Saramago arrives at a third point, connecting the imitation of the *sertão* through fiction and the materialization of literary tropes in real landscapes: the concept of “fictional reality,” marked by a *referential environment* that serves as an index to the works of Guimarães Rosa.

Moving on to a careful analysis of the literary treatment of local environments in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, Saramago shows that the novel itself already deals with the topic of ecological change, namely by focusing on how the transformations exerted upon the landscape are perceived by the characters over time. Saramago’s interpretation places special emphasis on how Rosa was attuned to a certain idea of a *sertão* that “needs to be filled,” that is, a space perceived as deserted that must be occupied by developmental infrastructure and governmental presence. This proves to be an exceptionally generative idea, and one that dialogues with the colonial occupation of the territory now known as Brazil, by coopting an imaginary of a “*terra nullius*” (Sylvia Wynter) ripe for occupation (52-53).

After going over the literary tropes of the novel, Saramago invites the reader to consider yet another case of literary and environmental crossovers: the Grande Sertão

Veredas National Park, a biome designed to emulate the landscape of a fictional narrative. Saramago draws our attention to the fact that the inhabitants of the region (“*veredeiros*”) were expelled from many of these lands in order to build the park, and points toward the tragic irony of the process that kicked out the people of the *sertão* in order to create a hyper touristic circuit of the *sertão* itself. Ultimately, what was at stake here was a process of deliberate desertification of a place to accommodate an economic project, supported by a fictional reality in which an idea of desertification was constructed as a critique, and not as mere representation.

The argument developed in *Fictional Environments*, however, takes this line of inquiry even further, and addresses the process of deaestheticization that is at the basis of such a logistical operation: in order to create the national park, the literary depth of the work of Guimarães Rosa had to be suppressed, and his (fictional) landscapes taken as realistic descriptions of a space/geography/biome. This entails downplaying the complex, multilayered, and oftentimes ambiguous quality of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as a literary work, in an operation that actually impoverishes the work of Guimarães Rosa, while claiming to be honoring it.

In the second chapter, dedicated to the work of Carpentier, Saramago peruses books and reports for foreign readers about the oil resources in Venezuela, and compares them to the literary representations of oil extraction areas. Moreover, she insightfully demonstrates how the novel *Los Pasos Perdidos* conserves, in literary form, the memory of a forested region. To do so, we are invited to think about the connections between the literary trend known as “*lo real maravilloso*” and environmental transformations, and how this form proves especially apt to work through specific, alternative notions of time, or temporalities (67): an understanding of time as apparently static, but where the landscape faces constant and deep changes (among other instances, Saramago brings in Carpentier’s engagement with the sightings of flying saucers over the Orinoco river).

According to Saramago, Carpentier anticipates Timothy Morton’s critique of *ecomimesis*, by “questioning the gap between the content and the frame” (76): in other words, by disrupting the idea of the forest as a “purely virgin world”, i.e., stuck in a purely static temporality, one that is identified in the West as belonging in the past. She analyses

the gold and diamond exploitation in the Amazon during the first half of the 20th century, with a focus on the Santa Elena region, as well as the oil extractivism in the Orinoco basin. The oil fields constitute a picturesque spectacle, so far detached from the images of an oil-fueled modernity that fill the modernist imaginary, and that would not be possible without the destructive action exerted upon the El Tigre region. In this sense, Saramago continues, it is essentially a “spatialization of time” that is at stake here, under the guise of “conservation efforts.” Conservation should not be perceived here in the same sense that the environmentalist movement would fight for later on, but rather as the “preservation of a collective environmental memory through depictions of the forest (...) and [the] representation of the forest as a self-sufficient microcosm” (79). In the process, the book makes a compelling case for the articulation of Carpentier’s environmental concerns and the Caracas declaration. Paramount to Saramago’s argument is the essay published by the Cuban-born author in *Letra y Solfa* addressing the degradation of Venezuelan soundscapes, specifically in the Valles de Aragua, as well as the novel *Los Passos Perdidos*, which according to the author might have contributed to the development of a broader movement of environmental protection and awareness (81).

Saramago revisits the industrialization of the Venezuelan Guiana and questions the tensions between the original cultures of the region (exemplified in the very name of the deity Canaima, central to the Caribbean spirituality, and used in the designation of the Canaima National Park) and the developmentalist movement in vivid and fascinating terms, even if at times the reader is left wanting to know more about the indigenous cultures mentioned throughout the book.

Chapter 3 focuses on Juan Rulfo’s magnum opus *Pedro Páramo*, exploring multiple forms of crosspollination between the narrative and the Mexican Agricultural Program. The novel is read in conversation with the corpus of *novelas de revolución*, and their purported intent of promoting a sense of national identity based on the revolutionary event. Saramago aptly combines archival materials such as Rulfo’s interviews and documents concerning the author’s views on Jalisco and the workers deserting the land due to soil erosion and corn cultivation. By doing so, Saramago is able to bring together testimonies that all too often are dismissed or overlooked by scholars in the literary field for not fitting

neatly into what is expected to be valued in a literary author. The author of *Fictional Environments* wastes nothing (pun intended), and all the literary and para-literary documents available are put to serve a brilliant analysis of the many discussions of literature and environment.

In this chapter, it is remarkable how Saramago uses Raymond Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin to articulate the relationship between *Pedro Páramo* and the environmental realities of Comala and Media Luna (119), relaunching the idea of a “folkloric time” to signify a narrative chronotope where nature is given a central stage as a living and participating force, exerting forms of agency upon the events of life, and not as mere landscape. Equally helpful is Saramago’s use of Gabrielle Schwab’s notion of “imaginary ethnography of the future” to illuminate the relationship between Rulfo’s work and the geographies upon which his narratives are modeled.

In chapter 4 the author returns to Brazil, this time to look at Clarice Lispector’s *A Cidade Sitiada* as “an alternate chronicle of developmentalism in Brazil from the viewpoint of those left on the discursive margins by these policies” (125). Saramago interprets the apparent lack of depth of the human characters in the novel as an attempt at decentering the human and exploring alternative perspectives over a changing reality (126), a practice that not only coopts the narrative structure, but the language itself, as the author notes pointing toward the syntax of the book.

Saramago invites us to reconceptualize the role of descriptions in Lispector’s early texts. She suggests that, instead of the typical understanding reserved for descriptions as a pause in the progression of the narrative, in Lispector the “descriptive mode” functions as a dynamic narrative progression, whose visible traces are exerted upon the landscape (129). These descriptive passages highlight the human and non-human interactions, and Saramago draws from the work of Rob Nixon to expand on the idea of slow violence, or violence that is not perceived as violence at all, to reflect on entities in Clarice’s work, such as the horses, that slowly vanish from the landscape as the developmentalist projects were implemented in Brazil. Even if not mentioned in the book, her observations bring to mind the renowned essay by Oliver Sachs on where all the horses went when carriages were replaced by cars in most modern cities (“The Machine Stops,” *New Yorker*, February 4,

2019). But Saramago also gestures toward the parallels between animals (mostly horses) and women, revealing modes of interspecies solidarities in Lispector's work.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how Lispector's spatial referents, in particular the Atlantic Forest, reflect and critique the long process of deforestation in Brazil, and how that is tethered to the colonial occupation of the land and extends throughout the Vargas era and the projects of modernization espoused by the regime. Saramago's readings are backed by a cohesive set of disciplines, and it is of particular relevance her use of the work carried out by economist Celso Furtado, whom she creatively relates to the perspectives of Lispector.

In the last chapter the work of Mario Vargas Llosa is revisited from an environmental perspective, with particular emphasis on *La Casa Verde* and *El Hablador*. The setting here is the Peruvian Amazon. The contradictions between the environmental pursuits of his novels and his work as a public intellectual and a politician, dissecting with detail the environmental dimensions of the writer's platform while running for the office of President of Peru (in the presidential campaign of 1990). Saramago convincingly shows that Vargas Llosa's "contempt for the indigenous populations living in the Amazon" can be related to the content of some of his works, and elaborates on the limitations and pitfalls of naive or romanticized depictions of the engagements between the original inhabitants of the Amazon and the forest.

Throughout the book, it is nothing short of remarkable how Victoria Saramago dovetails literary critique and social, political, and environmental analysis. Her incursions into domains that are not often within the purview of literary criticism do not feel forced or out of place, but rather an illuminating complement to her exegetic work. That is probably the most distinguishing achievement of *Fictional Environments* (among many others): that it seamlessly brings together such disparate fields and uses literature to cast new light on environmental history, proposing original and innovative concepts to help us think with and through the connections between literature and ecology. But it also does the reverse movement, by contributing to a more nuanced approach to the idea of environment, considering fictional creations. Saramago's multilayered approach opens new pathways for future research on literature and the environment in Latin America,

while inviting us all to reconsider the responsibility of literary criticism in the face of ecological catastrophe.

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