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Between the speculative and the spectacular: climate, capital, and spectacle in *A extinção das abelhas* (2021)

Entre o especulativo e o espetacular: clima, capital e espetáculo em A extinção das abelhas *(2021)*

Entre lo especulativo y lo espectacular: clima, capital y espectáculo en A extinção das Abelhas (2021)

Chloe M. Hill*

Abstract

This article investigates the use of spectacle to represent climate change in the 2021 novel *A extinção das abelhas* by Natalia Borges Polesso to explore the alienation of experience in the Capitalocene (Moore, 2015) and to imagine how heterogeneous communities may be formed in the face of the ecological crisis. In the novel, spectacle highlights the degradation of both the natural environment and civil society. Yet, despite this world being in collapse, the narrative articulates, through its formal structure and later conclusion, an ecological *détournement* that encourages readers to imagine alternative forms of collectivity and futures for humanity.

Keywords: climate change; spectacle; capital; collectivities.

Resumo

Este artigo investiga o uso de espetáculo para representar a mudança climática no romance *A extinção das abelhas* (2021) de Natalia Borges Polesso, a fim de explorar a alienação de experiência sob o *Capitaloceno* (Moore, 2015) e de imaginar como comunidades heterogêneas podem ser formadas diante da crise ecológica. No romance, o espetáculo destaca tanta a degradação do ambiente natural quanto a degradação da sociedade. Contudo, apesar deste mundo em colapso, a narrativa articula por meio da estrutura formal e sua conclusão eventual um *détournement* ecológico que convida os leitores a imaginar formas alternativas de coletividade e futuros para a humanidade.

Palavras-chave: mudança climática; espetáculo; capital; coletividade.

Resumen

Este artículo busca investigar el uso del espectáculo para representar el cambio climático en la novela *A extinção das abelhas* (2021) de Natalia Borges Polesso con el fin de explorar la alienación de la experiencia bajo el Capitaloceno (Moore, 2015) e imaginar cómo pueden formarse comunidades heterogéneas ante la crisis ecológica. En la novela, el espectáculo destaca tanto la degradación del medio ambiente natural como la degradación de la sociedad civil. Sin embargo, a pesar de este mundo en colapso, la narrativa articula a través de su estructura formal y su eventual conclusión, un *détournement* ecológico que invita a los lectores a imaginar formas alternativas de colectividad y futuros para la humanidad.

Palabras clave: cambio climático; espectáculo; capital; colectivo.

*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States of America. E-mail: chloehill@unc.edu

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> We watched the images on the computer screen. On Instagram stories, we sent everything over text and video, our favorite apps, because technology would alert us, technology would save us, technology would connect us, but there we were, unfazed, sitting, lying down, our necks L-shaped, our opposable thumbs dancing quickly over our own personal black mirrors, non-transferable and impossible to let go of, typing in uppercase letters words of dismay (Polesso, 2021, p. 200-201, our translation).

Between December 2018 and February 2019, Natalia Borges Polesso writes in her 2021 novel, *A extinção das abelhas*: 500 million bees were found dead across just four Brazilian states, 400 million in Rio Grande Sul alone. The number of dead bees tripled in the following years, and their extinction became one of the leading indicators for the novel's *colapsômetro* ("collapsometer"). Unveiled at Davos in a ceremony broadcasted worldwide via live transmission, the *colapsômetro*, essentially a glorified thermometer, is meant to measure and impose regional limits of temperatures and resource usage levels across the globe. Individuals can download an app, accompany their region's progress, and play games. Those who receive high scores are promised deductions on their income tax. Regina, the novel's protagonist, finds herself amidst this circus of spectacle and degradation. Regina's own life is collapsing around her. Everyone from her girlfriend to her best friend and local grocer are thinking about leaving her. To establish a connection with the outside world, Regina signs up to become a webcam girl, performing sexual acts live over the internet for an international community of users.

Coupling spectacle and climate change, environmental collapse and the degradation of social order, I argue that Polesso's (2021) narrative employs these themes to interrogate forms of isolation and solidarity, the personal and the collective, and the local and the global. Like Benedict Anderson's (2006) examples of the novel and the newspaper to generate a sense of "imagined community", spectacle in Polesso's (2021) novel can be both alienating and unifying as spectators in their respective locations tune in and coalesce in the digital space. Spectacle, and the apocalyptic environment it spotlights in *A extinção das abelhas*, become a site of contestation in order to, on the one hand, criticize the consumer capitalist society of the globalized age, and, on the other, to explore how heterogeneous and improvised communities can be forged in the face of existential and ecological crisis.

As a work of climate fiction — that is, a narrative that dramatizes natural or manmade environmental catastrophe — Natalia Borges Polesso's (2021) *A extinção das abelhas* offers a mode of understanding the planet and global relationships. Novels, by their nature, as Adam Trexler (2015, p. 14-15) argues in this 2015 volume *Anthropocene fictions*: the novel in a time of climate change, "[assemble] heterogenous characters and things into a narrative sequence… This complexity allows the novel to explore diverse human responses…" to a variety of climatic and environmental challenges. Furthermore, Trexler (2015, p. 14-15) contends, the novel can "think about climate change's intermingling with cultural narratives" and explore various aesthetics spanning both rural and urban life. In this way, Trexler (2015) affirms, "Climate change is, itself, a complex network of things and effects". Not only does climate fiction articulate the complex environmental processes of climate change and possible futures for humanity, but it also invites readers to behold a new configuration of the world itself. "Narrating climate change," Trexler (2015, p.74) continues, "also reconfigures expected connections between characters, exposing the limits of interpersonal conflict and the potential for new human organization in the Anthropocene". The climate novel becomes an aesthetic tool for imagining the whole world, offering a sense, as Ursula K. Heise (2008, p. 25) has argued, "that the Earth's inhabitants, regardless of their national and cultural differences, are bound together by a global ecosystem whose functioning transcends humanmade borders". Such connections are made legible for the reader of climate fiction by tasking her with recognizing "that ecological crisis — conceived of as a state of generalized precariousness — exists not only for her and her locality, but also for seemingly infinite others spread across the planet, others with whom she has little or no identification beyond shared vulnerability," as Mark Anderson and Bora (2016, p. xx) assert in their introduction to *Ecological crisis and cultural representation in Latin America*.

Such connections, networks, and identifications combine to create what Heise (2008, p. 55) calls a "sense of planet — a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines".

A sense of planet is invoked in Polesso's novel as it explores the political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological networks of both a planet and a region in crisis. Most notedly, a sense of planet appears in the narrative's emplotment of multilingualism and the collation of catastrophic events across the globe. By staging a variety of international transits — Aline, Regina's best friend, almost like a sister, moves to London to attend Imperial College, and Lupe, Regina's mother, travels all over South America, the United States, and even South Africa as a circus performer and later as a vacationer — a multitude of languages and national traditions are cast within the same sphere. For example, Regina talks over a video call with Aline in London, where she lives with roommates from Syria and Iran. When introduced, the roommates speak with Regina in English, transcribed in the text as English, and not translated into Portuguese. Regina borrows the stage name she will use on the camgirl site, Divine, the star of many John Waters films, but which she spells as Divaine to attend to non-native pronunciation. Mr. Parker, the carnival owner with whom Lupe tours the U.S., "would mix up words from Spanish with Portuguese, not knowing which language was which. Everyone understood, no one complained" (Polesso, 2021, p. 116, our translation). He speaks in a mix of English, Portuguese and Spanish, treating these languages as comparable, which in turn assumes the reader is able to easily navigate between these linguistic registers, for example "Hablo perfeito, daughter" (Polesso, 2021, p. 116). Multilingualism also appears as polyphony in the text through its formal structure, a subject which will be discussed in more detail in later paragraphs. Alternating between Regina's perspective in the narrative present, told through first person narration, and Lupe's perspective in the past, told through third person narrative, the novel compares different modes of expression and self-expression. By treating multilingualism through narrative events, characterization, and structure, *A extinção das abelhas* adapts "the novel of transnational contact to the era of multilingual circulation," as Rebecca Walkowitz (2009, p. 570) has written of what she calls "comparison literature", that is, works that foreground various forms of comparison — linguistic and discursive, formal and diegetic, geographic and political — to tease out understandings of national and world literatures in the 21st century. Through such comparison we can start to see a sense of planet take shape. A similar mode of comparison can be found in the narrative's assemblage of foreign events and current affairs. When, in the middle of the novel, Rio Grande do Sul is cut off from the rest of the Brazil and becomes a dumping ground for it, Regina recalls news of other trash cities around the world:

> I once read about a Chinese city that had been wiped out. It had become an e-waste dump. We watched another report around the same time about Ghana, about the toxic effects of electronic waste in Accra, about the gusts of acid wind, about the people going blind, about how they walked, ate, shat, and lived on top of tons of garbage… We were reminded of an old documentary call *Island of Flowers*. In it, pigs ate before people. The end of world had already happened a long time ago right in our own backyard. And we watched it as if it were fiction, as if it wasn't our problem (Polesso, 2021, p. 214-215, our translation).

Harnessing what John Tomlinson (1999) calls the complex connectivity of the globalized age, Polesso's treatment of the garbage cities helps to tighten the gap between here and elsewhere.

There are certain events, Tomlinson contends (1999, p. 115), such as the fallout in Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the communist world, the creation of the European Union, global summits on climate change, wars in Beirut, the Gulf, Somalia, or Bosnia, that "may add to the extension of the individual's 'phenomenal world'". While the aforementioned events seem larger in scale then the garbage cities mentioned in the text, they forebode the larger catastrophe of environmental collapse that the novel articulates. Such events manifest in the banality of day-to-day life. Distant events become relevant to individuals' routine experience in such a way that significance is

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not self-contained within physical locality or politically defined territories. "If we were to look at a sample front page of, say, *The New York* Times," Benedict Anderson (2006, p. 33) proposes,

> we might find there stories about Soviet dissidents, famine in Mali, a gruesome murder, a coup in Iraq, the discovery of a rare fossil in Zimbabwe, and a speech by Mitterrand… The arbitrariness of their inclusion and juxtaposition… shows that the linkage between them is imagined.

In *A extinção das abelhas* this imagined linkage is twofold: what is arbitrary for Anderson occurs mnemonically for Regina; for the reader, such juxtaposition in the text once again gives way to a sense of planet, one engendered by a sense of the world's end.

In the 21st century, we can extend the newspaper as a tool for imagined linkage between places to the Internet as a global town square. With the emplotment of the internet in Polesso's (2021) novel — online games and climate tracking, as well as the protagonist's own webcam show — what the narrative seems to offer us in its version of a sense of planet is what Heise (2008) has called Virtual Crowds. Through Virtual Crowds, Heise (2008, p. 81) seeks to interrogate "the question of how global ecological and technological systems might be represented, what kinds of human collectivity they enable, and what modes of inhabitation planet-wide communities entail". By means of textual collage — that is, the collating of diverse regions, dialects, perspectives, and even discursive registers such as the reproduction of online spaces in the novel — Virtual Crowds emerge, establishing "a complex mosaic of life in the global society of the mid-twenty-first century" (Heise, 2008). Virtual crowds present an extremely crowded informational space "in which billions of voices compete for attention… a densely 'populated' realm of information exchange emerges in which competing bits of facts, factoids, details, stories, images, and sounds jostle each other…" (Heise, 2008, p. 84). This cacophony surfaces in Polesso's (2021) novel through Regina's experience on the camgirl website. Her first visit to the site collates pornographic videos with a notification from the *colapsômetro* app: "A notification appeared in the corner of the screen with a green bubble about the drop in the colapsometer levels in Latin America" (Polesso, 2021, p. 51, our translation). Moreover, as everyone around Regina is slowly abandoning her, the camgirl website is a place where, surprisingly, she finds human contact: "When I first entered the site… I imagined that, when the camera turned on for the first time, I'd see some drooling pervert jacking off… But no. It was a man… fragile… he just wanted to talk" (Polesso, 2021, p. 107). As Regina chats with her client, recently separated from his wife, she recalls the website *chatroulette* and

> all of the strange people I had passed over with a finger on the return button. The images I saw for one or five seconds raced through my mind, images of people with whom I didn't have sex and with whom I shared nothing more than those five seconds. Ordinary men and women, couples, groups, dicks and pussies without faces, in grainy close-ups (Polesso, 2021, p. 107-108, our translation).

Chatroulette becomes an excellent case study for Heise (2008)'s virtual crowds, particularly when examined through the lens of the erotic. "As pornography becomes more private (cheaper, faster, and easier to access discreetly than ever before)", Margret Grebowicz (2013, p. 48-49) argues in *Why internet porn matters*, "the pornographic imaginary becomes one of communities, networks of support, sharing and open discussion". Grebowicz (2013), inspired by Baudrillard, calls this the ecstasy of community. However, despite the utopia this phenomenon would seem to invoke, Grebowicz (2013, p. 56) ultimately concludes that it results in a false sense of community, for it is always self-referential and its communication produces no meaning. It is masturbatory in both senses of the word.

In this way, the ecstasy of community is not dissimilar form what Guy Debord (1995) describes as the "society of the spectacle". Rather than emphasizing community, spectacle, Debord (1995, p. 12) argues, "presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as means of unification… the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation". The contradiction of the spectacle is that it requires a being-in-common that is ultimately realized through separation and isolation, as Debord (1995, p. 22) writes: "[t]he spectacle thus unites what

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is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*". Such separateness is perhaps best understood through the novel's use of the internet, despite the virtual crowds that emerge therewithin. Today's online presence is aptly described by Jonathan Crary (2013, p. 9) as a space that encapsulates working without pause, absolute availability, and endless consumption. "A 24/7 environment," Crary (2013, p. 8-9) writes, "has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness". The 24/7 environment invoked by the internet's hegemony in the 21st century is not dissimilar, Crary (2013, p. 10) argues, from the anthropogenic climate change: "24/7 is inseparable from environmental catastrophe in its declaration of permanent expenditure, of endless wastefulness for its sustenance, in its terminal disruption of the cycles and seasons on which ecological integrity depends". Amid the spectacle of the internet,

> the planet becomes reimagined as a non-stop work site or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions… the state in which producing, consuming, and discarding occur without pause, hastening the exhaustion of life and the depletion of resources (Crary, 2013, p. 17).

In this environment, rather than invoking virtual crowds, individuals are separated, isolated, and neutralized by the compulsory consumption of ephemeral, interchangeable content "that, in addition to its commodity status, circulates to habituate and validate one's immersion in the exigencies of twenty-first century capitalism" (Crary, 2013, p. 52). What Crary (2022, p. 2) has deemed the "internet complex," far from attaining the optimistic harmony of a borderless world, has, in fact, imposed an "implacable engine of addiction, loneliness, false hopes, cruelty, psychosis, indebtedness, squandered life, the corrosion of memory, and social disintegration". Even Regina's encounter with her first client seems to signal a civilization at the brink of collapse: "I thought... that it was very sad that people had gotten to the point of confessing to strangers dressed up as animals on the internet. But this was humanity now. This was civilization" (Polesso, 2021, p. 107, our translation). Such toxicity as imagined in the "internet complex" is not merely a metaphor for the degradation of civilization or of the natural environment, but the very means by which we access the internet contribute to ecological collapse through the extraction of natural resources and the infinite expenditure of energy.

A sense of spectacle haunts Polesso's (2021) novel. Early on, the reader learns that Brazil's current president is a former television star, who is offering a lottery to provide new homes to the needy — seemingly, a thinly-veiled reference to Luciano Huck and the "Lar doce lar" segment of his Sunday program, *Caldeirão do Huck*. Here the spectacle is twofold: not only has the TV star reached new heights as chief of state — blurring the lines between entertainment and civics —, but the reader is compelled to recall this segment which peddles in a kind of poverty porn, exposing viewers to the poor living conditions of low-income residents and then making middle-class spectators feel better about themselves when these individuals' homes are outfitted with new refrigerators and a fresh coat of paint. This kind of voyeurism is transformed into surveillance — yet another brand of spectacle in the dystopia Polesso's novel boasts — when the communities of Rio Grande do Sul feel the need to form neighborhood watches to protect from perceived threats such as those posed by the food insecure, the homeless, and the lower classes. Surveillance as a spectacle, coupled with exclusionary practices, takes a chilling turn when the narrator recounts that another app has been developed to systematically hunt down lesbians and trans men, an app started in Hungary and Poland with worldwide participation, where users are ranked based on points they accumulate by killing off these marginalized individuals.

Regina transforms herself into a spectacle as soon as she creates her webcam profile. As a webcam "girl", performing amateur pornography in real time, Regina's body becomes something to look upon, an image that is consumed and paid for by viewers across the country and across the globe. When she first explores the website that she will eventually join, she describes the sex acts she encounters there as "degrading images of the human body", strengthening the link between

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the spectacle of climate change and the spectacle of sex Regina herself engages in; her ostensibly degraded body mirrors her degrading natural environment (Polesso, 2021, p. 50). The parallels between these two spectacular degradations converge when Regina's experience on the porn website is punctuated by the notification from the *colapsômetro* app. Since the ad Regina reads to register as a webcam "girl" promises making new friends from the comfort of your own home (Polesso, 2021, p. 55), the *colapsômetro* app suggests the pretense of community and active civil engagement by means of its daily intrusion in social life and by the gamification of that very social life, while in reality it foments greater division and isolation by pitting users against one another, negating its communitarian effect in favor a competitive one. By making herself a spectacle, Regina also makes herself a commodity, and there is no limit to the number of users who will consume her image. Steven Marcus, one of the first critics of pornography, Linda Williams (1999, p. 108-109) explains, "… implies that the twentieth-century image of a masturbating woman can be interpreted as the very symbol of alienated consumer culture: a glut of the senses… reading [the] pornographic body as directly *reflecting* the alienated conditions of its economic base". At the end of the novel's first section, Regina logs onto the webcam site one last time:

> That day the only thing that mattered to me was coming. I didn't say a word to the guys. I just masturbated… Until I got tired. I was tired of it. I got tired of not feeling anything… I came and I didn't… It didn't make any difference… They hijacked my orgasm. They hijacked my pleasure (Polesso, 2021, p. 185-186, our translation).

Regina's sense of isolation reaches its peak and even her pleasure is depleted, mirroring the exhausted natural resources of her surroundings.

The environment's transformation into commodity under the aegis of spectacle is cast into greater relief as the novel juxtaposes national economy, housing, tourism, and leisure alongside the ecological crisis. Economists are tasked with inventing new words for the economic situation in Brazil, just as ecologists are tasked with coming up with new terms to describe the fate of the planet (Polesso, 2021, p. 96). Economic rankings are likened to the region's rankings on the *colapsômetro* (Polesso, 2021). The poor are condemned for destroying the environment by Brazil's minister of finance at the Davos Forum and shortly thereafter eco-villages crop up on the real estate market. In these exclusive condominiums, "No poor person would ruin the natural environment. The simulacrum was perfect there" (Polesso, 2021, p. 199, our translation). This simulacrum is extended to the image of the bees themselves. Once they've gone extinct, artificial hives are created that, for nostalgic reasons, look like the old ones. The simulacrum of the beehive once the bees have all died off recalls the simulacrum of social reality that is engendered by the spectacle. Climate change as a spectacle is transposed into entertainment and leisure when Eugênia and Denise, Regina's adoptive aunts, go away on an ecotourism trip, an "escape" they call it, to "help clean up a forest that was overtaken by trash" (Polesso, 2021, p. 148, our translation). Regina categorizes this general atmosphere as the "the era of circus spectacle", a moment when words have become meaningless and, in their place, "the strangest of monuments" have been built to explain the climate crisis to a mass of spectators (Polesso, 2021, p. 26, our translation).

Virtual crowds, Heise (2008, p. 90) argues, offer an "opportunity to rethink individual and collective relationships to local places and global systems". In her own readings of texts, Heise (2008) contends that virtual crowds amount to "a new kind of public sphere that functions sometimes as a complement to and sometimes as a metaphor for ecological connectivity" that ultimately allows for the envisioning of "communications technologies and networks as opportunities to develop eco-cosmopolitan awareness and presence". However, quite the opposite would seem to occur in Polesso's (2021) novel. The digital public sphere featured in *A extinção das abelhas* presents itself as a contradiction — a space where, on the one hand, the lonely might for the briefest second find solidarity while paying for a sex show, and on the other where users are anesthetized to the growing environmental risks and can instead channel such fears into apps as innocuous as keeping up with the *colapsômetro* and as pernicious as killing off queer and trans folks. The *colapsômetro*

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and its associated apps provides a digital commons — albeit one based on fear — where various parts of the globe intersect and interact as witnesses of global events. The reader of climate fiction immediately recognizes global effects of climate change through such indices as exorbitant coffee prices, common fruits becoming increasingly harder to find, the dominance of Big Agro and its toxic effects on both the marketplace and laborers. But such examples also dialogue with the breakdown of the social order invoked in the text, underscored by gated communities, neighborhood watch groups, and the systematic extermination of marginalized groups played out in online games. If anything, these virtual crowds situate the planet as both a "natural object" — the collapse of the natural environment — and as a "technological construct", that is, the global as portrayed through technological devices and spaces (Heise, 2008, p. 83). In this way, the natural object is one in decay and that decay is digitized and gamified, underscoring the parallel between the breakdown of the natural world and the breakdown of civil society in Polesso's (2021) novel. The relationship between the two becomes symbiotic. Technologies appear in the narrative in such a way that encourages the reader to reconsider or remap global spaces, while also acknowledging that the exploitation of nature has been advanced by such technologies. A sense of planet in *A extinção das abelhas* is, therefore, not necessarily a hopeful or cooperative one, but rather proffers a Platonic notion of being-in-common that is exacerbated by the novel's leveraging of spectacle and, ultimately, social disorder to illustrate climate change.

Plotting climate change as spectacle in *A extinção das abelhas*, Borges Polesso's (2021) narrative reifies the tension between catastrophic events that would seem to bring the world together and the generally apathetic response to climate change imagined by the *colapsômetro* and other online communities, where "division is presented as unity, and unity as division" (Debord, 1995, p. 36). The spectacle creates its own sense of planet by creating a world that is "*here* and *elsewhere*" (Debord, 1995, p. 26) and in which "the spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle in everywhere" (Debord, 1995, p. 23). The harmonious sense of planet imagined by Heise (2008) is upended in Polesso's novel through a global vision that is dystopic and at odds, mediating climate change vis-à-vis a spectacle that dislocates individuals from a sense of place and transforms nature into yet another commodity of the capitalistic machine. The degradation of community, played out on the digital stage in Polesso's novel, is intimately linked to the degradation of the natural environment. Crary (2022, p. 42) likens the internet to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, accumulated detritus that inhibits "exchanges between individuals and communities" and produces a numbing cacophony and disorientation in which thinking is constricted and the possibility of dialogue crowded out". The internet erodes civil society, and replaces it with "monetized, online simulations of social relations. It fosters the belief that we no longer depend on each other, that we are autonomous administrators of our lives, that we can manage our friends in the way we manage all our online accounts" (Crary, 2022, p. 7). The internet and the virtual crowds elicited in *A extinção das abelhas* provide a sense of planet, insomuch as they also function as a global conceptualization of the dissolution of society.

Through such a spectacle, that is digital, economic, and recreational, Polesso's (2021) novel seems to suggest that society, more than nature, is the most important problem of environmentalism. In so doing, the narrative gives credence to debates over our current geological era's nomenclature. Coined in the 1980s by scientists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F Stoermer, the Anthropocene describes an age in which humans are the dominant species of the planet and their actions have had a significant impact on the environmental processes of the planet. Critics, such Jason W. Moore (2015, p. 170), have found the term insufficient, reducing "the mosaic of human activity in the web of life" into "a homogeneous acting unit," which often ignores that not all of the planet's humans (indigenous populations, for example) play an active (or even passive) role in anthropogenic climate change. The *Capitalocene*, on the other hand, imagines a "historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" (Moore, 2015, p. 173). Such accumulation of capital, inevitably, not only alienates individuals from one another but from nature, as well, for as Crary (2013, p. 63) argues in *24/7*, capitalism requires "the dissolution of

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the relation to the earth". Polesso's (2021) novel would seem to be set in what Andrew Kalaidjian (2017, p. 20) calls the Spectacular Anthropocene, a moment in which our environmental discourse is increasingly mediated by technology, thereby endowing the Anthropocene with a spectacular quality, in which there would seem to be a direct relationship between "detachment and apathy towards the physical environment" and "the proliferation of media and virtual environments". The "paradox of the Spectacular Anthropocene" is that "[in] the Anthropocene, humans have a more direct influence on the environment than ever before," yet "never have [they] engaged with the world in such an indirect and mediated fashion" (Kalaidjian, 2017, p. 20). The spectacle (social media, our phones, etc.) distracts us from the environmental crisis and alienates us from our natural environment — the antidote to this spectacle would seem to be the reaffirmation of "affective connections between humans and non-human elements of the environment" (Kalaidjian, 2017, p. 24). Kalaidjian (2017) advocates for what he calls an ecological *détournement*. "There are unprecedented ways," he writes, "to visualize and aestheticize ecological crisis, yet such activity draws us even deeper into capitalism's spectacle of anthropogenic power. For this reason, it is perhaps only the monstruous return of nature itself — changed, augmented, made weird by human activity — that can disrupt and *détourne* the human-dominated ecosystem" (Kalaidjian, 2017, p. 23). The spectacle, in Polesso's (2021) novel, both produces and capitalizes on humanity's disintegrating relationship with the natural world, a virtual reality that simulates connection, but in fact drives a wedge between people and their environment, oneself and another. Regina and her mother, Lupe, both try to reclaim the animality of human beings through spectacle by donning ape-like costumes in their performances. Regina, playing the dominatrix, wears a gorilla mask to maintain her anonymity on her webcam show. Lupe runs away with the circus early on in Regina's childhood to act as its resident "monga". By inhabiting the feral in their performances, Regina and Lupe seem to be repairing the lost link between the human and the natural world.

Eventually, Lupe no longer wishes to perform the role of the monga, not because she is disturbed by its animalistic monstrosity, but rather because she is disturbed by its spectacle. What once had felt like an expression of freedom, "it was mine, my story", Lupe affirms, beginning to feel dehumanizing as she realizes how the image of the "wild woman" is consumed (Polesso, 2021, p. 135, our translation). Recalling Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman of southwestern Africa, exhibited as a freak show attraction throughout Europe in the 19th century, Lupe contemplates the difference between spectacle and self-expression: "It's as if they were doing her a perpetual harm. A horrible and infinite show. People think they can own everything and everyone" (Polesso, 2021, p. 135). In this way, consumption of the spectacle is extended to an act of colonization — Baartman, who was brought to Europe from colonial South Africa by British surgeon William Dunlop, remains for many "the epitome of colonial exploitation and racism, of the ridicule and commodification of black people" (Parkinson, 2016). If consuming the spectacle is akin to consuming nature, then ecological *détournement* might also be a decolonial gesture. At the end of the novel, Lupe returns to Brazil, where it seems she has joined a group of landless rural workers (from the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra — MST): "Lupe adjusted her red cap and began to weed" (Polesso, 2021, p. 188, our translation). Belonging to an autonomous social group whose objective is agrarian reform, Lupe signals a relationship with nature and with labor that is non-extractive and anti-capitalist.

Beyond the ecological *détournement* that Regina and Lupe would seem to enact through their embodiment of the animalistic or the feral, this symmetry between mother and daughter gestures to the more utopic sense of planet that Heise (2008) imagines. Organized in three parts, *A extinção das abelhas* features short chapters interconnected, in the first part, by the final word of one chapter and the title of the subsequent. These chapters, as mentioned previously, switch back and forth between Regina, in the near future, and Lupe, in the past. This narrative structure is at first disorienting, but soon reveals a fluidity that reifies the connectivity of the digital age and the spectacular, creating parallels between mother and daughter, despite their temporal and geographic distances. As Polesso explains in an interview with the *Diário do Nordeste*: "It's as if the reader had to put

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together a kind of puzzle and follow clues. So, I connected the chapters in a different way, and tried to capture the reader's attention through this fluidity that emerges through pages" (Barbosa, 2021). In order to articulate the complex processes of climate change and to capture various possible futures for humanity, climate novels, Trexler (2015, p. 14) argues, "must change the parameters of storytelling". Such fictions boast a necessarily porous genre: "literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire" (Trexler, 2015), and because these novels often assume the fate of the whole world as their subject, this generic pastiche reifies the transnational porosity such fictions employ. In other words, formal choices in these narratives also have the added effect of contributing to a sense of planet. The generic and formal play found in climate narratives works to "capture both a sense of the planet's many types of connectedness and of cultural heterogeneity as well as ecological dynamism" (Heise, 2008, p. 64). Such formal choices deploy "existing ideas and ideologies of collectivity and totality… in an attempt to envision global ecological belonging" (Heise, 2008, p. 65).

Belonging is highlighted in *A extinção das abelhas* through the parallels between Lupe and Regina that happen at both the formal and the narratological level. For example, while Regina seems to always be left behind by those closest to her in her life, Lupe is always leaving people behind (her family, her friends from the circus, among others). In this way, Lupe's escapades — literally her escape — acts as a foil to Regina's inertia that traps her in the unnamed decaying city set in Rio Grande do Sul. These parallels occur physiologically and geographically, as well. In the final section of novel, Regina has damaged her foot and is walking with a limp, just as Lupe limped on a prosthesis most of her adult life. At the end of the novel, after Regina has joined a group of women seeking safe harbor across the border, the reader learns that their destination is Santa Cruz de La Sierra in Bolivia, the same city Lupe first ran off to when she left Regina and her husband, and to where she later returns after years abroad. Finally, just as Lupe's death is announced in the narrative, Regina is told "you're not going to die! The world isn't going to end" (Polesso, 2021, p. 253, our translation). In this way, Regina and Lupe give way to one another, not just through the formal play of the chapter titles, but existentially as well.

The novel's formal arrangement seeks to create an affective architecture of relationships across space as an antidote for the division caused by the spectacle, but it also seems to recuperate visions of the past and the future that are in lost in the present of the Spectacular Anthropocene. Thinking about climate change and the future of the planet also creates a temporal disjunction. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009, p. 197-98) has written,

> the current [climate] crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility… We normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past… [To consider the end of humanity] we have to insert ourselves into a future 'without us' in order to be able to visualize it. Thus, our usual historical practices for visualizing times, past and future, time inaccessible to us personally — the exercise of historical understanding — are thrown into a deep contradiction and confusion… Our historical sense of the present… thus becomes deeply destructive of our general sense of history.

Through the formal imbrication of Regina's narrative with her mother's, the reader is shifted between distinct times and spaces. These forays into the past in Polesso's narrative and the parallels drawn between past and present act as a negotiation of time necessary for counteracting spectacular time, which Debord (1995, p. 110) describes as "…time devalued — the complete inversion of time as 'the sphere of human development'". The spectacle, like Chakrabarty's (2009) reading of climate time, paralyzes history and memory, abandons any version of history "founded in historical time, [it] is in fact a *false consciousness of time*" (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 114). In dialogue with Chakrabarty (2009), Mark Anderson and Bora (2016, p. xvii-xviii) explain:

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> As continuity between human history and the planet's future becomes increasingly unimaginable, humanity's future is limited to the Anthropocene, a geological period whose inevitable close… entails the extinction of the human species… The sense of historical agency is lost as the present loses its character as event, as a historical juncture in which human agency may intervene to shape the future. The rate of change accelerates so quickly that we come to feel mere spectators of a process that we ourselves initiated… ecological crisis disrupts the historical imagination, displacing it from history onto the scale of geological time and causing it to fail in its labor to relegate the past to the past and project a future.

By interweaving Regina's present with Lupe's past and by foregrounding memory vis-à-vis familial relationships, Polesso's (2021) narrative restores the historical imagination disrupted by the climate crisis. From the beginning, past, present, and future converge around the image of the bee. Recalling an outing to a reservoir with her family when Regina was a girl, she remembers they were "attacked" by a swarm of bees. As if speaking directly to Lupe, Regina asks, "Did you know there aren't any bees around here anymore? I mean, there are but they're rare, you almost never see them. You can't kill them under any circumstances. And I remember that day we killed a whole bunch of them" (Polesso, 2021, p. 17, our translation). Through memory of personal events Regina tracks the past, present, and future of the bee, reviving a historical sense of time obfuscated by crisis and spectacle. It is precisely memory that the narrative advocates for, as is affirmed in the opening of the novel's third section: "What can actually save us is this constant exercise of reconstructing time through language. Memory" (Polesso, 2021, p. 250, our translation). Pages later, when it is discovered that Lupe has died, she is described as pure memory "…and this isn't nothing. It's everything. It's the whole damn thing" (Polesso, 2021, p. 252, our translation).

As the narrative employs memory as a tool for recuperating visions of the past it also allows for alternative models of thinking through the future. Since Polesso's (2021) novel takes place in a future beyond the date of its publication, Julia Braga Neves (2023, p. 138) contends, "the notion of future in *A extinção das abelhas* serves both as an alert directed to the world outside of the narrative and as a temporal element in the development of the plot and the construction of the protagonist Regina and her mother, Guadalupe (Lupe)". Moreover, the imbrication of the past and the present through memory in the narrative, collated with the pervasive sense of collapse, offers an opportunity to read dystopia or apocalypse as the organizing principle of the text. As such, we are once again confronted with ideas of social disorder and capitalism's persistence over social life. "The dominance of dystopia in popular culture calls to mind," Robert T. Tally Jr. (2024, p. 122) writes, the "famous remark, variously attributed to Fredric Jameson or Slavoj Žižek and by now almost a cliché, about how it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism". What is at issue in this familiar observation, Tally Jr. (2024, p. 123) continues, "is whether and how well we are capable of imagining alternatives to the *status quo* in which we find ourselves at present". Rather than espousing spectacle, Polesso's (2021) novel turns readers into spectators in order to shock them out of the status quo. As she explains in the *Diário do Nordeste* interview, "It seems like horror is an increasingly necessary shock, so that people understand that worlds are ending all the time, from one moment to the next, right in front of us" (Barbosa, 2021). Favoring the speculative over the spectacular, *A extinção das abelhas* leans into thinking about a future in which humans do not exist.

At its outset, *A extinção das abelhas* implies that its titular extinction is not that of bees, but rather of humanity. For example, in the opening line, "People go away" (Polesso, 2021, p. 11, our translation), or more emphatically when the *colapsômetro* is unveiled,

> I told her the world wouldn't end. It wasn't an optimistic statement. She said I was right. The world, the planet, the universe, all of this would take an eternity to burn out. And its end would likely by caused by a black hole, an asteroid on a collision course, an encroaching magnetic field, but us, the human race, we'll be the ones to go extinct (Polesso, 2021, p. 26, our translation).

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This extinction is both literal and metaphoric — the erosion of civil society in conjunction with the decaying natural environment invites readers to consider the ways in which not just our species, but that which makes us human, is already endangered. The novel's middle section, more journalistic in tone than its other parts, offers an inventory of disastrous events: the rape and capture of women by the Islamic state, dark skies over Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul, the migrant crisis in Greece, deaths caused by contamination with pesticides, proliferation of e-waste, the Brumadinho dam disaster, the Amazon rainforest fires, the COVID-19 pandemic, the extinction of a variety of species, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, to name a few. Curiously enough, the same day as the Brumadinho disaster (January 25, 2019), *El país* published a piece entitled "'Two minutes to the end of the world", reporting on the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock, for which Polesso's *colapsômetro* is likely an avatar, and which marks the minutes left until midnight, in other words, the end of the world (Salas, 2019). In 2019 the clock read 11:58. As of this writing, the clock is at 90 seconds to midnight. In cataloguing this game of Russian roulette humanity seems to be playing with itself, the narrative concludes, "We are the extinction of the bees. Civilization. The consumer society. Us. The civilized" (Polesso, 2021, p. 296, our translation).

The extinction of bees becomes an apt allegory for understanding our own precarity and for surviving a collapsing world. Like the eponymous matsutake mushroom of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2015, p. 2) *The mushroom at the end of the world*, Polesso's bees might address "the imaginative challenge of living" in precarity and invite us to contemplate "collaborative survival in precarious times". The fate of the bees seems intrinsically tied to the narrator's own existence as a social being. Again, recalling the childhood memory of the day at the reservoir, Regina collates the demise of the bees with her own longing for human connection: "It was good when someone took you by the hand. Anyway. You can't anymore. You can't kill bees anymore" (Polesso, 2021, p. 17, our translation). The collapsing ecosystem represented by the bees' extinction in Polesso's (2021) novel signals humanity's own precarity and the precarity of the spectacle to engender collectivities, let alone collaboration. The beehive functions as a network of collaborative effort, destroyed by the spectacle and its mean of separation. The alienation engendered by spectacle and, necessarily, capital, produces ruins or spaces of abandonment. As Tsing (2015, p. 19) argues, "we are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival". In Polesso's (2021) novel, it's not just the virtual space that signals society's ruination, but also the physical space of the city Regina inhabits — a city that isn't immediately identifiable, populated by abandoned buildings, squares, streets, and detritus. Not only is the natural environment in collapse, but Regina's own physical environment is "falling apart" (Polesso, 2021, p. 176, our translation). As a result, Regina suffers the alienation of the society of spectacle not just as another internet user, but also by the abandonment she endures from the people around her who have managed to escape these ruins.

Like Jason W. Moore (2015), Tsing (2015, p. 19) situates the start of the Anthropocene with "the advent of modern capitalism", which, through alienation, has transformed humans and non-humans into resources, ultimately "obscuring collaborative survival". Collaborative survival, Tsing (2015, p. 155-56) contends, "requires cross-species coordinations", a process of world-making that accumulates and assembles various human and non-human living arrangements that would amount to a sense of planet, as Heise (2008) would have it. Such arrangements can be found in what Tsing (2015) calls "latent commons". Latent commons imagine "entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause"; "fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutionalized alienation"; and the "eruption of shared assembly" (Tsing, 2015, p. 135, p. 255, p. 258). At the end of the novel's first part, Rio Grande do Sul has exceeded acceptable usage levels on the *colapsômetro* and is thus cut off from national resources and quickly deserted by its wealthier residents. Suffering from diabetic shock and hallucinations, Regina is discovered in the final section by Lu, a former lover, in an abandoned building. Lu is fleeing Rio Grande do Sul with a group of women: Pietra, a veterinary student; Glória, a manicurist; and Aurora, a retired P.E. teacher and trans woman. These women form their own network, both through their interpersonal relationships — Glória and Aurora are in a romantic

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relationship, for example — and the "escape network" they have created with those who have already crossed the border and those who soon will. Collaborative, though not utopic, Tsing's (2015, p. 255) latent commons are not redemptive, but rather occur "here and now, amidst the trouble". As Braga Neves (2023, p. 152) explains of this group of women, "There's no concrete ending nor a model of a perfect society nor radical alternative, but rather a possible alternative. It's worth noting that Regina and these other characters have no other option but to survive". This affective network of survival provides a material collectivity in the face of the simulated community the spectacle projects, and is reproduced narratologically when the text collates the women's crossing at Rio Grande do Sul's northwestern border with Lupe's death, which, at the same time, seems to ripple out to the novel's other characters in their respective locations: Paula, Regina's ex-lover who has fled to Portugal, Lupe's friends from her early days in the circus waiting to cross the street, Denise and Eugênia, Regina's adoptive aunts aboard an airplane, their daughter Aline waiting for them at Heathrow airport. More than just connecting the present with the past, both narratologically and diegetically — "Time was suspended… In that briefest of moments, there was a crossing and a continuation" (Polesso, 2021, p. 279-80, our translation) — , Lupe and her death realize a "fugitive moment of entanglement" and an "eruption of shared assembly", as Tsing (2015) would put it.

Tsing's (2015) "latent commons" as it appears in *A extinção das abelhas* helps us tease out how environmentalism and a sense of planet negotiate the tension between globality, as an interconnected ecosystem, and globalization, as a capitalist institution that is, in many ways, responsible for the degradation of the natural environment, questions Heise (2008, p. 27) herself raises. The spectacle, for one, strengthens the relationship between environmental collapse and processes of globalization. The spectacle has the same homogenizing effect across social life in diverse geographic spaces as globalization. As Debord (1995, p. 120) explains, "[the society of spectacle] eliminates geographical distance, only to reap distance internally in the form spectacular separation". In this way, Polesso's (2021) novel highlights the local-global quality of climate change itself. Like Anthony Giddens (2002, p. 12) writes of globalization, climate change at first glance appears to be a phenomenon occurring elsewhere, "out-there", but is in fact an "in-here" problem intricately connected to the most intimate of lives. It is precisely this amorphous spatial quality that makes it "so easy to imagine the 'end of the world' and so difficult to imagine the end of our now global, socio-economic system" (Tally, 2024, p. 123). Moreover, "the translocality of global ecological crisis", Mark Anderson and Bora (2016, p. xxii) argue, "makes visible the unsustainable absurdity of globalization as a self-destructive way of imagining the planet" and "it also reveals the fictionality of the globe as virtual configuration, inhabited by statistics but not people". Most of Polesso's (2021) novel would seem to embrace such a fictionality, reducing individuals to internet users and the environment to usage levels on the *colapsômetro*. However, as the "latent common" emerges, the narrative tackles this myth head on:

> We were conditioned against solidarity, that's why we worked so hard at it, manufacturing a kind of understanding… This was the planned result of chaos, an orchestrated collapse: that people should either die or kill themselves. Against all odds, Regina was now in a car with four other women, crossing the border with Argentina (Polesso, 2021, p. 278, our translation).

At the end of the novel, as the reader is led to a safe harbor by Lu, Regina, and the other women, as the novel posits an alternative form of community in the face of collapse, the bees return. Speculative rather than spectacular, *A extinção das abelhas* challenges the notion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism by recuperating the solidarity that was lost to the spectacle, by staging an ecological *détournement* with the return of the bees, and, in the end, by projecting a version of the future marked by collaborative survival and not alienated submission. In so doing, Polesso's (2021) novel reveals a telling trend in 21st century literature about anxieties around the fate of humanity in the face of environmental collapse, and — looking from a Global South perspective — *A extinção das abelhas* might be asking by whom and from where such imaginative acts take place.

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