Let me begin with the question of how the urgency of climate change and the notion of the Anthropocene have impacted the practice and discourse of the humanities in recent years. The recent critical studies in the field of post-colonial history, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) and Ian Baucom’s *History 4°Celsius* (2020) bear mentioning here. They see mankind at a “planetary conjuncture”, pointing out how “anthropocenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty 2021: 201). Chakrabarty argues that the axiom of man-made history, going back to philosophers such as Giambattista Vico and only slowly challenged by historian Fernand Braudel and newer developments of environmental history, has now led to a situation where the recorded history of globalization needs to be complemented by the “deep history of human beings”, namely “species history” (Chakrabarty 2021: 219, 220) as a collective geological and planetary force. Baucom, building partly on Chakrabarty, sees climate change as “one of the outer frontiers of a new theory of historical time” (Baucom 2020: 5), involving “dizzying jumps between temporal scales” (Baucom 2020: 6). He calls for a foregrounding of the natural history of the modern world, namely “the planet’s anthropogenetically altered ‘natural’ or *postnatural* history” (Baucom 2020: 7).

In the present essay on contemporary fiction, I am obviously not concerned with historiography as such, nor even with the question of method in literary studies. Rather, the postcolonial historians’ programmatic statements prompt me to ask how two contemporary novels respond to these challenges on their own terms. In fact, it has been stated that the unsettling of the boundary between human and natural history has posed new challenges for reading and for literary representation (Heise 2008: 54). I hope to show that the novels to be
discussed here, Pola Oloixarac’s *Las Constelaciones Oscuras* (2016) and Carlos Fonseca’s *Museo Animal* (2017), share in some sense the historians’ agenda of “elongate[ing] our scales of time and [. . .] dispers[ing] conceptions of agency across a mingled human and natural spectrum” (Baucom 2020: 12), so that the categories of the “human” and the “natural” elements tend to coincide (Chakrabarty 2009: 201–207).

Furthermore, I want to show how the two novels are self-consciously conceived as going beyond the paradigm of the global. They may be tentatively grouped as planetary novels. The term has been used, for instance, by Susan Stanford Friedman: “I use the terms planetary and planetarity in an epistemological sense to imply a consciousness of the earth as planet, not restricted to geopolitical formations and potentially encompassing the non-human as well as human” (Friedman 2015: 347, n.9). The planetary novel, therefore, denationalized and de-territorialized, is associated with “a relationality of being toward others”, including the “historical other of prehistory”, geological or “deep” time, as well as habits of imagining the other (Keith 2018: 272–275). The two novels considered here may be part of “a much larger trend of recent novels that have fashioned narrative and formal efforts to animate or represent the occluded relationships linking ‘close living substance’ to the planet” (Keith 2018: 280). If for the contemporary Latin American novel the subject of nature has for a long time appeared as something like an exhausted resource itself, my examples suggest a return of nature – not as a picturesque backdrop or national reservoir, as in the heydays of Romanticism and Regionalism – but in the shape of a natural history that affects the very form of the novel. The contemporary novelistic reworking of natural history appears to be a distinct phenomenon, yet its broader engagement with ‘Nature’ certainly also resonates with the role of natural materialism and extractivist themes explored recently by Héctor Hoyos (Hoyos 2019).

Yet how is natural history connected to temporality? For a long time, conceptually, man-made and natural history have been kept apart. The traditional *historia naturalis*, going back to the Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder (ca. 22–78), was essentially ahistorical and incremental, even as it underwent a process of temporalization during the latter half of the eighteenth century, not least in response to new discoveries in the “New World” (Findlen 2006: 437). While the atemporal character of natural history was often adduced to emancipate the domain of History as such, Immanuel Kant began to see the first signs of an “archeology” of nature, for which he cites the geological theories of Linnaeus (Lepenies 1976: 57–58) – which is remarkable since Linnaeus is commonly associated with a static, merely classificatory conception of nature. In fact, as Wolf Lepenies has shown, the temporalization of natural history occurs within the writings of Linnaeus and Buffon themselves, as their static systems
are increasingly pressured to accommodate biological forms as ‘points of transition’ between different species (often rationalized as ‘monstrosities’), and thus raising the question of their transformation (Lepenies 1976: 61, 64). As we will see, the literary adoption of natural history is inscribed into temporality, yet not necessarily a progressive, evolutionary one. Furthermore, the term “post-natural” in the title of my essay indicates that, while the two authors variously explore the semantics and rhetoric of natural history, the very concept of nature has changed and is no longer conceived as the opposite of human history.

**Las Constelaciones Oscuras:**
Interconnected Times and Species

The Argentine writer Pola Oloixarac’s novel *Las Constelaciones Oscuras* (2016) exemplifies the multiplication of temporal scaling by grafting different narrative levels unto each other, suggesting a mobile, reiterative relation between different historical periods, rather than a strictly developmental logic of history, thereby echoing certain (post)-modern approaches to the historical imagination in the novel (Kaakinen 2017). Thus, Oloixarac’s novel features one shorter, late nineteenth-century thread around the fictional European botanist Niklas Bruun; a further thread located during the 1980s–1990s, at the time of the emergence of the internet as well as subculture hacker communities, centers on the hacker Cassio Brandão; and finally, one around the year 2024 with a dystopian regime of state-directed DNA-tracking, featuring the biologist Piera, who develops a genetic virus to be implanted into Cassio’s own body. Cassio moves from Brazil to Bariloche in Argentina, and through its various references to Brazilian and Argentine participations in international projects and political alliances, the novel fleshes out a continent-inflected version of the “global” Latin American novel (Hoyos 2015), while it explicitly (and somewhat idiosyncratically) dates the Anthropocene to the use of nuclear energy in the year 1945 (Oloixarac 2016: 42).

The thread around Niklas Bruun’s expedition into the Brazilian jungle, significantly set in the year of Charles Darwin’s death, 1882, introduces a fantasy running counter to Darwin’s developmental theory of natural selection, namely a mode of natural science that investigates the hybrid transformations between humans, animals, and plants, and that is repeatedly associated with an explicitly subterranean imaginary (Oloixarac 2016: 15, 18, 101, 137): “Sus notas trazan sistemas de cuevas que se hunden cientos de kilómetros en el Atlántico negro: reinos enteros donde los seres se apartan de la representación de la naturaleza” (Oloixarac 2016: 24). According to this historically situated, visionary form of
natural science the different natural species would no longer reproduce but rather enter and invade each other at the level of present existence: “Los cambios eran mucho más rápidos: ocurrían durante la vida misma del individuo, se daban por contactos inesperados y por mimesis que no esperaban el trabajo silente de ciclos reproductivos que se seleccionan los mejores rasgos” (Oloixarac 2016: 140). The phenomenon of mimesis – in the sense of natural beings taking on the appearance of others, and here understood in a decisively non-evolutionary fashion – has come to be associated especially with the tropical region of the Amazon rainforest, as I will further discuss below. Oloixarac’s interest in the cultural history of the region is attested by her earlier libretto for a chamber opera on Hercule Florence (Hércules en el Mato Grosso, 2014), a nineteenth-century traveler and early photographic experimentalist1, as well as a planned non-fiction work on the Amazon, Atlas literario del Amazonas (Brizuela 2014; Blasco 2021).

First, I want to highlight that the motive of the travelling natural scientist in the tropical forest recalls a central constellation of the modern Latin American novel, namely its association with an archive of knowledge about nature (Echevarría 1998). More specifically, as Bieke Willem has persuasively argued in a recent article, Oloixarac’s novel self-consciously inscribes itself within the lineage of the distinctively Latin American genre of the novela de la selva, echoing some of its formal and thematic elements (Willem 2020). For her part, Elisabeth Heyne has shown in great detail how the novel dialogues with new trends in (Amazonian) ethnographies and their interest in alternative epistemologies of perception (Heyne 2020). For instance, Oloixarac herself has acknowledged being influenced by the work of Brazilian ethnologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who has described the animist world-view of indigenous people in terms of what he calls a “multinaturalist” alternative to the Western mode of objectivism: “To know is to personify, to take on the viewpoint of that which is to be known; [...] for the shamanist knowledge shows a given ‘something’ as a ‘someone’, another subject or agent. The form of the Other is a person” (Viveiros de Castro 2017: 311; my translation).

While the nineteenth-century plot line of a botanical expedition into the Amazon occupies only a part of the narrative, the apparently neat tripartite temporal structure of the novel (1882 – 1983 – 2024) is complicated by the fact

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1 The fictional naturalist expedition of Niklas Bruun appears to be partially modelled on a historical one by Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (1824–1828), in which Hercule Florence participated. For instance, the novel alludes to the Brazilian emperor Pedro II’s interest in photography (Oloixarac 2016: 207). For her knowledge on Florence Oloixarac draws on Brizuela (2012).
that the ‘early’ plot line also reappears in the later sections. The novel is thus constructed around the resonances that the literal and literary jungle entertains with the metaphorical jungle of data, genetic, and digital codes since the twentieth century. For instance, human and sexual relations, such as the one between Cassio and a girl named Mora, are described as if occurring in a natural habitat: “un animal en la selva oscura”; “su medio natural” (Oloixarac 2016: 73). The nerd Cassio is characterized as an “organismo fotofóbico” (Oloixarac 2016: 85), which corresponds in turn with Niklas’ eschewing of human relations and his obsession with non-human beings, the “más allá del humano” (Oloixarac 2016: 136, 138). As Willem notes: “Oloixarac recycles the trope of a cosmic unity by repeatedly (in fact, almost ad nauseam) using metaphors based on comparisons between the human and the nonhuman and between the animal and the non-animal” (Willem 2020: 138). Moreover, the novel explicitly suggests an analogy between the Amazon region and the discovery of the “new world” of data, including their common challenge to “traditional” modes of perception: “El enorme, nuevo continente de datos representaba el nuevo mundo por descubrir: había que diseñar los sentidos, el tacto, la vista, que pudieran percibir ese laberinto” (Oloixarac 2016: 166). Accordingly, coding languages and algorithms are compared to species of plants: “[. . .] los primeros lenguajes informáticos, específicos y porosos, variegándose como especies de plantas” (Oloixarac 2016: 68).

Moreover, Las Constelaciones oscuras is distinguished by a peculiar style, through which the characters are presented less as novelistic subjects and more as products or transmitters of genetic codes. In fact, towards the end of the novel Bruun joins a “speculative botanist”, traveling with him towards the interior of the Amazon, where they end up in the laboratory of a rat-like being, named Hoichi, who cultivates a species of hallucinogenic flowers (“Crissis pallida”) said to look like spiders, for their implantation into the bodies of women (Oloixarac 2016: 216). This cyber-punk like aesthetic in the novel may be understood as a parodic development of central tropes in literary discourses about the Amazon, such as the often-noted perceptive problem of identifying distinct forms in the tropical surfeit (Anderson 2014; Willem 2020: 133; Lindquist 2008). The visual impenetrability of the jungle is echoed by the comment of the mutant rat Hoichi in his laboratory: “Hay tantas cosas que nos miran y no vemos” (Oloixarac 2016: 104) which is in turn an echo of the theme of technological surveillance. The de-centering of the human in Oloixarac’s text gestures not only at an ecologically intertwined world, it also carries dystopian tones, since the novel tells of the construction of an entity called “Stromatoliton”, a gigantic archive of biometric data-gathering and optical surveillance. Such temporal parallels and echoes, between nineteenth-century naturalism and modern information technology, between
real and metaphorical jungles, are complemented by geographical and genealogical connections, namely by the fact that Cassio’s mother is an Argentine ethnologist who had conducted research in Brazil.

The contradictory alliances between natural and human actors, the mutual entanglement between nature and technology, as well as the confrontation between different temporalities show how Oloixarac self-consciously inserts her novel into discourses both about the Anthropocene and the Amazon (Andermann 2018: 192). Literary and novelistic representations of the Amazon forest are notable not only for their mapping impulse, but also for their explorations of different regimes of temporality – from Euclides da Cunha’s writings on Amazonia to Alejo Carpentier’s *Los Pasos Perdidos* (1953). Oloixarac’s novel takes up precisely this notion of time travel as associated with the Latin American tropics:

Remontaron el río. Era como volver a los inicios de la creación, cuando la vegetación estallaba sobre la tierra. [. . .] Los pastizales se deshacen a medida en que se internan en riachos tornasolados, que los árboles cortan como castillos, bajando en ramas desde lo alto para volver a alzarse, líneas de materia vegetal líquida y dura uniendo la tierra con el cielo. Seguían avanzando, y los vapores nubosos envolvían el follaje, y sólo algunos árboles se perdían en lo alto como fantasmas, en pináculos de rocas que empezaban a descender, en dirección al cráter oculto por la ley del barro que reina en todas direcciones. Por donde miren, el manglar se despliega en un laberinto de manos hundidas en el barro, las manos olvidadas de seres enormes crismando bajo el río. Niklas cierra los ojos para guardar las imágenes, mientras su mano se mueve sobre el cuaderno. (Oloixarac 2016: 208–209)

There is an obvious allusion here to *Los Pasos Perdidos*, notably in the first line of the passage (Willem 2020: 136). Yet temporality is not only linked to the idea of travel, it is materially sedimented and genetically transmitted through links of deep time. For instance, Bruun is associated with the deep time of genetic history: “Entonces los visitantes empiezan a mezclarse con las nativas, ingresando en un torrente de sangre y semen en la historia genética de la isla” (Oloixarac 2016: 17).

Likewise, temporality is inscribed in the genetic bank of Stromatoliton. The term is explained as being derived from stromatolite, a stone resulting from the petrification of once-living bacteria. The different layers are to be understood as different sedimentations of time. Of course, during the early nineteenth century the scientific method of geology, as represented by Georges Cuvier, was precisely the field that played a crucial role for the temporalization of natural history, by suggesting the notion of a “deep time” in both vertical and horizontal terms (Dünne 2016: 41). In this sense, Oloixarac’s novel asks to be read as a

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2 Dünne (2019) explicitly refers to Oloixarac’s novel as a “cosmogrammatic fiction”, situating it in a longer genealogy of the concern with geology in Argentine fiction (46).
planetary text, insofar as it engages far-ranging chronologies and foregrounds spatial and other forms of comparison and interconnectedness: “The planetary operates through different temporalities, including geologic and prehistoric time, which prefigure and thus destabilize the nation (as well as the West and the human ultimately) as an organizing rubric, opening the novel instead to much wider-ranging temporal and spatial sets of relations and influences” (Keith 2018: 275).

Such a notion of deep time is echoed by the narrator’s tendency to sometimes reach back millions of years, to millenarian trees (Oloixarac 2016: 18), to past colonies of cockroaches, to the parallel emergence of civilizations among both humans and insects, to the memory of the human species made possible by the genetic data library of Latam, partly instigated by the Argentine trauma of “personas desaparecidas” (Oloixarac 2016: 83). This universal genetic bank makes it possible to track down a person, a process which is again described in metaphorical terms, putting the “person” in the position of the object searched for in the impenetrable surface of the jungle: “Como un animal, la persona se esconde en los bosques; no pasa mucho tiempo hasta que es encontrada” (Oloixarac 2016: 83).

Oloixarac’s novel, then, destabilizes the distinction between humans and nature, thereby invoking the “temporal and spatial expansions invisible to man” (Oloixarac 2016: 24). In the context of jungle imagery, the notion of natural mimesis is also associated with alternative indigenous mythologies, as those theorized by Viveiros de Castro: “En la mitología tupinambá, los encuentros entre especies diferentes son sucesos del orden maravilloso. Una especie comienza por imitar a otra, empieza por poseer sus gestos para después comerse; es una historia de amor cuya temporalidad excede al arco humano” (Oloixarac 2016: 36–37).

Through its invocations of genetic, volcanic-geological (Oloixarac 2016: 19) and cosmological temporalities, the novel programmatically gestures toward a planetary frame. Its title, Dark Constellations, refers to the notion that in the southern hemisphere darkness overpowers the light of the stars (Oloixarac 2016: 144); to the Inca’s ‘negative’ astronomical constellations made up of dark clouds, and hence, by extension, to an alternative to epistemologies of the Western Enlightenment, in short, to a “parallel natural history” (Heyne 2020: 3.1), said to coincide with the “constelaciones oscuras de la historia de la ciencia del continente del Antropoceno” (Oloixarac 2016: 144). Although the novel is planetary in its orientation, it mobilizes a specifically Latin American modernity, combining indigenous epistemologies and alternative histories of scientific and technological knowledge.
The nameless narrator of Carlos Fonseca’s novel *Museo Animal* works in a museum for natural history in New Jersey. The English translation of the novel (Fonseca 2020) modifies the title to *Natural History*, an interesting choice in light of Fonseca’s pronounced affinities with the work of W. G. Sebald, whose essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999; ‘Aerial war and literature’) has in turn been translated as *The Natural History of Destruction*. The initial and programmatic association of the narrator with a museum of natural history points to Carpentier’s *Los Pasos Perdidos*, where the male protagonist also works in a museum, as a curator of indigenous musical instruments. Thus, similar to Oloixarac, Fonseca inscribes his novel self-consciously into the tradition of naturalist voyages and the specifically Latin American tradition of fictions of the archive (Welge 2021; Echavarria 1998). Thus, he acknowledges the influence of Alexander von Humboldt, among others: “On *The Natural History* [*Museo animal*] I wanted to play with this tradition of natural voyages, to reflect upon their meaning and artificiality, to reimagine the jungle as something more than a lost paradise” (Azurdia 2020). Classical ‘archival’ Latin American novels incorporated the early discourses on natural science by European travelers, since they promised the valuation of autochthonous nature and were generally associated with progress (Echavarria 1998: 102). While Fonseca revisits this idea of the archival novel, it is now no longer conceived in a national or even continental mode; rather, it gestures at a “planetary” form, that is, it aims not at the representation of the planet, but it encourages connections between different times and places (Keith 2018: 275).

At the beginning of the novel, the first-person narrator learns of the passing of his friend Giovanna Luxembourg, a fashion designer from New York. The day after Giovanna’s death, the narrator receives a shipment of documents and records, the nightly reading of which introduces him more and more to the story of her family origins. Through this reading, the narrator becomes immersed in the life of an Israeli photographer with Hispanic roots, Yoav Toledano (who will eventually turn out to be Giovanna’s father), who is trying to escape his country’s 1960s climate of war and who has developed a fascination with Latin America since his youth. From Haifa he travels first to Spain, “[. . .] como si todo viaje transatlántico pidiese una repetición del viaje de Colón” (Fonseca 2017: 115).

The novel thus emphasizes that Toledano’s travel plans are a sort of individual rehearsal of colonial tropes, the paradigms of colonial travel and discovery. Of course, these tropes had already been reworked in *novelas de la selva*, where they appeared under the signs of irony and mimicry. While also taking distance from these regional novels, it is apparent that Fonseca’s novel takes its cue from the meta-textual trajectory in this tradition. As Jens Andermann has described it: “Ese discurso narrativo caracterizado por la inautenticidad y el mimicry, [. . .] ya
no puede enfocar la selva como un silencioso afuera del texto sino que la abarca como intertexto, como aquello que media entre un corpus y su reescritura” (Andermann 2018: 227; cf. Wylie 2009: 1–3).

The last and longest part of the novel describes, in relative temporal slowness, a voyage young Giovanna and her parents take into a South American, yet geographically undefined jungle. Instead of untouched purity, there they encounter a “gringo”, who invokes an entire “genealogy” of previous travelers to the Latin American tropics: “[. . .] pasan por sus tormentosas frases Cristóbal Colón y el barón Alexander von Humboldt, Hernán Cortés y Moctezuma, los indios de Cipango y el temible Aguirre” (Fonseca 2017: 342). If the travel and quest motif in the classical Latin American novel was often linked to the experience of disillusionment (Welge 2018), Fonseca’s novel stresses the “negativity” of the travel experience with respect to previous, paradigmatic journeys. Connected to Toledano’s being a photographer, the novel uses the metaphorical semantics of the negative image in the sense of a “sombra histórica de lo que fue” (Fonseca 2017: 125):

Le sigue una travesía latinoamericana que es una suerte de reverso negativo de aquellas grandes travesías clásicas de los grandes viajeros. Allí donde Humboldt encontró la imagen de una América silvestre y sublime, ellos encontraban la imagen de una naturaleza ruinosa, repleta de basura. [. . .] Allí donde Franz Boas encontró la naturaleza de lo desconocido, ellos parecen encontrar un siniestro espejo de sí mismos. (Fonseca 2017: 156)

The narrator and Giovanna had become friends because of their common fascination for animal mimicry. In fact, Giovanna understands fashion as “un arte del camuflaje y del escondite” (Fonseca 2017: 39). This isotopic field of associations also includes allusions to Subcomandante Marcos, the Mexican leader of the Zapatista movement, whose masked guerilleros are said to return the jungle to its anonymity: “En esas máscaras la selva volvía a perderse en su anonimato” (Fonseca 2017: 63). The art exhibition, projected originally by Giovanna together with the narrator figure, would have been dedicated to different aspects of masking and hiding. Remembering these plans, the narrator muses on the implications of mimicry, namely the erasure of the boundary between man and nature: “[. . .] traer a un animal vivo al museo, elaborar una anatomía de la mirada, llenar la sala con retratos de ojos hasta que se confundiesen las miradas y ya nadie supiese cuáles eran los animales y cuáles los humanos” (Fonseca 2017: 90).

Such a scenario is reminiscent of a page in W. G. Sebald’s novel Austerlitz (2001), where photographs of the eyes of humans and animals are juxtaposed, suggesting the levelling of different modes of seeing (Sebald 2001: 11) (Figure 1). Similar to Oloixarac, then, Fonseca mobilizes the “tropical” aesthetics of mimicry via a re-contemporization of late nineteenth-century discourses. For instance, Alexander von Humboldt is an important point of reference both in Museo animal and in
er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war. Von den in dem Nocturama behausten Tieren ist mir sonst nur in Erinnerung geblieben, daß etliche von ihnen auffallend große Augen hatten und jenen unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt. Im üb-

Fig. 1: W. G. Sebald (1997), *Die Ringe des Saturn*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer.
Fonseca’s critical study *The Literature of Catastrophe* (2020), where the Prussian explorer, via his scientific interest in earthquakes and volcanology, is associated with the temporalization of natural history and the introduction of eventfulness into its previously tableau-like order: “Catastrophe presents itself as the event that disrupts the continuity of the catalogue, the harmony of its taxonomy, leaving in its place a pure multiplicity” (Fonseca 2017: 29).

Humboldt, for his part, had commented that tropical nature is distinguished by an overload that produces visual confusion, which challenges the scientific ideal of panoptic vision, leading to a constant relation between fragment and totality (Humboldt 2004: 7; Lindquist 2008: 231). Such visual confusion, arising in the tension between immediate perception and objectifying distance, is a recurring theme within the work of the Victorian evolutionary biologist Henry Walter Bates (1852–1892), in his naturalist travel book *The Naturalist on the River Amazon* (1863). Bates’ narrative comments on animal mimicry in the Amazon forest distance themselves from the Linnean tradition of the static isolation of natural objects and instead foreground the processual nature of vision as it unfolds in the Amazon’s “many wonders in its recesses” (Bates 2010: 11). This means that the naturalist is taking on the position of the animal being deceived. As Will Abberley has put it, Bates and other naturalists “sought to simulate a crypsis as a sensory-cognitive experience for readers” through ekphrasis and other verbal means (Abberley 2020: 29), and where the “vivid immediacy for personal impressions came at the cost of scientific detachment” (Abberley 2020: 32). The analogy between human and animal vision implies the levelling of the distinction between the naturalist and animal. This phenomenon may also be observed in the volume’s illustrations and the animal. This may be seen in the frontispiece, which shows Bates himself, having shot a toucan, now surrounded by a flock of the birds, which had been hidden by the tropical vegetation (Fig. 2). The illustrators, Wolf and Zwecker, mimic Bates’ moment of visual confusion as the birds emerge from hiding, suddenly taking on forms. A similar scene occurs in Fonseca’s novel. Here the narrator remembers a foundational childhood experience, namely a visit to the zoo, where the boy is transfixed by the visual enigma of animal mimicry, in the form of an insect, the so-called walking stick:

Allí, detrás del cristal, se hallaba la vida como enigma a descifrar. La vida a modo de rompecabezas o de estereograma. [. . .] Era frente a esas cajas aparentemente vacías donde yo me postraba, a la expectativa de que súbitamente surgiese la figura hasta entonces oculta: la singular mariposa que se confundía con el ramaje [. . .] Me encantaban esos pequeños trópicos en cautiverio en donde la nada se hacía finalmente visible. (Fonseca 2017: 92)

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4 For a detailed discussion of this image, see Abberley (2020: 46–47).
Fig. 2: Henry Walter Bates (1863): *The naturalist on the River Amazons: a record of adventures, habits of animals, sketches of Brazilian and Indian life and aspects of nature under the Equator during eleven years of travel*. London: J. Murray, 1863. Image: [https://www.loc.gov/item/49032931/](https://www.loc.gov/item/49032931/).
This emblematic scene repeats the discourse about the visual perception of the tropics (Humboldt, Bates), yet in does so in the mode of zoological domestication. Therefore, it multiplies and heightens the sense of re-presentation. When the narrator tells us that his early fascination for the phenomenon of camouflage was later complemented by the reading of a book by a French philosopher, concerned with the “devouring” of an original object by its copy (likely an allusion to Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacres et Simulations*, 1981), then it becomes clear that the narrator conceives of the biological phenomenon of camouflage also in an aesthetic, poetological sense. *Museo animal* repeatedly invokes acts of vanishing, which, through the character of Virginia MacCallister, Giovanna’s mother, are also associated with the artistic practices of the avant-garde (Shell 2012: 17–18).

**The Novel and/as Natural History**

In an interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* Carlos Fonseca commented on his early interest in the paradigm of natural history:

> I still remember a book that left a strong impression on me when I was 16 or 17 and starting to get into literature. It was not a novel but rather Strabo’s *Geography*, where the narrator tells us about about the many lands and the forms of nature he has seen. I remember reading that book and first feeling tempted to write a novel: a novel without characters, where the true character would be nature itself. I think that, to some extent, that bizarre idea has remained with me up until today. I think that explains, as well, my interest in natural histories, be it Alexander von Humboldt’s travel notebooks or the works of Sebald (Sequeira 2020).

The novel repeatedly invokes the utopia of such a poetics. Thus, the lawyer character Gerardo Esquilín, intent on defending a collective art project designed by Giovanna’s mother, which was based on “plagiarism”, finally muses on the possibility of a post-anthropocentric form of history. This utopian concept of history is specified as a critique of modernity that reconnects with older practices of the historical avant-garde as well as with the paradigm of natural history:

> [. . .] la imagen de una historia mucho más amplia dentro de la cual el juicio que lo ocupaba era apenas la punta del iceberg, una historia amplia y extensa como las cartografías que de niño dibujaba sobre el techo de su casa. Una historia impersonal e inhumana como los viejos catálogos de historia natural. (Fonseca 2017: 205)

5 The study by Shell is explicitly cited by Fonseca as an inspiration for his novel (Fonseca 2017: 429).
This sentiment is echoed by further passages that convey a meta-poetic perspective. For instance, there is the character of a writer, named Juan Dinis, who cherishes the idea of a post-anthropocentric type of novel, where not human subjects are the protagonists, but where fire is the subject of history:

Según pasó a explicar, la novela estaba a punto de entrar en una nueva etapa: una etapa inhumana, como le gustaba llamarla, en la que poco importaba la experiencia urbana. [. . .] Una novela vacía, repleta di polvo y aire, una novela geológica, que retrate en un instante absoluto el monumental paso del tiempo. Una novela archivo, eso es [. . .]. (Fonseca 2017: 242–243)

This is further echoed by the comment of a priest travelling through the jungle, who also speculates about a new historiography, concerned not with humans, but with geology: “Una historia universal que procede a paso geológico y no humano. [. . .] Una historia escrita a otra escala: a escala natural en vez de a escala humana, escrita con el ritmo de las corrientes subterráneas, escrita sobre la corteza de los árboles” (Fonseca 2017: 347). In fact, it might be said that Fonseca’s novel is indeed less interested in the psychological development of its characters, but rather aims to construct a network of symbolic relations in space and time. Because of its global as well as encyclopedic ambition, the novel may be classified as a “maximalist novel”, as defined by Stefano Ercolino. According to Ercolino, this form of novelistic totality comprises centrifugal as well as centripetal tendencies. Furthermore, the narrative digressiveness of this type of novel is structured and harmonized through metaphors and metonymies (Ercolino 2014: 113), in this case mostly visual ones (photography, camouflage).

For its digressive style (and the inclusion of photographs), the novel is especially indebted to the poetics of Sebald. The most direct allusion to Sebald is via a shared reference to the English baroque author Thomas Browne (1605–1682). As mentioned above, on the first pages of the novel the narrator receives a parcel from Giovanna; it is marked by five black dots, which seem to resemble a domino (Fonseca 2017: 17). Yet soon the narrator realizes that this is indeed the sign of the so-called Quincunx, and which is described as the programmatic encounter between nature and culture (Fonseca 2017: 20). This sign is traced to Thomas Browne’s The Garden of Cyprus, where it is said to be defined in the following way: “[. . .] la prevalencia del patrón quincunque en la naturaleza como demostración de un diseño divino” (Fonseca 2017: 20). Years later, he even had authored an article on this topic in an academic journal: “Variciones del patrón quincunce y sus usos para la lepidopterología tropical” (Fonseca 2017: 20).

Here, readers familiar with the work of Sebald recognize – mediated by the explicit citation of Browne – an implicit allusion to the beginning of the novel The Rings of Saturn (Die Ringe des Saturn, 1995). Here the narrator speaks about
Browne’s attempt to recognize in nature – which resists a totalizing, comprehensive representation – a recurring geometrical pattern: “[. . .] it befits our philosophy to be writ small, using the shorthand and contracted forms of transient Nature, which alone are a reflection of eternity. True to his own precept, Browne records the patterns which recur in the seemingly infinite diversity of forms, in *The Garden of Cyprus*, for instance, he draws the quincunx, which is composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which its diagonals intersect (Sebald 1998: 16–17).

For all three authors the quincunx works as a meta-poetic sign. For Sebald and Fonseca, the figure of Browne embodies the anachronistic science of natural history, revisited as a model for postmodern literature, marked by an unstable speaking position, a fragmented, discontinuous sense of totality, and the logic of association and correspondence rather than one of cause and effect (Morgan 2013: 224). Fonseca thus also perhaps shares other motives of Sebald’s passage on Browne, namely the “science of the disappearance in obscurity” as well as the typically baroque (and Benjaminian) notion of history as catastrophe (Sebald 1998: 36). As seen above, Toledano is even said to write a “natural history of fire”, bearing the (Sebaldian) title *A Brief History of Destruction* (Fonseca 2017: 355). As Kaisa Kaakinen has recently argued, Sebald has been an enabling figure for a variety of contemporary authors. In this context, she also remarks that Browne’s concept of the quincunx may be related to a deeper principle of narrative organization, whereby digressive, paratactically organized narratives are brought into an overarching coherence and a network of relations (Kaakinen 2017: 194-195), similar to the logic observed by Ercolino.

Fonseca’s novel contains a postscript by the external narrator who finally receives notice of the posthumous exhibition designed by Giovanna, in a gallery of contemporary art in Puerto Rico. Since the nameless narrator (like the author) grew up in Puerto Rico, this final chapter is shadowed not only by posthumous memories, but by a sense of nostos, both epic and ironic, a return to origins, to the “green of the tropics” (Fonseca 2017: 409). The description of the exhibition includes various quotations and images of the technique of camouflage, straddling the border between science and art, including a photograph of a boy, which again resonates with the page from Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (Fig. 3). The boy depicted is Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921), a New England painter, naturalist, and pioneer of evolutionary biology, who has become a crucial figure for “multidisciplinary speculations” (Shell 2012: 28). Thayer was especially interested in a universal theory of protective coloration, that is, the idea that animals evolve according to the momentary possibility to blend in with the natural environment, namely through a technique of so-called “counter-shading” which diminishes their outlines against the natural background (Abberley 2020: 54).
The phenomenological experience of crypsis was employed to erase the boundaries between science and art, while Thayer himself insisted on the difference between camouflage and mimicry: “Mimicry makes an animal appear to be
some other thing, whereas this newly discovered law makes him cease to exist at all” (Shell 2012: 29).

The novel subscribes to a concept of subterranean history as well as the practice of natural history, distinguished by temporal and spatial interconnections. The topos of visual indeterminacy, associated with the Latin American tropics, is translated into the poetics of the text (camouflage, mimicry), aiming at a conceptual dissolution of the boundaries between humanity and nature, art and nature, past and present.

**Conclusion: Other Worlds and Histories**

Both novels discussed here, through their respective depictions of voyages into the forest, or through their metaphorical rewriting of jungle imagery, play on the metaphor of the “new world” and of new world discovery; they employ the idea of travelling towards “los inicios de la creación” (Oloixarac 2016: 208), but there is also the sense that their travelers “llegan tarde” (Fonseca 2017: 396). In fact, in contrast to the Latin American jungle novel, as mostly associated with the vogue of regionalism, the novels by Oloixarac and Fonseca relinquish the very idea of the realist representation of nature. In contrast to the earlier literary image of the tropics as embodying arrested time and a realm distinct from the history of modernity, the contemporary novels associate the tropical space with deep time and emphasize the continuity of humans with non-humans. According to this very scheme, in *Las Constelaciones Oscuras*, Bruun disappears toward the end of the novel, or is possibly himself transformed into a hybrid being (Oloixarac 2016: 148), thus echoing the figure of Cassio, who, in his capacity as a techy nerd, is associated with the “arte de desaparecer” (Oloixarac 2016: 224). Both characters are also compared with a camouflaging serpent (Oloixarac 2016: 84, 136). Fonseca’s novel ends with the frame narrator’s comment that he has succeeded in becoming an “incomprehensible animal” (Fonseca 2017: 425).

Furthermore, both novels feature a scene of “una biblioteca encerrada en el medio de la selva” (Oloixarac 2016: 210; Fonseca 2017: 387), thus self-consciously alluding to the “traditional” function of the Latin American novel as archive, collection, or museum, as overwriting of previous discourses. Disappearance into the natural background, camouflage, or species transformation – both novels suggest

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6 This latter aspect, however, is already visible in Carpentier’s *Los Pasos Perdidos* (Saramago 2021: 63, 90).
the human subject’s continuity with nature, yet, in contrast to the nineteenth century backdrop of natural science, arguably a nature that is itself conceived as post-natural. Optical games of hide-and-seek, negative photographic images, dark constellations: both novels invoke such visual metaphors in order to emphasize a perspectival shift with regard to the perception of the world. If Alexander Beecroft has argued that the technique of narrative entrelacement is the novelistic equivalent of the paranoid connectedness in the age of globalization (Beecroft 2014: 283), temporal strata and the mimesis or mingling of species are self-conscious novelistic devices that seek to convey the deep time of the Anthropocene.

Works Cited


