

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

44.1 (June 2022): 113-129

e-ISSN 1989-6840

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2022-44.1.07>

© The Author(s)

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence

Homo Consumable: Human Trafficking and Waste in Fernando A. Flores's *Tears of the Trufflepig*

ELSA DEL CAMPO RAMÍREZ

Universidad Nebrija

ecampo@nebrija.es

Fernando A. Flores's 2019 work *Tears of the Trufflepig* deals with, among other topics, the commodification and fetishization of disenfranchised human beings. The novel describes how a previously extinct indigenous community, the Aranaña people, is being artificially brought back into existence to enrich and expand the global black market via the shrinking and selling of their heads. Through the analysis of how shrunken heads, or tsantsas, are depicted in the story, together with the examination of the portrayal of South Texas as a landfill (therefore implying that its inhabitants are, by extension, human waste), the aim of this paper is to describe the process through which those who are considered 'redundant' or even 'disposable' can easily be transformed into a product for consumption. Ultimately, in the context of neoliberal capitalism, the story seems to suggest that not only can the category of 'waste' be applied to human beings, but even worse, that this categorization proves to be a social construct driven by purely economic factors.

Keywords: human commodities; human waste; residual communities; market; racial minorities; shrunken heads

...

Homo Consumible: Tráfico de personas y residuos en *Tears of the Trufflepig* de Fernando A. Flores

La reciente obra de Fernando A. Flores, *Tears of the Trufflepig* (publicada en 2019), trata, entre otros temas, la mercantilización y la fetichización de las personas marginadas. La novela

describe cómo una comunidad indígena previamente extinta, los Aranaña, es devuelta a la vida de forma artificial para enriquecer y expandir el mercado negro global a través del encogimiento y venta de sus cabezas. A través del análisis de cómo estas cabezas reducidas, o tsantsas, son presentadas en la historia, junto al estudio de la representación del Sur de Texas como un vertedero (insinuando que sus habitantes son, por ende, deshechos humanos), este artículo describe el proceso mediante el cual quienes son considerados “redundantes” o incluso “desechables” pueden ser fácilmente transformados en meros bienes de consumo. En última instancia, la historia parece sugerir que, en el contexto del capitalismo neoliberal, no sólo puede asociarse la categoría de ‘residuo’ a los seres humanos, sino que, aún peor, se demuestra que dicha categorización es un constructo social dependiente de factores puramente económicos.

Palabras clave: mercancía humana; deshecho humano; comunidades residuales; mercado; minorías raciales; cabezas reducidas

"If you're not paying for something, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold."¹
(Lewis 2010, n.p.)

I. INTRODUCTION

In his 2018 *Demografía Zombi*, Andreu Domingo divides neoliberalist society into two conflicting and mutually exclusive categories: the resilient and the redundant. The first group is constituted by individuals who suffer the consequences of an economic system that delegates all responsibility and "whose mission is to provide the worker with the necessary tools so that it is they, and under their own sole responsibility, the one who deals with crises and manages their own career, risks and economic security" (21; my translation).² Regarding the second category, Domingo writes:

The categorization of a population as "redundant," as is being done under the neoliberal empire, sets the stage for the application of shamelessly teratological policies that, in the name of resilience, be it of the human species, or capitalism itself as a complex system, demands the proactive sacrifice of part of the population [...]. Resentment against immigrants, but also against the long-term unemployed, against anyone identified as 'the redundant other' infringes at the same time upon the nation and the market (227; my translation).³

However, even if the redundant seem to pose a direct threat to the wellbeing of the market, the resilient merely survive, rather than thrive, within it. No one wins, save capitalism.

Domingo describes the "redundant" individual as something that must be gotten rid of or relocated so that it does not interfere with market growth; something irredeemably wasteful that cannot be reintegrated into the post-industrial network. The author visibly draws from Zygmunt Bauman's (2004) notion of "human waste," a category constituted by the outcasts and the leftovers of a globalized and expanding capitalist economy, the side-effect of a logic of disposability paramount to the global system of production that typifies modernization and that, as a result, has made part

¹ Though a similar reflection was already worded by American artist Richard Serra in 1979: "[In commercial broadcasting] it is the consumer who is consumed. You are the product of TV [...]. You are the end product delivered en masse to the advertiser" (Serra 1980, 104); this statement is popularly attributed to Andrew Lewis in a 2010 post on the Metafilter website.

² "tiene por misión dotar al trabajador de las herramientas necesarias para que sea él, y bajo su única responsabilidad, el que haga frente a las crisis y gestione su carrera, sus riesgos y su seguridad económica", in the original.

³ "La categorización de población como 'redundante', tal y como se está dando bajo el imperio neoliberal, prepara el terreno para la aplicación de políticas de carácter descaradamente teratológico, que en nombre de la resiliencia, sea de la especie humana, sea del propio capitalismo como sistema complejo, demanda el sacrificio proactivo de parte de la población [...]. El resentimiento contra los inmigrados, pero también contra los parados de larga duración, contra cualquiera con el que se identifique el 'otro redundante' atenta a la vez contra la nación y contra el mercado", in the original.

of the population expendable. Thus, for Domingo, the resilient and the redundant constitute categories of, respectively, belonging to and exclusion from the productive chain, a division between individuals who are considered useful for the economy (their presence thus legitimated) and those who are perceived as disposable.

However, there is a possibility that neither Domingo nor Bauman consider, which is the idea of transforming this redundancy back into a consumable product. To this end, if those who fall under the category of waste—the unemployed, immigrants, the dispossessed—cannot participate in the market as producers or consumers, they will become the outcome. This is one idea that could be drawn from Fernando A. Flores’s 2019 novel *Tears of the Trufflepig*, where the author, in a way that is both mordacious and terrifying, depicts how a fictional Native American community from South Texas, the Aranaña people, are made to become, building on Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) notion of *homo sacer*, “homo consumable,” in an unscrupulous market that benefits from, among other things, the selling of their heads.

Tears of the Trufflepig is a dystopic novel set in the near future, in the now double-walled frontier between South Texas and Mexico, an area ruled by rival crime syndicates fighting for the financial monopoly of the black market. Contraband is focused on ‘filtering,’ namely: the artificial production and trafficking of now extinct animals. The story opens with the death of El Gordo Pacheco, leader of the most powerful cartel, and the subsequent turmoil and competition for the control of the filter market. Amidst the tumult and chaos stands Esteban Bellacosa, a repo man who, after pilfering some of the money given to him to pay for an excavator that has now gone missing, is now concerned about his personal safety. In his endeavour to resolve the matter, Bellacosa will cross paths with Paco “Tcheco” Herbert, an incognito journalist who invites him to an illegal filtered dinner he needs to attend in order to write a story on these exclusive illicit meals. To their great surprise, what initially seems a shady event masks a whole underground market that profits from trading with the shrunken heads of indigenous people. Previously exterminated Native American tribes, particularly the Aranaña people, have thus become a consumer good, a product prized by the wealthy for its exclusiveness.

The depiction of the Native American people at the border as marketable items and the treatment they will receive throughout the novel will be taken as the starting point to study the implications of human waste and wasted humans as described in Bauman’s 2004 *Wasted Lives*. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to analyze how the commodification of human lives is achieved in the novel, an examination which, drawing from the field of Waste Studies, will be carried out following two core themes: on the one hand, the particularities of the human heads being trafficked in the novel and, on the other, the stultification and disposal of the impoverished population of MacArthur, Texas.

2. HUMAN HEADS

If, following Bauman (2004), during earlier colonial times the extermination of aboriginal tribes was carried out “for the sake of clearing new sites for Europe’s surplus

population" (38), the scenario presented in *Tears of the Trufflepig* is strikingly different. In the fictitious MacArthur where the events take place, not only is the Aranaña population not annihilated, but, on the contrary, it is being brought back to life and transformed into merchandise for the sake of a global neoliberalist market that flourishes. It does not matter if that involves the trade in real people; it does not matter if human beings are thereby commodified.

The Aranaña people are presented in the novel as unwanted immigrants: "[if you] see somebody trying to cross this little valley between the two border walls, you can pick them off, like the immigrant is a plastic duck at a carnival game" (Flores 2019, 277).⁴ However, at the same time they are also portrayed as an almost unattainable luxury, thus fall into an ambiguous category which could be described as opulent waste. Though apparently extinct since the sixteenth century, it is soon revealed that this indigenous community is now being artificially filtered to be used as raw materials for shrunken heads, their status having thus moved from oblivion to revalorization, the shift between these categories being determined by the economy. In other words, their initial disappearance might have been related to what Bauman terms "wasted humans," namely: the excess, "the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay [as] an inevitable outcome of modernization" (2004, 5). However, the Aranaña have moved from this category of human waste, inconvenient for (neo)colonial purposes, and have become purposeful: still agentless, but now profitable. The problem is that being valuable in terms of money does not necessarily make them wanted or "adaptable" in the complex social web that shapes this future South Texas: "It will not be sufficient for a readmission of the 'redundant' to the society from which they have been excluded—just as storing industrial waste would hardly suffice to make it into a market commodity" (Bauman 2004, 13). This social ambiguity to which the Aranaña are exposed makes Paco Herbert reflect on the issue: "That poor cook back there knows he's worth more with his head cut off and sold on the black market with a plaque of authenticity and everything, than being a slave here [...]. We're lucky, people like us. Our heads aren't worth a thing" (94).

The commodification and appropriation of the identities of indigenous citizens and racial minorities is not something new at this (future fictional) point in the history of the United States, as real world examples can already be signaled. For instance, on July 13, 2020, American football team owner Dan Snyder finally decided to change the name and logo of the Washington Redskins NFL team, a pejorative name which was chosen in 1933 and which has been highly controversial since its inception. The polemic that had developed around this brand answers to two issues: on the one hand, the derogatoriness towards indigenous communities framed in the term 'redskin,' a color-coded label which derives from the establishment of racial identities following the colonization period in the territory and which has been criticized for its offensiveness.

⁴ Henceforth, page references from the novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

On the other hand, a caricaturized stereotyped depiction of a Native American was selected as the mascot for the team and consequently used as a form of entertainment during games. The image of the Native American individual was thus translated into an unspecific cartoon, objectified and used for commercial and recreational purposes.

In *Tears of the Trufflepig*, the commodification of indigenous societies is manifest in all the paraphernalia surrounding the process of shrinking and selling the Aranañas' heads. Consequently, despite their difficult categorization in terms of social roles and their still present "wasteness," the Aranaña serve a double purpose: on the one hand, their heads can be shrunk and sold on the black market for massive amounts of money; on the other, the head-shrinking process is only prized when it is carried out by a fullblood Aranaña: "Only a pure-blooded Aranaña native could be involved in the process, if the shrunken head was to have any street market value" (269). The Aranaña are, consequently, both products and producers in a market that restricts their entry as consumers, a strategy that may prove successful in the practice of keeping the unwanted population under control, since all potential for agency is immediately rooted out.

The practice of shrinking heads described in the novel has likely drawn inspiration from the head-shrinking rituals carried out by the Shuar people, popularly—and pejoratively—known as "Jívaros" (Rubenstein 2007, 358). The Shuar, together with other similar Amazonian tribes such as the Achuar, Huambísa and Aguarina, live across the upper Amazon region,⁵ near the border with Northern Peru and Eastern Ecuador.

The process of shrinking a head, or making a "tsantsa," consisted mainly of removing the facial skin from the skull, then placing the skin around a wooden ball and boiling it until it reduced down to half its original size, the method concluding with the sewing shut of the eyelids and lips. This tradition responded to intertribal warfare and ritualistic procedures aimed mostly, though not exclusively, at preventing the avenging soul of the enemy from taking revenge. In fact, once the rituals of making the tsantsas had taken place, these objects lost all their social and public value (Rubenstein 2007, 365).

Steven Lee Rubenstein points out that "the movement of tsantsas from one [sociohistorical] context to another has led to radical changes in their meaning" (2007, 359). Originally, they signified power, being made to both celebrate victory in combat and to help transfer that power to women in the household to make them productive in their tasks of bringing babies into the world and growing crops; all this via rituals that rendered shrunken heads impractical and useless once these had concluded. Their function, therefore, was ritualistic and ephemeral, restricted to a specific moment of time. By the late nineteenth century, after the Ecuadorian colonization of the upper Amazon, warring among tribes began to be driven by the Euro-American demand for shrunken heads that they would exchange for weapons and other goods. Their posterior

⁵ There is not total agreement about the term "Jívaro": for some scholars, it refers strictly to the Shuar, while for others it also includes the Achuar, Aguarina and Huambísa tribes. Still, the tradition of shrinking heads is only ascribable to the Shuar as there is little evidence to suggest that the other tribes also did it (Rubenstein 2007, 363).

exhibition in museums and private collections in the twentieth and twenty-first century was the culmination of this process of alienation, transforming tsantsas into a cultural representation and trademark of the indigenous community that previously made them. As Rubenstein concludes, the religious, social and economic values and meanings of shrunken heads have therefore shifted from them being markers of power to trading objects, to mere indicators of indigenous identity in western museums. Thus, whereas shrunken heads were, originally, ritualistic items and signifiers of status imbricated with ideology, their relatively recent ascription to museums has shredded all remnants of cultural identity. The fact that imitations can be found in gift shops have ultimately demoted them to mere merchandise inside a world economy based not only on expansion, but also on accumulation (Rubenstein 2007, 372).

This degrading process of devaluation of not only human beings, but also of precious ritualistic objects is also addressed in *Tears of the Trufflepig*, with Paco Herbert's sullen realization that: "It's crazy, how the shrunken heads market has steadily grown, right? People pay good money for those little heads [...]. I bet those people look at a shrunken head and can't even imagine that it was once a living, breathing human, with desires and loves" (94). Because tsantsas are something people can buy and sell, with a value that is exclusively economic, everything related to their origins and manufacture is, at best, conveniently ignored. It makes no difference that a human being has to die for a shrunken head to be made: what matters is the huge positive impact its selling has on the market. As such, the Aranaña are not seen as people, but as feedstock that can be disposed of at will. In a similar way to what Euro-American buyers might have felt during the late nineteenth century when trading tools or weapons for shrunken heads, the only non-monetary value attached to these luxury items lies in verifying that they have been truly made from a person's head; humanity has thus been reduced to a label of authenticity. During the underground dinner that Bellacosa attends, one of the distractions offered to the select guests consists of exhibiting, as if in a gallery, five framed tsantsas in a glass case: "The plaques all read that the men who these heads belonged to were pure-blooded warrior descendants of the Mapuche Indians in South America" (127). If the origins of shrunken heads—and of the individuals from which they are made—ever had any value other than the one granted by its worth on the market, in Flores's novel this is no longer, nor was it ever, the case. In other words, if real tsantsas currently exhibited in museums still preserve, even if in a perverted way, some of their meaning in relation to the indigenous tribes they have come to represent, in this story they are simply portrayed as a treat for the wealthy, devoid of any ulterior significance.

Another remarkable difference between historical tsantsas and the shrunken heads described in *Tears of the Trufflepig* has to do with the individuals shaping these objects. Daniel Steel explains the Shuars' belief that the victim's avenging spirit was trapped in the tsantsa, and that rituals involving this item were aimed at retrieving the power of this avenging spirit while convincing it to leave the head without doing harm. Because of that, Steel has noted that "women and children were generally believed not to possess

this avenging spirit" (1999, 755), this being why tsantsas were made only with male warriors from other tribes. This religious perspective is completely missing in Flores's novel, where the sex and age of the person chosen to use for a tsantsa is irrelevant as long as they do not look white. As Oswaldo, Bellacosa's brother, painfully remarks: "They were going to shrink my head [...]. I saw them do it to a lot of others. Women, too. Young. Kids. All ages with dark skin" (140). Once again, because these shrunken heads are mere containers devoid of any cultural and/or societal value, the individual whose head it is is also irrelevant. For this reason, there seems to be a constant confusion regarding who may or may not become a tsantsa not only in terms of sex and age, but also in terms of provenance: "They consider him dark-complected enough to cut his head and sell it as an Aranaña shrunken head" (42). It does not matter which "Other" one chooses as the material for a shrunken head, as long as it looks "Other" enough. The immediate consequence is, as Raymond Rocco puts it, the configuration of otherness as an intangible, simplistic arrangement: "The notions of 'difference,' of 'plurality' and of the 'other' remain primarily abstractions, ungrounded in the structure of everyday life of those 'others' on the margins of dominant society. As they are conceptualized now, these terms function as 'sliding signifiers,' with no stable content or empirical reference" (2006, 409). The classification of otherness in the novel is achieved strictly in terms of opposition to the "I," considering that all traits of indigeneity belong to the same category simply because they are not white, and therefore putting all instances of miscegenation and ethnic difference in the same boat, ignoring the particularities and individual identities of specific communities. Even Bellacosa falls into this essentializing generalization when claiming: "*After all, I'm a fucking Indian, we are all fucking Indians in the Valley. That's why we're here. And what the hell is a Mexican Indian, a mistake. Columbus thought he landed in India somewhere, so that's what he called all these Mexicans. Fuck Columbus. Fuck the Indians. I'm an Indian, too. Fuck me*" (5; italics in the original).

Perhaps the novel could be read as a warning against the dangers of indulgently embracing this potpourri of indigenous miscegenation, since that could lead a person to forget their cultural and ethnic origins and become a manufactured item in the assembly line of the global market. This idea is hinted at at the end of the story, when Bellacosa runs into Tranquilino, an Aranaña worker who had previously disappeared without notice in the novel. To Bellacosa's surprise, the formerly shabby and poverty-stricken farmer now appears smartly dressed in a suit and does not seem to recognize his interlocutor: "The man, visibly scared, said, 'I'm sorry. You have me confused with somebody else.' Bellacosa thought the suited man was joking. He was the carbon copy of Tranquilino" (313). One of the possible interpretations of this passage could be a literal one: the man Bellacosa has seen is not Tranquilino, but a *copy* of Tranquilino, as further Aranaña people are being filtered *en masse* to allow the grow profits. Tranquilino, therefore, has lost all constituents of his identity, the same way shrunken heads have been dissociated from their cultural and religious aspects: the tsantsas, as well as the victims forming them, are no longer identifiable communities, but empty containers

with purely monetary value. Their shape and aspect are lucrative, but everything else is considered wasteful and, accordingly, cheerfully disposed of.

Flores's novel successfully mitigates a dilemma posed by Bauman regarding "the technical problem" of waste disposal on a planet that is already full (2004, 4). Mentioning an anecdote involving the President of the Ford company, Bauman reflects on the fact that, after modernity, waste cannot be made to vanish without a trace but, in the best-case scenario, only pressed and compacted. *Tears of the Trufflepig*, though, seems to offer the idyllic situation for the global economy, where waste can, in fact, effectively and almost magically be made to disappear. As is the case of Tranquilino, the market can successfully erase a person's heritage and identity, recycling the reusable "parts" without having to worry about any unwanted leftover. Accordingly, though for Bellacosa ignoring his lineage gives him comfort: "Bellacosa slowed down, feeling strangely relieved that his birthplace was still a mystery to him" (4); forgetting one's ascendancy and distinctiveness may lead to awful consequences for the marginalized individual as well as for the community, since such oblivion benefits nothing but the neoliberal economy.

In one of Bellacosa and Paco Herbert's lunch conversations, the latter manifests his relief at being white enough so as not to be categorized as indigenous and, therefore, be worth nothing: "Our indigenous blood has all but washed away. With what? With America, *compadre*", he tells Bellacosa (95). This white-washing is not only racial, but also cultural and historical, for Bellacosa himself, though acknowledging his Native heritage, does not know where exactly he is from, his constant cry of "*Fuck it, [...] I'm an Indian, too*" (194; italics in the original) being nothing but a platitude. Paco Herbert, though, seems to imply that forgetting one's ancestry and the fading of the color of the skin are adaptive advantages that help them go unnoticed. What he does not realize is that it is precisely this obliviousness which allows for the objectification of human beings in the first place, which, in turn, "turns human beings into commodities or non-human 'things'" (Lam 2018, 369). In other words: oblivion entails what Orlando Patterson (1982) termed "social death," namely, the condition whereby some individuals or communities are not acknowledged as fully human by the rest of society.

In a similar way, Jeffrey P. Blick (1988) has used the example of tsantsas to elaborate on the issue of "cultural pseudospeciation," which he defines as "[the tendency whereby] cultures tend to speciate, much like biological organisms, such that other cultures are viewed as belonging to other species and are therefore inferior" (1988, 655). Thus, on account of the enemy's presumed inferiority or, even, due to the perception of them as an individual from a different species, the "Other" is dehumanized, and killing them is not only condoned, but validated. The concept of "cultural pseudospeciation," initially associated with the context of tribal warfare and genocide can be extracted from its original framework and brought to the fore in economic terms, too. In *Tears of the Trufflepig*, because the Aranaña are deemed inferior, they can be mercilessly tortured and killed in order to be used for trade. Even individuals from other ethnic origins, such

as Bellacosa and his brother, who are of Indian descent but presumably not Aranaña,⁶ may enter this market of genocide simply because they “look Indians.” When Bellacosa is kidnapped and subjected to chilling experiments, the following conversation takes place among several scientists:

“What’s his name?” one of the scientists outside asked.

[...] “Esteban Moises Bellacosa Dolíd,” Marcos said.

“No way,” the same voice outside replied, as if being put on. “Is he Aranaña?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t look it. Who can even tell any of these things anymore? What does he look like to you?”

“He looks Basque,” a different voice said. “Not from around here, for sure” (213–4).

3. LAND AS A DUMPSITE

If the first step on the path towards transforming the “Others” into a consumer good is their objectification—conceptualizing them as abstract, slippery signifiers, which complicates their appreciation and identification as real, complex human beings—the second would be their “wastification,” or, in other words: associating them with trash and thus justifying their disposability. Though, as previously stated, Flores’s work seems to imply that the disposal of such waste is successfully dealt with, since Aranaña individuals can be (re)placed at different points in the production chain with no undesirable surplus being created, the truth is that leftovers and scrap management are still presented as a problem in the novel. In fact, the constant finding of mass graves, abandoned warehouses, and scattered uncorrupted corpses of filtered animals throughout the story illustrates how the border has become a dumpsite, a populated landfill accommodating the slop of a fickle and readily obsolescent market, impeding the characters’—and the reader’s—ability to forget that, as Stallabrass suggests in “Trash,” “commodities are merely ‘deferred trash’” (2009, 407; quoted in Signe Morrison 2013, 2).

Fictional MacArthur depicts a post-natural world, following Bill McKibben’s term (2006, 51),⁷ where even the evolution and life cycles of living organisms have been altered by the filtering technique. The problem posed by waste management is aggravated by the fact that filtered creatures do not decompose, thereby leaving an eternal imprint on the planet’s surface that cannot be incorporated back into the circle of life. The first time Bellacosa encounters corpses of filtered animals, he is shocked by the fact that these bodies neither decompose nor smell, which is why no animal has come near the carcasses to feed on them: “It doesn’t stink. Even if they died a while ago it would still have that death stink, right? That’s how it is with dead things” (40). The leftovers can therefore be

⁶ Only presumably, since the ending of the novel suggests that Bellacosa is, indeed, an Aranaña Indian brought into existence through the filtering technique, the reason why, among other clues given, he does not recall his origins.

⁷ According to Bill McKibben, in his 1989 *The End of Nature*, the modern notion of nature as eternal and independent from human intervention is ended, for a natural spot unaltered by human hands no longer exists.

eliminated, but they cannot be made to disappear, to the extent that they even surpass being part of the food chain. The filtered waste is undeletable, in the same way as it is unusable in any other sphere, which raises the question of what to do with it. How to manage waste which is imperishable? What to do, then, when the drainage process of surplus waste is inexorably obstructed?

The challenge posed by these filtered, non-decomposing corpses raises another question related to their climatologic and ecological consequences. Bellacosa's interlocutor in that particular scene mentions in passing that "something in the clouds" must have killed those birds, but he does not further elaborate on what that something may be. Similarly, at some point in the story it starts snowing in the city, something that does not go unnoticed by the characters: "It's snowing. I can't believe that. It rarely happens here, doesn't it?" (253). The fact that the filtering market may already entail terrible and unstoppable consequences for the environment is thus suggested, though never addressed in depth in the story: "[Paco Herbert's] article was developing an environmental slant [...]. Paco Herbert noticed everything pointed to grave environmental consequences the filtering syndicates and their underground market had created. Experts who'd been running tests on the changing life spans of wildlife, global warming and bird migrations all over the world were coming to hazardous conclusions that couldn't continue being ignored" (294-5). The problem of waste management only increases as time goes by, the novel finishing with the discovery of an abandoned warehouse full of troughs containing the remnants of poorly-reconstructed unicorns: "It looks like they were trying to make those horses. With the horns on their head. But they all have their horns growing out of somewhere else. Look at that one, it's coming out of its back. That one out of its ass" (291).

The wastification of the land also entails the eradication of one's sense of relevance and connectedness to the nation. In the opening lines of the novel, Bellacosa appears, walking cautiously on rusted planks of aluminum, trying to determine whether or not the site he is standing on could be the remnants of his birth house, and failing in his attempt. Bellacosa's identity and past are being erased by waste, and there is reason to suspect that his personal situation may not be too dissimilar from that of others. The ever-growing substitution of buildings and houses by ruins and scrap materials is gradually transforming MacArthur into a wasteland which, as a consequence, is effacing people's sense of identity and belonging to the territory: "*What's happened in this land, Bellacosa thought. What becomes of your home when so much change leaves it almost unrecognizable? What becomes of our culture and families, our brothers and sisters?*" (276; italics in the original).

The eradication of identity is not only damaging to the individual and his/her sense of self-validation, but is also dangerous as this practice is imbricated within what Raymond Rocco describes as "technologies of racialization" that are directed at depicting immigrants⁸ as "disposable and vulnerable subjects" (2016, 100). According to Rocco, the kind of neoliberalism that has become popular in the United States since

⁸ Rocco specifically addresses the Latino population, though his ideas might also apply to any non-white ethnic and racial identity.

the late 1970s has entailed the appearance of a series of incongruities which ultimately prompt an image of the Latino immigrant as someone, or rather, something, disposable, despite their undeniable positive impact in making the country's economy so buoyant. Thus, though a necessary—perhaps even indispensable—source of low wage labor, the immigrant becomes structurally vulnerable,⁹ constantly threatened by associations with foreignness, strangeness, illegality, and deportation; hence becoming a crucial but nonetheless throwaway figure (2016, 110). Eventually, Rocco states, commodification “promotes a sense of worthlessness that results from the objective economic and political policies adopted by the US regime of neoliberalism” (2016, 108), and this sense of worthlessness eventually serves to regulate the ways in which ethnic and racial minorities are permitted to participate in different societal institutions. The situation described is not too different from what one witnesses in *Tears of the Trufflepig*, where Coleen Rae, a waitress in Bellacosa's favorite restaurant, gloomily declares: “they feel entitled to treat me like shit. To talk to me like I am temporarily their property. The things people think they can get away with, when they start seeing you not as a person but as their property, like they own you” (183).

Daiva Stasiulis, however, draws attention to the similarities, as well as differences, regarding these technologies of disposability when applied to temporary migrants and to indigenous peoples, in the sense that the latter, though equally disposable, are not perceived as entirely indispensable (2020, 33). The reason behind this is to be found in the very same foundation of white-settler colonial societies, which were established through projects that involved reducing, eliminating, absorbing and removing indigenous peoples from their lands. However, this decimation of Native American tribes, as well as their refusal to assimilate into white colonial culture, implied that labor had to be found elsewhere while the now dispossessed indigenous populations were confined in reservations (2020, 33). In that sense, and bearing the situation of the Aranaña tribe in mind, while at times the connections between MacArthur and a dumpsite are clear: “Now the land has gone bad and nothing will grow” (8), it might not be too bold to claim that at certain points the city is also presented as a kind of reservation to control the influx of “undesirable” “Indians.”

As happens with real reservations, MacArthur is revealed as the place the Aranaña tribe initially inhabited: “They are the original natives from these parts” (123), so it is also presumed that this is the logical place where they must be relocated and confined. Thus, the two borders that stress the partition between South Texas and Mexico constitute not only signifiers of the limits that migrants are not expected to trespass beyond, but also markers of the containment of the—filtered—Native American tribes that are preferably left between the boundaries. This prevents them from participating in the active life of the rest of the nation, who can successfully ignore their presence and

⁹ The notion of “structural vulnerability” or, in other words, the creation of objectified subjects who are seen as disposable by neoliberal hegemony, has been further developed by authors such as Linda Green (2011), James Quesada, Laurie K. Hart and Philippe Bourgois (2011), and Lori A. Nessell (2012).

disregard what may become of them inside these boundaries. In fact, the double wall does not reinforce the differences between individuals on either side of the border. Being an enclave in which to store garbage and waste—as well as indigenous populations—, its individuals have become empty carcasses of the cultural heritages they are supposed to incarnate. Interestingly, being outside or inside the border does not seem to make such a big difference in this process of the eradication of identity: “[Bellacosa] neither liked nor disliked all these Mexicans and Americans living along both sides of the border. He saw them now as one and the same people, both stale imitations of the cultures they were meant to be a part of” (38). That is, the territory has become a site of sacrifice of one’s sense of self and place in the nation as well as in history.

In their 2012 project *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco set their minds to presenting different examples of what they termed “sacrifice zones” in the United States; namely, “those areas in the country that have been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement” (2012, xi). Among these areas of oblation—where, notably, only the marginalized and the disenfranchised are steadily immolated, the reservation is presented as a site of the dislocation and disempowerment of Native American communities. As an example, the village of Whiteclay, in Pine Ridge, is described. With the lowest per capita income as well as the lowest life expectancy in the country (Re-Member 2017) which condemns its inhabitants to a life of extreme poverty, alcoholism, and domestic as well as public violence, Hedges and Sacco state that “violence imposed on Indian culture has become internalized” (2017, 4). The situation of the Aranaña people as described in Flores’s novel does not seem to differ from that described by Hedges and Sacco regarding the Pine Ridge Reservation, as Bellacosa soon acknowledges that “the history of violence along the border had karmically doomed the dream of prospering and the pursuit of happiness not only for him, but for all his people, the people living along the borders of Mexico and the United States. He asked out loud what could become of his lot” (186). The answer to this query leaves little room for hope, since violence seems to have rendered people powerless, while their struggle for survival makes any opportunity to grow socially and economically impossible. In fact, the disappearance of racialized individuals and their subsequent use to fabricate shrunken heads shows that MacArthur has become a site where, borrowing from Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, practices of necrocapitalism¹⁰ are employed. Banerjee uses this term to allude to “some contemporary capitalist practices [which] contribute to dispossession and ‘the subjugation of life to the power of death’ in a variety of contexts” (2008, 1542). This author states that necrocapitalism arises in those areas where the use of necropolitical and necroeconomical techniques intersect, since “practices of accumulation in (post)colonial contexts by specific economic actors—transnational corporations, for example—[...] involve dispossession, death, torture,

¹⁰ A term the author in turn borrows from Achille Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics, which he described in his 2003 article of the same name as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003, 39; cited in Banerjee 2008, 1542).

suicide, slavery, destruction of livelihoods, and the general management of violence” (2008, 1548). It could be argued, then, that necrocapitalism operates in MacArthur, leading to violence and both the death of minority tribes—as exemplified by the shrinking of their heads—and the erasure of the Native American identity from society and history, which also seems to answer to a conscious, systematic and controlled practice: “Somebody, some entity, had been suppressing the knowledge and culture of the Aranaña. They’d gone through elaborate, if half-assed, means to even black out the few books that referred to them” (202).

Regarding the prospects of those individuals of miscegenated descent, at some point, Paco Herbert comments that “Aranaña descendants have the most demanding, degrading jobs and are discouraged from education, through—through political influences” (142), which is not too different to the situation described by Hedges and Sacco concerning Pine Ridge, where “the vast majority of Indian tribes and tribal members are extremely vulnerable, both to the dissolution of government [...] as well as the tremendous disparities in income and resulting joblessness” (16-17). However, the instances of extreme violence and erasure aimed at rendering the Aranaña tribe disposable can be, and are indeed, counteracted through the embracing of one’s identity, in the same way that in Pine Ridge the revival of one’s ethnic traditions and religion seem to offer a sense of rootedness to those who accept the rituals practiced by their ancestors prior to the white invasion (Hedges and Sacco 2012, 8). At the end of the novel, Bellacosa hugs the Trufflepig he has previously saved, and disappears into the horizon the same way his ancestors did, thereby finally embracing his indigenous identity and running away from an existence that compels him to participate in a necrocapitalist system of exchange based on accumulation and disposability of human lives.

But what exactly is this Trufflepig? The Trufflepig is described as a horrendous, appalling creature and the latest trend in the filtering market: “it looked like a pig with tiny ears, but it acted very doglike, with its front legs erect. A slurping, salivating tongue hung out of its mouth, which was actually a beak, like a chicken’s or rooster’s. It had the dark green skin of a crocodile, with rivulets shining like a fine pair of boots” (115). Besides, not only is the Trufflepig a cross-species patchwork, it also cannot walk, it does not urinate or defecate, and it excretes a dense white substance resembling milk from its eyes. Paco Herbert does describe it as “disgusting” (161). However, this striking and repulsive animal, useless as it seems, turns out to be the Aranaña’s mythological god: “The Aranaña, unlike other tribes that worship deities that resemble men, they worshipped this Trufflepig, which doesn’t exist” (255). The name is referred to as a sloppy translation for Huixtepeltnicopatl, *‘the pig of dreams,’* as, in Aranaña cosmogony, it is believed that dreams—and reality—are all projections of this deity.

If in the Aranaña system of beliefs reality and dreams are different threads in the same tapestry—as both are supposedly imagined by the Trufflepig—overall, the whole story seems to be a dream produced in the Trufflepig’s unconsciousness, as Paco Herbert at some point speculates: “But look around. It’s fucking snowing. Is this really South

Texas? You think a fucking Trufflepig is dreaming all this?" (256). Yet, the Trufflepig has other more formidable powers, as at some point it is revealed that the Aranaña's god is a kind of mirror: "a mirror reflecting who we are as people beyond time and space. A creature that reflects the ugliness of reality and embodies it in its being" (255). If one assumes that the whole novel is a projection of the Trufflepig, then one must also concede that what the story depicts is indeed a crazed and sometimes surreal reflection of all that is ugly in present-day reality, most notably: a) how marginalized and minority individuals served as guinea pigs in Mengele's horrifying experiments for the sake of a science put at the market's disposal, and b) the way dispossessed and disempowered communities can only participate within a buoyant global economy as manufacturers or as commodities: "A price tag is now placed on every Indian's head to be mounted and encased" (35).

The playful and seemingly mocking atmosphere distilling from the pages of Flores's work does not entirely shroud the underlying layer of ominous threat towards indigenous communities in—perhaps not so—fictional South Texas. The novel illustrates a near future in which disenfranchised communities, far from being allowed a space for self-representation and progress, are being used as, literally, consumable goods, thanks to a process which has, as its ultimate consequence, impeded their capacity for agency. This commodification of human lives is carried out in the story through two main channels. On the one hand, by objectifying or reducing identities and individuals to mere objects for trading, as can be seen with the exclusive and luxurious shrunken heads that have become so popular among the rich. The second means, perhaps more subtle but nonetheless equally successful, is that of turning the territory into a dumpsite, therefore implying that any person inhabiting the area is also part of the waste.

Such a scenario in which the Aranaña population can serve both as precious raw material and rubbish might prove how easily the category of "waste"—which Joshua O. Reno considers a social construct: "though appearance may suggest otherwise, things are judged 'polluting' because of how they fit within encompassing systems of social classification" (2014, 4)—can fluctuate, depending on the not always clear distinction between redundancy and disposability, in this case applied to human beings in a territory troubled by eccentric consumerism and distressing "trash." This idea does not challenge Bauman's assertions regarding what he terms "human waste" but, rather, it emphasizes how easily this category can fluctuate depending on the needs and desires of the market. Against that, *Tears of the Trufflepig* seems to offer, if not a possible solution, at least an ineludible requirement: that of not forgetting, as memory is a necessary tool in the struggle against commodification and eradication. In the quest to turn the tables of a *status quo* that prospers in conformity and compliance, memory and remembrance stand as the only bulwark in a silent, but still enduring resistance.¹¹

¹¹ The research underpinning this article is part of the research project "Literature & Globalization: Communities of Waste," funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the National Research Agency (AEI) (PID2019-106798GB-I00).

WORKS CITED

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford UP.
- BANERJEE, Subhabrata Bobby. 2008. "Necrocapitalism." *Organization Studies*, 29 (12): 1541–63.
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. 2004. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BLICK, Jeffrey P. 1988. "Genocidal Warfare in Tribal Societies as a Result of European-Induced Culture Conflict." *Man, New Series*, 23 (4): 654-70.
- CHABRAN-DERNERSESIAN, Angie, ed. 2006. *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- DOMINGO, Andreu. 2018. *Demografía zombi: Resilientes y redundantes en la utopía neoliberal del siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Icaria Antrazyt.
- FLORES, Fernando A. 2019. *Tears of the Trufflepig*. New York: MCD x FSG Originals.
- GREEN, Linda. 2011. "The Nobodies: Neoliberalism, Violence, and Migration." *Medical Anthropology*, 30 (4): 366–85.
- HEDGES, Chris, and Joe Sacco. 2012. *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. New York: Bold Type Books.
- LAM, Joshua. 2018. "Black Objects: Animation and Objectification in Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*." *College Literature*, 45 (3): 369-98.
- LEWIS, Andrew (blue_beetle). 2010. "User-Driven Discontent." *Metafilter*, August 26. [Accessed online on October 26, 2020].
- MBEMBE, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, 15 (1): 11–40.
- McKIBBEN, Bill. 2006. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House.
- NESSEL, Lori A. 2012. "Disposable Workers: Applying a Human Rights Framework to Analyze Duties Owed to Seriously Injured or Ill Migrants." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 19 (1): 61–103.
- PATTERSON, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- QUESADA, James, Laurie K. Hart, and Philippe Bourgois. 2011. "Structural Vulnerability and Health: Latino Migrant Laborers in the United States." *Medical Anthropology: Cross-cultural Studies in Health and Illness*, 30 (4): 339–62.
- RE-MEMBER. 2017. "Pine Ridge Indian Reservation." [Accessed online on March 30, 2021].
- RENO, Joshua O. 2014. "Toward a New Theory of Waste: From 'Matter Out of Place' to Signs of Life." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31 (6): 3-27.
- ROCCO, Raymond. 2006. "The Theoretical Construction of the 'Other' in Postmodernist Thought: Latinos in the New Urban Political Economy." In Chabran-Dernesian 2006, 404-12.
- . 2016. "Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants." *Latino Studies*, 14 (1): 99–117.

- RUBENSTEIN, Steven Lee. 2007. "Circulation, Accumulation, and the Power of Shuar Shrunk Heads." *Cultural Anthropology*, 22 (3): 357-99.
- SERRA, Richard. 1980. *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980*. The Hudson River Museum.
- SIGNE MORRISON, Susan. 2013. "Waste Aesthetics: Form as Restitution." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 1-15.
- STASIULIS, Daiva. 2020. "Elimi(Nation): Canada's 'Post-Settler' Embrace of Disposable Migrant Labour." *Studies in Social Justice*, 14 (1): 22-54.
- STEEL, Daniel. 1999. "Trade Goods and Jívaro Warfare: The Shuar 1850-1957, and the Achuar, 1940-1978." *Ethnohistory*, 46 (4): 745-76.

Received 26 October 2020

Revised version accepted 9 June 2021

Elsa del Campo Ramírez is an associate professor at Universidad Nebrija in Madrid, where she teaches Literature and English. She completed her PhD at Universidad Complutense of Madrid in 2017, after spending a research year at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Her book, *Envisioning A Decolonial Future: The Poetics of Presentism and Chicana Literature*, was published in 2019.