



## **The Material Ethics of Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Peregrinaciones de una alma triste***

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Juana Manuela Gorriti's novella *Peregrinaciones de una alma triste* (1876) opens in a most Romantic vein: Laura, the protagonist, suffers from tuberculosis and is subjected to arsenic poisoning by her doctor in an attempt to cure her.<sup>1</sup> As her doctor prescribes "mañana doble dosis; triple, pasado mañana" (4), he declares, with the zeal of a true believer, "niña mía [. . .] desde hoy comienza usted a tomar para curarse aquello que a otros da la muerte: el arsénico. Arsénico por la mañana, arsénico en la tarde, arsénico en la noche...¡Horrible! ¿no es cierto?" (4). The lovesick Laura promptly shatters this Romantic scene by rejecting his prescription.<sup>2</sup> She dumps his arsenic into her handkerchief and proceeds to steal out of the house and into the world. From this moment on the novel unfolds into an episodic travel narrative that takes the protagonist through Chile, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, and Brazil. In these newly independent nations, Laura experiences beautiful landscapes that welcome her at the same time that she encounters political geographies that are hostile to her as a woman. As her story takes shape, first recounted directly to a friend and then in letters to the same, Laura's character describes an alternative mode of being female and Latin American in the nineteenth century. Rejecting patriarchal social limitations upon women, Laura's strength grows as she eschews convention to find her cure in travel and in developing an ethical relationship with the material world.

The physical world, both human and natural, stands out in Laura's recounting of her travels. Its prominence, and the respect that Laura grants it, signals how much Gorriti's text deviates from the possessive gaze that Mary Louise Pratt, among others, describes as the predominant attitude towards the natural world and subaltern bodies that began with the Conquest of the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Far from an association based on power, the relationships that Laura establishes with the people and natural places she encounters comes close to what Donna Haraway calls a "co-constitutive relationship" ("Otherworldly" 163) between humans and nature. This co-constitutive bond is one founded on an ethos of mutual respect, a material ethics informed by evolutionary theory but inspired by Romantic ideals that opposed the subordination of the natural world and subaltern human groups to the needs of a modern nation.<sup>4</sup> Viewing her own body from both a late Romantic and a material perspective, Laura's narrative details her sympathetic relationships with the human and natural landscapes of a Latin America in transition

toward an uncertain future. Tracing an ethical trajectory that includes the material as a constitutive element of modern subjectivity-agency, *Peregrinaciones* critiques the methods by which Latin American nations pursued modernity through slavery, war, and other forms of oppression. In so doing, Gorriti's novella opens spaces for new models of gender and material personhood, proposing alternative, ethical narratives of modernity and the nation.

### Material Ethics

The power structures of colonial and post-independence Latin America treated the natural world as a commodity (Nouzeilles 24; Barrera-Osorio 6). Gabriela Nouzeilles highlights the desires that animated the colonial and modern economies of exchange, designating (post)colonial Latin America as “uno de los últimos refugios de lo natural,” characterizing nature as an object of fantasy and consumption for capitalistic culture (13). Further, Stacy Alaimo argues, “Nature, as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism, has long been waged against women, people of color, [and] indigenous peoples [. . .] because of their supposed “proximity to nature”” (239).<sup>5</sup> That is, nature, and a body's perceived proximity to it, has also functioned as the ideology that marks females and subalterns as commodities, rather than subject-agents. The zeal for consumption in the Americas was extended to the racialized human bodies considered to be commodities, following Foucault's idea of biopower (140), and these same bodies were subsequently marked as obstacles that lay in the path of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Thus in the nineteenth century, nature and the material world, along with its subaltern peoples, continued to be considered the primary materials that—if appropriately consumed—could fuel a possible modernity in Latin America. If not consumed, these materials and bodies could impede progress towards this ideal modernity. Domingo F. Sarmiento exemplifies this dual view of nature as both a site of potential growth and a repository for retrograde culture in his novel/essay *Facundo* (1845): he rhapsodizes about the “fondo de poesía que nace de los accidentes naturales del país” (78), and portrays unspoiled Argentine nature as a Romantic backdrop to a civilization yet to come, in contrast with “la naturaleza salvaje” (66) of the *pampas*, home to what he characterizes as the barbaric *gauchos* and indigenous culture (64-72). Nineteenth-century narratives of modernity were constructed from the same natural materials that were also seen as barriers to the continent's hopes for the industrial, culturally powerful future that remained a distant ideal for Spanish America.<sup>7</sup>

However, in 1859, a radical cognitive shift occurred after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*: the material world moved from the background to the fore when it became incorporated as an element of modern subjectivity. While the natural commodities consumed during the Colonial period and the primary materials (natural and human) of nineteenth-century nation building were considered to be unquestionably material, the human subjects at the top of the social power structure had not been so closely associated with the material world. Nonetheless, as popular knowledge of evolutionary theory quickly spread throughout Europe and Latin America, the theory changed the way that popular culture conceived not only of biological history to date but

also of the nature of human society and its future (Levine and Novoa, *From Man* 8, 12-13). Adriana Novoa and Alex Levine state, “The publication of Darwin’s evolutionary work not only initiated a new way of understanding organic evolution; it also radically transformed the understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment” (*From Man* 8). In Argentina in particular, “The irruption of Darwinism [...] challenged the belief in the very possibility of a cultural evolution independent from the biological realm” (Levine and Novoa, *From Man* 12). The evolutionary future of humans and the natural world was seen as contingent rather than planned (Brantlinger, cited in Levine and Novoa, *From Man* 8) and nature was reconceived as “the scene of competition and struggle, not higher harmony” (Gould, cited in Levine and Novoa, *From Man* 8). These new ideas not only challenged existing narratives of Spanish American progress and modernity, but also confirmed the prominence of natural science among the powerful ideologies creating new narratives of the modern, which, for Argentina, included both science and Darwinian evolution as central tenets of the modernizing state (Levine and Novoa, *¡Darwinistas!* 5).

Caught somewhere between a lingering Romantic spirit and the jarring materialism of evolutionary theory and its popular interpretations, Gorriti’s *Peregrinaciones* combines these somewhat incongruous cultural elements that flowed through Argentine popular culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The text abandons the Romantic tuberculosis narrative and instead traces the path of a melancholic woman who must heal her physical body. Along the way, the text implicitly addresses discourses of modernity and critiques their exclusion of subalterns and the natural world.<sup>8</sup> The text addresses its political concerns through the physical world that Laura encounters and with which she remains sympathetic, all the while revealing an underlying Romantic vision of nature as an ideal good in contrast with human culture.<sup>9</sup>

The interplay between the spiritual and the material, between Laura’s *alma* and her *cuerpo*, is the substance of her journey; the recuperation of the link between body and soul is the healing process effected through Laura’s travels.<sup>10</sup> Along the way, her voyage of healing develops an ethical perspective that includes nature and the dispossessed and promotes solidarity between subaltern subjects and the natural world. Laura herself is subjected by Foucauldian social power structures and empowered by Certeau’s individual tactics of everyday life, a subject-agent that deviates from the submissive feminine models of her day. While Laura’s story is not one of total triumph of the will over the physical body, her travels and general recuperation of health show how her *alma*, despite its *tristeza*, combats the weakness of the flesh to pursue an ethical existence. Written in the historical context of a late-nineteenth-century Argentina that tended toward apocalyptic, racist, and deterministic social interpretations of Darwin’s evolutionary theory (Levine and Novoa, *¡Darwinistas!* 26-29), Gorriti’s narrative instead demonstrates a sympathy with, and for, alterity, as well as a profound skepticism regarding established systems of social and political power.

Consequently, as she wanders through America, Laura deconstructs the ideologies of agency and gender, as well as of civilization and savagery, which underlay nineteenth-century discourses of modernity. Gorriti conjures a nontraditional, material female

subject-agent whose border-crossings, both geographic and epistemological, challenge the dominant patriarchal social and economic structures of nineteenth-century Argentina.

### Material Escape

The text opens with a frame narrative voiced by the protagonist, Laura, who returns from a trip to recount her escape and travels to an unnamed female friend. In defiance of her doctor's orders, Laura has left Lima and her tuberculosis treatment behind in order to travel to Chile, Argentina, Brazil, then to Paraguay, Peru, and back to Brazil at the end of the novel. Laura's physical body is prominently featured from the beginning of the text, and over the course of the trip Laura brings herself from sickness to health and beauty, such that her friend initially does not recognize her (1).

Laura begins her *peregrinaciones* when she decides to follow the model of a young tuberculosis patient who had found health through travel. Once she decides to escape her doctor and "la tiranía de[ . . . ] galeno" (5), Laura uses social expectations of feminine weakness as the tools for her escape by faking symptoms that convince her doctor she has taken a turn for the worse. The facility with which she inveigles her doctor with "endiablados síntomas de enfermedad" (7) emphasizes the absurdity of a medical profession that relies on socially embedded assumptions rather than empirical data to diagnose and treat patients.

Laura's physician exemplifies the backwardness of the medical profession, and by extension, the patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century Argentine society. She tells him of her desire to escape, and he encourages her to travel in her dreams while remaining physically under his care. Her doctor explains indulgently, "en las regiones del espíritu, nada tengo que ver. Viaje usted cuanto quiera [ . . . ]. Pero en lo que tiene relación con esta personalidad material de que yo cuido, ya es otra cosa. Quietud, vestidos ligeros, sueltos, abrigados; ninguna fatiga, ningún afán, mucha obediencia a su médico y nada más" (7). As she dreams of travel, he expostulates that he would recognize her in her imagined disguise: "Qué disfraz resistió nunca a mi visual perspicacia..." (6). And yet his perspicacity fails when he meets her on the street after she has escaped her house, dressed precisely as she had described. Even worse, he comments on her beauty and notes that she is dressed exactly as the sickly Laura had fantasized earlier, "Precisamente así soñaba vestirse la pobre moribunda de quien acabo de hablar arriba" (9). Unable to recognize her material body once it has shed its trappings of illness, he does not connect the beauty before him with the dehumanized body of his patient and instead follows her on his horse, catcalling, "Adiós, cuerpecito de merengue. ¡Buen viaje, y que no te deshagas!" (9).

As this buffoonish doctor shifts from *galeno* to *galán*, he perceives Laura as an object of erotic desire once she is outside the confining space of her family home. Whether objectified by a tactless male suitor or science, in either case her body (like the nature she will soon embrace) represents a commodity controlled by material possession. Once she exits her house she is free, both spiritually and physically, to purchase her tickets and begin her travels.

## Material Femininity

Gorriti's depiction of Laura offers a feminine heroine who is not easily reduced to illness or romance, or to subjection or agency. The multiple meanings of *alma* as life-soul-person denote both the spiritual and physical presence of Laura, a subject-agent not reducible to one dimension. Laura's inherent multiplicity allows her agency to overcome the social and physical subjection that makes her body a site of illness at the beginning of the text. Her will converts her body to a place of strength as the novel and the journey continue, a physical reality that controverts the idealized, ethereal woman of the time with a living, breathing female body.

Gorriti's text begins by establishing the physicality of Laura's suffering and illness. As she suffers, Laura redefines for herself the material, natural world that embraces her. Laura's travels free her psychologically, and her autonomy brings her strength. Through force of will she flees her house despite her physical limitations, declaring, "hice un supremo esfuerzo que triunfó de mi postración, y me convenció una vez más de la omnipotencia de la voluntad humana" (7). The "omnipotencia" of her will brings her to overcome her faint on the train, after which she declares, "Aquella fue mi última debilidad" (12) and opens a window to "aspir[ar] con ansia la brisa pura de la tarde" (12). The conviction of her will strengthens her body: "Al llegar a Callao bajé del tren con pie seguro [. . .] me interné fuerte y serena en las bulliciosas calles del puerto" (12). Her *alma* strengthens her material body as she resolves to overcome her illness through her sympathy with the material world.

Laura's ability to overcome illness and heal her own body emphasizes the material reality of her being that directly challenges the ideal of the "ángel del hogar" that describes social expectations for females during the nineteenth century in Latin America. Nancy LaGreca describes this image as "portray[ing] the perfect woman as the Christian, chaste, maternal guardian of the happiness and success of her children, husband, and other family members. Extreme self-sacrifice and stoic suffering for the good of others were its main principles" (5). Francine Masiello explains that this feminine ideal is a strategic element of Argentine nation building, since "[b]y enforcing woman's duties to the home and by emphasizing her empathetic qualities, leading intellectuals molded an image of the Argentine spouse and mother to suit their projects of state" (*Between* 53-54). This patriarchal ideal for women intended to focus women's energies on home, family, and procreation, effectively restricting the feminine social sphere to the house and garden. Female bodies themselves were reduced to what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar refer to as "Cyphers" (9), borrowing the term from poet Anne Finch to describe how, in the nineteenth century, female bodies were often depicted in literary texts and culture more generally as empty spaces, vessels to be shaped by male writers who filled them with "their penises or their pens" (9). Laura's rejection of illness as representative of the incorporeal image of angelic femininity marks the text's critique of the patriarchal social order throughout Spanish America.

The protagonist's unquestionable materiality is emphasized first through her illness and later during her recovery. From the moment Laura leaves the confines of her house, the main source of her suffering becomes her body's discomfort itself after she rejects the

principle of female abnegation. When compared with the self-effacing, idealized *ángel del hogar*, Laura's abandonment of her family home seems selfish, an impression emphasized by Laura's mother's sobbing as Laura sneaks out. Laura reasonably concludes, though, "menos doloroso le sería llorar a su hija ausente que llorarla muerta" (12). An angel might be expected to suffer within the bosom of her dotting family, accepting without question the death that would inevitably be her reward. But in *Peregrinaciones* Laura is no angel.<sup>11</sup> Her desire for self-preservation drives her to abandon her home and allows her to overcome her physical ailments. Unlike the idealized female figure who suffers in silence, Laura competes with, and often wins over, the social and physical forces that subject her.

In many cases, social contexts bring about physical effects in Laura's body. She gains strength, both physically and psychologically, when she flees the noxious influence of her physician and the social circles of Lima. She recognizes the stimulating effect of her separation from society, having "fortalecido el corazón con el pensamiento mismo de mi soledad" (12). Consequently, when her boat sails she is the only passenger that does not suffer *mareo*. She feels a sea change within her mind and body as she rejects social and medical prescriptions:

Rompí el método del doctor, y comí, bebí, corrí, toqué el piano, canté y bailé: todo esto con el anhelo ardiente del cautivo que sale de una larga prisión. Parecíame que cada uno de estos ruidosos actos de la vida era una patente de salud; y olvidaba del todo la fiebre, la tos y los sudores, esos siniestros huéspedes de mi pobre cuerpo. (14)

The further she goes against the doctor's orders, the better she feels: "¡fenómenos capaces de dar al traste con las teorías del doctor y de todos los médicos del mundo! aquellos desmanes, bastante cada uno de ellos para matarme, parecían hacer en mí un efecto de todo lo contrario. Por de pronto, me volvieron el apetito y el sueño [. . .] El principal agente de mi mal, la fiebre me había dejado" (15). She rebels against the medical profession and the patriarchy as she follows her body's dictates and eats, drinks, and sleeps her way to health.

Although Laura's recovery initially inspires "una loca alegría" (14), the title reminds us that she is an "alma triste," a body/soul who suffers from a persistent melancholic depression. Even after she feels cured of illness, Laura sees her physical ailments as stemming from her sadness: "me preguntaba qué había sido de ese dolor del alma que ocasionó mi enfermedad. Dormía o había muerto; pero no me hacía sufrir. ¡Ah! ¡él me esperaba después, es una cruel emboscada" (16). Laura's melancholy is threaded throughout the text, casting a lugubrious pall over what might be otherwise appear to be a tale of feminine liberation. This aspect of the narrative thwarts a utopian reading of Laura's story, making space instead for a complex feminine subject-agent that is not easily reduced to one state of being, whether physical or social, strong or weak, happy or sad.<sup>12</sup>

### **Nature and Material Sympathy**

The natural world enters Laura's narrative with purpose, first appearing as a background space and then gathering force to present itself as another actor in the tale by initiating

interactions with humans. Initially the scenery seems to reflect human sentiments through a sort of Romantic mirror, as for example when Laura is traveling to Salta with the nun-to-be Carmela and the lover Carmela has renounced, Enrique.<sup>13</sup> The narrative describes the couple's "romántica odisea" (31)—unnoticed by any but Laura, who has unintentionally discovered their love—as a journey in which each lover's inward pain is reflected by their natural surroundings, "teniendo por escenario el desierto con sus ardientes estepas, sus verdes oasis y su imponente soledad" (31). The contrast between the bleak desert and ardent plains reflects the choice that Carmela makes during the course of the trip: she must choose between her promise to devote her life to God (reflected in the bleakness of the "ardientes estepas") and the man she loves (the "verdes oasis"), an option that tempts her with happiness and the fecund joys of partnership. As she continues to choose the "imponente soledad" of her vow of chastity, her decision to renounce happiness in favor of the martyrdom worthy of an angel implies a marriage to Christ within the silent confines of a nunnery. As each step toward Salta brings her closer to martyrdom, Carmela contemplates the green and brown hues of the vistas that confront her, "suspendida su alma entre el cielo y el infierno" (31), between love and the *infierno* of her religious duty.

Carmela chooses, angelically, the path of desolation when she takes her holy vows. In a cutting critique of martyrdom as a feminine ideal, the narrative details how not only Carmela but also her parents and Enrique suffer the consequent misery of her choice, focusing on the social repercussions of female sacrifice. Later, Carmela is described as becoming an angel upon Enrique's valiant death in battle: "Carmela no era ya una mujer: su voluptuosa hermosura terrestre habíase transformado en la belleza ideal e impalpable de los ángeles [. . .]. Carmela semejava a un ángel, pronto a remontar el vuelo hacia su celeste patria" (74). Laura's descriptions of the lovers' acute and prolonged suffering articulates the absurdity of abnegation as a female ideal, making visible the "material consequences," to borrow Alaimo and Hekman's term (7), of treating female bodies as commodities.<sup>14</sup>

As she progresses toward Salta, Laura's description of nature shifts from a reflective to a healing relationship through which beautiful views and green mountains physiologically relieve her body and mind. She describes a symbiosis between humans and their verdant surroundings that approaches sympathy, a word that today denotes an attraction or affinity that is seen as primarily an emotional or intellectual connection between two entities. However, a historical denotation for sympathy also describes a physical relationship between two bodies that share a condition with one another in a physiological sense ("sympathy")—for example, illness or the easing of pain. Understanding sympathy as both an emotional/intellectual as well as a physical connection, the natural world in *Peregrinaciones* is a sympathetic system in the sense that it feels together with Laura and her traveling companions both emotionally and physically. In some cases, as with the love-torn Carmela, the sympathetic connection between nature and humans is simply reflective and the landscape presents an image of the miserable young woman's interior mindscape. In other instances, however, the connection between humans and nature is clearly physiological in nature, as when Laura first takes in "la brisa" upon beginning her journey (12), a wind of change that heals her body as it separates her from the patriarchal social order.

Laura and her fellow travelers experience this sympathetic connection in the form of a physiological embrace from the green mountains and valley that welcomes them to Salta. A soft, green path leads them to their destination. Laura notes the “curvas más suaves, cambiando su gris monótono en verdes gramadales donde pacían innumerables rebaños” (33) and “una brisa tibia [que] nos traía, en ráfagas intermitentes, perfumes que hacían estremecer de gozo mi corazón” (33). As the gray desert gives way to green pastures, the sights and smells welcome the travelers and beckon them on. Not only the landscape but also the inhabitants salute the travelers from their rooftops, “Benévolas invitaciones que conmovieron a mis compañeros” (33). The travelers continue to their destination via “aquellos poéticos senderos cubiertos de perfumada fronda, que parecían delirios de la fantasía a quien no conociese el esplendor de aquella hermosa naturaleza” (33-34). The dreamy, scented pathways give way to a cathedral-like space within the forest: “un bosque de árboles seculares, que enlazando sus ramas, formaban sobre nuestras cabezas una bóveda sombría, embalsamada, llena de misteriosos rumores” (34). Inside this natural, spiritual space, each member of the group meditates: “Profundo silencio reinaba entre nosotros. Parecíamos entregados a la contemplación de aquel nocturno paisaje; pero en realidad callábamos porque nos absorbían nuestras propias emociones” (34). The travelers experience a restful silence.

Laura and her fellow travelers pass from the peace of the silent forest into an open area lit by stars: “De repente comenzó a clarear el ramaje y el espléndido cielo de aquellas regiones apareció tachonado de estrellas” (34). Laura describes a gently sloping trail that draws the travelers toward their destination. The landscape explodes with wildlife, animal and vegetable, to welcome the visitors:

Habíamos entrado en un terreno que descendía en suave declive, flanqueado por setas de rosales que cercaban innumerables vergeles. El suelo estaba cubierto de yerbas y menudas florecillas cuyo aroma subía a nosotros en el aura tibia de la noche. Una multitud de luciérnagas cruzaban el aire, cual meteoros errantes; los grillos, las cigarras y las langostas verdes chillaban entre los gramadales; los *quirquinchos*, los vizcachas, las iguanas y los zorros atravesaban el camino enredándose en los pies de nuestros caballos [. . .]. En aquella naturaleza exuberante, la savia de la vida rebosaba en rumores aun entre el silencio de la noche. (34)

The Edenic commingling of plants, animals, and humans energizes the travelers as they close in on Salta. However, despite (or perhaps because) the openness and natural vistas of the trail had created a feeling of freedom and release, Laura describes mixed feelings upon returning to her birthplace (35), for when she returns to the social space of Salta, she reenters a system of power that excludes her.

And thus Laura’s return to Salta and society is a return to physical illness. For, after only a few weeks in Salta, Laura once again becomes ill after spending time with old friends and in society; she explains, “vi venir el tedio, esa extraña dolencia, mezcla confusa de tristeza, enfado y desaliento; de hastío de sí propio y de los otros [. . .] Mi salud comenzó a sentir la influencia de aquel estado moral y decaía visiblemente” (65). Her resistance to depression seems weakened after her contact with society. Her “hastío de sí propio y de

los otros” (65) overwhelms the hope and joy that she had felt upon her arrival to Salta, and Laura recognizes her need to travel: “Como en Lima, huyamos—díjeme—, busquemos otros aires, y sobre todo, horizontes desconocidos, que no despierten ningún recuerdo” (65). Salta, however, has depleted her pocketbook along with her spirits and physical health. A timely invitation from a heretofore unknown brother saves Laura from her *hastío* by welcoming her to his *hacienda* (66). There, as during her journey to Salta, Laura responds to the natural world as an organism in sympathy with nature.

### **Ethics and Material Sympathy**

In addition to the community she feels with nature during her travels, Laura’s social commentary throughout her narrative shows that the boundaries of her sympathy—her “feeling-with” physically and emotionally—encompass not only her natural surroundings but also the marginalized groups and people she meets as she travels.<sup>15</sup> In Rio de Janeiro, for example, she receives an inheritance from her slave-owning grandfather’s estate, and uses some of the funds to purchase the freedom of a slave, Francisca, along with her children (132). Laura checks to see that the family is thriving and free upon her return (148). She also uses the money to try and help an indigenous woman held captive by a Portuguese man in Rio, with the assistance of an elderly black mendicant who—paid handsomely by Laura—promises to help the *cautiva* to her freedom (129). Unfortunately, not all of these acts of kindness bear fruit: the novel ends with the *cautiva*’s death (148). Nonetheless, Laura’s social ethic and natural sympathies consistently align her with the socially dispossessed.

Laura’s progressive attitude is especially noticeable in Brazil, a nation in which slavery (abolished only in 1888) was still legal during her travels. In addition, Brazil had just scored a victory, along with Argentina and Uruguay, over Paraguay in the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-70).<sup>16</sup> Laura’s social commentary when she arrives in Rio is especially barbed as it contrasts with the beneficent descriptions of the scenery she encounters. As she closes in on Rio she enthuses, “Nada tan bello como aquel anfiteatro de montañas, bosques, vergeles y palacios que, descendiendo de las nubes, mojava sus pies en las olas del océano” (119), describing the mountainside swooping down to welcome her at the port. However, Laura’s joy is cut short: “Sin embargo, mi entusiasmo se enfrió algún tanto, cuando al entrar en la ciudad, vi a sus calles angostas y sucias llenas de un pueblo miserable, sujeto a los horrores de la esclavitud” (119). In contrast with the mountainous amphitheater that welcomed her, the dirty, narrow streets of the city repel her with her knowledge of the slavery that thrives within; she complains, “la vista de aquellas miserias me hizo daño” (119).

Nauseated by visions of slavery, she then catches sight of a Brazilian warship arriving back from Paraguay, unloading “los despojos de aquel país heroico y desventurado” (119), referring to the devastating (for Paraguay) aftermath of the recent war. The chapter ends abruptly here, and the narrative uses Laura’s affective responses to evoke disgust at the practices of a slave-owning society and the unabashed exercise of war as an efficient means of enriching one nation at the expense of another.<sup>17</sup>

Laura's critique of slavery and war as the unethical biopolitics of the Brazilian state highlights the textual contrast between sick social structures and the healing effects of nature. An earlier visit to Paraguay had shown Laura the extent of the destruction and pillage wrought by the War of the Triple Alliance, the material consequences of biopower. She describes, "cuán dolorosa fue su decepción al llegar, encontrándola desierta, asolada, abandonadas sus casas al saco y la violencia [. . .] Escombros humeantes, muebles destrozados montones de ricas telas, vestiduras y vasos sagrados, yacían por tierra obstruyendo las veredas, mezclados con cadáveres en putrefacción" (112). Reinforcing the state's treatment of human subjects as commodities, the infamies of war have been carried out in the open, "ejercidas por los brasileros a la luz del día y a vista de sus jefes" (112), with the blessing of the Brazilian army's commanders, "quienes lejos de castigarlos, tomaron parte en aquellas infamias" (112).

Laura escapes the human horrors of war and slavery, as well as nineteenth-century social limitations, by eschewing the drawing room in favor of ships and mules, horses and carriages that carry her from Peru through the Southern Cone to Brazil. Laura herself is chameleonic throughout the narrative, changing appearance to sneak out of her parents' house, or donning men's clothes to escape "[los] salvajes [. . .] civilizados" (139-40) who attack her. Slipping in and out of gender roles at will, Laura's health and spirits rise and dip with the landscape, soaring out in nature and plummeting when she spends time in civilizations that condone slavery, war, and repression.

As it contrasts the destructive features of human society with the harmonies of the natural world, Laura's narrative directly challenges Sarmiento's famous dichotomy between civilization and barbarism in *Facundo*, which he describes as "la lucha entre la civilización europea y la barbarie indígena, entre la inteligencia y la materia: lucha imponente en América" (75). Laura deconstructs Sarmiento's differentiation between civilized human culture and the barbarism of the indigenous/natural world by underscoring the feral character of "[los] salvajes [. . .] civilizados" (Gorriti 139-40) in contrast with the healing majesty of nature. Her social commentary further undermines Sarmiento's formulation by criticizing slavery, injustice, and the subjugation of women by a patriarchy just as brutish as the "salvajes civilizados" she encounters. Sarmiento postulates "la lucha [. . .] entre la inteligencia y la materia" (75), and Laura allies herself with "la materia," sympathizing with the material, natural world the state uses to fuel its transformation into a modern nation.

### **A Material Ethics**

Although Laura's progressive social views are not without their own blind spots, as she navigates the "border zones" between nature and culture (Haraway, *Primate* 6) she consistently questions the material and discursive use of nature as a commodity to be consumed by the modernizing state. She critiques the biopolitics that turn nature and subaltern bodies into materials for nation building. In the process of challenging the discourses of cultural imperialism, Laura's narrative captures the margins of Latin American culture that are excluded from the imagined ideal future. She feels sympathy with the natural world and her body acts as a biological filter for the damaging narratives

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of modernity, reacting with *hastío* and *síncope* when her contact with human culture and the toxic narratives of modernity overwhelms her.<sup>18</sup>

Laura's narrative is initially framed through the Romantic lens of illness as a metaphor for depression ("alma triste") brought on by lovesickness, but it ends on a very different note. For Laura later claims that she is healthy despite her sadness: "yo superé valientemente esos obstáculos; y lejos de sentir cansancio, encontrábame ligera y fuerte. Tan cierto es que el dolor del alma preserva el cuerpo y lo hace invulnerable" (143). Her illness is, as she notes many times during her voyage, the result of a sick society.

*Peregrinaciones* signals the similarities between the commodification of women, slaves, and nature in the pursuit of a modernity that is "always "somewhere else"" (Mejías-López 34). The text's unremittingly negative view of the idea of modernity that Latin America pursued during the late nineteenth century offers a critical assessment of material subjectivity and post-independence social structures.<sup>19</sup> Laura's natural sympathies and material ethics demonstrate small but substantial new ways of thinking and being modern in nineteenth-century Latin America, a perspective that begins to unravel the patriarchal/colonial narrative of possession as power.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Juana Manuela Gorriti (1818-92) was one of the foremost Argentine writers, editors, and educators of her generation. Her family was exiled for political reasons when she was young, and in her adulthood Gorriti traveled between Argentina and Peru, engaging with literary communities and creating an extensive network of literary friendships in both places. Gorriti produced short fiction, novels, memoirs and short nonfiction, along with an edited cookbook. Francine Masiello provides a biography and synthetic analysis of Gorriti's work in her substantial introduction to an English translation of *Sueños y realidades*. While much has been written on the author, only a few articles have focused on *Peregrinaciones*. These include Lea Fletcher's description of Gorriti's critique of medicine and patriarchy, María Salgado's review of illness discourse and heterogeneity, Francesca Denegri's analysis of the female pilgrim, Mary Berg's general synopsis ("Rereading"), Rosalía Baltar's study of travel narrative as encounters with otherness, and María Cristina Arambel-Guiñazú's reading of the text as coded social critique. Berg's prologue to the Stockcero edition of *Peregrinaciones* provides a detailed synopsis of the novel (x-xiv), and her biographical "Juana" includes a very complete bibliography of criticism written on Gorriti up to 1990. Rocío Del Aguila reads *Peregrinaciones*, along with other texts by Gorriti and Clorinda Matto de Turner, as an illness narrative that both expands and subverts gender norms within a national context. Volumes of articles on Gorriti edited by Amelia Royo and Cristina Iglesia are notable among more recent criticism, along with Lea Fletcher's edited collection *Mujeres y cultura*.
- <sup>2</sup> Lovesickness was a common nineteenth-century depiction of tuberculosis (Sontag 18-22). As it happens, Laura's broken heart (from her husband's abandonment and later incarceration) only comes up a few times in the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, together with Gabriela Nouzeilles's edited collection *La naturaleza en disputa* and Antonio Barrera-Osorio's *Experiencing Nature*, all describe a process by which the natural world was coveted and commoditized as part of the process of empire building during and after the Conquest. Foucault's notion of "biopower" adds human bodies to the natural resources consumed by the state (140).
- <sup>4</sup> My understanding of modernity as a narrative of futurity and coloniality is indebted to Carlos J. Alonso and Walter Mignolo. Alonso posits that "'modernity' is always more than just a category: it is an operation of exclusion that always has already taken place" (20). Walter Mignolo ties the idea of modernity explicitly to the colonial project and an inherent difference from Latin America; he explains that "'modernity' is a complex narrative whose point of origination was Europe; a narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, 'coloniality'" (3).
- <sup>5</sup> Alaimo's article traces a cultural history of nature and feminism, including nineteenth-century feminist ethics vis-à-vis nature in the U.S. (240-41).
- <sup>6</sup> Aníbal Quijano argues that our current understanding of race itself was invented through this process of colonization and commodification; he asserts that "[t]he idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America" (534).
- <sup>7</sup> While Alonso claims that rhetorically this future will never arrive (8, 20), Alejandro Mejías-López asserts that Spanish America in fact experienced its own modernity

through liberal political experiments (24), suggesting that historians read Spanish American modernity negatively only in hindsight (33-34). Nonetheless, Mejías-López agrees that rhetorically, for the most part, “modernity is indeed always “somewhere else”” (34).

- <sup>8</sup> Emilio Carrilla terms this aspect of Romantic thought “romanticismo social” (154-57). José Miguel Oviedo characterizes Spanish American Romanticism as conjoined with political liberalism, describing them as “principios inseparables durante un buen tiempo” (16).
- <sup>9</sup> Oviedo explains the Romantic zeal for American nature as an interest in representing “[la] realidad “criolla”” (17) in addition to the drama and exoticism that these natural scenes presented.
- <sup>10</sup> According to one admiring review from a contemporary, Gorriti succeeds in bridging the space between Romantic aesthetics and natural science in *Peregrinaciones*. Mariano Pelliza writes in his prologue to the 1886 edition of *Peregrinaciones* that Gorriti successfully transmits nature through art (xxi) while she addresses current ideologies through the lens of Romantic prose: “Hoy se le pide a la novela algo más que la pintura de las costumbres [. . .] Si el romance ha de ser una escuela donde aprenda a conocer al mundo; conviene cultivar esta rama de la literatura relacionándola con [...] la ciencia social o positiva [. . .] Así lo ha comprendido la discreta novelista Salteña” (xxi-xxii).
- <sup>11</sup> Denegri suggests that nineteenth-century female narrators presented themselves as pilgrims/*peregrinas* in order to enact the role of the angel while they traveled (355-56). She concludes that pilgrim narratives nonetheless push social boundaries for female writers (362).
- <sup>12</sup> Gorriti’s edited *Cocina ecléctica* (1890) similarly showcases the irreducible variety of feminine subjectivity (Austin 175-90).
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor describes Romanticism as developing from philosophies that understand nature as an “inner source” (368), at other times (in the case of the German Romantic Herder) as “a great current of sympathy, running through all things” (369). However, Oviedo claims that the transcendental side of Romanticism is mostly absent from Spanish American literature (18).
- <sup>14</sup> Alaimo and Hekman’s edited collection *Material Feminisms* heralds a return to the material in feminist theory, as a complement to the almost exclusively discursive focus of postmodern feminism (2-5). Their idea of “material ethics,” through which we can “compare the very real material consequences of ethical positions” (7), has informed my analysis here.
- <sup>15</sup> Masiello asserts that Gorriti frequently allies the feminine cause with that of indigenous groups and other subalterns (*Between* 47). In the context of contemporary feminist ecocriticism, Douglas Vakoch comments on the parallel subjugations of women and nature (2).
- <sup>16</sup> Fought between Paraguay and the alliance of Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, this conflict was devastating to Paraguay in terms of lives lost and land ceded to Argentina and Brazil (Halperín Donghi 134-35).
- <sup>17</sup> Both slavery and war exemplify Foucault’s notion of biopolitics (139) and biopower (140), the state’s “subjugation of bodies and [. . .] control of populations” (140) for the enrichment of the ruling oligarchy.

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- <sup>18</sup> Laura's relationship with nature in this text comes close to the "sentimental ecology" that Richard Magee describes as a "reintegrat[ion of] human existence and the experience of the natural world along emotional and affective lines" (66), a perspective he associates with 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist ecocriticism.
- <sup>19</sup> This is the type of thinking that Mignolo (following Quijano's idea of "coloniality of power" [539]) denominates "decolonial," or "engaging in epistemic disobedience and delinking from the colonial matrix" (9). Decolonial work entails thinking outside of the conceptual structures that derive from Eurocentric, capitalistic notions of culture and state.

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