

“Pasto sin fin del basurero”: Trash and Disposal in the Poetry of José Emilio Pacheco

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ABSTRACT: Within the vast body of poetry written by José Emilio Pacheco (Mexico, 1939-2014), there is a clear and profound engagement with environmental themes, such as the lives and experiences of non-human animals and the effects of pollution on natural environments. In this essay, I examine a series of Pacheco's poems that reflect on the production of trash and the act of disposal. Through his consideration of the waste that humans produce, Pacheco manages to draw our attention to the centrality of garbage as a socio-material element that mediates relationships between humans and the more-than-human environment. By reading Pacheco's poetry through the lens of waste and disposal, I argue that the trash in his work throws into relief three central concerns of contemporary ecological thought: 1) the difficulty of squaring Western, anthropocentric notions of time with planetary timescales; 2) the uneven exposure of certain bodies to varying levels of toxicity; and 3) the vulnerability of humans in the face of ecological crisis. In this sense, I contend that Pacheco's poetry constitutes a significant aesthetic contribution to our attempts to think through notions like the Anthropocene, which, in essence, elevates the waste produced by (certain) humans to the status of epoch-defining actor. In short, Pacheco's poetry helps us channel our energy toward dealing with a world full of trash.

KEYWORDS: José Emilio Pacheco, trash, discard studies, ecocriticism, Anthropocene

In the vast poetic oeuvre of the great Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco (1939-2014), there is an undeniable commitment to environmental themes. His poems portray issues of urban pollution and the environmental harm brought about by the expansion of capitalist notions of progress and development, and they imagine the inner lives of nonhuman beings, including animals, trees, mountains, and the sea, in an effort to critique hubristic notions of human superiority and control over the material world. The ecological thread that runs through almost half a century's worth of poems has not gone unnoticed by critics who seek to expand the more traditional frame for reading Pacheco's work, which emphasizes its themes of time and memory and its deployment of intertextuality and colloquial language.¹ Magda Graniela, for instance, approaches Pacheco's ecopoetry through phenomenological and ethical lenses, emphasizing how he confronts the reader with environmental issues in order to provoke sustained reflection and concrete action. Analisa DeGrave tracks the shifts in literary representations of the environment in Latin America over the centuries and places Pacheco among a group of recent writers who focus on the threat of ecological disaster; for her, Pacheco's dystopian imagery evokes environmental corruption and the degradation of urban spaces and “conceptualize[s] the city as a global totality in which destruction is a fundamental part of a natural order” (94). Michael Dowdy also emphasizes the urban context of Pacheco's ecopoetics: “His poems in and about the Mexican capital seek to clarify [...] the city's spatiotemporal, historical, ecological, and geological dimensions by envisioning harrowing

convergences between economic, natural, and literary processes” (314).

This essay expands on such ecocritical approaches to Pacheco's poetry by paying attention to the presence of trash and what we could call “trash-adjacent” concepts, like disposal, contamination, and toxicity, in his body of work. A careful reading of a number of Pacheco's poems shows not only that garbage is indicative of environmental degradation, but that he puts discards to use in his reflections on the nature of time and the place of human beings in the order of things, as well as in his imaginative engagement with issues of environmental justice. In this sense, I argue that trash and disposal are central to understanding Pacheco's environmental ethics, which stress the vulnerability and precariousness of humans and human endeavors in the face of environmental catastrophe.

Trash and Time

One of the functions of trash in Pacheco's poetry is that of drawing attention to the passage of time.² That an encounter with trash should bring to mind time's passing is no surprise: when I look at the fruit peel, coffee cup, or candy bar wrapper in my garbage can, I may think of the moments when I ingested their previous contents, how they sated my hunger and thirst in the not-too-distant past, and how I am once again in need of nourishment. Or if I am feeling particularly morbid, the sight (and smell) of the fruit peel might put me in mind of my own mortality, or at the very least it should remind

me to take out the trash in the near future. Discards do not simply remind us of time's progression; they invite us to ponder different moments in time at the same time, layering them simultaneously or juxtaposing them as discontinuous fragments. When something is deemed to be no longer useful and is thrown out, its obsolescence "demonstrates something of the two-fold temporal quality of material things, that is, that the passing of utility both makes and marks time, that objects are produced by and productive of specific temporal relations" (Viney 4, emphasis in the original). What is more, the materials that we use and discard, the things that shift between being useful and useless, throw into stark relief the incommensurability of disparate timescales and complicate notions of the orderly progression of time, particularly in relation to the lifespan of an individual human being. Plastic, one of the most ubiquitous forms of trash across the planet, can serve as a useful example.³ For Gay Hawkins, disposable plastic packaging can be thought of as an element that has been enrolled in the production of what she calls "presentism," an "orientation to time in which the future [is] completely denied" due to the iterative logic that the ready availability of single-use plastic goods instills in modes of consumption ("Plastic" 100). Hawkins further explains that

Repetition and continual return was a process that reassured consumers that everything would be immediately and always available, nothing would be used up; plastic and what it contained would appear, disappear and reappear in a never-ending cyclical pattern. In this way, the presentism of disposability was paradoxical: the pleasure and value of immediacy also produced an unending now. In the case of disposability presentism and eternalism were not opposed but fundamentally interdependent. ("Plastic" 100)

The never-ending present perpetuated by the availability and disposability of plastic serves to bolster notions that are central to a modern, Western conceptualization of time and materiality, as well as the individual's relationship to those categories, namely, that time is an orderly, rational progression of a series of events that serves as a backdrop for and measuring stick of humanity's ever-greater mastery over the material world. However, as Hawkins's use of the past tense in reference to the interdependence of presentism and eternalism indicates, the accumulation of disposable plastic since the end of the Second World War has simultaneously and paradoxically solidified and undermined human confidence in such a neat, metaphysical concept of time situated in a telos of progress and self-realization. For her, "This particular enactment of presentism is now, of course, collapsing. In the age of the Anthropocene plastic is making its lively and enduring presence felt. Its persistence and emergence in spaces and bodies everywhere is revealing a troubling new temporality: the deep time of our anthropocenic future" ("Plastic" 100). While Hawkins draws this conclu-

sion by considering a specific disposable material, her insight about a future that seems to be always already haunted by the material impact of plastic (regardless of our willingness to recognize it) offers an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which trash in general complicates time and our perception of it.

The shift from a hubristic, anthropocentric presentism to a troubling, anthropocenic future is evident in the way that trash and time come into contact with each other in Pacheco's poetry. A useful point of departure in considering the way Pacheco tracks this shift is the brief poem "De sobra," whose title signals its relationship to excess and disposability, despite the fact that the poem does not explicitly employ the vocabulary of trash present in other poems I examine below (words like *basura*, *desechos*, *restos*, and the like). However, in keeping with the crucial idea that trash is not a label that implies some set of inherent qualities that an object exhibits, but rather that it names the material effect of processes that are open ended, dynamic, and emerging (Hawkins, *The Ethics* 2-3), the poem's reflection on a processual relationship that renders an object excessive or unnecessary makes it relevant to an analysis of the valences of "trash" in Pacheco's body of work. In this case, the object marked as waste is also a subject: the one whose voice articulates the poem in the first person:

Al planeta como es
No le hago falta.

Proseguiré sin mí
Como antes pudo
Existir en mi ausencia.

No me invitó a llegar
Y ahora me exige
Que me vaya en silencio.

Nada le importa mi insignificancia.
Salgo sobrando porque todo es suyo. (Pacheco 641-42)⁴

Over the course of four terse stanzas, the poetic voice offers a matter-of-fact declaration of his own garbagification, his own status as a useless, spent object that the (personified) planet he inhabits is in the process of banishing to an existential dustbin.

The structure of the poem itself suggests the shifting status of object and subject that allows it to enact this operation of disposal. Both its opening and closing words—"Al planeta" and "suyo" (referring to the planet), respectively—locate Planet Earth in a position of poetic privilege as the predominant axis of activity in the poem, which constitutes a subversion of the almost completely unquestioned idea that Earth is a passive stage or platform for human action. Pacheco's use of verbs only serves to cement this radical shift. "Planeta" is ascribed verbs like *proseguir*, *poder*, *existir*, *invitar*, and *exigir*, all in independent clauses, which suggests a powerful form of

agency over other beings (641-42). The poem's human enunciator, on the other hand, is the subject of verbs in clauses that remain subordinate to ones that express the will of the planet—"Y ahora me exige / Que me vaya en silencio" (642)—or that stand out due to the strangeness of their construction. The opening stanza—"Al planeta como es / No le hago falta" (641)—is key in establishing the subject/object inversion due not only to the way that Pacheco makes good use of Spanish's syntactical flexibility to suggest the active role of the planet while maintaining grammatical coherence, but also to the way the expression *hacer falta* signals lack: in this case, a lack of both the agency one typically associates with a subject and the value that would make him worth keeping. And while the final line returns the poetic voice to the position of (grammatical) subject, the logic of disposal sketched out in the poem seems to have already finished the job of rendering it powerless and tossing it out: "Salgo sobrando porque todo es suyo" (642).

If Pacheco's syntactical and lexical choices frame Planet Earth as an agent capable of taking out the trash, his use of verb tenses highlights the temporal dimension that thinking about disposal compels. The poem, which consists of five relatively straightforward declarative sentences distributed over its four stanzas, manages to deploy the present, preterit, and future tenses over that short span. While this kind of detail may seem unremarkable, I would argue that it is a simple yet effective demonstration of the way that the act of disposal or an encounter with disposed objects opens up an opportunity to contemplate multiple—and often incongruous—timelines. In the opening and closing stanzas, the poetic voice announces and then confirms the realization he has come to: that he himself is an unnecessary excess. Here, the present tense that brackets the poem suggests the presentism that Hawkins associates with plastic, the sense that the possibility and ease of disposal stunts our ability to engage with the future that is inscribed in the remainders that we leave behind ("Plastic" 100). Yet this eternal present, which I am suggesting is emblematic of contemporary, Western, consumer society's conception of time as subservient to human activity, butts up against a different, incommensurable timeline in the poem's second and third stanzas. The second stanza couples the future and past tenses to throw into stark relief the incongruity of the lifespan of a human being and what we could call a planetary timescale: "Proseguiré sin mí / Como antes pudo / Existir en mi ausencia" (641). What is more, the absence of a verb in the present tense in these three lines serves to further accentuate the fact that the human experience of time is so inconsequential in the planetary long run that there may not be a place for it in a consideration of what the planet needs or wants. This sense of irreconcilability becomes more apparent in the third stanza, which imagines the human as an alien presence on Earth, in addition to offering a potent image of banishment or disposal: "No me invitó a llegar / Y ahora me exige / Que me vaya en silencio" (642).

One may object to my reading of "De sobra" on the grounds that it misses the point Pacheco is making, namely that the poem is

really about the existential dread we experience when we confront our own mortality, and that Pacheco develops a poetic image of a personified planet's indifference to the poetic voice's concerns in order to invoke that sense of dread. In other words, one might argue that rather than being about trash or disposal, "De sobra" is a poetic realization of the "familiar existential theme of the 'alienated' self, the estrangement of the self both from the world and from itself" in contrast with "the ancient notion of a *kosmos* in which human beings have a well-ordered place" (Crowell). I think, however, that the poem invites both of these readings at the same time. In fact, the effectiveness with which "De sobra" expresses cosmic estrangement relies in no small measure on the logic of disposal that is lexically, grammatically, and thematically inscribed in the poem. One of Pacheco's earlier poems, "Desechable," works with similar thematic elements in a way that resonates with "De sobra" and opens up the latter to a trash-inflected reading:

"Nuestro mundo se ha vuelto desechable",
dijo con amargura.
"Así, lo más notable
en el planeta entero
es que los hacedores de basura
somos pasto sin fin del basurero." (428)⁵

Once again, Pacheco puts into contact human subjectivity, a planetary perspective, and the production of waste, only in a more explicitly ecological discourse in this case. Here, the production and accumulation of trash not only degrade the environment, rendering our world disposable; they also threaten to collapse distinctions among the human, the material objects that humans put to use, and the space produced through human and more-than-human socio-material relationships. Just as "nuestro mundo" is rendered "desechable," signaling an erasure of the distinction between permanence and transience, the "hacedores de basura" are also "pasto sin fin del basurero," which suggests the opening of a threshold of indistinction between humans who produce trash and trash itself (428). I also note some slippage between Pacheco's use of what may appear to be synonyms at first blush: *mundo* and *planeta*. By labeling *our* world as disposable and declaring that what is noteworthy across the entire planet is the becoming-trash of the trash makers, the unnamed speaker quoted in "Desechable" seems to hint at the incommensurability between the era of human habitation of Earth and the timescale of the planet itself that Pacheco develops more explicitly in "De sobra." In other words, *nuestro mundo* and *el planeta entero* are not one and the same: in light of ecological crisis, it would seem that the former's days are numbered, while the latter will persist.

While "De sobra" and "Desechable" could be said to perform a witnessing of the production of trash at or near the imagined end of one timeline—the end of *nuestro mundo*, at least as we know it—"Ustedes, los que escudriñen nuestra basura" contemplates the

intersection of trash and time from a different vantage point: the beginning of human history.⁶ Here, the poetic voice is a prehistoric man who, speaking on behalf of his tribe, addresses an *ustedes* that seems to refer to both the archaeologists and anthropologists who would study the material remains of his people's culture as well as modern humans more broadly. The poem is ultimately a reflection on the importance of the mammoth to the prehistoric people the poetic voice represents: he details the rituals they developed to hunt this formidable beast and the material and cultural significance they derived from its body (they would eat and drink its flesh and blood, cover their own bodies with its hide, and make weapons of war and symbols of social distinction from its bones), and he ends by lamenting the consequences of this example of early human mastery over nature:

Así pues, hemos vencido al coloso.
Escuchen cómo suena nuestro grito de triunfo.

Qué lástima.
Ya se acabaron los gigantes.
Nunca habrá otro mamut sobre la tierra. (Pacheco 388)

By cultivating a perspective that is both situated in the distant past and clearly able to see into the future, Pacheco once again manages to signal the tensions between different temporalities. Only a poem could hope to posit that a prehistoric human would simultaneously celebrate his triumph over the mammoth and foresee (and bemoan) the ultimate consequences of that triumph.

A similar contradiction of perspectives based on the juxtaposition of different timelines is what brings trash into play in the poem as well. The first stanza reads as follows:

Ustedes, los que escudriñen nuestra basura
y desentierren puntas
de pedernal, collares de barro
o lascas afiladas para crear muerte;
figuras de mujeres en que intentamos
celebrar el misterio del placer
y la fertilidad que nos permite seguir aquí contra todo
—enigma absoluto
para nuestro cerebro si apenas está urdiendo el
lenguaje—,
lo llamarán *mamut*.
Pero nosotros en cambio jamás decimos su nombre:
Tan venerado es por la horda que somos. (Pacheco 387)

The poetic voice clearly articulates the existence of two groups—*ustedes* and *nosotros*—divided by language and time. The difference based on language operates on two levels. In a more apparent or superficial way, the difference could be attributed to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign: words like "mamut" or "mammoth" are

artifacts of a different moment in time and would simply mean nothing to the prehistoric people Pacheco conjures in his poem. On a deeper level, however, the linguistic chasm separating *ustedes* and *nosotros* signals the very ground upon which normative conceptualizations of what constitutes the human are based: language itself. By emphasizing prehistoric humans' lack of language—they would never utter the mammoth's name, their minds are still in the process of concocting language—Pacheco plays with the idea of the human in a way that echoes Giorgio Agamben's comments on the "anthropological machine," the rhetorical and ideological processes that modern humans have used to produce the human as such.⁷ For Agamben,

What distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a nonspeaking *man* [...] who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. But all evidence suggests that this is only a shadow cast by language, a presupposition of speaking man [...] The animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side. (36, emphasis in the original)

Just as the human-animal divide is an unmendable fracture that language only partially obscures, the rhetorical elegance and mastery of Pacheco's prelinguistic caveman throws into sharp relief the inadequacy of the neat, evolutionary timeline that we use to make sense of human interactions with the material world. In other words, by deploying a poetic voice whose perspective is equal parts prehistoric and modern, Pacheco compels us to consider both the limitations of human perceptions of time and the potentialities opened up by juxtaposing disparate temporal perspectives.

It is just such a juxtaposition that brings the notion of trash into the poem. In purely syntactical terms, the poem's first sentence is both deceptively simple and dizzyingly complex, and these differing structural layers underline the dual temporal perspectives I examine above. The basic information the opening sentence communicates is "Ustedes [...] lo llamarán *mamut*" (Pacheco 387). However, the terrain covered by the ellipsis, which is a nine-line nonrestrictive clause that unpacks the *ustedes* addressed by the poetic voice, manages to distend and twist the reader's perception of time, both syntactically and thematically. In terms of grammar and syntax, the use of the subjunctive and future tense for the verbs attached to "Ustedes," coupled with the large gap that the nonrestrictive clause opens up between the sentence's subject and predicate, manages to disorient the reader by stretching the sentence's temporal frame and placing the reader (who is very likely inclined to count herself

among the people addressed by the poetic voice) in a nebulously defined future. And the content that the nonrestrictive clause invokes thematizes the connection between trash and time, for the poetic voice manages to recognize that the emblems of his people's material culture—flint arrowheads, stone blades, statues of fertility goddesses, and the like—that the archaeologists of the future will scrutinize and study are, in fact, trash.⁸ The power of this syntactical detour that places trash and culture on the same thematic plane is only enhanced by the way the poetic voice is projected through incommensurable moments in time (the very distant past and a present that is rendered as an uncertain future). In this sense, "Ustedes, los que escudriñen nuestra basura" is an incisive reflection on what seem to be two related and inescapable facets of the human condition: our tendency to *lay waste* to the natural world (the poem's reference to the disappearance of the mammoth raises the specter of extinction in general) and to *make waste* that fills the world. For just as the passage of time mediates the meaning of the prehistoric discards enumerated in the poem, it also plays a fundamental role in transforming the emblems of our own material culture into trash.⁹

Pacheco explores the relationship between making waste and laying waste even further in "Malpaís," which examines the role of volcanoes (in particular, the Ajusco Volcano, a lava dome located just south of Mexico City) in the development and growth of Mexico's capital city.¹⁰ For Michael Dowdy, this is one of several of Pacheco's poems that cultivate an "ecological perspective" coupled with a "topographical grounding of place,"¹¹ a perspective that "recognizes the ways in which cities are grounded in, and bounded by, topographical constraints [...] while also making that topography an active agent of change" (303). The city and the volcano, with their attendant timelines, condition each other's development and degradation and ultimately clash violently with one another. The first half of the poem uses the past tense to track the ambiguous role that landscape and geological features play in Mexico City's identity:

Ésta fue la ciudad de las montañas.
Desde cualquier esquina se veían las montañas.
Tan visibles se hallaban que era muy raro
fijarse en ellas. (Pacheco 28g)

While the mountainous terrain is recognized as an essential facet of the urban imaginary, it remains in the background despite its ubiquitous presence, hidden in plain sight. The mountains seem inert and docile from the human perspective of time's unfolding and the growth and development of the city, which entails ever-greater encroachment upon this seemingly passive landscape:

Cuando no quede un árbol,
cuando ya todo sea asfalto y asfixia
o malpaís, terreno pedregoso sin vida,
ésta será de nuevo la capital de la muerte. (Pacheco 29o)

The landscape comes to life in the poem's second half, which "shifts to the prophetic voice's future tense" as it imagines the moment when the volcanoes will erupt and lay waste to the city in revenge for the city having laid waste to the forested hillsides over the centuries (Dowdy 303). The point of transition between these two incommensurable timelines is marked in the poem by the appearance of trash, waste, and pollution. It is the "polvo del lago muerto," the "desechos fabriles," the noxious emissions from "incesantes millones de vehículos" and the "mierda arrojada a la intemperie / por muchos más millones de excluidos" that both reveal "nuestros poderes destructivos" and unleash the power of "los invencibles volcanes" (Pacheco 29o).

Pacheco imagines the trash, waste, exhaust, and shit that are seemingly inevitable byproducts of urban growth as the material marker of the limit between human history and geological time, much in the same way that trash and disposal signal the gaps and incongruities between human and more-than-human timescales in the poems examined above. But "Malpaís" also considers the effects of the way that the toxicity of discards is distributed across bodies and through the environment. In this case, such effects are felt with acute intensity by the plant life of the Valley of Mexico; however, the fact that the "mierda arrojada a la intemperie" is done so by "millones de excluidos" also seems to suggest that human bodies, especially those that could be considered "excluidos," find themselves in close contact with the toxicity that arises from discards and are therefore subject to its effects. This brings me to the second key facet of ecological discourse that the trash in Pacheco's poetry helps him engage with and that I examine in the next section: a consideration of the exposure of bodies to varying levels of toxicity.

Trash and Environmental Justice

The concern with exposure to environmental degradation and harm highlights Pacheco's investment in issues of environmental justice, which, for Robin Morris Collin, "challenges the full spectrum of disproportionate impacts which place a toxic boundary around communities of color and vulnerable individuals, making them acceptable sacrifice zones" (7). While Collins refers specifically to environmental racism in the United States, she recognizes that similar issues "are posed even more starkly at the international level" (7). In his poetry, Pacheco is clearly aware of these issues, and he meditates on the way that the lively, uncontrollable quality of trash and pollution destabilizes the toxic boundary that Collins mentions, breaking containment and threatening to expand the scope of sacrifice zones far beyond what hegemonic sectors of society may view as "acceptable." What is more, as my reading of "Malpaís" suggests, Pacheco's vision of environmental justice takes a broad view of what kinds of bodies are subject to the uneven distribution of the toxicity of discards. As that poem and another I examine below make clear, in addition to considering the effect of toxicity on humans, he imag-

ines how the bodies of plants, volcanoes, and nonhuman animals experience the implications of waste.

A brief poem that clearly articulates the stakes of toxicity for human bodies as Pacheco sees them is "Contaminaciones":

El esmog, el tabaco, el hexaclorofeno,
el aire emponzoñado que te va corroyendo,
son la vida que filtra en todos su veneno
y siempre nos recuerda: *vivir es ir muriendo*.
(145, emphasis in the original)²²

The smog, tobacco smoke, and hexachlorophene mentioned in the first line may not immediately seem to fit in the category of "trash," but rather the more general one of pollution, as the poem's title suggests. However, trash—and, more broadly, waste—is not simply a kind of object or material. It is, rather, a term that designates a certain kind of socio-material relationship, an ongoing, open-ended processes in which materials or objects are marked as expendable excess (Hawkins, *The Ethics* 2-3).²³ Smog, tobacco smoke, and hexachlorophene, then, are all residues, the material excess produced as a result of human activities like driving, smoking cigarettes, and disinfecting our bodies.²⁴ When I drive my car, for instance, my aim is to get from one place to another, but whether I think about it or not, that particular engagement between my body and my car, with its internal combustion engine, results in the production of an excess, a material remainder composed of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and other volatile organic compounds that engage in a series of chemical reactions with different components of the atmosphere, resulting in the production of smog, which can negatively impact the respiratory health of those exposed to it ("Smog"). So not only are the *contaminaciones* invoked by Pacheco in the poem material remainders left in the wake of different human activities; the trajectory they take as discarded elements evinces matter's unruliness, its tendency to behave in ways that we had not planned for. This type of "thing-power," as Jane Bennett calls it, "gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (xvi). The vibrancy of the toxic materials catalogued in "Contaminaciones" is underscored by the fact that they are equated with life itself—"son la vida que filtra en todos su veneno" (145). But the liveliness of the poem's pollutants is by no means life-giving: these doubly-excessive substances are figured as noxious: they produce "el aire emponzoñado que te va corroyendo," and they seep into our bodies like poison, serving as a constant, if disavowed, reminder that "*vivir es ir muriendo*" (145). The recognition of the specter of death as the constitutive outside of life is made possible by the way Pacheco frames gaseous and liquid substances that might seem to be passive objects that remain inert until moved upon by other forces as actants with agentic capacity of their own, to return to Bennett's deployment of Bruno Latour's language for describ-

ing the thing-power that exceeds human volition. Bennett explains that "an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii, emphasis in the original). Focusing on the thing-power of smog, for instance, does not in turn diminish the role of humans who help produce smog as a byproduct of their driving habits; rather, it is a way "to begin to describe a more *distributed* agency" that shows how human bodies are caught up in, exposed to, and conditioned by their own actions and the activity of a host of other material phenomena (Bennett viii-ix, emphasis in the original). Pacheco's poem eloquently distills these concerns by representing relatively invisible substances as protagonists in one of humanity's fundamental dramas: the interplay of life and death.

In terms of the way that "Contaminaciones" figures the exposure of bodies to the toxicity of waste products, the focus on substances that would have been virtually ubiquitous in Mexico City in the early 1970s tends to universalize the experience of environmental danger. This broad vision of the implications of toxicity is bolstered by the poem's deixis: the tainted air eats away at *you*, its poison seeps into *all of us* ("todos"), and it reminds *us* that living is a journey toward death. Such an inclusive vision seems to posit that no bodies are more (or less) exposed to toxicity than others. This might lead to the conclusion that Pacheco falls short of fully engaging with a vision of environmental justice, which is fundamentally about denouncing differential exposure to environmental harm that disproportionately affects marginalized bodies and working to correct the injustice that such differential exposure creates. While I do not discount this kind of critical reading of the poem's figuration of environmental harm as an evenly-distributed phenomenon, I think it is also possible to read "Contaminaciones" as a reflection on how the sacrifice zones I mention above are unruly and the toxicity that those with political, social, and economic power deem to be acceptable in certain spaces tends to exceed the bounds of those spaces. In this sense, the poem offers a vision of how waste, with its liveliness and its capacity to act on human bodies, escapes the schemes of human design and desire and exposes human bodies to harm.

Pacheco's engagement with environmental justice finds a clearer—and much more radical—expression in the poem "Zopilote."²⁵ Here, Pacheco pays homage to the lowly vulture or turkey buzzard, who serves an essential function in "nuestras brigadas de reciclaje" (204). He begins with a gesture of vindication, defending the vulture from commonly-held views that associate the airborne scavenger with filth, disease, disorder, and danger to humans: "No es una injuria al reino de las aves. / Tampoco aberración o falla natural perpetuada / por mera inercia evolutiva" (203).²⁶ The poem develops a defense of the vulture first along aesthetic lines:

Al arte por el arte del pavo real o del faisán corresponde
su equivalente utilitario. (La belleza

está en los ojos de quien la contempla
y es cuestión relativa.) (203)

By pitting the flashier peacock and pheasant against the vulture and positing that utility is perhaps as valid a criterion for making aesthetic judgments as any supposed inherent expression of beauty, the poetic voice seems to expand the field for determining the worthiness of the creatures we encounter in the world. However, I sense in the way Pacheco deploys enjambment an unravelling of the defense of the vulture on aesthetic grounds in the very moment it is being articulated. The division between the second and third lines of the stanza, for instance, manages to focus attention on *belleza*, the basis for the argument being made, while at the same time fracturing the platitude put forward in the parenthetical aside, namely that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The suggested shakiness of advocating for the value of vultures on aesthetic grounds transforms into a clearer rhetorical and ethical dead end in the next two stanzas, which fall in the center of the poem:

Lo ves y te conduce su asimetría,
el color apagado y más bien luctuoso
y la no menos plúmbea repugnancia
de su moco de pavo. (Todo él,
aun sin la papada, se diría
un guajolote incomedible.)

Concedamos: es feo como el diablo.
(¿Alguien conoce al diablo?)
Y suscita los odios más despiadados.
(Es común apedrearlos; he visto niños
que se adiestran para ser verdugos.) (203-04)

Here Pacheco's lexical choices underscore the ultimate shortcoming of valorizing (or not valorizing) certain animal bodies on aesthetic grounds: this type of judgement, as articulated in the poem, is inescapably anthropocentric and presupposes that one of the purposes for the existence of animals is to delight and enchant human beings. Along with the fact that the poetic voice addresses the reader directly, thereby anchoring the aesthetic assessment of the vulture in a concrete human perspective, words like *condoler*, *luctuoso*, *plúmbeo*, *repugnancia*, *moco*, *incomedible*, *feo*, and *odio* clearly indicate the vulture's failure to overcome visceral human reactions and inhabit an aesthetic plane comparable to the one that situates the peacock or pheasant as beautiful. Or perhaps this is not an expression of the vulture's failure to meet certain aesthetic standards, but rather an exposure of the shortcomings of a human aesthetic imaginary that fails to see the tremendous worth of a creature because of repugnance. In fact, these shortcomings are sharply criticized in the parenthetical asides that crop up throughout the poem. By bringing up the relative and contingent nature of beauty, emphasizing

(in)edibility as a central feature of the way humans think about animals, and conjuring an image of brutish human violence toward animals, these asides constantly undercut the feasibility of making anthropocentric aesthetic judgements of the vulture.

So, if the *zopilote* is not an "injuria al reino de las aves," (Pacheco 204) but trying to generate appreciation for its beauty presents both aesthetic and ethical problems, how might an effective defense of the vulture be articulated? The conjunction "pero" with which the next-to-last stanza begins marks a significant point of transition in the poem's rhetorical strategy: a shift away from the type of anthropocentric aesthetic judgement already marked as exhausted and toward a broader ecological perspective that does not abandon the human perspective, but rather de-centers it and opens it up to an appreciation of the vulture as part of a web of life. The poem's final two stanzas read:

Pero sin esta variante regional
del buitre tan infamado por la retórica,
sin este "aura tiñosa" o "gallinzo"
—con tales nombres se le injuria—
¿qué hubiera sido de los lugares pobres frecuentados
por la fiebre amarilla y otras plagas
de los *tristes tropiques*?

Los zopilotes
Fueron nuestras brigadas de reciclaje.
Ahora se han acabado los zopilotes.
La basura está a punto de ahogar al mundo. (204)

Pacheco confronts us with the reality that the toxicity occasioned by trash, disposal, and decay is in fact not evenly distributed, but concentrated with particular intensity in *lugares pobres*. The truly radical gesture enacted in the poem is the recognition that animal bodies, like those of vultures, are part of the assemblages of people, places, and contaminants that should be taken into consideration in discourses of environmental justice. In other words, vultures' bodies also do the work of absorbing toxicity and corraling environmental harm within certain zones that mark them—along with marginalized humans—as expendable.

The transition in the poem that marks the opening up of a broader view on the place of the vulture in the web of life is also attended by a shift in temporal perspective. The hypothetical posed in the next-to-last stanza—what would impoverished zones be like if it weren't for vultures?—leads to the final stanza, in which the predominance of the past tense (*fueron*, *se han acabado*) in reference to vultures reveals that the poem is being enunciated from some moment in the future, after *zopilotes* have become extinct. Once, again, this jarring temporal shift seems to be precipitated by the presence of trash. Through this evocation of the phantasm of extinction—echoed in the title of the section of *Islas a la deriva* to which this poem pertains: "Especies en peligro (y otras víctimas)"—

Pacheco makes manifest the intersection between marginalization and disposal. In this sense, "Zopilote" can be seen as both a de-centering of the primacy of the human and a poetic imagining of the way that the separation and containment of the toxicity that inevitably attends the ethos of disposal and comes at the expense of specific kinds of human, animal, and environmental bodies is bound to exceed its limits.

Trash and Human Vulnerability

"Zopilote" ends with a matter-of-fact declaration about the ubiquity of trash: "La basura está a punto de ahogar al mundo" (204). This type of sentiment is a thread that runs throughout the examples from Pacheco's body of work I examine in this essay, tying together poems about cavemen, volcanoes, city streets, vultures, and humans who struggle to understand their place in the universe. The poetic image of a (not-too-distant) future in which the world is defined by or, perhaps, composed of the garbage we make not only shows us a point of contact between the two uses to which Pacheco puts trash in his poetry that I analyze here, namely highlighting the incommensurability of human and other timescales and reflecting on the way that toxicity and environmental harm are distributed across bodies in the environment. It also gestures toward an overarching function of trash in his poetry: it signals the profound vulnerability of human life on this planet. Poems like "Zopilote," "Contaminaciones," and "Malpaís" focus on vulnerability by explicitly referencing the way that the waste humans produce constitutes a doubly destructive matrix of harm that ensnares both human and nonhuman bodies. And poems like "De sobra," "Desechable," and "Ustedes, los que escudriñen nuestra basura" juxtapose incongruous timescales in a way that manages to highlight our own ephemerality as material beings as well as that of the material we leave behind, our remainders and detritus.²⁷

The relationship between the production of trash and the fragile nature of human existence forms the nucleus of "En el camión de la basura," a poem that links material culture, trash, and human frailty with great poetic efficiency:

En el camión de la basura todo se va:
Los objetos inútiles, los envases de plástico,
Las ruinas de la vida, los tributos desiertos
Pagados a la muerte de los días,
Los papeles, las cartas que ya nunca
Volverán a escribirse
Y las fotos de ayer.

Todo lo nuestro está hecho
Para acabar en la basura. (Pacheco 650)²⁸

The poem's lexicon emphasizes decay and finality—*basura, inútil, ruinas, desierto, muerte, acabar*—but the sense of finality exists in tension with cyclical movements: "la muerte de los días" is renewed on a daily basis, and the trash truck that collects the objects listed in the poem does not just *go to* the dump; it also *comes back*, a back-and-forth movement that suggests that finality and decay are inscribed in the heart of human relationships and human interactions with the material world. This point is made quite emphatically in the closing lines of the poem: *lo nuestro* is designed or destined to end up as garbage; trashiness has haunted it since its conception. Pacheco's use of the neuter form is key, since it establishes common ground between the material objects explicitly mentioned in the poem and the more immaterial aspects of human relationships that are merely hinted at. This highlights the fact that affective connections are grounded in materiality and subject to the forces and phenomena that affect the material world.

The trajectory toward the dump inscribed in human cultural and material production is certainly indicative of the vulnerability and precariousness of our place on this planet, but it is precisely from this state of vulnerability that Pacheco articulates the possibility of forging meaningful connections with each other and our environments. By way of conclusion, I cite one of Pacheco's poems about reading and writing poetry as an intersubjective experience, "Carta a George B. Moore en defensa del anonimato," which he opens with the following reflection:

No sé por qué escribimos, querido George.
Y a veces me pregunto por qué más tarde
publicamos lo escrito. Es decir, lanzamos
una botella al mar, harto y repleto
de basura y botellas con mensajes.
Nunca sabremos
a quién ni adónde la llevarán las mareas.
Lo más probable
es que sucumba en la tempestad y el abismo. (302)²⁹

Here Pacheco recognizes the potential futility of writing and disseminating poetry: it is a message in a bottle tossed out into a trash-filled sea. In this sense, a poem—which could stand for other human artistic endeavors—is just another piece of detritus that the writer leaves behind. "Sin embargo," the poem continues, "no es tan inútil esta mueca de náufrago" (302). Tossing out a poem is useful in this case because it reaches a reader, George B. Moore, and prompts an exchange of letters between him and Pacheco. In a broader sense, the potentially wasted gesture that Pacheco describes is useful because it opens up a line of communication, the potential for a relationship grounded in vulnerability and impermanence. This is the power of trash in Pacheco's poetry: it reminds us that the trash we make exceeds our ability to corral and control it, and it urges us to be mindful of and take responsibility for the consequences.

NOTES

¹In a monograph on Pacheco, Ronald J. Friis summarizes this critical consensus: "The two major aspects of Pacheco's work that have caught critics' eyes are the temporal and the intertextual. This is natural considering that they are two of the poet's most prominent themes" (16). María Rosa Olivera-Williams adds that Pacheco's poetry is a "lirica de lo cotidiano, de lo claro, de lo sentimental, de lo irónico y sobre todo de lo social" and that "[r]e-creación, re-escritura, re-lectura, recuerdo, intertextualidad son las bases de la poética de Pacheco" (242, 250).

²As I note above, the theme of time has been one of the centerpieces of critical engagement with Pacheco's poetry. As early as 1976, José Miguel Oviedo signals time as one of Pacheco's basic themes, noting that in his poetry, "el tiempo solamente pasa. O, tal vez, nosotros por él, sin dejar huellas reales" (40). While I agree that the transitory and the ephemeral are key concepts in Pacheco's poetry, it seems to me that they are always in tension with the fact that we do leave behind *huellas reales*, the trash that appears over and over again in Pacheco's poems.

³See Ritchie and Roser for a summary of recent empirical research on the worldwide production of plastic, along with an analysis of the amount of plastic disposed of on an annual basis.

⁴Throughout this essay, I cite the most recent edition of Pacheco's collected poetry, *Tarde o temprano*, published in Mexico by Ediciones Era in 2009 and in Spain by Tusquets Editora in 2010. Beginning in 1980, Pacheco published his collected poetry under the same title, making substantial additions as his body of work grew with each subsequent edition of *Tarde o temprano* (1986, 2000, and, finally, 2009). While tracking the publication history of Pacheco's poetry in periodicals, anthologies, and collections is beyond the scope of this essay, in addition to citing *Tarde o temprano*, I will indicate via endnote the collection to which each of the poems I cite corresponds in order to give an idea of where they fit in the chronology of Pacheco's body of work. "De sobra" appeared in *Como la lluvia: Poemas 2001-2008*. It is also worth mentioning that Pacheco tended to revise his poems from one instance of publication to another, producing multiple versions of the same texts. For a broad consideration of the centrality of the concept of versions of poems and reworking as a reading and writing practice in Pacheco's poetry, see Zanetti.

⁵"Desechable" appeared in *El silencio de la luna: Poemas 1985-1993*.

⁶"Ustedes, los que escudriñen nuestra basura" is the third of four poems in a cycle called "Prehistoria" from the collection *El silencio de la luna: Poemas 1985-1993*.

⁷This sort of reflection on the invention of language is present in another of the poems in the "Prehistoria" series. In "En las paredes de esta cueva," the voice of the same prehistoric man describes the marks he makes on the wall of a cave, an act that he characterizes as the simultaneous invention of the alphabet, God, and power (Pacheco 385-86).

⁸See Rathje and Murphy for a sustained, engaging reflection on archaeology as an epistemological practice that is intimately related to garbage.

⁹A similar "archaeological" approach to the relationship among time, material objects, and trash is on display in "Demolición" (from the collection *La arena errante: Poemas 1992-1998*), only in this case it is applied to the context of architecture and the shifting composition of the urban land-

scape: the demolition of a decrepit colonial house to make way for more modern buildings evinces a timeline marked by progress and aesthetic evolution, but what is obscured is the timeline of anonymous family legacies that are transmitted through the material remains of fragmented plates and other household items buried underneath the patio of the old house (Pacheco 583-84).

¹⁰"Malpaís" appeared in *Los trabajos del mar: Poemas 1979-1983*.

¹¹Dowdy borrows these terms from historian Arif Dirlik's consideration of the role of specific spatial imaginaries in the context of globalization.

¹²"Contaminaciones" appeared in *Irás y no volverás: Poemas 1969-1972*.

¹³Michael Thompson's influential study *Rubbish Theory* offers a related but slightly different take on trash as socio-material process. Thompson sees rubbish as a concept that mediates the life of objects in relation to human society, regulating their passage back and forth between "durable" and "transient" states of value. In this sense, thinking about trash, waste, rubbish, and garbage as terms that mark an object's status at a given moment or in a particular situation underscores the fact that all objects can be viewed in relation to trash and their susceptibility to falling into or being taken out of this category.

¹⁴Hexachlorophene is an organochlorine compound that was widely used as a topical disinfectant until the 1970s, when it was linked to cases of severe brain damage in the United States and France. For more on the chemical properties and uses of hexachlorophene, see "Hexachlorophene." For more on the neurotoxicity of hexachlorophene, see Kimbrough, whose study was published around the same time as "Contaminaciones."

¹⁵"Zopilote" appeared in *Islas a la deriva: Poemas 1973-1975*.

¹⁶Vultures are certainly not the only animals that Pacheco takes up as poetic subjects, with a particular eye toward questioning ways of thinking that locate the human in an *a priori* position of superiority over non-human animals. A cursory look at the section of *Islas a la deriva* in which "Zopilote" is found—aptly titled "Especies en peligro de extinción (y otras víctimas)"—shows poems focused on birds, fish, spiders, houseflies, ants, whales, and more. See Ares-López for a consideration of the way that Pacheco's use of animals works to dismantle anthropocentrism and imagine the sentimental life of animals. For an examination of the way Pacheco uses the discourse of natural history to highlight the relationship between humans and animals whose habitats are under threat, see DeGrave, esp. pp. 95-98.

¹⁷Another lens through which to read these poems (and Pacheco's poetry in general) would be to track the environmental sensibility they evince in relation to the broader development of ecological discourse and awareness since the second half of the 20th century. While I would not propose any definitive conclusions in this regard based on the selection of poems I am working with here, my sense is that Pacheco's ecological sensibility is at times completely in step with contemporaneous environmental concerns. For instance, the way "Contaminaciones" takes on air pollution and chemical residues reflects the impact of the large-scale urbanization in Mexico City that was already underway in the 1960s and 1970s, and the sense of the human as being at odds with the planetary in "De sobra" fits well with anxieties about the Anthropocene that became more widespread in the

2000s. In other instances, he manages to give poetic expression to environmental concerns before they entered into mainstream discourse. Such would be the case for the posthumanist element of "Zopilote" (published in the 1970s).

¹⁸ "En el camión de la basura" appeared in *Como la lluvia: Poemas 2001-2008*.

¹⁹ "Carta a George B. Moore en defensa del anonimato" appeared in *Los trabajos del mar: Poemas 1979-1983*.

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