

# **Volcanic Lakes and Hallucinatory Vegetation: Disaster to Think about the Future**

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## **Abstract**

I examine two works by Cuban artist Camila Lobón and by Nicaraguan artist Darling Lopez that aim to relocate narrations, feelings and concepts in relation to the idea of nation. Discussing the totalizing concepts that sustain Cuba and Nicaragua's narratives through the methodologies proposed in the works: speculative fabulations and assemblage as opportunities to think about the future looking sideways more than ahead. I argued that bridging forms and emotions, the social and earthly history can sustain a narrative beyond the totalizing discourses imposed by the state and the production of knowledge, demanding neatly delimited plots and denying the possibility of "assemblages" between fields.

As a woman artist, born in a totalitarian system in the '80s, four years before the fall of the socialist bloc, I recognize fear as part of my life, a fear shaped by decades, so much so that the reference points are now lost, the cause of it forgotten, yet that feeling still persists. The fear, the wariness, the waiting, works in response to trauma have been on the Nicaraguan and Cuban art scene for decades. Revolutions in both countries have been bolstered by histories of terror. What do we artist-heirs of this terror do through our work in the face of totalizing discourses? Here I am interested in addressing two works that aim to relocate narrations, feelings, and concepts: *Mary y los hombres lagartos* (Mary and the Lizard Men) by Cuban artist Camila Lobón and *Piedra dulce* (Sweet Stone) by Nicaraguan artist Darling López. Two young women artists—both born post-Cold War—determined to respond to the authority of totalitarian states, will be the focus of this essay. I attempt to discuss the nation—Cuba and Nicaragua—and the totalizing concepts that sustain it through the methodologies proposed by these works—speculative fabulation and assemblage—as possibilities to think about the future, looking sideways more than ahead.

## **Speculative Fabulations: Villa Laguna and the Lizard Men**

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<sup>1</sup> Cuba

In the last three years Camila Lobón has focused on writing and illustrating stories and designing her own storybooks. At the start they might seem to be fables for children, stories about animals with a moral at the end. This is the case, in part, but Camila has dedicated her books to her family, first to her brother and then to her grandmother. It has been the way the artist has found to explain the future to her little brother and to process the political and affective past of her grandmother. Conjuring stories to contend with the history and future of a nationalized family, intrinsically linked to the history of the state, has been Camila's work and the possibility of escaping from totalitarian fiction produced for decades until turning into truth. *Mary y los hombres lagartos* is a fabulated family story featuring the grandmother as the protagonist. Camila is 10 years my junior and she understood earlier than I that the family has been shaped by the revolutionary process.

Mary was living in Villa del Lago, where the magical flowers growing there made all the inhabitants happy: "In the town by the lake there grew magical flowers, whose nectar gave its inhabitants an uncontainable joy and made them dance, sing, and declaim beautiful poems."<sup>2</sup> Mary's best friend was Cloud Head, who made it rain, helping flowers grow. However, the Turtle Lords forced the rest of the townspeople to surrender their flowers for they had become so enthralled with eating them, but many inhabitants were discontent with their reign. One day the lizard men arrived to save the people of Villa del Lago from the Turtle Lords. The lizard men banished the Turtle Lords and Mary went to tell everyone; years of joy would begin. The lizard men promised a future of justice and safety for all the people; they would not let the Turtle Lords return.

Mary joined the lizard men's project to contribute to the future everyone had dreamt of; she taught the inhabitants of Villa del Lago to read so the deeds of the lizard men would be known to all. Soon she fell in love with a lizard man, who became her husband. One day the lizard men prohibited the people from planting magical flowers; their justification was that the flowers were a temptation that would make the Turtle Lords return and besides, dancing and entertainment were a distraction for the townspeople of Villa del Lago. They were living times of surveillance and gravity; they had to tend to security, so they could not allow the lack of concentration induced by the flowers. From that moment on, the flowers would be controlled by the lizard men and the inhabitants would devote their energies to guarding against any possible enemy attacks. Cloud Head moved away after the deforestation and Villa del Lago became a dry, swampy place.

Mary had two children, but her lizard man husband was sent to war to take justice to other faraway lands. He returned from war very ill and died whilst, at the same time, a long famine

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<sup>2</sup> Camila Lobón, *Mary y los hombres lagartos*, artist's book, 2019

began in Villa del Lago. Without magical flowers and rain, the soil became sterile, and many townspeople decided to leave Villa in small boats. Those who dared to protest were rubbed out by the lizard men.

One day Mary grew tired of the situation and decided to go where the flowers were stockpiled to ask the lizard men for explanations; she discovered they had been eating the flowers turned over by the townspeople and she decided to tell everyone. No one listened to her; they were too busy watching out for possible enemies. Mary decided to return to her old childhood home with her children to keep them safe and sound, and she begged Cloud Head to return and to bring her rain; the flowers began to grow again with the rain brought by her friend, but they were never again magical. “From that time on, Mary stayed there. And she grew old, telling her grandchildren about the times of magic and hope that were once lived in Villa del Lago.”<sup>3</sup>

Fabulating history, speculating on the future of totalitarianism, that is what Camila Lobón does in *Mary y los hombres lagartos*. Lobón approaches vegetation, a magical entity, to refer to that which is deeply yearned for but lost, in contrast to solemnity vs. entertainment/dance/laughter; sacrifice vs. self-care, care for the other; heroic patriarchy vs. member of the family; nation vs. affect; war vs. home; promised future vs. harmonious present. Fabulating is a strategy for thinking about the history of the nation through a more important history, family history, that is told in the intimacy of the home, by the grandmother; it is a domestic story, heard countless times in the kitchen, where women gather to speak. There, where those who uphold the home dare to remember what must not leak into the public sphere. Because women are those responsible for safeguarding the family’s shameful histories, they are the ones who provide the opportunity to avert strictness, authoritarianism, in pursuit of an unblemished moral coherence, demanded in the public sphere, in the case of totalitarianism, by the state.

The lizard man and Mary —María del Carmen Galdós, the grandmother of the story and of Camila— were accomplices and victims of the terror instituted in Villa del Lago. They were asked to sacrifice, to be heroes, to be martyrs, to be vigilant, thinking of the other as the enemy, accusing, repressing, being intransigent in the face of dissent, indoctrinators. At the same time, Mary endured the migration of those who did not fit in with the political project: Cloud Head, fearing for her children, lost her partner, distrusted everyone and they distrusted her. Those of us who have experienced totalitarianism have been forced to be victimizers at

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<sup>3</sup> Camila Lobón, *Mary y los hombres lagartos*, artist’s book, 2019

the same time as victims; that demand for conformity from the new man: sacrifice and intransigence<sup>4</sup>.

Why use the fable as a narrative strategy to tell of the totalitarian experience? The fable offers a possibility of thinking from the perspective of the future and, from the distance offered by non-human characters, to retell what has already perhaps been untiringly described, making use of resources that produce effects of “realism,” without it being enough to achieve empathy. The fable also makes it possible to think from the present, not the promised future through sacrifice, not in the terrifying past brought about by the state. Camila proposes to us that we think of ourselves today in the here and now.

It is the regeneration of the plant world, albeit permanently damaged, that signals a future with a degree of hope in Camila’s speculative fable. It is the incapacity to sustain a reciprocal relationship with nature that led Mary and the rest of the inhabitants of Villa del Lago to collapse. The magic was produced in that assemblage with vegetation and water; it was the desire for total control that shattered those harmonious intersections. Camila proposes a future of coexistence with other species in response to the effects of terror. Colombian anthropologist Fals Borda described the turtle men (*hombres-hicotera*) of El San Jorge, on the Colombian Caribbean coast, as also being in ecological coexistence. The amphibious man does not fit into the nation’s project of progress, the effects of which he resists using the techniques of the turtle: “Like the turtles when they inflate their water bladder and bury themselves in the bogs and under the clods of the dry beaches to pass the summer”<sup>5</sup>. However, the way of life of the amphibian man is destined to disappear along with the ecology of El San Jorge, one dependent on the other. That is the case of the Villa del Lago and its essential dependence on the blossoming flowers.

### **Assemblages: Volcanic Lakes and Urban Fossils**

Piedra Dulce, an assemblage piece of 2018, was produced by Darling López with a fossilized paving stone and contaminated water from Lake Xolotlán. Several milliliters of contaminated water occupied the space of one of the fossilized holes in the paving stone. Revolutions are like volcanic lakes—as Darling López would have it—first there is a long-lasting containment, and then they explode without warning:

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<sup>4</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *El triunfo del artista, La revolución y los artistas rusos: 1917-1941*, trans. Noemí Sobregués (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2017), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Fals Borda, *Resistencia en El San Jorge. Historia doble de la costa 3* (Colombia University: Bogota, 2002), 27A.

I make a simile between the formation process of volcanic lakes and revolutionary processes. Crater lakes are formed by a process of many years, the hollow remains from an explosion of a volcano, and the lake is formed after many years of rain because there is no filtration and they are practically like puddles, like stagnant water, and when the water comes, it grows vegetation, fauna, and they become extremely beautiful places.<sup>6</sup>

A lake of volcanic origin polluted by political decisions, Xolotlán has become one of the ever unfulfilled promises of Nicaraguan presidential campaigns. For decades, Lake Xolotlán has been part of a political power struggle, interrupting its ecological life with strategies of administrative discourses. In all likelihood the body of Sandino, just as that of others who had to be disappeared, had been tossed into the lake.

The paving stones, in turn, unlike the lake, were deliberately produced and placed on the streets of Managua by President Somoza, also as a political strategy. Then, during the Sandinista revolution, they were turned into projectiles and pieces of barricades, leaving paving stones on the Sandino side of the national discourse. Nevertheless, civic expressions that begun in Nicaragua in April 2018 decentered state symbols, and paving stones were used as projectiles against the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN; Sandinista National Liberation Front).<sup>7</sup> Darling López decided to collect those loose paving stones after they were part of a civil clash in a simultaneously effective and symbolic way. Some were eroded and resembled fossils more than industrial objects, and they began to look like volcanic stones.

The architectural, economic, and social ruin has produced strange encounters. In Piedra Dulce Darling López takes on the assemblage as a possibility in the face of the vulnerability provoked by social and ecological disasters: the events of April 2018 and the water of Lake Xolotlán polluted for decades. The assemblage concept is useful for Ana Tsing, a U.S. anthropologist, in thinking about the formation of ecological communities. It refers not merely to the organisms gathered in a space, instead and more importantly, to the forms of life that emerge from the very assemblage: “For living things, species identities are a place to begin, but they are not enough: ways of being are emergent effects of encounters”<sup>8</sup>. The assemblage becomes a method to revitalize the intersection between political economics and environmental studies, thinking about the juxtapositions prompted by capitalism between

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<sup>6</sup> Darling López, interview by the author, August 25, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> In April 2018 in Nicaragua public protests broke out throughout the country stemming from reforms in the Social Security system. The *autoconvocados* (self-summoned), as the protesters were known given the spontaneity of the acts, were harshly put down. There are no exact figures on the number of dead and missing; to date more than 300 victims have been identified.

<sup>8</sup> Ana Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.

non-human entities. Those possibilities of intersection position the assemblage as a conceptual path to be explored more deeply to reflect on nation-building in Nicaragua.

The Sandinista revolution coming from the past refuses to be restored; it is the incurable image of the nation. Here I am thinking of a revolution as an image of thoughts, not as a historical event and not like any image, instead as an image that refuses to be cured, remedied.

Piedra Dulce proposes to conceptualize that image as an archaeological find from the future that simultaneously invokes and struggles with the oddity of national history: “There is, indeed, no point in flogging a dead horse: today, nationalism’s alleged doubles, cosmopolitanism and its ethno-politan avatars, are no longer useful conceptual points of departure”<sup>9</sup>. The task of the artists addressed here coincides with this vision; it is the quest for new conceptual starting points given the incurable-images formed under nationalist, cultural, or political budgets that long ago ceased to be useful in thinking about the future. Thinking of the incurable-image as: “[The] intensive sites of repetition where borders have historically been erected where encounters ought instead to have been cultivated”<sup>10</sup>.

Piedra Dulce is an attempt at turbulence from the incurable-images that constitute the conceptual constellation of Nicaraguan identity. If the incurable-images are cultural, historical, and political sediments of the nation, then Piedra Dulce is a symptom of the future presented in fossil form, fossilized from its very inception. The fossilized future contains the legitimacy of an archaeological discovery and the potentiality of what has not yet happened.

### **Disaster as Starting Point**

For Darling López and Camila Lobón, natural disasters and social disasters are not only similar, but they go hand in hand; polluted lake and 2018 protests, 1959 revolution and deforestation—fictionalized or real—both types of disasters appear connected in a continuum of effects that make it impossible to speak of ecology in the absence of social event. “The most convincing Anthropocene timeline begins not with our species but rather with the advent of modern capitalism, which has directed long-distance destruction of landscapes and ecologies”<sup>11</sup>. Ana Tsing incites us to position ourselves in the place of precarity more than in that of progress to think of ourselves as vulnerable beings that need the collaboration of other

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<sup>9</sup> Tarek Elhaik, *The Incurable-Image: Curating Post-Mexican Film and Media Arts*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Elhaik, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, 19.

species for survival. That, looking sideways more than ahead, stepping away from the linear logic of the history of modern progress.

Ecologies begin to form part of the social history of the nation; they become actively political springboards for imagining conceptual starting points. Earth's history and human history, speculative fabulations and speculative realisms must be told together to think about a conceptual reformulation aimed at the future: "Actual players, articulating with varied allies of all ontological sorts (molecules, colleagues, and much more), must compose and sustain what is and will be"<sup>12</sup>.

State relations are upheld by the demand for sacrifice and intransigence for the formation of the "new man," the ideal human being, a historical entity; capable of correcting the weaknesses produced by nature through scientism. "Terror is not an optional feature but a basic and integral part of totalitarian societies"<sup>13</sup> and it is under normalized terror that speculative fabulations and assemblages as methods, processes, and practices are produced.

Camila Lobón and Darling López turn to fossilized objects, volcanic lakes, hallucinatory blooming, as useful conceptual departure points to think about futures; at the same time, they criticize and learn from the incurable-images produced by the social sciences, national history, and cultural politics. By crossing forms and emotions, the social event and earthly history sustain a narration beyond the totalizing discourse imposed both by the state, and by the production of knowledge that demands neatly delimited plots and deny the possibility of the "assemblage" between fields.

Totalizing narratives are patriarchal, vertical; they are walls of histories, returning to Elhaik. The incurable-images live in the shadows of those walls of history. The mud is the place where they give rise to multispecies, feminine, speculative narrations, according to Haraway, ruins and displacements that promote strange encounters, following Tsing, zones of turbulence, assemblages, images of thoughts, but what can be done when those small useful turbulences to decenter totalizing discourses, incurable-images, are produced under the terror in Central America and the Caribbean? How can they be made effective, active, in inhospitable territories, where the artwork has lost any possibility of public life beyond state control?

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<sup>12</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 34.

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