

## REVIEW

**Carolyn Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change*, Vanderbilt UP, 2024.**

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Exploring art's capacity to help challenge reality, *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change* by literary scholar Carolyn Fornoff examines how contemporary Mexican literary and visual arts have captured climate change's anxieties, the archive it leaves behind, and the effects it has on the more-than-human world. Fornoff is primarily interested in examining how "ecological catastrophe, and specifically situations that foreclose the possibility of future life" are narrated by cultural productions (2). In exploring these cultural productions, she finds that creators repeatedly use their art to contest and reimagine prescribed futures generated by rampant extractivist and consumerist capitalism.

Her introductory analysis of "Piel territorio," a poem by the Zapotec filmmaker Luna Marán, depicts the three characteristics that Fornoff uses to build her subjunctive aesthetics: the questioning of extractivist capitalism, the privileging of imaginative potential over function, and lastly, how art itself is entangled with detrimental economic structures. On the one hand, her analysis portrays "dispossession as the foreclosure of Zapotec futurity" while simultaneously serving as a witness to this disposition and defying the notion of a definitive ending (6). Lastly, her initial analysis of the phrase "la tierra es eso que hace que seamos" defies the "Western conceptualizations of land as property or as resource," to focus on "the dependent entanglement of human life with territory" (1, 6). This short initial analysis serves as a map that she will replicate in each of the chapters to embody "the subjunctive ability of art to imagine the world otherwise becomes a key means by which to express alternative formulations of how the relationship with territory *should be or could be*" (2). As such, she successfully articulates how subjunctive aesthetics becomes a natural response occurring in contemporary Mexican cultural productions given "the era of climate change, when doubt, anxiety, and hope jumble together to form the structure of feeling," (177).

Thus, her analysis takes inspiration in the subjunctive grammatical structure to develop its proposals. Fornoff particularly anchors her critical framework on the uses and repercussions the subjunctive has in the Spanish language. Unlike in English, the Spanish subjunctive directly impacts action verbs by working as a postmodifier with dependent clauses that are constantly "supplementing, supporting, contesting, or complicating what has come before" (2, 5). Additionally, the author leans into how the essence of the subjunctive dependent clause exhibits wishes, doubts, emotions and future possibilities through the main verb (5). Taking this grammatical structure into the aesthetic realm, the author reads humans' subordination to the environment as a sort of subjunctive mode. Later, she reflects on how this dependence is also characteristic of the human relationship to temporality. She highlights that the human connection to the past and present inevitably tethers humans to time. Fornoff connects these two subjections, that of environment and time, to the present-day struggles we face with climate change. The author thus leans on the natural tendency of the subjunctive to represent open-ended desires to explain how it is used to bring forth ways in which to rewrite the human relationship to the more-than-human and, by doing so, also rewriting the futures that have been established thus far (6).

Her use of the word *foreclosure* to conceptualize these pre-determined outcomes becomes important because re-establishing these futures is one of the key contributions that her subjunctive aesthetics proposes. However, her analysis extends beyond it to consider the subjunctive's nature of embracing "uncertainty, anxiety, and ambiguity [...] in the service of postextractivist imagining," "the coordinates of contingency, supposition, affect, and dependency" (4, 5). Additionally, she considers how these characteristics force narratives away from certainty and push the author and reader "towards knowledge-making practices motored by doubt, emotion and imagination" defying the finitude of the Anthropocene (4). Having understood where the basis of her framework lies, the following section will delve into each of the pillars that Fornoff uses to cement her subjunctive aesthetics. This analysis will highlight the

chapters that are most representative of either the questioning of extractivist capitalism, the privileging of imaginative potential over function, or, lastly, of how art itself is entangled with detrimental economic structures. Mimicking Fornoff's opening, this section will follow the three primary characteristics and briefly review the most exemplary instances presented by the author.

The first is the repeated questioning of extractive capitalism that, exacerbated by government policies reliant on a fossil fuel economy, brings a "foreclosure of the future" that the subjunctive defies (6, 9, 10). This is particularly tangible in chapter 3, where Fornoff turns her focus to poetry and how it has framed the dialogue around endangered and extinct species. The poetry presented in this chapter, such as that of Karen Villeda or Maricela Guerrero, aims to extend the life of species by imagining them through words, thus defying the foreclosure of their extinction (94). Here, she uses the concept of *contiguity* defined by Mario Aquilina to highlight how poetry can, more than other forms of writing, highlight "sequence, contact, proximity, and bordering" through the various figures of speech it uses (94). Much like the grammatical nature of the subjunctive, this strategy directly puts readers in contact with more-than-human lives through the images it recalls in the readers' minds (94). For instance, Xitlálitl Rodríguez Mendoza's *Jaws (Tiburón)* (2015) offers commentary into how the lives of both, human and more-than-human, have fallen prey to commodification and are now often not the feared enemy or predator society has constructed to be (104). Additionally, she highlights the pivotal role subjunctive aesthetics plays when facing a government reliant on fatalist discourses to the demise of important ecosystems by saying that "the role of the poet is not to be a prophet of doom, but to make the case for life amid conditions of endangerment, as we will see in the works considered ahead" (98).

The second characteristic she mentions is a push towards the "imaginative potential" of art and less so on its "evidentiary function" (6). This is particularly evident in the first chapter where she analyzes two of Verónica Gerber Bicecci's works, *Otro día...* and *La compañía*, that characteristically recycle and repurpose other pre-authored pieces to give them a different meaning. In *La compañía*, for instance, Gerber Bicecci takes Amparo Dávila's *El huésped* and, by presenting it almost intact alongside Elizabeth del Angel's photography and Manuel Felguérez's abstract work, she manages to present a solid critique of the devastating effects of the mining industry in Mexico. The fact that Dávila's text is presented with few literary modifications leads the reader away from the function to prioritize the imagined future proposed. Similarly, the second chapter looks at the struggles of Indigenous land defenders and how the nature of the subjunctive is present in how their images, in the form of slogans and street art, survive their deaths. Most of the cases she touches on are of defenders who placed their lives on the line for land conflicts that highlighted the high price citizens are left to pay for an extractivism that pretends to bring progress only to then take their lives (67).

Fornoff opens the chapter with the story of Samir Flores Soberanes, an activist who spoke against a megaproject that intended to develop a thermoelectric plant as well as a natural gas pipeline infringing in ejidos and Indigenous lands in the state of Morelos. His 2019 murder highlighted the political corruption involved in pushing the vote for this project forward while simultaneously catalyzing citizens' action against it. Fornoff argues that it is after the death of activists like Samir that slogans like "Samir Vive" and the appearance of public art stencils that take back the right these communities have to public space despite being forcibly removed while simultaneously highlighting that Samir survived his own death within the cause (59, 70). Thus, this chapter's focus is on how, rather than bringing the focus to legal proceedings, the death of these land defenders inspires public art and protests. It is these repercussions that turn death into reimagining of territory, performing a similar gesture of pointing toward the future and away from a normative function (59).

The last quality is perhaps the most reminiscent of the grammatical performance of the subjunctive: the “state of subordination and entanglement with external factors from the climatic to the economic” (6). The author explains that most objects, even those that stand against extractivist values, still exist within “neoliberal funding structures and uneven dynamics of cultural circulation” (178). Most clearly seen in Chapters 4 and 5, Fornoff delves into the film industry and the extractivist economic system she posits it cannot exist without (178). The fourth chapter explores specific films depicting citizens’ resistance against megaprojects such as the construction of a dam in Betzabé García’s *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2015), an ejido’s reaction to severe droughts in Coahuila in Everardo González’s *Cuates de Australia* (2013) as well as Laura Herrero Garvín’s *El Remolino* (2016) which explores the effects of flooding in a Chiapas community that has suffered from chronic deforestation. Despite their critique of megaprojects, Fornoff astutely looks back at the ways in which these films still participated in the extractivist economy. For instance, she points to how the industry turned depictions of hostile environments and the rural resistance battling them into coffee table books for the consumption of wealthy patrons (123). Most generally, she notices how often these forms of resistance become a commodity tokenized in international festival circuits (124). Chapter 5 presents two tangible, potential alternatives that point towards an escape from this connection between oppressive economic systems and cultural productions: the Mexican film economy and the ecological footprint of the industry. For her first example, Fornoff focuses on Cine Móvil ToTo. This initiative is a travelling cinema powered by bicycles and solar panels that aims to provide access to art for remote communities. Additionally, the author highlights that the circuit features Mexican productions that are often overshadowed by Hollywood films that predominates the rest of the cinema industry in the country. Lastly, she briefly focuses on how filmmaker Mónica Álvarez Franco decided to track her emissions in the film *Bosque de niebla*, as a commentary on the toll that the industry takes on the more-than-human world.

The fact that these two last chapters pivot from a direct focus on primary cultural productions underscores just how anchored subjunctive aesthetics is in the everyday world. Focusing on the procurement of funds brings forth the book’s ability to outline the impacts on and contact with lived reality as a significant strength. The author carefully considers the political and social effects of subjunctive aesthetics in providing a way to imagine other modes of living in and interacting with the world. A second significant contribution of this work is Fornoff’s effort to bring the theoretical conversation into Latin America in its own terms. For instance, this book privileges the understanding that critics such as Cristina Rivera Garza contribute to conversations often centered outside of the region. Overall, author Carolyn Fornoff assesses how cultural productions are helping contemporary Mexican society process the inequity and disasters that, aided by capitalist economies benefiting from extractivist policies, have contributed to climate change. The power of subjunctive aesthetics lies in how it can defy these futures by the reimagining a better one, making it a book that lends itself to interdisciplinary discussions that can even extend beyond academia and onto the real world.