THEORY NOW
JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, CRITIQUE, AND THOUGHT

LOGICS OF WASTE IN LILIANA COLANZI'S *YOU GLOW IN THE DARK*

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LOGIQUES DE DÉCHETS DANS *YOU GLOW IN THE DARK* DE LILIANA COLANZI

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Fecha de recepción: 26/07/2023
Fecha de aceptación: 01/04/2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30827/tn.v8i1.28807

Abstract: Waste, as anthropologist Myra Hird has put it, is *the* signifier of the Anthropocene, but it is not a univocal one. It operates simultaneously at symbolic and material levels, and its valences can be positive or negative. Waste is a key concept for thinking through what is at stake in the relationships that human beings foster with the more-than-human world and for considering the material limits on human attempts to dominate the environment. In this sense, literary fiction, with its ability to invigorate the imagination through its creative work with perspective and temporality, is a rich site of reflection on what waste means. A significant example is the Bolivian writer Liliana Colanzi's *You Glow in the Dark* (2024), a short story collection in which waste of many kinds is omnipresent, from residues left behind by all organisms as they live and die to nuclear waste that threatens the physical integrity of those who come into contact with it. In this essay, I think alongside Colanzi's stories, arguing that their use of waste as a

prism through which to consider the passage of time, notions of creation and destruction, and the decentering of human perspective offers valuable lessons on how to live with the waste we create.

Keywords: Waste; Anthropocene; Ecocriticism; Liliana Colanzi; Latin American literature.

Resumen: Los desechos son, como afirma la antropóloga Myra Hird, el significante clave del Antropoceno, pero el significado de los desechos no es unívoco. Operan tanto a nivel simbólico como material y pueden tener implicaciones positivas o negativas. Como concepto, los desechos son claves para pensar lo que está en juego en las relaciones entre los seres humanos y el mundo más-que-humano, así como para dar cuenta de los factores materiales que limitan el afán humano de dominar el medio ambiente. En este sentido, la ficción literaria, que es capaz de estimular la imaginación por medio de un manejo creativo de la perspectiva y la temporalidad, se constituye como espacio privilegiado para contemplar lo que significan los desechos. Un ejemplo importante es *You Glow in the Dark* (2024) de la escritora boliviana Liliana Colanzi, una colección de cuentos en la que imperan muchos tipos de desechos, como los residuos que deja atrás todo organismo mientras vive y muere o los desechos radiactivos que ponen en peligro la integridad física de cualquiera que se acerque a ellos. En este ensayo, medito sobre los cuentos de Colanzi para plantear que utilizan los desechos como lente para contemplar el paso del tiempo, ideas sobre la creación y la destrucción y el descentramiento de la perspectiva humana, lo cual nos ofrece una lección valiosa sobre cómo vivir con los desechos que producimos.

Palabras clave: desechos; antropoceno; ecocrítica; Liliana Colanzi; literatura latinoamericana.

Résumé : Les déchets sont, comme l'affirme l'anthropologue Myra Hird, le signifiant clé de l'Anthropocène, mais la signification des déchets n'est pas univoque. Ils opèrent à la fois sur le plan symbolique et matériel et peuvent avoir des implications positives ou négatives. En tant que concept, le déchet est essentiel pour penser les enjeux des relations entre les êtres humains et le monde plus qu'humain, ainsi que pour rendre compte des facteurs matériels qui limitent la volonté humaine de dominer l'environnement. En ce sens, la fiction littéraire, capable de stimuler l'imaginaire par une gestion créative de la perspective et de la temporalité, se constitue comme un espace privilégié pour contempler ce que signifie les déchets. Un exemple important est *You Glow in the Dark* (2024) de l'écrivaine bolivienne Liliana Colanzi, un recueil de nouvelles dans les-

quelles prédominent de nombreux types de déchets, tels que les résidus que chaque organisme laisse derrière lui pendant sa vie et sa mort, ou les déchets radioactifs qui mettent en danger l'intégrité physique de quiconque s'en approche. Dans cet essai, je médite sur les nouvelles de Colanzi pour affirmer qu'ils utilisent les déchets comme un objectif pour observer le passage du temps, les idées sur la création et la destruction, et le décentrement de la perspective humaine, ce qui nous offre une leçon précieuse sur la façon de vivre avec les déchets que nous produisons.

Mots-clés : déchets ; anthropocène ; écocritique ; Liliana Colanzi ; littérature latino-américaine.

Trash, waste, garbage, and detritus can be found all over contemporary cultural production. In Latin America and Spain, the areas whose cultures I study and write about, the last several decades have seen writers, filmmakers, and artists creating works that center trash, landfills, and waste workers in cultural texts that engage with the economic crises of neoliberalism, ecological disasters, and social inequality, among other pressing issues[1]. Such waste-focused cultural products are certainly concerned with the past in that they index things from previous moments that accompany us in the present, but they are also inevitably oriented toward the future, since waste "will remain as one of the most lasting and visible monuments to human existence on Planet Earth" (Amago 6). This sort of long temporal view of waste suffuses *You Glow in the Dark* (2024), the most recent short story collection from acclaimed Bolivian writer Liliana Colanzi[2]. Several of the book's stories offer complex and compelling accounts of waste that resonate with

1 Giving even a basic summary of the scope, diversity, and vibrancy of this vein of cultural production far exceeds the purposes of this essay. Readers interested in waste and culture in Latin America and Spain would do well to explore the following recent works of cultural criticism: Gisela Heffes's *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación: Apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina* (2013), Maite Zubiaurre's *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste* (2019), Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* (2021), and my *Trash and Limits in Latin American Culture* (2024). Not only do these books argue forcefully for the importance of paying attention to waste and wasting practices in order to understand contemporary culture, but they also serve as useful compendiums of the type of cultural production I am referring to.

2 Colanzi is a multifaceted writer whose commitment to literary expression is clear in her academic work —as a professor at Cornell University she has published widely on speculative fiction, horror, animality, and feminism— and her editorial projects —her independent publishing house Dum Dum editora has been publishing experimental works by authors like Sara Gallardo, Mónica Ojeda, and Andrea Abreu since 2017. Along with *You Glow in the Dark* (originally published in 2022 as *Ustedes brillan en lo oscuro* by Páginas de Espuma), her two other short story collections —*Vacaciones permanentes* (2010) and *Nuestro mundo muerto* (2016)— have solidified her place among Latin America's finest contemporary short story writers and garnered several honors and awards, including the VII Premio Internacional de Narrativa Breve Ribera del Duero in 2022 *Ustedes brillan en lo oscuro*. All references from Colanzi's book in this essay come from Chris Andrews's English translation of the collection, published by New Directions in 2024.

this dossier's charge to consider works of literature that speak to ecological issues of the present while setting their sights on what is to come, imagining what kinds of texts will matter as we move toward a future that is sure to be haunted by the damage that has been inflicted on the environment up until now. In this essay, I consider how Colanzi engages with waste as a material presence that challenges normative conceptualizations of time and progress, allows us to contemplate ways of making sense of the world that break with boundary making and gestures of exclusion, and reminds us of how we are inextricably entangled in a web of life that far exceeds our own reach. Before delving into Colanzi's stories, however, a few words about waste itself are in order.

1. Waste Matters

Waste —understood broadly as material excess or residue, what is left over and, from a particular point of view, no longer useful— is all around us. It always has been, and it always will be. Our current era, though, is increasingly defined by the production of a certain kind of waste: that which attends industrial activity and the patterns of consumption typical of economic regimes predicated on a growth mindset, which "equates progress with constant economic development and growth" despite the very real and widely understood geophysical limits that are threatened by the commitment to such an economic system (Prádanos 11). The World Bank's 2018 report on global solid waste management recorded an increase in the production of solid waste from 1.3 billion tons per year in 2012 to 2.01 billion tons in 2016, and it projected that by 2050, 3.4 billion tons of solid waste will be produced annually (Kaza et al. 17-18). While such figures are not surprising, they are nonetheless alarming. And they resonate with Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo's trash-centric riff on the opening line of Karl Marx's *Capital*: "We would have to say, today, that *the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of trash*" (163)[3]. Pardo goes on to remark that our modern form of capitalism is truly exceptional in its dedication to the speedy production of all kinds of waste in ever-greater amounts, noting that no other society "has reached the point that we have, that is, the point where trash has become a threat to society itself" (163)[4].

This problem —the threat that waste poses— is a complex one with both individual and social dimensions. At its root, it is not simply a question of aggregating the con-

3 My translation. Original quote: "Nosotros tendríamos que decir, hoy, que *la riqueza de las sociedades en las que domina el modod e producción capitalista se presenta como una inmensa acumulación de basuras*".

4 My translation. Original quote: "ha llegado a alcanzar el punto que han alcanzado las nuestras, es decir, el punto en el que la basura ha llegado a convertirse en una amenaza para la propia sociedad".

sumption and disposal habits of individuals; rather, it is an issue that must be understood as a function of the dialectical relationship between individual actions and social structures. From the individual perspective, disposability engages powerfully with notions of freedom:

> Our convenience items, those commodified objects that not only do not demand physical maintenance and our careful attention, but even practically frustrate all attempts at taking care of them, most easily and absolutely become trash. Their ability to minimize physical care in consumption necessitates that they maximize disposability. The polystyrene cup is effortlessly discarded and the consumer spared the trouble of washing it. This relative freedom from taking care of the object supposedly saves the consumer time. In the metaphysical ledger, all time not wasted on matters of bodily necessity gets recorded in the positive, rational column, the sum of which is presumed to equal our true humanity. "Carefreeness" is the real promise of technology, and its real fulfillment is trash (Kennedy 122).

Disposable cups, for instance, make almost no demands on our time. By not requiring us to care about them, they allow us to care about and for supposedly more useful, higher-minded pursuits. In this sense, contemporary regimes of waste have everything to do with individual actions, desires, and motivations. But the convenience items that Greg Kennedy considers are also the product of a system, a social investment in the easy replacement of consumer goods that, coupled with neoliberal forms of waste management that tend to make the processes of dealing with waste invisible, produces the fantasy of collective human mastery over the environment, an "ethos of disposability" (Hawkins 9). So, consumer choices are acts of individual agency at the same time that they are inscribed in a broader system that determines, to a great extent, the horizons of possibility for dealing with waste. And thinking beyond convenience items to issues of landfills, large-scale industrial waste, nuclear waste, and decisions that are made regarding who is exposed to these types of materials and who benefits or suffers from dealing with them, waste management systems are significant exercises of power (Liboiron and Lepawsky 79-96).

It is no wonder, then, that scholars are turning more and more to waste, trash, and detritus as objects of study in an attempt to better understand and articulate what is at stake in the environmental crises that confront us. Myra Hird, for instance, sees waste as "*the* signifier of the Anthropocene […] an epoch of permanently temporary waste deposits left for imagined futures to resolve". And, as Tian Song argues, this constant churn of waste can even be seen as the issue at the heart of climate change: the "chain of transformation of energy and matter" organized by modern economic structures produces "solid garbage (the original meaning of this term), liquid garbage (waste water),

and gaseous garbage (waste gas), as well as dissipated heat (waste heat), the final state of all types of energy after usage" (110). Indeed, given the sense of complexity, intractability, and entangled-ness that the issue of waste emits, Marco Armiero's formulation of the Wasteocene —the idea that "waste can be considered the planetary mark of our new epoch"— is powerful and appropriate, not only because of the omnipresence of waste, but also because of the way that waste articulates relationships between animals (both human and nonhuman) and places at both local and planetary levels (2).

Nevertheless, we must remember that waste is a capacious term, one that encompasses far more than just the plastic bags and polystyrene cups that litter roadsides or construction waste that clogs landfills. Much like other facets of thought opened by the idea of the Anthropocene, restricting our vision of what waste is and how it works to the garbage that we humans produce betrays the tendency among many of us toward an inflated sense of self-importance. In fact, we could even go so far as to say that the production and disposal of waste is, as anthropologist Joshua Reno has argued, one of the processes that all biological entities on this planet, whether human or nonhuman, have in common. In this seemingly universal dimension, waste is not only an index of death and decay, but also of life:

> […] both bodily waste and discarded artifacts […] share more than symbolic relevance; they actively resemble each other because of the similar interpretive fate they face when separated from the form of life—the living process—that gave rise to them. The transience of decomposing and deteriorating matter can be seen as loss, but also as the perpetuation of life. Unless they are actively maintained and preserved under the right conditions, moreover, such objectual forms become unbound and gradually devolve into other life processes (Reno, "Toward a New Theory of Waste" 9).

Through a bio-semiotic perspective, then, it is possible to read the trace of life that waste communicates both before and beyond human culture. The tension concerning what waste signifies —it is a sign of both life and death— is fundamental to any consideration of the way waste works in specific cultural contexts.

Given that some waste stems from human and nonhuman biological processes while other waste is the byproduct of human economic activity, one might be tempted to separate them into discrete categories and evaluate them accordingly. The former might be seen as "natural" forms of waste that, on the whole, are good and unavoidable. The latter, on the other hand, would be an undesirable "unnatural" product of cultural activity, a problem that human societies can fix. Any clarity such a scheme may provide is, however, an illusion. If the notion of the Anthropocene has taught us anything, it is that "nature" and "culture" are not really separate spheres; instead, they are categories

that collapse into each other, making it nigh unto impossible to parse the real difference between the two. This is not to say that all forms of waste are the same, that they are inevitable, or that we simply have to accept the dangers that some waste presents without acting to protect ourselves and the world we live in. Rather, it underscores the importance of differentiating between static categories or kinds of waste —fixing waste into a series of boxes of single, absolute meanings— and multivalent senses of waste that recognize the slipperiness and opacity of materiality (Reno, "What is Waste?" 2). As Reno argues, "distinct senses of waste can be linked as part of ongoing semiotic or interpretive processes, which emerge from the very gaps between interpretations of waste and waste itself, insofar as these relate to our assumptions about what it means to be human" ("What is Waste?" 2). In short, waste's complexity and slipperiness merit equally complex analytical approaches that consider its logic, the senses it makes, from multiple vantage points.

Literary fiction, with its ability to invigorate the imagination through its creative work with perspective, temporality, and discourse, can be a rich site of reflection on the senses of waste. Stories like the ones in Colanzi's collection both train our gaze upon waste and wasting processes and defamiliarize waste itself, creating an imaginary space in which waste is not merely a peripheral, inert leftover but rather a central material force that helps give shape to the world in strange and often disconcerting ways. Three of the collection's seven stories —"The Cave", "Atomito", and "You Glow in the Dark"— offer especially rich reflections on waste as a complex, multivalent material and set of relations[5]. In what follows, I read elements of these three stories with an eye toward what they reveal about the logics of waste as they relate to temporality and timescales, order and disorder, and notions of vitality. Since I will refer to elements of the stories in differing levels of detail over the course of this essay, a brief summary of each of their plots should help readers find their way through my reflections.

"The Cave", the collection's opening story, is a fragmented or episodic narrative that presents a series of nine vignettes that take place in and around the same cave outside the city of Oaxaca in southern Mexico over the course of an enormous span of time: the earliest fragment narrates the experience of a woman giving birth to twins in an imprecisely-defined prehistoric moment, while the story's final vignette takes place in a far distant future after the demise of humans and even nonhuman intelligent life forms in the area. Over the course of eons, the cave is the scene of intense drama, both human (murder, love affairs) and nonhuman (the moving final days of a posthuman being left

5 The Spanish-language edition of *Ustedes brillan en lo oscuro* has six stories; Andrews's English translation of the book features an additional story, "Chaco", drawn from Colanzi's previous collection *Nuestro mundo muerto*.

behind by his family), as well as the evolution and ultimate demise of a particular species of bat and the persistence of troglofauna. Throughout all of this activity, the cave is shaped by multiple forms of waste, residues, and discards.

The book's second story, "Atomito", is set in the Bolivian city of El Alto in the not-too-distant future, where a nuclear power plant —the Túpac Katari Nuclear Research Plant, known as "the Plant"— looms large in the lives of residents of La Yareta, a neighborhood that overlooks the facility. The plot centers on Kurmi Pérez, a young woman whose mother has recently passed away, and her friends, who, like her, are marginally employed and constrained by the economic and political malaise of the heavily surveilled, unequal society in which they live. The Plant, which has long promised to bring modernization and economic growth to El Alto, is the target of more and more intense protests from citizens who suspect that the unsafe handling of nuclear waste is putting them in danger. Some strange events related to the Plant —including a lightning strike that seems to unleash the power of nuclear contamination and a series of unexplained sitings of the facility's cartoon mascot Atomito— intersect with the lives of Kurmi and her friends, putting them on the path toward harnessing the abject power of waste and exacting vengeance on the Plant from the social and ecological margins that the power plant and the interests it represents have rendered as a sacrifice zone for the purpose of generating wealth.

Nuclear waste is also at the heart of the collection's concluding story, "You Glow in the Dark". As Colanzi mentions in an author's note at the end of the book, it is a fictional account that imagines the events surrounding the real radiological accident that took place in Goiânia, Brazil, in 1987 (112). In 1985, the Instituto Goiano de Radioterapia moved to a new facility and left behind equipment that used radioactive cesium-137. Two years later, recyclers looking for scrap metal entered the partially destroyed, unsecured facility and hauled away scrap, including the capsule full of cesium-137, which they ruptured and sold to a junkyard. From there, many people, including children at a birthday party, came into contact with the nuclear waste without knowing what it was; in the end four people died from this exposure and 249 people were confirmed to be contaminated in what is the worst nuclear accident in Latin America to date (*The Radiological Accident in Goiânia* 1-3)[6]. Colanzi's story is a collage of imagined testimonial

6 The report produced by the International Atomic Energy Agency that I cite above has detailed information about the scope of the accident and the remediation efforts it required, including the difficulty of finding a disposal site for the "large volumes of radioactive waste" the incident produced (*The Radiological Accident in Goiânia* 67). While this incident is, unfortunately, a relatively obscure historical event (overshadowed, perhaps, by the catastrophe that took place in Chernobyl in 1986), Colanzi is not the first Latin American writer to draw inspiration from it. Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli's *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* (1996) weaves a similar accidental exposure to cesium-137 into her dystopian novel about a group of waste workers who, destined to die from radiological con-

accounts of the immediate efforts to contain the contamination; the interior experience of Devair, the junk dealer who bought the capsule of cesium-137, and his wife Gabriela; official reports on the investigation of the incident; a haunting account of the contents of the "nuclear cemetery" where waste from the incident is still stored; and accounts of the lingering presence (and lack of collective memory) of the incident in present-day Goiânia. As with "The Cave" and "Atomito", this story approaches the idea of waste in complex ways with a level of formal inventiveness that prioritizes its meaning and power at every turn.

2. Timescales of Waste

The idea of the Anthropocene has prompted reevaluations of many of what we might call the core ways of conceptualizing how the world works, at least from the perspective of the Western thought that has asserted itself as universal over the last five hundred years. These reevaluations are characterized in large part by incongruities and incommensurabilities: for instance, that the *human* and the *natural* are out of whack, out of sync, that they have exceeded their proper bounds to the extent that their erstwhile oppositional, hierarchical nature is increasingly unfeasible (Chakrabarty 209). One way to think of this is along the lines of what Bethany Wiggin has called "Anthropocene duplicities", a label that cleverly signals that the binary schema that have traditionally helped us organize thinking about the world and our interactions with it both persist in the Anthropocene epoch and are deceitful (150-153). Time is one such element that the Anthropocene shows is is simultaneously and paradoxically fast and slow (Wiggin 152). And beyond the duplicitousness of the passage of time, the Anthropocene throws into sharp relief the interplay of seemingly disparate timescales as well. While the scale of the life of a human being or that of other individual animals or plants has always been imbricated in the deep time of geological processes or the temporal logics of the half-life that govern radiological decay, the ecological crises of the Anthropocene have scrambled and shattered "twin assumptions at the heart of Western positivism: (1) time is a linear, uninterrupted march toward progress; and (2) nature is an atemporal, boundless resource underpinning, but largely separate from, the human historical experience" (Fornoff et al. xiii). Carolyn Fornoff, Patricia Eunji Kim, and Bethany Wiggin's notion of the timescale (as opposed to the timeframe) is an apt characterization of how the plurality of temporal logics at play in the world relate to each other in a constellated form of depth

tamination, sacrifice themselves in order to overthrow the warlords who control Faguas, the novel's fictionalized version of Nicaragua.

and entanglement, "not as a smooth slice of neatly separated layers of time but rather as […] jostling and unstable temporalities, defined by processes of assembling and unravelling, ruptures and contingency" (xiii). Paying attention to timescales, then, both decenters human notions of progression and advancement and opens us up to seeing time otherwise.

Waste is a powerful material and discursive presence that embodies the scrambling operation of timescales that Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggin posit. Its incessant becoming, constant transformations, and lingering presence in the environment condense the incongruities of multiple rates of the passage of time, and the cycles that it enacts underscore the shortcomings of succession and progress as frameworks for apprehending time. Waste "demonstrates something of the two-fold temporal quality of material things, that is, the passing of utility both makes and marks time, that objects are produced *by* and productive *of* specific temporal relations" (Viney 4). What is more, waste brings disparate temporalities into contact with each other, imbuing the present with different temporal dimensions by layering multiple pasts within the present. Such dynamics are on display in *You Glow in the Dark*. In particular, Colanzi manages to stage the scrambled, shattered temporal dynamics of the Anthropocene by showing how waste constantly brings the past into the present and how it displaces the "orderly" flow of time (from past to present to future) as the measure of experience through a clear focus on the materiality of waste in its multiple manifestations.

The nuclear waste present in "Atomito" functions as a clear index of how the past persists in the present and calls into question linear progress despite efforts to neutralize it and leave it behind.[7] La Yareta, the *alteño* neighborhood where Kurmi Pérez and her friends live, and its relationship with the nuclear plant, is key in this regard. The story of La Yareta follows the typical trajectory of a migrant neighborhood (mainly internal migrants, in this case) in a rapidly urbanizing area of Latin America. As Aymara-speak-

7 For the sake of space and in order not to belabor my arguments about waste and time, I only focus on "Atomito" in this section. However, both "The Cave" and "You Glow in the Dark" merit analysis in this regard as well. In the latter, the nuclear waste produced by the radiological accident in Goiânia also indexes the persistence of the past (especially past injustice) in the present, despite attempts to move on and forget. Toward the end of the story, a woman who was pregnant at the time of the accident remembers from the vantage point of the present (presumably the early 2020s) how life simply went on and people —herself included— tended to forget the tragedy. After seeing some graffiti with nuclear-themed imagery on a wall in Goiânia, the incident and its aftermath come rushing back to her: she remembers and searches for more shards from the past (Colanzi 106-07). I see this character as something of a stand-in for Colanzi who reproduces inside the bounds of the story what the author attempts in her fictionalization of the Goiânia incident: they both search through the detritus of history, trying to bring something significant from the past so that it can speak to a present that behaves as if it has overcome the past. "The Cave", on the other hand, is not so interested in bringing the past into the present. Instead, the story deftly manages to upend any notion of the primacy of anthropocentric timescales by stretching its plot over such an inconceivable span of time that any notion of development or progression is rendered almost inconsequential. In lieu of progression, what links the story's nine fragments is its titular cave, which serves as a repository for all kinds of waste throughout time.

ing people moved to El Alto in search of economic opportunities, they built houses that "sprang up in less than a decade, like a cluster of mushrooms stubbornly clinging to the trunk of a crooked tree, without council permission or any but the most rudimentary planning" (Colanzi 29). Kurmi casts her mind back to this period of "underdevelopment" marked by precarious, uneven access to basic necessities like water that required exorbitant time and effort to procure. The Plant is cast as the solution that will bring progress to La Yareta, effectively moving it forward in time and aligning it with modernity. Municipal workers start handing out flyers with the nuclear plant's logo, promising to provide assistance to residents in procuring "property titles and mak[ing] La Yareta a model neighborhood with all the basic services: water, sewage, electricity. Soon after that, they paved the roads, and construction began behind the wire fence" (30). Beyond the institution of a rationalized, legal system of property ownership and basic services, the Plant is also a source of pride for residents like Kurmi and her mother, especially due to the signs of modernity and progress that it exhibits. One of their neighbors, a woman who hails from the same town as they do and had to leave because of incessant drought, works in the Plant's cafeteria and regales them with stories of its gleaming surfaces and modern delights: "The woman spoke to them of gardens where roses bloomed all year round, employees in blue overalls operating the reactor's three towers, the convention center with its marble floor shining like liked candy, the hotel for international visitors with its own cinema, and the real-lawn tennis courts" (30). The Plant's promise of modernity and progress is all-encompassing: not only does it purport to put a place like La Yareta on the same cosmopolitan timeline as the rest of the developed world —hotels and movie theaters for dignitaries from abroad and sophisticated jobs requiring specialized skills for locals— but it also activates the fantasy of controlling time by leaving seasonal cyclicality behind —roses and lush grass tennis courts all year long.

This initial framing of the Plant as the key to securing La Yareta's place on the forward march of progress is, however, illusory. In the middle of Colanzi's narration of the history of La Yareta and the optimism-inspiring arrival of the Plant, the narrator interjects a comment about the waste upon which this linear temporal framework depends: "What nobody knew much about were the metal drums holding waste from the Plant, piling up in the warehouses. According to a rumor, this was no ordinary trash but a kind of material that had to be managed in a very particular way. Still, that was just one of the many legends going around about the place" (30). That Colanzi characterizes the mystery surrounding the production and disposal of nuclear waste at the plant as legend is significant. Here, "legend" not only refers to the presence or absence of popular knowledge regarding toxic waste that is registered in public discourse; it also activates

the notion of a presence (both discursive and material) from the past that circulates and operates in the present.

The legend of the waste produced and hidden by the Plant in its efforts to frame time exclusively as a march toward progress crops up in small ways, such as inflicting mysterious illnesses on the inhabitants of La Yareta. Kurmi stops hearing from her neighbor who works in the plant's cafeteria after she falls ill, and her mother dies from a sickness that is never specified but that the reader intuits is connected to the nuclear waste that lurks nearby (31). A few weeks before the action of the story, Kurmi had come home to find her mother's body, realizing that she had been dead for hours because her hand was frigid "and when she took it in hers, the cold jumped across into her body, got under her skin like a worm, and crept up to settle in her brain. Since then, she's been dogged by an intermittent headache and can't get warm no matter how much she layers up in thick woolen sweaters she's knitted herself" (25-26). This coldness, unleashed by the waste's effect on her mother's body and transferred to Kurmi, underscores the fact that the Plant's temporal regime truncates the timelines of those who live in the sacrifice zone where the waste is disposed of[8]. Kurmi and her friends, who struggle to find jobs or are marginally employed and who all experience to one degree or another the illness and death that ravage their community, are stuck in a form of time that seems broken and cyclical compared to the promise of progress and growth that the Plant claims to offer. Indeed, they *waste* time almost ritualistically, gathering often at Kurmi's house to drink and listen to music[9].

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8 Here I am invoking a term that environmental justice activists and scholars use to designate places that are close to facilities that produce environmental harm, like nuclear plants, oil refineries, factories, and military bases. For Steve Lerner, the notion of the sacrifice zone "dramatizes the fact that low-income and minority populations […] are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid" (3). Ryan Juskus traces the genealogy of the term, noting how it has gathered nuance and polysemy through its use as a concept in livestock and land management and discussions around critical energy, Indigenous political ecology, and environmental justice. He also highlights the theological resonance invoked by the term "sacrifice": "It suggests that even more fundamental than an inequitable distribution of harms and benefits, the social relations that produce sacrifice zones are the material embodiment of a largely implicit sacrificial theology that is deeply embedded in and productive of contemporary societies. This sacrificial ecopolitical theology binds some lives and lands to ecologies of death in sacrifice zones to free other lives and lands to sustain themselves and flourish in greener pastures: some must die to save others" (20). In terms of the ideas that I am exploring here, the theological valence of sacrifice zones underscores the way that nuclear waste produces different timescales: one of progress and flourishing (gestured at in the Plant's roses and grass tennis courts in Colanzi's story) and another of dissolution (death in the case of Kurmi's mother and pain that distends time, like the headaches that Kurmi develops).

9 The initial description of Kurmi's house as her friends approach it is worth quoting in full: "The house they visit faces a patch of wasteland. It's an unplastered brick house with a half-built second story and a gravity-defying design, like many of the dwellings in the area. The neighbors use the wasteland to dump their trash: carcasses of fridges and old stoves stand there like monoliths beneath the sky of the altiplano. From the second story of the house you can see the twinkling lights of the Power Plant and the stores a third of a mile away: a beautiful swarm of fireflies. By day you can also see the army tanks guarding the facilities, dragging themselves from one side of the perimeter to the other like listless caterpillars" (Colanzi 25). The house, a place where time is defined by waste and whose material conditions contrast with the timeline of development and progress that the nuclear plant enacts, is also contiguous to an improvised dump. In this scene, multiple forms of waste but up against one

In fact, it is within this time-wasting framework (in a house next to a vacant lot full of trash) that the legend of the Plant's waste begins to take on more legendary, spectacular proportions. Bored by the petty bickering of the group, Orki (one of Kurmi's friends) looks out the window, fixing his gaze on the nuclear plant's reactor towers. A bolt of lightning strikes one of them, and the following scene unfolds while only a stupefied Orki bears witness:

> A viscous light is bubbling out of the tower's base, spreading beyond the perimeter, engulfing the appliances dumped in the middle of the wasteland. The earth has cracked open and something long hidden is pouring out in all directions. Orki wants to close his eyes and obliterate that vision, but his eyelids have turned to Stone. A second before the lights go out all over the city, he feels a spreading warmth in his groin (34-35).

This passage is dense with waste: the nuclear waste from the Plant, the trashed appliances in the vacant lot next to Kurmi's house, and the urine that the overwhelmed Orki produces when confronted with this scene. The lightning bolt that links these forms of waste together also manages to puncture the earth and knock something loose: the *something* that had lain hidden for a long time and now spreads out in all directions and that begs to be read as a reference to both the nuclear waste housed in the Plant and the forms of life and their attending timescales that nuclear modernity and its single-minded vision of temporality have tried to neutralize by burying them in the past.

Indeed, the incident that Orki witnesses seems to unleash the power of waste — waste material, wasted lives, and waste spaces— to forcefully bring outdated, outmoded elements from the past into a present that has tried to discard them. For Kurmi, the strange waste spill helps her begin to understand and accept the incommensurable timescales at play all around her. After the incident, her headaches vanish, and she begins to hear her mother's voice and carry on conversations with her. One day while knitting, Kurmi contemplates the yareta plant (a variety of cushion plant that grows in the Puna grasslands of the Andes and can live for thousands of years) in the vacant lot next to her house. She thinks about what the area must have been like 2,000 years ago when the plant first bloomed and what will remain alongside it after another couple thousand years. The voice of her mother (who, it bears repeating, was cut down and tossed aside because of nuclear waste and, fantastically, has been brought back because of it as well) tells her that the mountains will remain, that in order to understand movement and change in the world, she must not see things through her own eyes, but "'how they look to the yareta'" (44).

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another in a way that highlights different timescales and temporal trajectories. And the ominous military presence suggests the violence and force that are necessary to privilege certain ways of understanding time and progress over others.

If Kurmi's encounter with waste helps bring back the comforting presence of her mother and a way of apprehending time that is at odds with what the Plant represents, then Orki's experience leads to a personal transformation with great political potential. After the lightning strike, his friends start seeing videos of him dancing as if entranced throughout El Alto. At first, people laugh and throw things at this young man who dances without rhyme or reason, but soon many people join him, including, without explanation, his girlfriend Sayuri, who died from an overdose before the events of the story began. When he sees her in the crowd of dancers, he is pleasantly surprised:

> The girl smiles: behind the glitter lipstick her teeth are a dazzling white. And now it's as if Sayuri had never gone away. The desire passing between them creates a magnetic field strong enough to revive the hidden, buried city. Maybe Orki thinks the crowd all around him is made up of guests at that party without a beginning or an end; maybe he's unaware that they are creating the party as they go, and that it's heading for the Plant (46).

Again, the inexplicable return of the past triggered by waste (Sayuri's return from the dead) augurs a large-scale resurrection of a "hidden, buried city", an ambiguous force that progress seems to have left behind. And the multitude that joins Orki and Sayuri as they festively (but threateningly) move upon the nuclear plant follows a temporal logic that is at odds with that of the Plant: it has no beginning or end. Apprehending time through waste —seeing time as waste sees it, to modify the counsel of Kurmi's mother— opens up the characters of "Atomito" (and the story's readers) to the fact that modernity's way of organizing time is not universal. In the following section, I continue to think about waste's ways of organizing things by turning to two other stories from Colanzi's collection that foreground how the seeming disorder of waste produces meaning.

3. The Disordered Order of Waste

Whether it be the trash in a dump, excretions or residues like excrement, nuclear-contaminated stuff, or even time that is ill spent, waste defies order. Waste —for many of us humans, at least— concretizes disorder and produces the urge to clean up, to separate and categorize, to keep the useful things that make sense to us and banish or throw away the useless stuff that does not. For John Scanlan, garbage and other forms of waste perturb our sense of order by "[b]eing something and nothing; between whole and part" and enacting a "stateless condition of being one thing and then another (or even being at any time *neither one thing nor another*)" (Scanlan 53). The will to order, with its impulses toward rational arrangements, refining, and exclusion, is not just an important part of making things make sense; it is also integral to the development of knowledge in Western culture, and it spins a fantasy of waste reduction, or even elimination (58-61).

Be that as it may, waste is pervasive. It attends the modes of production and consumption that threaten ecosystems across the globe, but, in other forms, it is also a sign of and a part of life. In light of Scanlan's contention that waste is the Other to Western notions of order, organization, and sense, is it possible to say that waste makes sense? What sort logic does it exhibit? Much like waste's capacity to trouble Western, positivistic epistemologies of time as an ordered sequence of events that inevitably leads to progress, I contend that waste gives the lie to universalist notions of order and sense-making that rely on neatly defined categories with clear boundaries, hierarchization, and exclusion. Waste —in the form of scraps, residues, traces, bits, and fragments— is jumbled and messy, oozy and prone to contaminating spaces and objects we think of as pristine. It is precisely in these points of contact and contamination that waste makes sense: the key to its logic is metonymy, that is, association through contiguity. Thinking with waste in its messy configurations, its contiguities and concatenations, is akin to the interconnectedness of what Timothy Morton calls "the mesh", the form of material relationality that undergirds a modality of ecological thought that welcomes the nonsense and strangeness of contact and embeddedness (*The Ecological Thought* 29-30). Colanzi's stories —in particular "The Cave" and "You Glow in the Dark"— are a literary space in which waste's metonymic routes of meaning-making are explored through both form and content. In this sense, they model a way to "stick around with the sticky mess that we're in and that we are, making thinking dirtier" in "an act of radically being-with the other" (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 188, 196).

In "The Cave", Colanzi weaves together a narrative from nine fragments so dispersed in time that it is difficult to say whether they come together to tell what we commonly think of as a story. Each fragment is a complete unit that can be isolated from the others. The story's setting, however, is a clear through line, since each section takes place in and around the same cave in the vicinity of present-day Oaxaca: a prehistoric woman gives birth to (and subsequently kills) twins in the cave; another young woman from our era weathers a storm in the cave; a species of bat that lives in the cave suffers a genetic mutation after coming into contact with some sort of glowing, otherworldly substance, and the mutation heightens the bats' ability to hunt insects through echolocation, which in turn leads to higher crop yields and a stint of civilizational development for an indigenous group; over the course of millennia, stalactites and stalagmites form in the cave; an unwitting time traveler ends up in the cave during the time of the dinosaurs; a sort of posthuman creature lives out his final days coming through the piles of detritus in the cave. Those piles of detritus offer an important interpretive key to the story, for the cave is not simply the common setting for all the fragments; rather, it is a receptacle

for things left behind throughout time. In other words, the cave is a space where many forms of waste come together in seemingly random, nonsensical ways. It is precisely through those contingent connections that a mesh of meaning emerges in the story.

There are many possible moments of contiguity through waste that form chains of meaning in "The Cave", but to give an idea of how they operate, I would like to trace some of the connections and resonances that build on the story's first fragment. The unnamed prehistoric woman enters the cave after suffering a fall while hunting rabbits. The fall induces her labor, and the narrative voice, tightly focalized through the woman, recounts her disdain at becoming pregnant because she wants to maintain her status as a great hunter, as well as the memories of her mother, whom she saw give birth to many babies who did not end up surviving. As she contemplates her newborn twins, the notion of survival condenses in her mind: "She had survived the lump, as she had previously survived gomphotheres, cold, hunger, and fever. The instinct for life stirred within her again, alert and sharp" (Colanzi 10). The sharpness of her survival instinct leads to the fragment's culminating moment, which also brings the first forms of waste that Colanzi inscribes in the text:

> She removed the babies from her nipples and took them into the light to contemplate them once again: they were almost translucid, and covered with the finest down. She carried them to the back of the cave and, moved by curiosity or playfulness, pressed the four little soles of those bloody feet on the wall and, beside them, the palms of her own dirty hands. The symmetry of the prints on the rock gave her a sense of achievement. Then, with the same clean stroke that she had applied to the rabbit, she slit the throats of the double children. Before darkness covered them, they let out a soft mewing (10-11).

Both the babies and the blood used to make hand- and footprints on the cave's wall are rendered as waste. The babies become bodies that are tossed aside, and the blood that was once circulating through the woman's body is now "matter out of place" (Douglas 37), a residue that can no longer serve its purpose but that can be *repurposed* to make art. These are forms of excess that the woman leaves behind as she returns to the snowy steppes to rejoin the hunt. And they both reverberate in strange ways throughout the story's other fragments. Death —the body becoming waste— punctuates the experience of other beings who inhabit the cave, whether they be visitors who meet their demise in and around the cave like Xóchitl Salazar (who is murdered by a jealous boyfriend) or Onyx Müller (the time traveler who becomes a meal for a pterosaur), or the countless critters who call the cave home, including bats, beetles, coyotes, and many forms of troglofauna. These wasted bodies —human and nonhuman alike, laid low through grisly violence or banal "natural" processes— form an integral part of the world made in and of the cave. As Morton puts it, "All life forms are the mesh, and so are

all the dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings" (*The Ecological Thought* 29).

If the bodies that live and die in the cave form a mesh of biological waste that helps give "The Cave" its sense, then the cave art that the prehistoric woman initiates in the story's opening fragment helps create a related mesh of cultural residues that are never far from the biological ones (the rock art, it bears repeating, is made with blood). The cave paintings themselves reverberate through time, calling the attention of different beings who view them. Xóchitl Salazar is disturbed and frightened by them; in fact, she has their image "fixed in her pupils" in the very moment of her death (Colanzi 12). And the posthuman creature who stays behind on Earth while his family migrates to other solar systems begins his fascination with the cave's waste by examining the paintings:

> He […] was also intrigued by the ancient paintings on the walls. No one really knew what sort of creatures had painted them or why they had disappeared, and no one apart from him had any desire to find out. It was a sign of decadence to look back at the past: his relatives were always founding new colonies, mutating, and adapting. To them, his obsession with things from bygone times was obscene, and they made a great effort to keep it secret. So his decision to remain behind had come as a relief to them all (21).

Once again, Colanzi presents us with an intricate web of waste in its many valences: the art made of waste matter from the birth of human twins whose dead bodies were left to decompose in the cave; the entirety of human culture that, now extinct, is nothing more that the detritus of history for these new posthuman, interstellar travelers; this particular posthuman, who wastes his time thinking about waste and whose fellow beings are happy for him to be tossed aside and forgotten like so much garbage. That is, in fact, his fate. When he senses that he is about to die, he goes into the deepest recesses of the cave to add his own body to the mesh of organic waste that sustains its ecosystem.

Each of the associative links of waste within and across the story's fragments rubs up against new ones as well in a proliferation of possible meanings activated by the jumble of different kinds of waste that come and go in the cave and grab our attention, like the bloody rock art or the junk that the posthuman creature sorts through (things like armadillo carapaces, jewelry, and —his favorite item of all— a Coca Cola bottle), "cleaning the various objects and putting them in order" (21). As this creature's final days attest, it is hard, perhaps even impossible, to resist the urge to order and categorize, but if we balance it with the kind of dirty thinking, to invoke Morton once again, of continuity and contact that waste invites, manifold forms of meaning may open up before us, just like they do in "The Cave".

"You Glow in the Dark", Colanzi's imaginative rumination on the Goiânia radiological accident, also offers a suggestive take on waste's power to generate meaning from the messiness of contiguity. Like "The Cave", it is a fragmented narrative, albeit with a considerably more condensed timeline and a sharper thematic focus, namely, the events and aftermath of the nuclear incident in Brazil. Despite any effect this tighter focus might have on the sense that the story makes, the fragmentation is a key formal feature in that it resists imposing meaning on the waste presented in the story. Unlike another piece of literary fiction that takes inspiration from the incident in Goiânia, Gioconda Belli's *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*, Colanzi's story does not present a vision of waste as something that can be subordinated to anthropocentric designs. Belli's novel is a dystopian tale set in Faguas, a fictionalized version of Nicaragua, whose economy is based in large part on the massive shipments of trash it receives from countries in the Global North as payment for not despoiling its forest reserves, which help supply the planet with much-needed oxygen. The part of the novel that is relevant to my reading of "You Glow in the Dark" is the tragic exposure of a group of scrap recyclers to medical equipment containing cesium-137: not knowing what the glowing substance is, they handle it without protective equipment and receive a lethal dose of radiation, much like what happened in Goiânia in 1987, as Belli explicitly notes (184-188). The workers who were exposed to the waste decide to infiltrate the compound of the tyrannical gang lords-cum-dictators that maintain (and benefit from) Faguas's neocolonial status and assassinate them in a suicide-bombing mission, thereby liberating the country and imbuing the waste incident with meaning. As the narrator puts it, "The opportunity for a heroic death could not be disregarded. Death should be put to good use if life couldn't be. It couldn't go to waste" (202)[10]. Belli's novel not only imagines heroism as a way of making death make sense but also as a way of giving waste meaning. In this sense, the waste in *Waslala* is instrumentalized as part of the novel's political imaginary, which can only envision waste having meaning in relation to human goals and desires. In short, it is subordinated to the novel's investment in catharsis.

While *Waslala* imagines how the waste at the center of a tragedy like the Goiânia incident must be imposed with meaning in order to tell a compelling story about it, Colanzi takes a more radical approach. "You Glow in the Dark" does not try to impose human frameworks on nuclear waste and contamination; instead, it exposes what is, from the human perspective, waste's horrifying logic of contamination, concatenation, and contiguity that exceeds our own forms of logic and sense making. Because it is a

10 My translation. Original quote: "No se podía despreciar la oportunidad de una muerte heroica. La muerte debía ser puesta en buen uso, ya que no la vida. No se podía desperdiciar".

fragmented narrative that brings together first-person testimonial accounts, third-person omniscient narration, legal journalistic documents, and even a reproduction of a photograph, the story's meaning depends less on progression and the forms of sense that linear narratives like *Waslala* depend on (development, hierarchization of characters, clear and rational delineation of different types of discourse, and so on). While the resonances that arise from the juxtaposition of its fragments are perhaps not quite as rich as in "The Cave", they are certainly potent. A brief consideration of a few fragments that pull the reader away from anything resembling a plot in order to underscore the metonymic logic of contiguity and contact throw into sharp relief Colanzi's commitment to staging the messiness of waste's meanings.

One of these is a section written as a newspaper article, "Photographic Tour of Abadia de Goiás", from *The Morning Paper*. This fragment is undoubtedly based on a real article published in Goiânia's *Diário da Manhã* in October of 2015. That article, "Passeio fotográfico em Abadia de Goiás", briefly relates two major events in the history of the town of Abadia de Goiás: the construction and dedication in the 1960s of a Catholic church in honor of what was seen as divine intervention on behalf of the son of the town's founder and the government's decision to house the contaminated waste from the Goiânia radiological incident there. Colanzi largely follows the broad strokes of the newspaper article, but she also adds to it and manages to emphasize the fraught nature of the siting of nuclear waste to a greater degree than the article. In the overall context of the story, this re-worked newspaper article is initially confusing because it opens with the story of the town's founding and the events leading to the construction of the aforementioned church. What at first seems like irrelevant information about a town founded outside of Goiânia in 1952 only begins to make sense toward the end of the fragment, where Colanzi gives details about the "nuclear cemetery" constructed in the town: "At this site, forty thousand tons of radioactive waste are stored in thirty-eight hundred metal drums, which are kept in a concrete vault between two banks of earth covered with sun-scorched grass" (Colanzi 104). The way Colanzi leverages and transforms the original newspaper article, which opens with the town's claim to fame as nuclear dumping ground, mimics the way waste interrupts and disturbs, drawing our attention to the 40,000 tons of contaminated stuff that sits uncomfortably beneath the surface.

The story's preceding section takes on greater significance in light of the posterior examination of the history of Abadia de Goiás. It lists a random selection of the contents of eighteen of the numbered drums containing contaminated items that, as we learn a few pages later, have become linked to the town due to the decision to bury the nuclear waste there. The opening item in the inventory is characteristic of the rest: "Kamilinha,

Leide das Neves's favorite doll is buried in drum #305", in reference to a young girl who was one of the four fatal victims of the accident (103). Other items mentioned include pieces of asphalt, dresses, unopened bottles of beer, the remains of dogs and chickens, love letters, movie tickets, and branches from a mango tree. This is a powerful staging of the random stuff of daily life, things that do not mean anything together outside of the fact that they are together. They are linked to each other through the contiguity of waste, and in, turn, their connections sprawl beyond the metal drums that contain them back to people and places they shared space with before they became waste. And the meaning they generate, like the waste in "The Cave", is only partially available to us. We can certainly apprehend, to some degree, the technical, political, and social shortcomings that allowed the Goiânia incident to occur, but some part of the messy meaning of waste that the event produced escapes our grasp. Colanzi gestures toward the way that waste exceeds our attempts to make sense of it, noting that "the problem is not about to disappear: the dump will remain radioactive for the next three hundred years" (105). What waste communicates, the problems it poses, is something that we can only try to grasp if we contemplate it as part of a messy web of materiality, a mesh that both includes and exceeds us in time and space.

4. Coda: The Vitality of Waste

You Glow in the Dark is a remarkable book that, among other things, takes waste seriously. Colanzi's stories foreground waste, its spaces, and its processes in ways that move beyond denouncing social and environmental ills and commenting on consumerist and industrial excess. To be clear, stories like "The Cave", "Atomito", and "You Glow in the Dark" demonstrate concern for those aspects of waste, and they engage in critical thought about the many ways waste produced by humans is harmful to the more-than-human world. But they also take the important step of imagining the role of waste above and beyond human actions and concerns. The way waste indexes time and underscores forms of making meaning through disorder in Colanzi's stories is a fundamental part of this effort. It is what helps her pull off the difficult trick of decentering the human within the eminently human art form of literary fiction.

This resistance to anthropocentrism is valuable because, despite the fact that those of us who read Colanzi's stories and appreciate and interpret them are humans, they remind us that we are a small part of the wider world, neither above nor below other parts, but entangled with them in ways that we oftentimes cannot understand or control. Nevertheless, that entangled mess or mesh sustains us. And waste is a significant part

of it. In "The Cave", Colanzi writes what amounts to an ode to the life-sustaining power of waste:

> The centuries of the mutant bats were prosperous for the cave as well. The bat guano, made up of insect exoskeletons, sustained life in the half-light. Beetles laid their eggs in it, and their larvae —hungry, ancestral miniatures— found refuge in the shit. Sunk in that dark matter, they traversed the inky night of their metamorphosis to emerge in their definitive form. Diligent colonies of fungi and bacteria worked on the excrement, breaking it down, before being devoured by the coleoptera. Attracted in turn by the beetles, salamanders hid in the cracks of the rock […] The life cycle that turns on shit, on guano, on bountifil excrement: the unwitting gift of one living thing to another, enabling existence to go on. Shit as the link, the fundamental bond in the mosaic of organisms (15).

This scene is a clear example of what Marco Caracciolo calls "narrating the mesh", capturing through narrative the "fragile interdependence, but also formidable complexity of pattern and connection" (11). It also returns us to the idea that waste, as it decomposes and deteriorates, entails both loss and "the perpetuation of life" (Reno, "Toward a New Theory of Waste" 9). While not all waste is as rich and life affirming as the bat guano that allows existence to continue in the cave and beyond (lest we forget, the bats in the story are essential for human flourishing as well), Colanzi captures the vitality of waste that is by turns enriching, disgusting, horrifying, and awe inspiring, but that always makes the world go round.

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