Ericka Beckman’s *Capital Fictions* is a devastating account of the complicity of the Latin American intellectual and literary elites in the exploitation of the continent. Focusing, first of all, on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when “letrados” were also presidents, ministers, customs agents and “principal architects of liberal reform,” she brings a refreshingly caustic analysis to bear on an intellectual class who “saw integration into the world order of capital as desirable and inevitable.” For years such radical criticism was taboo in U.S. literary circles. *Capital Fictions* signals a healthy change and marks a critical turn away from the worshipful devotion that literature still inspires in some circles. I suspect that the author got a good deal of pleasure out of exposing the feet of clay that supported the elegant Modernist stance. Julián del Casal, whose poem, “Mis amores” begins “Amo el bronce, el cristal, las porcelanas, las vidreiras de múltiples colores” becomes a commodity fetishist in Beckman’s reading and, as she notes, the local reality of Cuban sugar plantations run on black labor is hidden behind “his proto-consumer profile.” In the writing of Julián del Casal, Rubén Darío, and José Asunción Silva, Beckman argues, descriptions of luxury goods amount to import catalogues. She points out that Silva’s description of a drawing room in his novel *De sobremesa* is remarkably similar to an ad for his store, Almacén Nuevo. Both list imported luxuries, all the more prized given the difficulty of getting them from the coast to Bogotá. Silva was at once a modernist poet, a merchant and a promoter of consumption that targeted women buyers and thus he crosses the boundary between masculine artistic contemplation and the feminized realm of the commodity. Indeed, he offers a dramatic example both in person and in his artistic production of “the conditions of impossibility under which Latin American modernities emerged and all too often failed.” Beckman devotes an especially searching chapter to his novel *De sobremesa*, a novel published years after the bankrupt author’s suicide, with its unbalanced protagonist, a loser in both love and business. As an ironic postscript, she includes the illustration of a 3000 peso bank note on which is imprinted Silva’s poem “Nocturno.” When the poet died, his body lay alongside a wallet containing his last ten pesos in paper money and a copy of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s novel *Triunfo della Morte*, a scene that for Beckman conjoins decadence, bankruptcy and failure.

After the specious boom came the financial bust, dramatically described in Julián Martel’s novel, *La bolsa*, written after the Baring Crisis of 1890 when Argentina was forced to declare bankruptcy, an outcome that left it with expensively refinanced loans and the loss of nearly all of its railways. Beckman’s reading of the novel demystifies the role of the supposedly disinterested narrator as an uncontaminated witness, able to separate truth from the corruption that contributed to the crash. In her reading, *La bolsa* aims to restore confidence rather than offer solutions to the crisis and tendentiously holds up for criticism the caricaturesque figure of the moneylending Jew while sparing the British speculators who, according to one character, “are bringing their capital with a confidence that honors us.” Thus
Beckman argues, the collapse described by Martel can be attributed to Jewish capitalism and not to the British, whose economic interests in Argentina went on to prosper. In Beckman’s account, real events are often just as amazing as fiction. Even more astounding than the narrativization of Argentina’s collapse is the ghostly tale of Colombia’s Banco Nacional that, even after it had been liquidated and had run out of the appropriate paper for printing money, continued to print and circulate money, now stamped on paper used for chocolate wrappers.

The early twentieth century saw a proliferation of novels dedicated to single export products—tin, rubber, bananas—betraying a preoccupation with the dependence of societies on the single export commodity that “cannot be dismissed on the grounds of literary naïveté or documentary realism.” Here she focuses on the Colombian novel, La vorágine whose poet protagonist, Arturo Cova, after eloping with his girlfriend, Alicia, loses her to a trafficker and then tries to follow her tracks into the jungle. Here he confronts the horror not only of nature but of rubber extraction. The novel with its changing narrators, the “poetic” outbursts and the references to counterfeiting that shed doubt on “the practices of representation within a larger economic context” is a strange amalgam of protest and poetry. Rivera himself had spent time in the Amazon region, mapping boundaries on behalf of the Colombian government in an area where boundaries were difficult to determine. Beckman’s perceptive analysis highlights the brutal violence of rubber extraction while noting that Rivera himself was scarcely a wholehearted critic of the foreign exploitation of the Amazon. Indeed one of his letters reveals that he tried introduce himself to Henry Ford though he did not live to see Fordlandia, “the grotesque copy of American suburban life” that Ford wanted to create in the Brazilian Amazon.

Beckman terms “export reverie” the dream of a prosperous future through the exportation of “the gifts of nature” and the lyrical strains in which it was expressed. One such gift of nature, the banana, figured in a speech given by the Colombian Liberal, General Rafael Uribe Uribe at a conference on “el banano” whose export he saw as a key to prosperity. Uribe Uribe was the inspiration for José Arcadio Buendía, the patriarch of García Márquez’s novel, Cien años de soledad. Beckman argues, “the very legends Uribe Uribe sets down in his speech reappear in Garcia Márquez’s novel as key elements of his story.” Here, I suspect, she may be pushing her point too far although even if it is so, it does not diminish the achievement of a book that is nothing if not groundbreaking.