

Counter (Current) Discourses: Rivers in William Ospina's *Ursúa* and *El país de la canela*

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William Ospina's historiographic novels *Ursúa* (2005) and *El país de la canela* (2008, premio Rómulo Gallegos 2009) focus on moments of the Spanish conquest in the Americas that were characterized by greed and voracity for spatial dominance.¹ *Ursúa* narrates Pedro de Ursúa's expeditions to the Colombian mountains and the Amazon regions, impelled by his desire to find the mythical El Dorado. He falls prey to a murder plot instigated by Lope de Aguirre in 1561. *El país de la canela* is inspired by a previous historical event: Gonzalo Pizarro's frustrated 1541 expedition to an imagined land of cinnamon forests, supposedly hidden in the Andean cordillera. The novel further recounts how a group of conquistadores, under the leadership of Pizarro's cousin Francisco de Orellana, after having gotten lost in the jungle, builds a boat and sails for eight months on an immense river that will carry them eastward toward the ocean. The frustrated land expedition led them to accidentally discover the Amazon. In the two novels on conquests of land, the element of water bears a peculiar meaning. More than a mere means of transportation, water becomes a space of an alternative experience, practice, and narration.

In this essay, I propose to analyze the presentations of rivers in Ospina's *Ursúa* and *El país de la canela* (hereinafter *El país*). I will draw on ecocritical and deconstructivist analyses and describe the fluvial spaces as sites of resistance to a dominant spatio-historiographic narrative. In both texts water is portrayed as fundamentally different from land. Yet this difference is not articulated in terms of the binary opposite of a wild aquatic beast contrasting a dominated soil. Instead, water is associated with constant change; therefore it breaks any dualistic scheme. In addition, it propels the thinking of a deep interconnectedness beyond spaces and times. The rivers

that the travelers encounter resist being measured, represented, and understood according to spatio-logical principles of the Renaissance. If, for the Western colonizers, the control of space goes hand-in-hand with the attempt to formulate a notion of a stable subject position, the encounter with masses of water in flux makes this attempt utterly impossible. The conquistadores, floating on the Amazon, question the ideal of a safe subject and defy any simplistic belief in a transparent linguistic code to capture and communicate their experience. Through the narrated encounters with water as a site of instability and a medium of interconnectedness between different time-spaces, Ospina's novels become examples of postmodern historiographic metafiction. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, postmodern historiographic novels "re-write or . . . re-present the past in fiction and in history . . . , open it up to the present . . . prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110).² Ospina's narrative re-elaborations of historical events highlight the discursiveness of historiography and thus fashion alternative interpretations of that past, and indirectly, of the present.

Both *Ursúa* and *El país* open with paratexts of geographical maps of the New Kingdom of Granada in the early- and mid-sixteenth century.³ These maps present the coastal lines and geological formations of the Spanish provinces of northern South America known and assumed by Europeans at that time. In addition to the written words designating the names of places and regions, they display small triangles that are indicative of mountain chains, meandering lines that refer to rivers, and images of wheels and towers to designate cities and fortresses. The maps further show sailing boats on dotted lines on the light areas representing the oceans, indicating the routes of the Spaniards. In these geographical representations of the newly conquered lands, the water formations play prominent roles. For instance, in *Ursúa*, the letter size of the words "Mar del Norte," "Mar Caribe" and "Mar del Sur" is larger than that of "Nuevo Reino de Granada," the overall title of the drawing. The lines referring to the Cauca, Orinoco, Magdalena and, most significantly, the Amazon River are focal points, or more precisely focal lines, for the observers, as they are the thickest of the maps. The plan in *El país* provides a series of dates along the course of the Amazon indicating the sailor's journey, which will be told in the text. The prominent fluvial lines on the maps are the first elements that draw the readers' attention to a site, which is often undervalued in historiographic accounts of the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire. With respect to the solid masses of land, the focus on the "minor" spaces of the rivers allows Ospina to develop a discourse that defies a definition of space as a means of appropriation and exploitation.

Following the geographical references, the discourses in both novels open with comments on the act of storytelling, conceived as a verbal flow across time and space. The narrator sets about his account in *Ursúa* as follows: "Cincuenta años de vida en estas tierras llenaron mi cabeza de

historias. Yo podría contar cada noche del resto de mi vida una historia distinta, y no habré terminado cuando suene la hora de mi muerte” (13) (Fifty years of life in these regions filled my head with stories. I could narrate a different story every remaining night of my life and would still not have finished at the hour of my death).⁴ Similarly, *El país* begins with the remembrance of a yearning, inspired by a travelling tale: “La primera ciudad que recuerdo vino a mí por los mares en un barco. Era la descripción que nos hizo nuestro padre en su carta de la capital del imperio de los incas” (15) (The first city I remember came to me over the seas on a ship. It was my father’s description of the capital of the Inca Empire). From the beginning, the narratives about conquests of land and water are connected to acts—and problems—of storytelling. Ospina links the abstract discourse of words with the literal discourse of water, in the etymological sense of a *discurre* as a “running to and fro” (*OED*). He sees the task of literature less to state arguments than to confront and enmesh the readers with multiple discourses. The individual working through these diverse narrative streams may experience what Ospina terms an exercise in understanding.⁵

The narrator of both novels, the fictional character Cristóbal de Aguilar y Medina, is a mestizo son of a conquistador, born in Santo Domingo.⁶ He had participated as a young man in Pizarro’s expedition that led to the first Western traverse of the Amazon and in Ursúa’s expedition on the river some twenty years later.⁷ His narratees in *Ursúa* are the extra-diegetic readers; *El país*, which is supposedly told during one long night, is directed to Pedro de Ursúa himself. *Ursúa* can be described as a partial biography of the historical figure Pedro de Ursúa (1526 to 1561). The protagonist is presented as an adolescent in the Spanish Navarre, whose ambitions to discover the New World arise when his uncle Miguel Díaz de Armendáriz is appointed judge of the “Real audiencia de Santa Fé de Bogotá,” the highest Spanish court in the kingdom of New Granada. Pedro travels avidly: to Lima, the northwestern mountain ranges of the Andean system of Gran Colombia, the Cauca region with its extensive river systems, the highlands of Popayán, the Valle del Patía, and the Amazon basin. The narrator underscores his restlessness through the negative comparison with his uncle, who is bound to the court in Cartagena de las Indias: “Mientras el tío miraba los mapas, leía y releía las cartas, y fingía vivir en el mundo cuando en realidad vivía encerrado en los códigos . . . el sobrino ambicioso recorrió la aridez escalonada del Chicamocha, las orillas de guadales del Cauca, y los confines del occidente” (89) (While the uncle looked at maps, read and reread the codes of law, and feigned to live in the world, although he really lived among codices . . . the ambitious nephew strode across the cascaded aridity of the Chicamocha, the bamboo ranges of the Cauca region, and the western frontiers). After a series of new conquests and the subduing of numerous indigenous tribes, Ursúa embarks on his last excursion to the Amazon region, this time in search of the legendary El Dorado. During a voyage

along the Marañón River, his travel companion Lope de Aguirre suborns a mutiny and assassinates him.

The discourse of Ospina's partly fictional, partly historiographic biography is not chronological. Instead, it develops through a series of analepses, prolepses, references to the narrator's life, and the inclusion of additional voices.⁸ For instance, at the end, Cristóbal overhears (and includes in the narrative discourse) a false version of the discovery of the Amazon told by a drunken sailor in a bar. He, as a participant of the excursion, does not correct the speaker. While walking away out toward the dock in the dusk, he muses on the transience and corruptibility of historiography. He then meets Ursúa and begins to engage in a nightlong discussion, which will become the narrative kernel of *El país de la canela*.

Me quedé mirando el atardecer. Allí estábamos los dos, en el puerto de Panamá. . . . Y el sol hundiéndose en el mar era como esa montaña de oro que todos persiguieron, que algunos hallaron, y que a ninguno le ayudó a vivir. . . . Una sombra cubrió el sol a nuestra derecha . . . el barco negro que nos llevaría al futuro. (*Ursúa* 471)

(I remained, contemplating the dusk. There we were, the two of us, at the harbor of Panamá. . . . And the sun sinking into the sea was like that mountain of gold, which all pursued, which some encountered, and which did not help anybody to live. . . . A shadow covered the sun to our right . . . the black ship that would carry us to the future.)

The narration of that future has in fact been the topic of the novel, which is about to end. More than the encounter with new lands, the novel describes the encounter with masses of moving waters as a liminal experience that has the power to radically alter the (self-)perceptions and the lives of its travelers.

El país de la canela, published three years after *Ursúa*, is the autobiographical account of the narrator Cristóbal directed to his friend Ursúa. He is born in Hispaniola as the son of a conquistador who had fought with Francisco Pizarro in the siege of Cuzco and subjugation of the Inca Empire. After the death of his father, Cristóbal travels to Lima to request his inheritance, which he is denied for lack of proof. He reaches the city during the preparations of an expedition to the supposed land of cinnamon trees, which is to be led by the Pizarros' younger brother Gonzalo. Like the narrator, Gonzalo wrestles with the legacy of the past: "Era la hora de imitar a sus hermanos triunfales . . . él tuvo que inventar sus propias locuras" (91) (It was time to imitate his triumphant brothers . . . he had to invent his own madness). Cristóbal enlists in the crazed expedition, which consists of two hundred and fifty Spanish conquistadores, four thousands indigenous peons, and two thousand hunting dogs. Yet nature does not conform to their frenzy.

The expedition to a land of spices ends in a human tragedy. After erring through the highland rainforests for months, Pizarro, in an act of madness, accuses the indigenous peons of having lied to him and orders them all to be killed. The narrator assists the massacre as “uno de los muchos indignos que aceptaron en silencio la infamia” (134) (one of the many unworthy ones who silently accepted infamy). As the situation of the surviving members of the expedition worsens, Pizarro orders a group of soldiers under the mandate of Orellana to build a ship and reach out for help on the waterway. Cristóbal recounts that “a partir de ese momento fue el río que tomó las decisiones” (148) (from that moment on, the river decided for us).

The stream that will route them for the next eight months is described in terms of a titanic force that changes in time and space: “Cada semana teníamos la sensación de estar en otro río, en otro mundo” (211) (Every new week, we felt that we were on another river, in another world). The sailors meet with natives, and are convinced that they have encountered the tribe of the mythical women warriors of the Amazons, before they finally reach the Atlantic. However, they believe they are at the edge of a gigantic waterfall, as the ocean is invisible behind an immense wall of spindrift. When they realize that the water has a salty taste, “entendimos que el . . . estruendo de diez mil elefantes que nos había envuelto por días era el forcejeo de dos titanes” (265–66) (we understood that the . . . crashing of ten thousand elephants that had surrounded us for days was the wrestling of two titans). Cristóbal survives the clashing of the waters. He recovers and continues his journey to Spain, where he becomes the secretary of Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza, Marquis de Cañete. When the Marquis is appointed Spanish Viceroy of Peru (1555 to 1560), Cristóbal accompanies him to the New World again. The novel ends with a final conjuring up of the lure of the water:

Ursúa . . . si vas al viaje, si insistes en bajar hasta el río . . . si quieres resignarte a oír sólo el chillido de las guacamayas, el relato del río que no acaba, de la niebla que no quiere desprenderse del agua . . . ya temo que no seré capaz de dejarte correr solo ese riesgo, y entonces, iré contigo. (359–60)

(Ursúa, if you go on the journey, if you insist in descending to the river . . . if you want to subject yourself to only hear the sound of the guacamaya parrots, the never ending tale of the river, and to the fog that does not want to detach itself from the water . . . then I fear that I will not be able to let you run the risk by yourself, and then, I will go with you.)

The encounter with the river is again evoked as an exceptional experience, both sensory and mental. The characters accept the risk involved

in the adventure; for them, it entails a unique freedom and potential to explore and gain insight via the alternative space.

The description of nature is a key element in Ospina's writing. Through the presentation of the environment as an active, collective agent, he links times and spaces. In an interview with Wilber Rico for *Tribuna Latina*, he states that "mi pregunta por la naturaleza no es sólo una pregunta del siglo XVI, sino qué hacemos con la naturaleza hoy" (my question about nature is not only a question pertaining to the sixteenth century; it is also referring to what we do with nature today). Ospina's argument of the interconnectedness between different chronotopoi is fundamental for any ecocritical discourse. In the essay "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?" David Harvey elucidates what he terms the four basic laws of contemporary ecological thinking: "(1) everything is connected to everything else, (2) everything must go somewhere, (3) nature knows best, and (4) nothing comes from nothing" (329). With the exception of the third law (which Harvey rejects in his essay) all principles are fundamental to the perception of nature in the two novels under consideration. For instance, for Pedro de Ursúa, the hydrosystem of the Amazon becomes a connector between the New and the Old World:

Para Ursúa . . . esas aguas . . . eran . . . un contacto con su tierra de origen: quien las siguiera entre los montes, por los llanos sinuosos y por los abismos de agua, algún día vería asomar en el horizonte el mar azul y en su confin las costas de España y los muelles de Sevilla. (118)

(For Ursúa . . . these rivers . . . were . . . a source of contact to his homeland: whoever would follow them across the mountains, through the sinuous lowlands and the abysses of water, would some day see appear on the horizon the blue sea and on its shores the Spanish coasts and the citadel of Seville.)

Significantly, it is the encounter with the Amazon River, that most disquieting and inhuman of all forces, that gives rise to a transatlantic self-awareness in the protagonist. And it is not only external nature that can bring such a realization. The human body is also described as an ecosystem that consists of multiple time zones, interacting with the time zones of the outside world (Andermatt Conley 63, Harvey 331). The traveler Cristóbal experiences that, after riding on the back of the Amazon, "uno acaba por confundir su vida con la vida del río. . . . Al final, uno es ya esa serpiente sobre la que navega" (*El país* 252) (you end up mixing up your own life with the life of the river. . . . At the end, you have become the serpent on which you ride).

Similarly, Harvey emphasizes that, according to biocentric thinking, the "boundary between human activity and ecosystem must be collapsed" (331).

Since human activity also includes cultural production, the consensus of a divide between nature and culture is being challenged by many ecocritics.⁹ The environment—and water in particular—is both a place and a process.¹⁰ Such a characterization of space entails a decentering of the notion of a single, fixed place. This argument is a point of convergence between ecocritical and postcolonial thinking, since both challenge the notion of a fixed center and propose instead a texture of connections between relative times and spaces.¹¹ In a similar way, for Cristóbal, the land and waters that he encounters “no sabe[n] demorarse en un solo pensamiento” (*El país* 84) (won’t linger in one single thought). Instead, they alter and disseminate. Yet nature is not described in terms of a perpetual flow of ever-changing elements, emerging and disappearing in magical ways. Such a view would propel a stance, which Alberto Moreiras describes as one of the perils of a critical Latinamericanism (or in fact any study of geographical areas that were marked by colonialism): the insistence on a fundamental, essential otherness. In Moreiras’s words, “the risk of Latinamericanism today is to engage in a neotraditional production of difference that could then no longer be interpreted as having a fundamentally demystifying character” (96). Ospina eludes this peril precisely through the emphasis on interconnectedness between different chronotopoi and the refutation of any claim of an original, be it an original material, perspective, or awareness. “Todo ser nuevo” discovers Cristóbal while riding the river, “viene de otro relato” (*Ursúa* 125) (Every new being comes from another tale). Water, just like storytelling, is never new; it might disappear in the circulation system, but can also return to a point it has been to before (Andermatt Conley 63). The Amazon River is only a site of radical exteriority from the limited point of view of the sailors, who might not see the deep interconnectedness with, for instance, the Caribbean Sea, the rain, or the rivers in the Basque Country. Cristóbal talks without knowing where his discourse will lead him. Similar to the conquistadores, who had left for an unknown destination and were passively carried on the back of the immense river, he is carried on the stream of words through (and toward) an unforeseeable space-time. In a metapoetic reflection in *Ursúa*, he muses on the hidden drives of his account:

Tal vez llegue la hora de saber lo que quiere mi corazón con este relato, si es la vida insaciable de Pedro de Ursúa lo que teje, o si es apenas el consuelo de un hombre perdido que nunca entendió su destino, la enredada madeja de azares que me hizo descender dos veces por un río embrujado. (57)

(Maybe the time will come for me to know where my heart intends to reach with this account, if Pedro de Ursúa’s insatiable life is propelling it [lit: threading it together], or if it is just the solace of a lost man who

never understood his destiny, the intertwined tangle of lines of coincidence that made me twice go down a bewitched river.)

For the narrator, the flow of the river parallels the very flow of words. Notwithstanding all overflowing desire to recount, he presents his point of view to be limited and characterizes himself to be driven by forces that he cannot, or maybe does not dare to, understand. His account makes palpable, through the insistence on the sensory and the aim to communicate, what George Steiner describes as the “unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of [his] condition” (139). For Steiner, it is the potential of literature to communicate a liminal state beyond intelligibility, vocation, and ending: “Although the sentence may come to an end, the process of language does not” (123). In light of such a speaking from and about a site of estrangement, the insistence on the river as symbol, motivation, structuring principle, and motor in *Ursúa* and *El país* is compelling.

With its “weak” narrator, bifurcating accounts, and ruminations on the status of telling as flowing, the narrative gesture in Ospina’s novels is reminiscent of the writings of two thinkers who joined the perspectives of ecocriticism and poststructuralism. In their introduction to *Mille plateaux*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari challenge the notion of literature as an exercise in mimesis. Instead, they highlight the potential of the medium to deterritorialize and comprise a multiplicity of discourses: “Écrire n’a rien à voir avec signifier, mais avec arpenter, cartographier, même des contrées à venir” (11) (Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come) (*A Thousand Plateaux*, trans. Brian Massumi 4–5). In contrast to the notion of a text based on imitation (which they call a “livre-racine” or root-book), Deleuze and Guattari introduce the figure of the rhizome, an often subterranean conjunction of plant stems with multiple deposits of nourishing material, which produces shoots and roots at different points of its system. The characteristics of interconnectedness, heterogeneity, collective agency and the overcoming of structural ruptures are of special importance for the thinkers: “N’importe quel point d’un rhizome peut être connecté avec n’importe quel autre, et doit l’être . . . Un rhizome peut être rompu, brisé en un endroit quelconque, il reprend suivant telle ou telle de ses lignes et suivant d’autres lignes” (13, 16) (Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be . . . A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or new lines) (*A Thousand Plateaux* 7, 9).

Such an inclusive writing that develops in itself is no more a reproductive mirror of the world. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari describe it as a rhizome *of* the world, which interacts with it but is productive in itself (they explain this procedure with the image of the symbiotic interaction between orchid and wasp; both need and attract each other to live but

develop in their respective worlds, 17). Ospina's novels, too, have such a rhizomatic quality in so far as they entwine accounts of different entities and vectors or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, lines of flight ("lignes de fuite" 9). Cristóbal perceives a deep connection with his world when musing about the "lessons" learned during his time on the Amazon River: "Lo primero que nos enseñaron estos mares nuestros es que todo lo que ocurre tiene que ver con nosotros" (*Ursúa* 73) (The first thing these seas teach us is that everything that happens is related to us). He then describes the amount of texts that the Spanish conquest had generated as a metaphorical "mar de papeles" (101) (sea of words), which becomes a vector that influences the physical world within the text. Such a nature is performative. The performative, as Sabine Wilke reminds us, is always intertwined with history and cultural processes (197). No more mere background to human action, the sea is active, and it acts upon others.¹²

The narrative performativity in Ospina's texts, here again paralleling Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions, is an open-ended process. Although the narrator does not know where the flow of words will lead him, this does not stop him from continuing. For him, telling/floating without a clear beginning or end is inevitable. It might even be the only possible rescue from death: "No habría más salvación que seguir en el barco hasta donde nos llevaron las aguas" (342) (There was no other rescue than to continue floating on the ship to wherever the waters would lead us). In a similar vein, using the same trope of the river, Deleuze and Guattari describe the literary act as a "ruisseau sans début ni fin, qui ronge ses deux rives et prend de la vitesse au milieu" (37) (a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks, and picks up speed in the middle) (*A Thousand Plateaux* 25). Yet the textual flowing in *Ursúa* and *El país de la canela* does not do away with the notion of subjectivity.¹³ In Ospina's metafictional novels, storytelling is perceived as a way of collecting, which might entail the assembling of elements toward the forming of a narrative self, developed in and bound to the tissue of the text. Walter Benjamin's rag-picker reappears in *El país* under the guise of a collector of the bones of victims of the genocide: "Llevo un cuarto de siglo alimentándome de esos relatos, y recogiendo después los huesos de quienes los contaron" (358) (For a quarter of a century, I have lived off of these stories and then collected the bones of those who had told them). How are we to describe such a subjectivity, one patched together out of heterogeneous stories of death? Is Cristóbal just an instance, a *punctum*, in the net of rhizomes? I contend that his voice is more than just one knot in the tissue of meandering lines, precisely because he actively engages in an act of joining the narrative *objets trouvés* together in a new, fictional context. He gains awareness of the self through the encounter with and active assembling of narratives of others. In order to approach this challenging notion of subjectivity, I will briefly turn to another of Félix Guattari's texts.

In his ecological-philosophical manifesto "Les trois écologies," Guattari

moves even further beyond structuralism and reintroduces the notion of a subjectivity, yet not in terms of an autonomous entity.¹⁴ Instead, he describes an eco-subjectivity as one of a constant becoming, an immanence or awareness that “unfolds in a territory, in the subjective experience of time and space. It continues to experiment and by doing so resists hegemony and creates new modes of being” (Andermatt Conley 93). Ecology, for Guattari, is built on mental processes of thought, social activities, and natural components. Thus, it is no longer separate from a craft or art (*technè*) but is conceived as a technology, a writing (Andermatt Conley 99). Guattari’s ecocritical thinking of reality, which includes human and non-human temporalities and spatialities, finds its fictional parallel in Ospina’s two novels. The narrator is aware of diverse enunciations, those of human beings, of things, and of nature. His discourse is animated by a faint hope to decipher and include some of them in his present enunciation:

tal vez pueda . . . enlazar las historias, una detrás de otra como un collar de perlas, y anudar en su curso una leyenda de estas tierras, la memoria perdida de un amigo muerto, los desconciertos de mi propia vida, y una fracción de lo que cuenta el río sin cesar a los árboles. (*Ursúa* 15)

(maybe I will be able . . . to knot the tales together, one following the other like pearls on a necklace, and tie in their course a legend of these places, the lost memory of a dead friend, the confusions of my own life, and a fraction of that which the river ceaselessly recounts to the trees.)

However, his account is not presented in the tradition of a shamanic merger of man and nature, but more pragmatically as an enunciation in a world that is characterized by constant changes and exchanges. Becoming attuned to listening—to the sound of the waves, but also, maybe equally challenging, to one’s own remembrances and yearnings—and being able to conserve these narrations is a means of survival in a chronotopos beyond control, such as the “río desmesurado y el océano imposible” (266) (the boundless river and the impossible ocean). The new context demands adaptations of learned discourses to new contexts and the inclusion of alternative ways of making sense of the world through verbal explanation.

Stories are intoxicating. For Cristóbal, “esos relatos del Perú fueron los primeros licores de mi vida. . . . Alguien había contado que ese país [de la canela] existía y centenares de hombres necesitábamos que existiera” (*El país* 46) (these stories from Peru were the first liquors of my life. . . . Somebody had said that this country existed, and we, hundreds of men, needed to believe it did). The tales propel actions of all sorts. They even have life-saving functions. For instance, stories help Cristóbal not to be driven out of his mind during the expeditions. Thus, the collected narrations fulfill the age-old purpose to chase away fear. Hans Blumenberg, in his

Work on Myth, describes the function of myth precisely as countering existential insecurity: “Stories are told in order to ‘kill’ something. In the most harmless, but not least important case: to kill time. In another and more serious case: to kill fear” (34). In a similar vein, the narrator in *El país* acknowledges that, “sólo cuando se convierte en relato el mundo al fin parece comprensible” (106) (only when it becomes story, the world finally seems to make sense). Although he is less assertive than Blumenberg, since for him the world only seems to be comprehensible when turned into a story, his belief in the epistemological value of storytelling is undiminished.

In addition to their explanatory functions with respect to the world, the stories help the narrator delineate an image of the self (perceived as a part of the world), again presented through the metaphor of water. Despite his apprehensive tone and insistence upon his limited point of view, this narrator is well aware of his singular wealth of memory and power of enunciation: “Mis historias son tantas que ni el más hondo cántaro podría contenerlas. Ahora quiero contar sólo una” (15) (I know so many stories that not even the deepest jug could contain them. For now, I will only recount one). He has the authority to select and share certain stories from his exhaustive reservoir with his audience and to hold back others for future occasions. In some cases, he even prefers to directly talk to the river in himself, instead of to another human being. For instance, when he hears the lies about the expedition from the drunken sailor, he recounts his reaction: “En las brumas del vino, me descubrí diciéndole al río en mí mismo: ‘Tú y yo sabemos lo que sabemos; y nadie más merece esa verdad’” (*Ursúa* 451) (Amidst the fog of the wine, I found myself telling the river in me: “You and I know what we know; and nobody else deserves to know that truth”). In contrast to the official discourses he encounters, his insights are relational, procedural, inconclusive, and polyphonic. The voicing and writing of such an alternative version of an event calls into question any totalizing singular narrative and therefore functions as a counter-discourse to the established one. The narrator has left behind the safe shore of authoritarian discourse and is now able to comprehend his environment as a world becoming, “un mundo que no deja de crecer ante nuestros ojos” (*El país* 47) (a world that continues to grow right before our eyes). With their emphasis on notions of interconnectedness and fluidity, Ospina’s novels propose discursive sites that may resist a greed for space. They exemplify what Verena Andermatt Conley describes as key characteristics of ecocritical and, I would add, postcolonial narratives: “The conquest of space and territory through movement, action, and totalizing narrative is replaced by time, partial movements and story-telling” (114). The novels equally illustrate Deleuze’s deconstructivist approach to writing as testimony, derived from his reading of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (and again presented with the now familiar image of an aquatic movement): “Chacun témoigne de la façon dont se tord *la ligne du dehors* . . . ligne océanique qui passe par tous les

points de résistance. . . écrire, c'est lutter, résister ; écrire, c'est devenir; écrire c'est cartographier (*Foucault* 51, emphasis in original) (Everybody bears witness according to the way the *line of the outside* twists . . . an oceanic line that passes through all points of resistance. . . to write is to fight, to resist; to write is to become; to write is to map).

Ospina's writing, which "fights" fixed discourses about the colonization of the Americas, is in a state of constant "becoming" that "maps" alternative spaces to the sites of dominance and exploitation of natural resources, all in order to gain alternative insights into the postcolonial legacy of the past. Through the focus on the conquistadores's encounters with rivers and oceans, these spaces that have often been undervalued in the historiographic accounts of the conquest of the Americas, *Ursúa* and *El país de la canela* underscore the principles of interconnectedness and despatialization of the world and present the past as a challenge of the present and the future. Ospina proposes a discourse about space as a contested literary and cultural topic and also employs space as a new narrator. This pluralization of narrative instances in moving spaces has fundamental implications for the conception of subjectivity, now posed as a polyphonic interplay of enunciations. The new subjects discover and affirm themselves as parts of their changing life-worlds; they even learn to save themselves—from ignorance, fear, oblivion, or madness—in the narrative act.

The rhizomatic flow has abandoned the narrow field of a binary logic of representation and points toward the fluidity of a lived experience—that of water, as well as of the sailors, riding on its back for months, and of the characters and readers. Ospina's counter-current discourses of and on the rivers in both novels critically reevaluate the colonial and neocolonial endeavors in our present.¹⁵

Notes

1. The novels belong to a trilogy about the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire in the sixteenth century. The title of the last volume is *La serpiente sin ojos*.
2. Hutcheon coins the term of historiographic metafiction and identifies it as a type of fiction, which "refutes the . . . common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction [asserting] that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems" (93). Santiago Colás's modification of the definition of the concept, in *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm*, highlights the genre's political implication and relation to the question of the postmodern in the Spanish American context. For Colás, historiographic metafiction is a writing that "targets [a] society from within, without pretending to escape from it or to inaugurate a new society" (1). Colás specifies: "The concept of Latin American postmodernity . . . modifies an already existing body of European and North American postmodernism . . . and also critically reviews economic modernization and the politics of Western modernity. Latin American modernity . . . really exists only as a retrospective construction" (23). For a

discussion of the nexus between postmodernity and the genre of historiographic metafiction, see Karl Kohut's introduction to *La invención del pasado. La novela histórica en el marco de la posmodernidad*. For Kohut, "la posmodernidad y un manifiesto interés por la historia son . . . dos expresiones paralelas de nuestro tiempo" (20) (the postmodern and a manifest interest in history are . . . two parallel expressions of our time).

3. The maps at the beginnings of both novels can be read as paratextual examples that deconstruct the assumption of objectivity in historiography, since, as Christian Jacob reminds, "seeing the world from above is a timeless fantasy that geographical maps make actual by way of metaphor. . . . Maps reflect a desire for completeness, a dream of universality, in which seeing from a point of view forbidden to all others . . . is equivalent to possession" (*The Sovereign Map* 1).
4. The translations into English from Ospina's texts are mine.
5. "Creo que hice en la[s] novela[s] un ejercicio de comprensión" (Ospina "Contar la conquista") (I think, the novels [are] an exercise in comprehension).
6. In *Ursúa*, the narrator has no name. At the end of *El país*, the "editor" (again Ospina, under the guise of a paratextual voice) alludes to him as follows: "Aunque el "contador de historias" no nos cuenta nunca su nombre, hay razones para pensar que se trata de Cristóbal de Aguilar y Medina, hijo de Marcos de Aguilar, quien introdujo los primeros libros en las Antillas, y de una indígena de La Española" (365) (Although the "storyteller" does not tell us who he is, we have reasons to think that his name is Cristóbal de Aguilar y Medina, son of Marcos de Aguilar, who brought the first books to the Antilles, and of an indigenous woman from Hispaniola).
7. Ospina insists on the importance of his narrator being a character of racially mixed ancestry: "Para mí era muy importante que fuera un mestizo quien contara esta historia. . . . No podemos ver la Conquista como la labor de los paladines de la civilización contra unos pueblos bárbaros. Menos podemos tratar de invertir el proceso: contar la historia como un genocidio sobre unos pueblos que vivían en una situación idílica. Se trata de ver la complejidad del proceso" (Ospina "Contar la conquista") (For me, it was very important that a mestizo would narrate this story. . . . We cannot see the conquest as an endeavor of the brave soldiers of civilization against barbarian tribes. And even less can we attempt to invert the process and narrate the story only as the genocide of some people who had lived in an idyllic situation. We need to see the complexity of the process).
8. This shifting narrative instance is a main characteristic of postmodern historiographic novels. According to Hutcheon, "historiographic metafiction appears to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator. In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is . . . a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history" (117–18).
9. See for example Maureen Devine and Christa Grewe-Volpp's introduction to *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations*: "A current consensus among the otherwise very heterogeneous group of ecocritics is the realization that nature and culture can no longer be viewed as separate entities. Neither can nature be understood naively as the actual, prediscursive entity . . . nor can nature be seen as a mere text, as radical poststructuralists have proposed. Nature is both, an active, autonomous force, capable of subverting cultural and social achievements. . . . But nature is also . . . a social construction" (1).

10. For a discussion of the double definition of the environment as place and process, see Annie Merryll Ingram's introduction to *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (1–9).
11. See Ángel Rama's seminal *La ciudad letrada*, Edward Soja's "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," and Enrique Dussel's "Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity" for a discussion of the colonial power system based on the structure of a center and its periphery.
12. This description of an interconnectedness of various elements and vectors acting upon each other is probably the main common characteristic of performance studies and ecocritical approaches.
13. The discussion of the topic of subjectivity in a work on the Spanish conquest of the Americas has a long tradition. For an account of the interrelation between the "discovery" of the new continent and the taking shape of a Renaissance autonomous subject, see, among many others Kathleen Kirby's *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity*. Kirby summarizes: "The realization that the lands newly found by Columbus were actually a different continent collapsed the space of Europe and initiated the new astronomical sciences that would reconceptualize the globe as a single small gear in the . . . universe. . . . This in turn made 'man' able to conceive of himself as an independent actor, author of his peregrinations. . . . It was the first step in separating 'man' from his environment. . . . The reconception of the world that allowed the newfound Americas to be conceived as a separate continent may have been a key step on the path to the modern ideology of the individual" (42).
14. Guattari nevertheless retains and further develops the structural critique of a nature/culture division.
15. Thanks to the students of my graduate class "Colonial Literature from a Postcolonial Perspective" for the critical discussions that were my impulse for working on Ospina's narrative and to Amy Savage for her proofreading of this text. Special thanks to my editors Elizabeth Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis.

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