

**“La sensibilidad de lo mágico”: Human and  
Nonhuman Encounters in the Peruvian Amazon**

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Jamie Vásquez Izquierdo’s *Río Putumayo* was the only novel of the Bubinzana Group—an artistic movement established in Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon in 1962 that sought to address social and political injustice and, in tandem with the agenda of the “Boom” generation, innovate poetry and prose. Although published in 1986, the novel has existed in a fragmented form since the late 1960s and reflects the concerns of this earlier period and of the literary movement that inspired it.<sup>1</sup> Set during a significant moment of Peru’s twentieth-century history—the 1932–33 war with Colombia, fought over the strategic Amazonian port of Leticia<sup>2</sup>—*Río Putumayo* is revolutionary in tone, awash with references to communism, poverty, and urban malaise. While earlier generations of writers from the Peruvian Amazon had tended to focus almost exclusively on their tropical environs, particularly through recourse to romantic-inflected landscape descriptions and folklore, the Bubinzana Group wanted to restore the human presence in literature of the Amazon.<sup>3</sup> In their founding manifesto, the original members—Javier Dávila Durand, Teddy Bendayán Díaz, Róger Rumrill, and Vásquez Izquierdo—delineated their intention to renovate literary form, to emphasize poor social conditions, and, centrally, to transcend the hackneyed literary representation of the Amazonian inhabitant as always defeated by tropical nature:

El hombre debe ocupar el primer plano dentro del vasto paisaje amazónico. . . . El hombre ya no debe seguir siendo “*el juguete de los hados del río y del bosque, aplastado por una geografía inmensa, con una visión y una perspectiva que minimiza su participación en la*

*transformación de la historia y de la naturaleza que no puede dominar.”*  
(Arroyo 373)

(Man ought to take center stage amid the vast Amazonian landscape. . . . Man should no longer be “*the plaything of the fates of the river and forest, overwhelmed by an immense geography, with a vision and perspective that minimizes his participation in the transformation of history and of the nature he is unable to dominate.*”)

This clause, and the manifesto that frames it, sets the Bubinzana Group clearly apart from their literary predecessors, most immediately the Iquitos-based Trocha Group, headed by Francisco Izquierdo Ríos (1910–1981), which had flourished some twenty years before and for whom the region’s indigenous population had barely figured. While the name “Bubinzana”—both an hallucinogenic plant and the *icaro*, or incantation, sung by medicine men in the Peruvian Amazon—is an allusion to one of the novels of this earlier generation, *Bubinzana* by Arturo D. Hernández (1903–1970), Rumrill acerbically dismisses the literature of the Trocha Group as “selvismo,” (junglism) in which “‘folklore’, la anécdota, el farragoso descriptivismo . . . sepultan y escondan la epopeya humana” (Rumrill, *Reportaje* 63) (“folklore,” anecdote, dense description . . . bury and hide the human epic). Yet the manifesto also, more obviously, sets this new movement apart from the *novela de la selva*—a genre that came to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s as part of a broader trend of Latin American regionalism, and which often depicted the Amazon as a “green hell” of savagery and disease. The Bubinzana Group’s rejection of the idea of man as subject to the vagaries of fate recalls, in particular, José Eustasio Rivera’s 1924 novel *La vorágine*, partially set in the very same borderland as Vásquez Izquierdo’s later *Río Putumayo*. References to fate appear throughout Rivera’s novel, most memorably in the apostrophe to the jungle at the opening of part two: “¡Oh selva, esposa del silencio, madre de la soledad y de la neblina! ¿Qué hado maligno me dejó prisionero en tu cárcel verde?” (189) (Oh jungle, wife of silence, mother of solitude and mist! What malignant fate left me prisoner in your green prison?). Here the protagonist, Arturo Cova, adopts a number of tropes, including the novel’s central metaphor of the forest as a green prison. And despite such petitions, predictably enough, Cova ends up being “devoured” by the jungle, crushed by nature in precisely the terms repudiated by Vásquez Izquierdo and his literary circle above.

The *bubinzanos*’ rejection of the trope of nature overwhelming man as part of their call for a more human-centered Amazonian literature seems somewhat contradictory given that the human was already immanent—indeed preeminent—in the *novela de la selva*. As Candace Slater, among others, has noted, “[v]aried on the surface, the notions of New Eden and

Green Hell . . . reveal a common emphasis on the landscape as a fixed stage for human action” (238). And for all their posturing against *selvismo*, at times the humans in Vásquez Izquierdo’s *Río Putumayo* also seem overwhelmed by the jungle, a space abounding in dangerous plants and animals as well as a host of supernatural antagonists. This apparent misalignment between the aims of the Bubinzana Group and Vásquez Izquierdo’s treatment of nature in *Río Putumayo* will be the focus of this essay. By examining the novel’s recourse to some of the enduring themes and motifs of literature on the Amazon, including indigenous mythology, I will consider the degree to which *Río Putumayo*—and the literary movement out of which it emerged—succeeded in redefining human and nonhuman relations in this richly mythological and ecological place.

### “Los devoró la selva”

On the surface, *Río Putumayo* seems to embody many of the founding aims of the Bubinzana Group, including formal innovation and sociopolitical engagement. Like many of the Boom novels of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en la catedral* (1969), Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel includes long sections of dialogue, disorientating shifts in time, and magical realist sequences. In an intricate and fragmented narrative, it describes the squalid conditions first in Iquitos, regional capital of Loreto, and later along the Putumayo front, largely through an account of the experiences of a young Peruvian volunteer, Miguel Valdez. Unlike the Trocha Group, Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel dedicates almost as much space to the urban as to the natural environment. The first chapter depicts the neighborhood of Venecia in the impoverished Bélen district of Iquitos, home to Miguel and his girlfriend:

Nunca ha podido acostumbrarse a esas aguas que rebullen con fango, a las basuras que giran y giran rebalsando en el piso líquido de la calle. No puede acostumbrarse al griterío nocturno de los sapos en las charcas aisladas; a los chanchos gruñidores; a los perros . . . ; a los gallinazos, que “brincotean” recelosos y abusivos. (11)<sup>4</sup>

(He had never been able to get used to those muddy waters, to the rubbish that turned around and around forming pools on the watery pavements. He couldn’t get used to the nightly clamor of the toads in isolated pools; to the grunting pigs; to the dogs . . . ; to the vultures, which hopped up and down, distrustful and abusive).

Although partially evoking the sound of the tropical forest via a reference to the nightly chorus of toads, this portrait of a muddy, rubbish-strewn street inhabited by scavenging pigs, dogs, and vultures could hardly be further removed from the picturesque strains of the Trocha writers. The protagonist and many of his fellow soldiers enlist first and foremost to escape such poverty, earning themselves the disparaging nickname of “muertos de hambre” (40) (starvelings), only to find themselves engulfed in an even more hostile environment along the eponymous Putumayo River, the then disputed border between Peru and Colombia. Much of the novel focuses on unsanitary conditions and poor medical care along the frontline, again consistent with the concerns of the Bubinzana movement, which in 1970 had overseen the publication of *Noche de guardia*—a collection of poetry about patients in an Iquitos hospital—by a young surgeon and member of the Bubinzana Group, Pedro del Castillo Bardález. Alongside malnutrition, the lack of medical facilities was one of the recurrent complaints of Colombian and Peruvian soldiers in the outpouring of testimony published after peace treaty negotiations began in May 1933, and is an important strand of verisimilitude in Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel, which, despite its formal innovations, is notably realist with regard to the war.<sup>5</sup> Testimonial accounts on both sides also lamented the generalized lack of government interest in the Amazon region, reflected in *Río Putumayo* by the anger non-Amazonian soldiers direct against their Loretan comrades for embroiling them in a potentially deadly conflict over “este monte que no vale nada” (40) (this worthless jungle). Although ostensibly about an international territorial dispute, much of Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel focuses on divisions among Peruvian soldiers and, by extension, Peruvian society, particularly those between the country’s distinct geographical regions: the coast, the highlands, and the jungle.

While *Río Putumayo* can be seen, then, to engage in the kind of sociopolitical commentary propounded by the Bubinzana Group, the novel is also dominated by the jungle. In the tradition of tropical gigantism, prominent in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fictional and factual treatments of the Amazon, Vásquez Izquierdo presents the jungle as a vast and at times overwhelming space that makes the soldiers feel like “hormigas soterradas” (89) (buried ants) and proportionally reduces their battleship to the size of “un microbio movedizo en la vastedad de la luna y el Amazonas” (36) (a microbe flitting about in the vastness of the moon and the Amazon).<sup>6</sup> The jungle is also figured as a singularly inhospitable environment, with one soldier notably placing war itself last among the list of hardships of the front: “Todos estamos enfermos. . . . Y todos por igual estamos sufriendo los rigores del clima, de la distancia, del alejamiento de nuestros hogares, de la guerra” (119) (We are all sick. . . . And all of us are suffering on an equal basis the rigors of the climate, of distance, of homesickness, of war). Homesickness was a common wartime complaint,

called *nostalgie* by the French during the Napoleonic campaigns (Rosen 347). Here, though, homesickness, in combination with the other difficulties of Amazonian travel—ill health, oppressive climate, and solitude—seems a result less of the war than of the place, a distant kin of that hazy tropical condition “el mal de la selva” (jungle sickness) that afflicted a number of protagonists of the *novela de la selva*. Much of *Río Putumayo*’s action takes place not on the frontline but in the sick bay, likened to an “inmensa parrilla donde se asarían hombres” (102) (an immense grill where men would be roasted), a simile that invokes a cannibal feast, one of the persistent fears of outsiders to the Amazon, although here the threat is posed not by any supposedly savage indigenous population but by the climate, the rigors of which, we are told in the ninth chapter, “defeat” (the verb “vencer” (69) is used) even a regiment of notoriously brutal French mercenaries.

Vásquez Izquierdo draws a number of analogies between the theater of war and the Putumayo’s natural environment, primarily through the use of martial metaphors, as when peals of thunder are compared to the “fuego de ametralladoras gigantes” (46) (firing of giant machine guns)—a resemblance so convincing that it drives some of the soldiers to arm themselves. And it is not only nature that mimics war but vice versa, as when “el humo de la pólvora envuelve el monte como niebla” (90) (the smoke from the gunpowder envelops the jungle like mist). Throughout *Río Putumayo*, the jungle is figured both as a reflection and an extension of the battlefield. As well as the machetes of the enemy, soldiers have to contend with “los agresivos espinales, las plantas de hojas cortantes” (42) (aggressive thorns, plants with lacerating leaves) and “las flechas del sol” (42) (the sun’s burning rays (lit. “arrows”)). Even the animals act out their own form of warfare, as in chapter twelve, where the terminology of combat is employed in a disquieting account of a *shushupe* snake hunting down and killing its prey: “Sigue un rumor de lucha. Los contendientes se muerden por las testuces. . . . La shushupe ataca en silencio. . . . La bestia no quita la vista un segundo del cuerpo de su enemigo. (84) (The sound of a struggle ensues. The contestants have each other by the napes of their necks. . . . The *shushupe* attacks in silence. . . . The beast does not for a second take his eyes off his enemy). Coming just pages before one of the bloodiest battles of the novel, the snake’s aggression foreshadows that of the Peruvian soldiers toward the enemy a short time after: “Un grito animal se eleva de nuestros puestos de combate. . . . Y teñidos de cierta coloración rojiza, las aguas empiezan a sosegarse y arrastran suavemente los cuerpos de los soldados muertos. (90) (An animal shout rises up from our combat posts. . . . And tinged slightly red, the water begins to calm and gently carry the bodies of the dead soldiers). Animals appear human and vice versa in the morally levelling milieu of the jungle. Elsewhere in the novel the soldiers are described as “animales húmedos” (98) (damp animals) and are likened to “simios tontos” (124) (deranged monkeys), their bestialness drawn out by

reference to their “jadeo animal” (160) (animal panting) and repeated use of the verb “ladrar” (to bark) when describing their speech, once again reminiscent of the *novela de la selva* tradition, especially Rómulo Gallegos’s 1935 novel *Canaima*, in which one jungle-dweller, Count Giaffaro, is known for his bloodcurdling “aullidos bestiales, ululatos de terror animal” (Gallegos 185) (bestial wails, howls of animal terror).

Like the infernal jungles of *La vorágine*, styled after classical epic (see Menton; Morales), the Putumayo front in Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel is crossed with potentially deadly swamps, rocked by terrifying storms, and filled with the ubiquitous “nubes de zancudos” (39, 76) (clouds of mosquitos), an insect that, as the contemptuous dismissal of one Colombian official in the novel reminds us, is a key factor in tropical disease: “Aquí no hay más que zancudos y paludismo” (35) (Here there is nothing but mosquitos and malaria).<sup>7</sup> And in line with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates across Latin America as to the effect of landscape on moral character, particularly in relation to the possible degenerative influence of tropical regions, *Río Putumayo* provides a number of instances of people sinking into madness or savagery in the jungle, not least Miguel Valdez himself, who not only suffers from hallucinations brought on by Beriberi but, in the novel’s final chapter, dismembers an enemy soldier with a machete.<sup>8</sup> Another instance of madness comes in chapter seven, when a sick soldier attempts suicide on learning that he will not be evacuated from the Putumayo: “corre a agarrar un máuser, introduce el cañón en su boca y lucha por alcanzar el disparador con el dedo del pie. Los demás se echan sobre él y le atan a la cama. Grita el hombre y acaba gimoteando” (58) (he runs to grab a mauser, puts the barrel in his mouth, and tries to reach the trigger with his toe. The others throw themselves on top of him and tie him to the bed. The man shouts and ends up whimpering). The description of the raving man being tied to a bed is one of many examples of incipient neurosis among soldiers in the novel.

Of course, Colombian and Peruvian soldiers did commit suicide during the 1933 war, and this episode therefore partly employs the kind of social realism favored by the *bubinzanos* as well as meeting their requirement for humans to “ocupar el primer plano” (Arroyo 373) (take center stage) in literature of the Amazon. Yet the main effect here is to compound the associations between the jungle and madness—a trope that recurs throughout much early to mid-twentieth-century Latin American literature on the Amazon. In chapter eighteen there is a narrative flashback in which we learn of the childhood experiences of one of the Amazonian officers, Captain Abelardo Caniquiri, who recalls how as a young boy he was left home alone by his father, who went in search of his mother after she was “raptado por indios” (144) (abducted by Indians). When his father returned two weeks later, his shirt was hanging “en harapos malolientes y el pantalón se aniquilaba en sucios jirones que dejaban ver las piernas. Volvió con ojos

brillantes y barba rabínica. No dijo una sola palabra” (145) (in smelly rags, and his trousers were frayed into dirty tatters that left his legs exposed. He came back with gleaming eyes and a rabbinical beard. He didn’t say a single word). With his wildness of dress and expression coupled with speechlessness, Canaquiri’s father displays some of the unmistakable signs of tropical degeneration, drawing on the very tropes that the Bubinzana Group had wished to dispel in its literary manifesto.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in an allusion to one of the central narrative strands of *La vorágine*, involving an estranged father and son who communicate in the forests of the Putumayo by carving messages on tree trunks, Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel goes on to relate how, when his father disappeared for a second time in search of his long-lost wife, Canaquiri left the jungle for Iquitos, carving a message on wood to tell him his destination.

And yet there are subtle but important differences between the treatment of tropical degeneration, that longstanding Amazonian malady, in *Río Putumayo* and *La vorágine* (and the *novela de la selva* more broadly). In Vásquez Izquierdo’s novel, for example, there is a narrative aside about a Peruvian communist hiding in the Putumayo who is taken prisoner by troops when they spot his canoe floating downstream. At first this character, a *costeño* (someone from the coast), seems to exemplify the condition of tropical degeneration:

Viene bajando por el río una balsa destrozada, girando y chocando contra palos sumergidos. . . . Junto al remo, que se balancea y cruje solitario, yace un hombre caído de bruces, a espalda embetunada de sol. Le cubren con una frazada y le conducen hacia la canoa. . . . La balsa se va apartando de la canoa y se aleja girando en las aguas tranquilas, desaparece absorbida por los matorrales de la orilla y solo una pieza que se desprende continúa el camino. (101)

(A broken-up raft comes down the river, spinning and colliding with submerged trees. . . . Near the oar, which rocks and creaks by itself, lies a man face down, his back blackened by the sun. They cover him with a blanket and take him to the canoe. . . . The raft moves away from the canoe and recedes, spinning in the tranquil water, disappearing into the scrub by the bank, with only one bit that has come loose continuing its journey.)

With his tattered boat and weathered body, this man is reminiscent of Euclides da Cunha’s sketch of the Wandering Jew, the scarecrow made by the *seringueiro* (rubber worker) of the Upper Purus and cast downstream at Easter, where it “vai na lúgubre viagem sem destino e sem fim, a descer, a descer sempre, desequilibradamente, aos rodopios, tonteando em tódas as voltas, à mercê das correntezas, ‘de bubuia’ sôbre as grandes águas” (da

Cunha, *Obra* 266) (floats away on its doleful voyage without destination and without end, going downstream, ever downstream, twirling about, mocking in every direction as it goes bobbing at the mercy of the currents along the surface of the great water [*Amazon* 61]). The communist, whom they take to the sick bay, later escapes from the barracks, although a worse fate seems to await him in the jungle where the soldiers hear “un chapoteo de fuga desesperada por pantanos” (107) (the splashing of a desperate flight through swamps) as the man is “tragado por la vegetación” (107) (swallowed by the vegetation).

In his account of the *novela de la tierra*, Carlos Fuentes memorably lampoons the tendency for its protagonists to be “devoured” by nature:

“¡Se los tragó la selva!” dice la frase final de *La Vorágine* de José Eustasio Rivera. La exclamación es algo más que la lápida de Arturo Cova y sus compañeros: podría ser el comentario a un largo siglo de novelas latinoamericanas: se los tragó la montaña, se los tragó la pampa, se los tragó la mina, se los tragó el río. (9)

(“They were swallowed by the jungle!” reads the final line of *La vorágine* by José Eustasio Rivera. The exclamation is more than just the epitaph for Arturo Cova and his companions: it could be applied to a long century of Latin American novels: they were swallowed by the mountain, they were swallowed by the pampa, they were swallowed by the mine, they were swallowed by the river.)

By using the evocative expression “tragado por la vegetación,” Vásquez Izquierdo not only calls to mind *La vorágine*, perhaps by way of Fuentes, but the original aim of the Bubinzana Group to elide the representation of man as being “aplastado por la naturaleza” (crushed by nature). Indeed, just a few pages earlier in the novel, the word “aplastado” itself is used in the description of a soldier being crushed by a thick branch (98). Despite the obvious parallels with the regional tradition, however, the episode involving Demetrio is not simply a case of resurrecting the dusty Sarmientian trope of civilization versus savagery, the city versus the jungle. Rather, this man’s back-story is a tale of savagery unequalled in the forests of the Putumayo. On the run from the authorities because of his political activism, Demetrio goes into hiding when a group of soldiers come to his house. When his wife opens the door to turn them away, they brutally beat and rape her. Although Demetrio tries to console his wife by suggesting that they and their children all go to live in the jungle “a rehacer su vida” (106) (to remake their lives), in the end she commits suicide, leaving him to flee to the Amazon alone.

On closer examination, then, savagery is shown to reside in the institutions of the state—soldiers such as the protagonists of *Río Putumayo*—rather than in the jungle, which in the story above

(notwithstanding the rather ominous ending) is presented as place of solace for Demetrio. Later in the novel, a number of the soldiers, including Miguel, follow Demetrio's lead by volunteering to undertake a dangerous mission in the jungle that involves enduring "lugares anegados, y las sanguijuelas y las víboras" (127) (flooded areas, and leeches and snakes) rather than continuing to endure the wrath of their military superiors. Though *Río Putumayo* seems to promote a view of geographical determinism—indeed one character, Captain Barba, says quite explicitly, "es el medio, el medio que hace el hombre" (113) (it is the environment, the environment that makes the man)—this does not necessarily correspond to the regional writer's view of the jungle as promoting physical or mental decay. Some of the *costeño* troops do succumb to disease in the forest (there is a sustained account, for instance, of how one particularly brutal lieutenant almost dies of diarrhea), but others, such as Captain Barba himself, thrive in the environment. In fact, the Amazonian troops—"gente del medio, concedores del monte" (126) (people from the area, those who know the jungle)—prove equally susceptible to tropical illnesses, as exemplified by Miguel's contracting beriberi.

Rather, Captain Barba's statement suggests the potential of men to adapt to their jungle surroundings, not physically but through an intimate knowledge of place. This is embodied in the novel by local guides, who warn the soldiers when they try to set up camp that the ground is swampy, as well as the Amazonian soldier Mamerto, who leads his comrades to an Indian village "por la trocha que solo ellos y los animales conocen" (59) (along the path that only they and the animals know about). And although Miguel is an outsider to the forest, by the end of the novel he too becomes attuned to the tropical environment, as when, during a particularly violent skirmish, he suddenly intuits that the enemy has receded: "allí también se adquiere la sabiduría de la bestia, por el silencio del bosque, se sabe que el enemigo ha abandonado el ataque" (160–61) (there one also develops animal instincts; by the silence of the forest one knows that the enemy has stopped attacking). Miguel and the other soldiers also become increasingly integrated into the jungle flora, not just through their use of foliage as camouflage but through an alignment of trees with bodies, as in the description of "árboles y cuerpos mutilados" (90) (mutilated trees and bodies) flying into the air after an explosion. Although the adjective "mutilados" could apply only to the plural noun "cuerpos," it is notable that elsewhere in *Río Putumayo*, soldiers struggle to "diferenciar los árboles de los hombres que arriman en torno a ellos" (38) (differentiate the trees from the men who stand among them). Both in the dark forest and, in the passage below, in the underground prison cell in which Miguel and his fellow soldiers are incarcerated for insubordination, human beings are presented not as separate from, but as an extension of, nature:

Diez hombres se pudren en los calabazos, antiguos depósitos de municiones. Subterráneos. Paredes de troncos de huacapu labrados, sacos de tierra y monte. Los condenados (¡ni nuestros manos vemos, carajo, como si fueran invisibles!) buscan acomodo en el suelo, con la espalda arrimada a los troncos. (119)

(Ten men rot away in the dungeons, old munitions stores. Subterranean. Walls of carved *huacapu* trunks, sacks of earth and jungle. The convicts [we can't even see our hands, damn it, as if they were invisible!] try to get comfortable on the ground, their backs pressed against the trunks.)

Unable to discern even their own limbs in the darkness, here the soldier's bodies, contorted against the tree trunks, seem to dissipate into the earth.

As is clear from this gloomy example (the tone becomes darker still just a few paragraphs later when one of the prisoners dies), humans are far from center stage in this particular episode of the novel. Yet the relationship between man and nature is not simply antagonistic either: despite echoes of the *novela de la selva*, Vásquez Izquierdo's novel notably does not end with the death of the protagonist, who returns from the forest, and from the battlefield, remarkably unscathed. Rather, the novel advances the possibility that humans can become part of the jungle environment. Such a move is consistent with developments in twentieth-century aesthetics more broadly, which, rejecting the panoramic view of nature foregrounded by categories such as the sublime or the picturesque, argued that aesthetic experience did not accommodate any distinction between the self and other, but rather, in the words of John Dewey, “is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears” (249). More recently, ecocriticism has disputed any absolute distinction between the human and the nonhuman, as have a number of philosophical works, such as Matthew Calarco's *Zoographies*, which forwards a view of man and animals as part of an ontological whole. In *Río Putumayo* the idea of man and the natural environment as interconnected also has its roots in indigenous culture, particularly in animism, where “[a]nimals are believed to have essentially the same sort of animating agency which man possesses. They have a language of their own, can understand what human beings say and do, have forms of social or tribal organisation, and live a life which is parallel in other respects to that of human societies” (Hallowell 7). As the final section of this essay will explore, *Río Putumayo* presents the jungle as an animate space inhabited not only by humans and animals but by a variety of mythical beings specific to the Peruvian Amazon. Although the inclusion of indigenous myths in the novel might seem, on the surface at least, a throwback to the more folkloric inflexions of previous generations of Amazonian writers, it is, as I hope to show, fundamental to the Bubinzana

Group's aim to recast the relationship between man and nature in Amazonian texts, providing an inroad into what the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has defined as a "native" view of environment, "expressed . . . only with difficulty and indirectly through . . . local tradition, lore, and myth" (63).

### **"La sensibilidad de lo mágico"**

Aside from the assimilation of indigenous myths into the accounts of early chroniclers of the "New World," according to John Bierhorst, collections of South American folklore can really only be traced to the late nineteenth century, starting with the classic 1870s publication of indigenous stories from the Brazilian Amazon by Charles Frederick Hart and José Viera Couto de Magalhães (Bierhorst xx). Indigenous Amazonian cosmogonies were also an important strand of the *novela de la selva*, as Sá and others have recently explored. In the case of *La vorágine*, for instance, the inclusion of a foundation myth relating to the "Indiecita Mapiripana" is not merely a folkloric interlude but a crucial intervention in the novel, one that supplies an alternative, mythical counternarrative to the action (Wylie, *Colonial Tropes*, 84–85). Myth is also central to Gallegos's *Canaima*—a novel that takes its name from "[e]l maligno, la sombría divinidad de los guaicas y maquiritares, el dios frenético, principio del mal y causa de todos los males" (Gallegos 153) (the malignant, the gloomy divinity of the Guaicas and Maquiritares, the frenetic god, the origin of evil and cause of all wrongs).<sup>10</sup> In the case of the Peruvian Amazon, it was the writers of the 1930s and 1940s—figures such as Arturo Burga Freitas (1909–1979), Juan Ramírez Ríos (1909–1976), and members of the Trocha Group—who placed Amazonian myth at the center of their artistic production. While authors such as Hernández and Izquierdo Ríos often incorporated Amazonian folklore as a source of local color or the picturesque, Burga Freitas's *Ayahuasca: Mitos, leyendas y relatos de la amazonía peruana* (1939) is more ethnographic, and includes indigenous and local terminology as well as accounts of the geographical or ethnic derivation of myths.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their professed departure from the literary production of earlier generations, the Bubinzana writers also continued to deploy myth. Rumrill, perhaps the best-known member of the group and certainly its most productive writer over five decades, published a number of folkloric works, including the Amazonian sketches and songs *Magias y canciones* and an extensive compilation of Amazonian folklore, *Vidas mágicas de tunchis y hechiceros*. In his 1973 account of the foundation and achievements of the Bubinzana writers, Rumrill defined the group's rejection of artistic influence from Lima, the United States, and Europe in favor of Amazonian cultural roots as the "descubrimiento de la sensibilidad de lo mágico"

(*Reportaje* 66) (discovery of a magic sensibility), which he casts as a local variant of García Márquez’s “magical realism.” The publications of other Buzinza writers also showed a marked interest in Amazonian mythology, a tendency exemplified by Dávila Durand’s 1966 collection of poetry, *Yara* (from Tupi-Guarani, “forest sprite”), which includes a long sequence concerning the eponymous female spirit, and whose mythical and tropical reflexes are made clear from the outset by the front cover featuring the beautiful naked heroine, her back to the viewer, surrounded by lush vegetation and what looks like a large snake. The inclusion of Amazonian myths in *Río Putumayo*, therefore, although somewhat unexpected in a gritty war novel, is in keeping with the production of the Buzinza Group more broadly.<sup>12</sup>

Although early in the novel there is a reference to the *tunchi* (in the Peruvian Amazon a lost soul whose birdlike call is thought to herald death or illness), the sustained treatment of myth does not come until almost halfway through *Río Putumayo* in chapter nine, entitled “Cuentos” (Tales). From its opening paragraph, there is an obvious transition toward a mythical, supernatural interpretation of place:

La zona de vigilancia de la escuadra del sargento Canaquiri abarca desde el gran árbol de machimango, que aletea como una máquina puesta de pie, hasta el arroyo oculto en aquella depresión del terreno cubierta de vegetación de un extraño color negruzco. El caño de agua negra parece hallarse inmóvil, pero corre veloz por debajo de la superficie. En las noches, o cuando en ciertos momentos el día es una cosa muerta, se oyen chapoteos en las aguas. Los soldados corren a averiguar qué es lo que ha estado jugando en la linfa, pero solo alcanzan a ver un temblor y una línea de espuma y el silencio profundo de la selva. (63)

(The lookout zone of Sergeant Canaquiri’s squad runs from the big machimango tree, fluttering like an upright engine, up to the river hidden in a dip in the strangely black-hued vegetation-covered ground. The black water of the stream seems still, but the current is brisk underneath. At night, or at certain quiet times of the day, one hears splashing in the water. The soldiers run to see what has been playing in its depths, but they find only an electric eel and a line of foam and the profound silence of the jungle.)

Notwithstanding the inclusion of the poetic word “linfa”—a throwback, perhaps, to the more picturesque treatment of the Amazon by earlier generations—the jungle here is menacing and strange. The machimango tree flutters, as if animate, and all is not right with the current of the black stream, doubly concealed by its location in a hollow and by odd-colored

vegetation. In *Vidas mágicas* Rumrill notes how pools of black water are a common haunt of supernatural beings, including of boas and *yacurunas* (water demons), both of which feature in chapter nine of *Río Putumayo*. Nigel Smith also discusses the telltale signs of the habitat of the boa: “Patches of smooth water are common along the Amazon and its major tributaries where upwelling currents erupt on the surface. These bulging lenses of spreading water are sometimes attributed to the vigorous movements of the cobra grande as it digs an abode deep below” (67). The whole area has the feel of a “lugar encantado” (enchanted place), one of the sites, widespread in the Amazon, that the indigenous and *mestizo* people consider off-limits, normally because they contain sacred natural features such as waterfalls or rocks (see Smith 57).

Later in the chapter, soldiers sitting in this very clearing awaiting enemy action begin to exchange tales of supernatural forest denizens, including the *sachamama*, an enormous boa that kills anyone who makes eye contact with it (Luna 77–78). In his recent collection of folktales from throughout the Amazon basin, the Colombian poet Juan Carlos Galeano notes that Peruvian stories concerning the *sachamama* often relate to intruders in the forest (12). In the novel, the *sachamama* is presented not as an intangible mythological figure but as a very real threat to the soldiers, seated in the midst of this uncanny dell where they have just heard a sinister and inexplicable splashing. When being quizzed by Captain Barba, the non-local officer who avidly takes notes on Amazonian mythology throughout the chapter, one local soldier insists that the *sachamama* really does exist, and enlists as proof his own close encounter with it while fishing with his cousin on the Cotuhé River, a waterway in the immediate vicinity of the soldiers’ camp where skirmishes with the Colombian army had recently taken place:

oímos un gran ruido, un fragor dentro del monte, los pájaros se alocan y huyen chillando desbandados, el fragor se aleja monte adentro. Mi primo no resistió la curiosidad, bajó la tierra; le esperamos mucho tiempo. Cuando creíamos que ya no regresaría, le vimos salir del monte, asustado. No contó que había encontrado la selva abierta como una calle. . . . Ningún animal . . . que no sea la sachamama puede hacer eso, mi capitán. (Vásquez Izquierdo 64–65)

(we heard a crash, a clamor deep in the forest, the birds went crazy and fled screaming in all directions, the commotion moved further into the forest. My cousin was overcome with curiosity and got out of the boat; we waited for him for a long time. When we believed that he wasn’t going to come back, we saw him come out of the forest. He told us that the jungle had been ripped open like a street. . . . No animal . . . but the *sachamama* could do that, Captain.)

The next extended narrative concerns the *yacuruna*, to whom disappearances along the Amazon are frequently attributed. A dapper and amorous inhabitant of an aquatic underworld, known for seducing and abducting young women, the *yacuruna* is closely related to the *boto* (pink dolphin) in Amazonian mythology, a shape-shifter who can adopt the form of a human, often a gringo. This soldier’s account involves a female cousin and is therefore once again presented as a “true story.” He relates how the *yacuruna*, in the guise of a well-dressed and refined young man, began to call on his cousin every evening. As in oral accounts of the *boto* that recount how, under its spell, women are inexplicably drawn to the riverbank “at all hours of the day and night” (Slater 96), the formerly diffident young woman becomes obsessed with her suitor and spends her days by the river “lavando, lavando nomás” (Vásquez Izquierdo 66) (washing, washing, nothing else). Her parents, concerned about the relationship, consult with a shaman, noting some of the stranger’s physical defects (reddish eyes, odd-shaped ears and forehead) and explaining that although he came from the river they had never seen a boat. The healer identifies the suitor as a *yacuruna* and gives the parents a bunch of tobacco, routinely used in Amazonian healing and shamanic ceremonies, to drive him away (Wagley 90–92). When they produce the tobacco as instructed, the man metamorphoses into a *yacuruna*, reaching the riverbank only through the assistance of a group of fellow demons who come to his aid. The girl has to be physically restrained to prevent her from throwing herself into the water, and though she is later cured by the shaman, she spends her days brooding by the river. The narrative concludes on a note of suspense: “No les puedo decir en qué paró la cosa, mi capitán, mi sargento, porque en estos días me movilizaron” (Vásquez Izquierdo 68) (I couldn’t tell you how the whole thing ended, Captain, Sergeant, because at that moment I was sent to the front).

Although not explicitly mentioned in the remainder of the novel, the stories of these supernatural rainforest denizens—“Yacumama, sachamama, *yacuruna*. Voces quechuas, influencia quechua” (65) (*Yacumama, sachamama, yacuruna*. Quechan voices, Quechan influence)—continue to resonate. At the beginning of the next chapter, one of the soldiers observes of the trees:

Parecen fantasmas en su inmovilidad. ¿No se ha dado cuenta, mi cabo? Como si nos estuvieran espionando. Ellos ven todo lo que pasa en estas selvas. Pero no dicen nada. Se reirán de nosotros, porque apenas vemos el sitio que ellos nos dejan libre. (84)

(They are like ghosts in their immobility. Haven’t you realized, Corporal? As if they were spying on us. They see everything that happens in these forests. But they don’t say anything. They will laugh at us, because we can barely make out the space that they leave us free.)

Once again there are parallels with *La vorágine*, where one of the characters, El Pipa, having drunk an infusion of the powerful hallucinogen *yagé*, experiences a vision in which he sees trees talking and gesticulating: “El Pipa les entendió sus airadas voces, según los cuales debían ocupar barbechos, llanuras y ciudades, hasta borrarle la tierra el rastro del hombre” (213) (Pipa understood their angry voices, according to which they ought to occupy fields, plains, cities, until they wiped from the earth all trace of man). In this instance, however, parallels with the *novela de la selva* should be seen not as evidence of Vásquez Izquierdo’s inability to transcend the established paradigms of Amazonian writing but rather the proto-indigenous elements of Rivera’s novel, which, like *Río Putumayo*, is inhabited by Amazonian cosmologies (see Wylie, *Colombia’s Forgotten Frontier*, 195–201).

As with the tales of supernatural forest entities above, this passage also invokes a view of nature as animate and of nature and man as intertwined. Michael Uzendoski has identified “[t]ransformation and shape-shifting, rather than fixity”—the crossing of boundaries—as “the basic premises of Amazonian existence” (x). In the case of the *yacuruna*, for instance, we see how water demons can leave the river and seduce humans, and they are also known to take their victims back to their aquatic underworlds—places that are remarkably like the world above, though better, where, according to one of Galeano’s renditions, “They have cows, chickens, and pigs. There, people don’t pay electric or water bills. They also grow manioc, corn, rice, and coca” (25). It is through the inclusion of Amazonian folk beliefs in *Río Putumayo* that the author’s realization of the aims of the Buzinana Group to refashion human and nonhuman relations is most emphatically achieved. As Slater has said of Dolphin transformation narratives from the Brazilian Amazon:

This essential notion of Amazonian nature as both distinct from, and ultimately subject to, the human world is alien to the *encantado* stories. Although individual tales reveal considerable variation, . . . the corpus as a whole stresses equilibrium and interdependence. In striking contrast to representations in which human beings are inevitably silhouetted against a natural landscape, the Dolphin stories depict an uneasy continuum. (238)

Indeed, dolphins, as Jonathan Steinwand has shown, mark a special case in animal and nonanimal relations, calling “attention to the liminal positions of both cetaceans and humans” (182). In the final chapter of the novel, Miguel has the profound realization that “el hombre es una motita indefensa, abandonada a las fuerzas del Universo” (160) (man is a little defenseless speck, abandoned to the forces of the Universe). Although this calls to mind

the all-devouring nature of the *novela de la selva*, as well as sounding suspiciously like the concept of “fate,” spurned by the *bubinzanos* in their founding manifesto, the statement needs to be read in the context of the novel as a whole. This epiphany comes immediately after the soldier’s near brush with death and just before the reference to his newly acquired “sabiduría de la bestia” (Vásquez Izquierdo 160) (animal instincts). While it clearly can be related to what Cora Diamond has called the “bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability” (74), it also reflects a new sense of how one might inhabit the world, where man is just another part of nature—a nature at times beneficent and at times savage.<sup>13</sup> Such a view comes close to one of the central elements of Rumrill’s definition of “la sensibilidad de lo mágico”: “el sentimiento de comunidad total con la naturaleza” (*Reportaje* 67) (the feeling of total communion with nature). The magical sensibility that permeates *Río Putumayo* and the writings of the Bubinzana Group more broadly contributes to a profound reconfiguration of human and nonhuman relations in the Amazon, and to our understanding of a world in which man and nature are contiguous rather than always mutually destructive.

## Notes

1. On the back cover of the 1986 edition, Vásquez Izquierdo claims that he wrote the novel in 1967. In one of few accounts of the textual history of the novel, Marticorena Quintanilla relates how, prior to 1986, extracts from it had appeared in various publications, including in the newspaper *El Eco*, under the pseudonym Juan del Río, and in the anthology of Bubinzana writings compiled by Ayarza Uyaco and Bendayán Díaz.
2. A comprehensive account of the war is given in Donadio.
3. For an account of the foundation and aims of the Bubinzana Group, see Ayarza Uyaco and Bendayán Díaz; Rodríguez García; and the introduction in Rumrill, *Poesía de selva*.
4. All quotations from *Río Putumayo* are drawn from the 2007 edition of the novel. All translations are my own.
5. These early testimonial accounts include Lozano y Lozano; Molina Mendoza; Díaz; and Arango Uribe (who all published their denunciations in 1933).
6. The noun “inmensidad” is also applied to the Putumayo River several times in the novel—for example, pp. 90 and 145.
7. For a discussion of the association of the tropics with disease see Stepan 158–64.
8. For a discussion of this in relation to the *novela de la selva* see Wylie, *Colonial Tropes* 122–46; and Rogers.
9. The adjective “rabbinical,” though apparently denoting the unkemptness of Caniquiri’s father’s beard, seems strange in this discourse of tropical degeneration. It can be related to Vásquez Izquierdo’s Jewish heritage (he was until his death in 2007 the general secretary of the Israelite Society of Iquitos). See Segal.

10. More recently, the late Neil Whitehead has written on the cult of Canaima in contemporary Venezuelan culture in *Dark Shamans* and “Golden Kings, Cocaine Lords.”
11. For example, in the case of the myth of “La Chicua” (an evil spirit of the indigenous communities of Ucayali), the author includes native words with an internal gloss: “tuschpa – fogón” (Burga Freitas 74).
12. I have discussed the inclusion of mythological figures in *Rio Putumayo* elsewhere. See Wylie, *Colombia’s Forgotten Frontier* 171–77.
13. I first came across this statement by Diamond in Steinwand (185).

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