

## **Amazonia Dreaming: Distance in Pedro Shimose's Writings**

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### **Introduction**

The works of Pedro Shimose (Beni, Bolivia, 1940) have mainly received critical attention for their “committed” aesthetic, with *Poemas para un pueblo* (Poems for a people; 1968), his first collection with a clear politicized weight, and *Quiero escribir pero me sale espuma* (I want to write but all I get is foam; 1972), winner of the Casa de las Américas prize in 1972, having drawn most interest. The focus has fallen on his representation of marginalized voices, his articulation of the exilic experience from a political perspective, and his use of intertextuality.<sup>1</sup> This critical interest in his engagement with the Andean high plateau and the Europe of his middle and later years in both geographical and cultural terms has overshadowed the significant segment of his production in which Amazonia takes center stage as well as the texts into which the “oriental” element is more subtly woven.<sup>2</sup>

The minimal attention that this area of Shimose’s work has received is not at odds with the relatively modest interest that other Amazonian authors writing on regional subjects have attracted. Indeed, the bulk of literary production on the area that has attracted critical consideration has been written by travelers or visitors to the basin. These writers are largely outsiders who articulate their physical and emotional encounters with the area for the consumption of non-Amazonian audiences. Thus, from the early colonial period to recent decades, the Amazon as examined through critical works has been one observed with eyes trained in other realities and that looked upon the geography and culture of the area as Other: wondrous,

exotic, dangerous or threatening, but always alien. Shimose, by contrast and despite his Japanese ancestry, is himself part and product of the Amazonian environment and, like a number of authors who are now becoming the subject of increasing critical interest, has an insider's perspective.<sup>3</sup> Amazonia, as a character, a physical or cultural space, or a subject, is a steady if sometimes subtle presence in Shimose's writing; with the exception of *Sardonia* (Sardonia; 1967) and *No te lo vas a creer* (You won't believe it; 2000), markers and metonyms of the region play a role, overtly or more obliquely, in all of his poetic collections. This presence, although constant, plays an ambiguous role because the region is rarely introduced as an immediate entity or reality; instead, his poetic voices most often refer to it, in terms of both its physical makeup and its inhabitants, from a distance. Amazonia is not here or now but there and then or, to borrow the title of W. H. Hudson's autobiography, far away and long ago.

This persistent gap between poetic speaker and region may be expressed in temporal or spatial terms, but it always carries with it a sense of uneasy disjunction and is articulated through nostalgic discourse. It is not the expected distance that may emerge from the discovering gaze of an explorer, but one marked by intimate knowledge and an evolving understanding of loss. Although the origins of nostalgia have been traced back to the melancholia of Greek intellectuals, the word was first coined as a clinical term in the seventeenth century (Turner 148). Johannes Hofer created the neologism through the combination of the Greek words *algos* (pain) and *nostos* (home) in order to describe the melancholy, sometimes accompanied by fatal physical symptoms, that affected Swiss soldiers serving away from their homeland.<sup>4</sup> The word progressively lost its medical status but retained, and preserves to this date, a close link with the original notion of displacement from a real or metaphorical home. The term became assimilated into household vocabularies as a "vague, collective longing for a bygone time rather than an individual desire to return to a particular place" from the nineteenth century but is now broadly and often pejoratively associated with a superficial kind of sentimentality for the past and an inability to adapt to the conditions of the present (Fritzsche 1591). It is commonly perceived to be a somewhat shallow way of engaging with both past and present, as "the sentimental and safe retrospect, the pleasing melancholy, the whitewashing of less lovable aspects of history" (Goodman 195). Those critical of the phenomenon describe it as a "cult of pastiche and parody . . . which deliberately falsifies authentic memory" (Hewison, qtd. in Lowenthal 20) or "the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity" (S. Stewart 23). Nostalgic yearning can indeed display those characteristics, but conversely, far from being a simplistically maudlin and sterile way of looking backwards, nostalgia can also articulate a complex understanding of and engagement with the past. It has been categorized and shown, mainly by

historians, sociologists, and social anthropologists, to be a useful analytical tool to delve mainly into collective attitudes in the face of significant sociopolitical change such as that brought about by the French Revolution or the fall of communist states (Legg 485–88).

But the uses of theoretical approaches to nostalgia are not limited to the social sciences; nostalgia can be deployed as an instrument of literary analysis and, as a discourse, becomes a rhetorical tool in itself. The present work flows from the premise that nostalgic discourse, quite aside from being the marker of a particular aesthetic sensibility in the romantic sense or the expression of a collective reaction to historical circumstances, can be used rhetorically by a writer to enable the creation and mapping of complex relationships between times, places, and individual experiences. Nostalgic discourse articulates ruptures and, through the workings of the memory and the imagination, enables the metaphorical bridging of subjects and their distant “home” objects. This essay sets out to trace and explore any such ruptures and the attempts at suturing or broaching them in the context of Shimose’s writings on Amazonian subjects. It seeks to identify the author’s understanding and representation of the home referents, whether metaphorical or objective, and the position of their speakers in relation to them; it will consider the significance of the speakers’ changing places of enunciation, both temporal and geographical, and aims to map the developments of their voices over the course of the poet’s career.<sup>5</sup> Overall, Shimose’s articulation of distance through nostalgic discourse will be analyzed as a means of elucidating his poetic conception of Amazonia and the position of his speakers vis-à-vis the region.

### “Moxitania”

Shimose’s first collection, *Triludio en el exilio* (Trilude in exile) (1961), is the only of his works to have been written mostly in the poet’s home department of Beni. The collection devotes its third and final section to Moxitania, literally the land of the Moxo Indians, which under Spanish colonial rule occupied an area roughly similar to that now covered by the Bolivian Department of Beni.<sup>6</sup>

“Moxitania”—Shimose’s first published poem on an Amazonian subject—broadly outlines a creation myth loosely embedded in a verse love letter. In this missive of sorts, a speaker addresses the region as a sensual female, an “India vegetal tallada en esmeralda” (a vegetable Indian carved in emerald), while recounting her life story and the narrative of their bond.<sup>7</sup> Although the poetic voice speaks from the present, his concern is with the past, a fact first signaled by the title of the text: the term *Moxitania* has had no legal currency since Bolivia was constituted as a nation-state in 1825, but

it was previously used to describe a vast area to the east of La Paz, between the Beni and Guaporé rivers and north of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, where the Jesuits established a number of missions from 1682.<sup>8</sup> The use of this term alongside the apostrophic, epistolary dimension of the poem suggest intimacy as well as distance, both temporal (the letter is addressed to a region that no longer formally exists) and physical (letters are written to communicate with those away), which subsequently reveals itself to be central to the relationship between the subject and its object as well as to the text as a whole.

There are three distinct chronological phases evoked within the poem, each of which is aligned with a changing physical environment and defines a distinct stage in the evolving relationship between the speaker and Moxitania. Two of these stages belong to the past, and the third is the present time in which the poetic voice's utterances are inscribed. The first refers to a past that is furthest chronologically, a timeless mythical dawn when the Amazonian landscape was a nascent entity. The poetic voice describes an elusive liminal epoch in which both flora and fauna act timorously, seemingly conscious of an impending change: "la hoja ya presentía tu [Moxitania's] territorio de agua y de madera" (*Triludio* 40) (the leaf was already sensing your [Moxitania's] land of water and wood). Creation is in place—there are "garzas," "loros," and "motacús" (herons, parrots, and palm trees)—but Moxitania does not appear to have fully taken shape; part of her makeup remains an intuition or a promise, detaching her from the materiality of created beings. She partakes of the natural environment but cannot be wholly identified with it, revealing her physical elusiveness in a quality that escapes defined form and challenges traditional sensory perceptions and recreations of landscape:

Antes de la forma pero después del tacto,  
antes del sonido pero después del silencio,  
antes del color pero después de la luz  
...  
yo te amaba. (41)

(Before shape but after touch, / before sound but after silence, / before color but after light / . . . / I loved you)

The suggestion here is of an idyllic natural space inscribed outside conventional time in which experience is presented as unadulterated and free from limiting forces. Textures can be apprehended but are not constrained by shape. There are no sounds, yet the barren silence that precedes genesis has been banished. Light permeates everything without colors' breaking objects and beings into differently perceived entities. This chronologically vague yet precisely described mythological milieu occupies a metaphorical

space in the hemistichal center of each verse, between the two beats of each half-line. It is a rhythmically delimited locus in which each half of each verse is mirrored by its other half—“forma” and “tacto” (shape and touch), “sonido” and “silencio” (sound and silence), “color” and “luz” (color and light), are equally accentuated, and the trochaic accent of “antes” (before) is counterbalanced by the iambic “después” (after)—creating a rhythmic basin in the centre of each line as well as a distinct overall beat. The poetic speaker writes himself into this liminal environment as witness of a reality now disappeared, drawing attention to his privileged vantage point and the legitimacy of his historicizing testimony.

The Edenic milieu, construed as a sort of cosmogonic home, is subsequently replaced by the second and defining chronological stage in the speaker’s narrative, a period brought about by Moxitania’s paradoxical desexualization and her tangible embodiment as “the land”:

Pero Dios borró tu sexo para convertirte en barrancos  
 donde el hombre construyera su cabaña con cogollos de palmera;  
 . . .  
 para convertirte en limo donde los arados  
 rasgaran tu morena espalda como la yuca morena;  
 donde la cuchilla hendiera su filo para ahogar la sed de la tichela (41)

(But God erased your sex to turn you into slopes / where man could build his hut with palm hearts; / . . . / to turn you into silt where the ploughs / could split your brown back like brown cassava; / where the knife could cleave its blade to drown the rubber jar’s thirst)

There is a manifest tension between the erasure of Moxitania’s female genitalia and the penetrative and violent imagery that accompanies the description of this time period, marked by man’s arrival and the advent of farming. The loss of her sex is incongruously coupled with the phallic actions of ploughs and knives which ultimately lead to the birth of a new landscape. The entire body of this incongruously sexless Moxitania becomes a receptacle and is ravaged for the sake of a paradoxical and managed utilitarian fertility. This colonizing stage in which man subdues Moxitania—a remembered past constructed with poeticized fragments of human history versus the mythical cosmogony of the opening lines—brings with it the forceful end of the sensual relationship between the poetic subject and his object. Man’s possessing drive forces a break of intimacy between the speaker and his beloved, effectively displacing the former. This severance marks a site of trauma and the birthplace of the nostalgic gaze that develops into the present time and third stage in the poem, tingeing its retrospective look at the mythical past and the discourse that enunciates it. It is from this point that the evocation, and thus the poem as a whole, flows with a

backward movement (“recordando” [remembering]). The reader’s attention is drawn to the fact that the lapse between the mythical era and the present moment is not solely temporal:

Ahora que estoy lejos del instante en que te conocí,  
lejos, como la palabra está lejos de la piedra,  
lejos de tus labios que ignoraban el beso del metal  
y lejos del metal que ignoraba la existencia del callapo,  
el carretón, la flecha de chonta y la canoa,  
recordando tu cuerpo de rocío vertido en otro tiempo. (41)

(Now that I am far removed from the moment when I met you, / far, as words as far from stones, / far from your lips which did not know about the metal’s kiss / and far from the metal which did not know about the wooden buttress’s being, / the cart, the palm-shoot arrow, and the canoe, / remembering your dewy body poured in another time.)

The anaphoric emphasis on “lejos” (far) underlines how the mythical past is experienced as a different place from that now occupied by the speaker: time has been spatialized as the span between past and present is made perceptible by the changing face of the landscape. Both the passing of time and the advent of human civilization—the indigenous communities alluded to through the “flecha de chonta” (palm-shoot arrow) and the “canoa” (canoe), the European colonizers with their horses and farming techniques, and the nineteenth-century latex extractors with their “cuchillas” (knives)—are construed as exiling forces, with a metaphorical frontier running between the Edenic homeland and the paradoxically destructive-productive reality that supplants it. The self-identification of the speaker as an exiled subject in the latter part of the poem—echoing the title of the collection, *Triludio en el exilio*—is significant in that it bears implicit the identification of the mythified Moxitania as the ideal and/or idealized “home” from which he has been forcibly expelled by successive waves of human invasion and the passing of time. It simultaneously poses writing as a means both of resisting the ravages of alienation, here expressed in temporal and spatial terms, and of (re-)creating what is perceived as lost.

Exile is, of course, a fraught term for which there is no simple definition. Paul Tabori, in his monumental *The Anatomy of Exile*, notes that a universal description capable of capturing the broad range of circumstances and variations that may lead to banishment is unfeasible. He puts forward a generic definition, even as he acknowledges its limitations, as “a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion” (27). While in “Moxitania” there is no formal banishment from an actual country along the broad lines covered by

Tabori's definition or even physical displacement (the speaker remains in Amazonian territory at the point of his utterances), Shimose's alienated subject makes exile a viable metaphor for his condition by creating an alternative homeland temporally if not physically distant from the objective place from which he writes and that can serve as the "home" referent for his loss. Moxitania, in its mythical stage, is thus construed as an ideal "patria," a harmonious whole sited in the past and defined by opposition to the perceived fragmentariness of existence in present-day Beni. The unfeasibility of his homecoming is not motivated by racial, religious, or political issues but by the material impossibility of returning to a bygone era with all its physical characteristics, never mind to an imaginary one.

The metaphorical exile experienced by the speaker is fought against as it is voiced: like much writing by physically exiled authors, Shimose's poem emerges as a form of nostalgic resistance to the present, a means to sow a path to what has been lost and (re-)establish some form of connection with it. In order to achieve this, Shimose deploys various literary genres as tools to construct and counter his metaphorical banishment. The mythical narrative that shapes the early part of the text effectively creates the "patria" needed as referent for the speaker. The epistolary genre, loosely used here by the speaker to address Moxitania, points to and seeks to suture distance through intimate contact with his faraway subject.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the formulation of the speaker's loss in the discourse of the love lyric follows in the steps of a long tradition of Western poetry in which the homeland is personified as the exile's beloved.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, "Moxitania" is not a part-mythical, part-historical poeticized account of Beni's past but a carefully constructed metaphor for the poetic subject's individual experience of alienation from an unsatisfying present. Nostalgic discourse here does not shape a fruitless or self-indulgent yearning but allows the speaker, through the writing of "versos olorosos a vainilla" (41) (verses fragrant with vanilla), to salvage for the present the positive dimension of the past and therefore reconcile himself with his environment through the continuity of affection: "pese a todo / cómo te sigue amando mi corazón lleno de cielo" (42) (despite everything, / how much my sky-filled heart continues to love you). Nostalgia makes the present, with all its perceived losses, bearable.

### **Nostalgia and Utopia**

It was Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (General song; 1950) that inspired Shimose to write a collection of poems dedicated to Bolivia's ten departments in the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup> *Poemas para un pueblo* (Poems for a people; 1968) comprises a series of epic narratives of each region that aim to serve both as an introduction to their physical characteristics and as an

homage to the role of their own individual histories in the makeup of the Bolivian “patria” (homeland): the Casa de la Libertad, where the first Bolivian constitution was signed, is the focus of an eponymous poem to Chuquisaca, while “Crónica del metal” (The metal’s chronicle), in which aspects of Potosí’s mining history are set out, has metal ore as its speaker.<sup>12</sup> The book includes three long poems devoted to Bolivia’s Amazonian departments: “Santa Cruz de la Sierra: Desbordando lluvias” (Santa Cruz de la Sierra: overflowing rains), “Océano de savias” (Sap ocean) (on Beni), and “Tiempo del árbol” (The tree’s time) (focused on Pando). In contrast with the manmade artifacts, architectural constructions, and documented colonial past that are at the core of the texts on the western Bolivian regions, Shimose makes the natural landscape central to the Amazonian poems. Moxitania is a lush blend of flowering plants and water:

Lluvia sobre el mamuri y la peonias de lluvia, Moxitania,  
tierra de lluvia champada en aguacate, chapalea la lluvia,  
madreselva, ortiga, lluvia, voz flotante (“Océano de savias,” *Poemas para un pueblo* 63)

(Rain over the cassia shrubs and the peonies of rain, Moxitania / land of rain drenched in avocado, rain splashes, / honeysuckle, nettle, rain, floating voice)

With a similar emphasis on its biological wealth but evoking a different palette, Pando is described as:

Tierra negra de blancos espejismos,  
ipeacuana, bálsamo y pantera del búcaro a la hoja,  
guayabo, lodo y saurio de la vida a la muerte (“Tiempo del árbol,” *Poemas para un pueblo* 67–68)

(Black land of white mirages, / ipecac, balm, and panther from fragrant clay to leaf, guava tree, mud and lizard from life to death)

Despite the nature-centered lexical range that Shimose deploys to describe the Amazonian setting to his readers, the making of the collective “patria” (homeland) with which he is so concerned throughout *Poemas para un pueblo* demands a focus on man’s role in this landscape. The “patria” (homeland) is made by the “pueblo” (people) explicitly mentioned in the title of the collection and nature needs to become a setting for human actions rather than the sole protagonist of the narratives. The Edenic vision of a mythical era posed in “Moxitania” is thus translated into a utopian plan for the future, with man at its center. The road to this idealized future nonetheless begins in the past and is fraught with man’s failings and his

struggle with nature itself. Shimose's speaker, like the poetic subject in "Moxitania," recounts in detail the ravages of both colonial explorers and those involved in commercial enterprises such as the extraction of rubber, but speaks in positive terms of a new category of settlers whose own dreams mark the dawn of the region's glorious future:

Sangre de jaguar, cielo de garzas, parava y jochi, pacú y piraña,  
esta hechura de Dios es nuestra como es nuestro futuro. ("Tiempo del árbol," *Poemas para un pueblo* 71)

(Jaguar's blood, herons' sky, parrot and paca, pacu and piranha,  
God's creation is ours as is our future.)

Creation is at man's disposal but, in contrast with the past, the present generation in charge of building the future is not looking for "la ciudad de Enim con sus murallas de oro, / el reino de Eldorado con sus pirámides aéreas" (the city of Enim with its gold walls, / the kingdom of Eldorado with its golden pyramids), nor do they seek their fortune by bringing up "la sangre en la corteza de los árboles" (blood in the trees' bark), a reference to the rubber boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ("Océano de savias," *Poemas para un pueblo* 64). These new children project their dreams onto the land but, unlike their predecessors, set out to work in harmony with nature, salvaging aspects of the pre-Hispanic Eden and bringing it, past the political and revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century, into an idealized future: "estamos en el grito de tu nacimiento heroico" (we are in the cry of your heroic birth) ("Tiempo del árbol," *Poemas para un pueblo* 71).<sup>13</sup> This equilibrium is not easily achieved, and only those who are prepared to endure self-sacrifice can be part of the ideal tomorrow:

Mi madre vino en mi abuela oyendo madurar las pitahayas,  
cargando hambres,  
dibujando auroras,  
saboreando la amargura de la vida a cada paso,  
sintiendo la herida de la luz como una cosa suya,  
como una llaga abierta y quemante en el costado.  
Detrás de todo esto,

...  
y se quedarón allá [tus hijos], junto al rocío, fundando puertas y ventanas,  
construyendo tallos para la almendra y la guayaba,  
echando semillas en los surcos para el viento. ("Santa Cruz de la Sierra," *Poemas para un pueblo* 57)

(My mother came through my grandmother while they heard the pitayas ripening, / carrying hunger, / drawing dawns, / tasting the bitterness of life in every step, / feeling light's wound as their own, / as an open and burning wound in the side. / After all this, / . . . / and [your children] stayed there, next to the dew, founding doors and windows, / building stalks for the almond tree and the guava tree, / sowing seeds in the furrows for the wind.)

The sensory recounting of the speaker's own genealogy, linking the past with the future, presents the Christ-like suffering—the carrying of the sacrificial cross, “cargando” (carrying); the bitterness of the vinegar offered to quench his thirst, “amargura” (bitterness); the piercing of the side, “llaga . . . en el costado” (wound . . . in the side)—as the cornerstone of a bountiful forthcoming era implied in the “auroras” (dawns), “rocío” (dew), “tallos” (stalks), and “semillas” (seeds). This benevolent image of the more recent and considerate settlers of the Amazonian regions, with man rather than nature enduring pain, contrasts with the greedy exploits of the “conquistadores” (conquerors) and “siringueros” (rubber workers) that pepper the texts and that had already featured so prominently in “Moxitania.”<sup>14</sup> In *Poemas para un pueblo*, these new settlers are the link between the lost Edenic past, redeemed through their suffering, and an equally idealized future. Crucially, their emergence is parallel to the poetic voice's transition from individual mourning to collective dream. While landscape was evoked in Shimose's earlier work from an individual perspective and its loss was intimately experienced, the future alliance of man and land in these Amazonian poems is seen in societal terms. Although nature remains key, it is man's progress that becomes the central matter. In the context of the poet's overall production, the change of vision and the incorporation of a new *topos* is clearly determined by the development of his personal politics. *Poemas para un pueblo*, as it has been noted above, marks the opening of an era of poetic commitment in the context of the sociopolitical tensions that plagued Bolivia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, hence its optimistic emphasis on moral justice, the power of the people, and the people's renewed and reformulated relationship with the natural environment.

The utopian optimism of these poems does not, however, detract from their implicit assertion of a persistent underlying distance between the poetic subject and the Amazonian “pequeña patria” (small homeland) (“Océano de savias,” *Poemas para un pueblo* 65), which remains an elusive object. The realization of the dreams outlined in these texts is to take place in the future, which, like the past, is another time and another place and must be created through the imagination. While an idealized past was nostalgically mourned in “Moxitania,” here the utopian Amazonia of the future is posed as the recovery of that past and a positive alternative to the persistent estrangement

that lies between the poetic voice and his present environment. The ideal past and the utopian future become one and the same desired place, for although utopia is concerned with the future, its mechanisms are not altogether different from those involved in the nostalgic imagining of earlier periods. Chase and Shaw indeed note that “nostalgia becomes possible at the same time as utopia. The counterpart to the imagined future is the imagined past” (9). Shimose’s nostalgia for an Edenic Amazonia and his utopian vision for its future are part and parcel of a dynamic discourse which actively seeks to narrow an unremitting distance between the alienated subject and his home. If the past, as both a time and a place, cannot be recovered, then a future Amazonia that refigures it in a purified form—the effect of the redemptive suffering of man and land—becomes the prospective fruit of such discourse. The present nonetheless continues to be defined by the gaping estrangement between the speaker and his desired object.

### **Amazonia as Exile, Amazonia from Exile**

On 18 August 1971, Hugo Bánzer overthrew the national government of leftist president Juan José Torres. At the time, Shimose was working at La Paz’s Universidad Mayor de San Andrés as director of the Department of Cultural Events. This relatively indirect and non-militant association with the ousted government made him a persona non grata in the eyes of the new regime, and after several weeks of seeking asylum in various embassies, he fled Bolivia to Venezuela and then to Spain later that same year.<sup>15</sup> Shimose writes explicitly and poignantly about his own experience of exile in a number of poems in *Quiero escribir pero me sale espuma*, a work largely written while he was in hiding and during the first weeks away from Bolivia, as well as in several of his later collections, such as *Caducidad del fuego* (The expiration of fire; 1975), *Al pie de la letra* (Literally; 1976), *Reflexiones maquiavélicas* (Machiavellian reflections; 1980), and *Bolero de caballería* (A cavalry bolero; 1985).<sup>16</sup> Most of the texts that openly deal with banishment nonetheless offer few explicit references to Amazonia. Bolivia is mourned as a whole but is generally evoked in terms of its distinctive highland landscape; indeed, the parting images are of the Andean region, with a waning view of the high plateau and Lake Titicaca:

lejos del ladrido de los perros, cada vez más lejos de  
la noche  
con la patria más cerca  
el altiplano cada vez más pequeño, el lago  
con la patria más honda

la sangre derramada en las fogatas  
 con la patria más dentro (“El exilio comienza,” *Quiero escribir* 54)

(far from the dogs’ barking, moving further away from / the night / with  
 the homeland drawing nearer / the high plateau getting smaller, the lake  
 / with the homeland gaining depth / the blood shed in the bonfires / with  
 the homeland dwelling further inside)

While geocultural markers explicitly locate a number of texts in the western regions of Bolivia—such as “Chacaltaya” (*Caducidad* 28), one of the highest peaks in the Cordillera Real, or “Tiwanaku” (*Caducidad* 19–20) after the ruined pre-Incan town—and become the setting for the speaker’s first-person exploration of banishment through its association with the barren loneliness of a high altitude landscape or a lament for a lost civilization, Amazonia’s presence and its connection with the poet’s experience of exile takes an unexpected shape. Rather than in the form of an idealized landscape, the poet’s geographical homeland (and not the emotional construct central to “Moxitania”) is presented as a site of exile for others. “Fado del hombre que cargaba su pena” (Fado of the man who carried his sorrow; *Quiero escribir* 32–34), “Biografía de mi padre” (My father’s biography; *Al pie de la letra* 247–48), and “Un griego en Bolivia” (A Greek in Bolivia; *Bolero de caballería* 370–71) develop the theme of loss in terms of individual experiences of displacement, chronicling the stories of three foreign immigrants who settle in Shimose’s hometown of Riberalta, in Beni. Unlike in “Moxitania,” the exiled subjects themselves do not relate their own stories; these are, instead, mostly told by an observing poetic speaker. In “Fado,” Joaquim Pereira, a withdrawn Portuguese immigrant, lives a harsh, melancholic existence in the riverside town constantly re-reading “una vieja carta de amor” (33) (an old love letter). In “Biografía,” a speaker who may be identified with the poet’s own father, Ginkichi Shimose, a Japanese immigrant, shares his memories of a home country, “donde las centellas doraban el plumaje de la noche” (247) (where lighting gilded the night’s plumage). And in “Un griego,” Kristódulos, from Thessaly, makes his home “en la confluencia / de dos sueños” (370) (in the confluence / of two dreams), alluding to Riberalta’s location at the point where the Mamoré and Madre de Dios rivers join each other, but lives in the hope of returning to the hills of his homeland. There is no explicit exploration of the reasons that have brought these characters to Beni, but several common denominators link the men’s experiences and crystallize Shimose’s poetic efforts at rendering the displaced life. Each figure is marked by hardship: Joaquim works long hours, Ginkichi endures persecution, and Kristódulos cries as he sees his dream vanishing in the flowing waters. They are also defined by their withdrawn character, a reflection of their physical distance from their countries: Joaquim is

“solitario y sin sombra” (33) (lonely and shadowless), Ginkichi may be “rodeado de sus hijos y nuevas amistades” (248) (surrounded by his children and new friends) but is described as “sereno en su altivez sombría y silenciosa” (247) (serene in his sombre and silent haughtiness), while Kristódulos “hablaba solo / —como recitando a Homero—” (370) (he talked to himself / —as if he were reciting Homer—). They all die away from their homelands, which in their own minds have been turned into a form of Eden by distance and the passing of time.<sup>17</sup> Kristódulos, for example, tells the poem’s main speaker that the idyll is located in Greece:

¿Sabes qué es Grecia?  
 Un poema antiguo siempre nuevo  
 y yo, Kristódulos,  
 que perdí muchas cosas, no he perdido  
 la fuerza de creer que puedo  
 estar de nuevo en mis montañas (“Un griego,” *Bolero de caballería* 370)

(Do you know what Greece is? / It is an old poem that is always new /  
 and I, Kristódulos, / who lost many things, have not lost / the power to  
 believe that I can / be amidst my mountains again)

The concern here is spatial rather than temporal. In the absence of a return, the Greek’s nostalgia allows the idealized reconstruction of the homeland to remain in the past and to be projected onto a wishful future. There is no need to reconcile the past and current versions of his yearned-for object because they never meet. Instead, an idealized past becomes preserved, and treasured, as the embodiment of a desire that cannot be fulfilled.

Kristódulos’s self-shielding use of nostalgia turns Greece into an emotional safe haven while simultaneously pointing to tensions in Shimose’s vision of Amazonia from exile. The spatial separation between Joaquim’s, Ginkichi’s, and Kristódulos’s experiences of Riberalta and their “patrias” (homelands) allows them to inhabit two separate worlds: the physical if painful present-day refuge provided by the exilic milieu (Amazonia) and the emotional safe haven of the remembered and imagined homeland (Portugal, Japan, and Greece). By contrast, while Shimose’s evocation of Riberalta through the recollections of others’ exile may contribute to an objectification of banishment and allow for its more detached consideration, it also works against any potential idealization of his homeland. Though these narratives rooted in the poet’s recollections from his youth remind him of his long familiarity with the experience of exile and offer a positive nostalgic model, they also underline the emotional distance between the autobiographical poetic voice and its home object. The Amazonia of the recent past, rather than being preserved as the nostalgic-utopian object of *Poemas para un pueblo*, is presented as a locus of elusive

dreams and a site of mourning; through the experiences of these immigrants, the region becomes once again (as it did in *Triludio en el exilio*) a place of exile from which an ever-elusive home is nostalgically contemplated. The figurative exile of *Triludio* is conjoined with Shimose's actual banishment, which is reflected in his work from *Quiero escribir* onwards, and the poetic voice becomes doubly exiled as the idealized Amazonia, whether nostalgic or utopian, retreats further away in time and space.

### ***Riberalta y otros poemas***

As Shimose's poetic career develops and the imagining of a distant homeland, whether in positive or negative terms, gives way to a more naturalistic vision, his work progressively moves away from the re-creation of Amazonia as a natural landscape. Despite the persistent laments in his early work for the lost natural qualities of the region upon man's arrival, Shimose's poetry takes a clear path toward an engagement with the human, and thus cultural, dimension of Amazonian life. The region is increasingly articulated in terms of human actions and interactions rather than in relation to its natural wealth or the exploitation thereof. The biological and geographical environment remains present as a setting—it colors or even determines cultural behavior—but it is not the central focus or the main object of man's quest. During the poet's own period of exile and subsequent voluntary expatriation, his poetry becomes engaged instead in capturing the progressively urbanized nature of eastern Bolivian population centers and the challenges faced by remote communities. Untamed nature is pushed out by human settlements and acts as a surround, as a moat that encircles these lives and these communities but that remains external to them. Amazonia, in Shimose's later writing, becomes a townscape.<sup>18</sup> The shift away from the Amazon of forests and savannahs to one of small towns is fully crystallized in *Riberalta y otros poemas* (*Riberalta and Other Poems*) (1996), the chronicle of its speaker's return to the town of his childhood and youth, in which the present-day town comes face to face with the idealized version of its past spun by memory and imagination. The book opens with four poems titled after each of the names by which Shimose's hometown is known: "Riberalta," "Barranca Colorada" (The red slope), "La Cruz" (The cross) and "Ribera Alta" (The high shore).<sup>19</sup> Through the experience of the present, they offer a return to the site of the speaker's past. Shimose explores the tensions and synergies between immediate experience and memory, with the former acting as a trigger for the latter:

Me han cambiado el país, pero tú sigues intacta.

...

No hay nada más lindo que contemplar tus crepúsculos.  
 Soñar sueños que soñaron nuestros padres.  
 Circular por el color violeta del aire anochecido  
 y terminar echándote de menos. (“Riberalta,” *Riberalta y otros poemas* 7)

(They’ve changed my country, but you remain untouched. / . . . / There is nothing nicer than gazing at your sunsets. / To dream the dreams that our parents dreamed. / To move through the violet color of the darkened air / and end up missing you.)

The speaker returns to Riberalta to find it unchanged. The watching of sunsets and the sensory perception of the night air are facts of his present experience, but rather than reconciling the physical distance between poetic subject and the town itself, they underline the separation brought about by the passing of time. The continuity offered by the unchanged townscape proves misleading and highlights the fracture. The physical reunion brings with it a realization that, despite looking the same (“sigues intacta” [you remain untouched]), time has turned the urban space into an identical but different version of itself that triggers nostalgic memory (“terminar echándote de menos” [end up missing you]). This is particularly evident in “Ribera Alta”:

En la alta  
 ribera  
 un hombre espera  
 volver a Riberalta. (13)

(On the high / shore / a man awaits / his return to Riberalta.)

The exile’s return is only a partial homecoming: the yearned-for site does not fully correspond to the physical reality that surrounds him. Shimose playfully combines the geographical feature that gives name to Riberalta—the “alta ribera,” or high shore—with one of the appellatives of the town to illustrate this clash of expectation and reality. The temporal comes against the spatial, and, as was the case in *Triludio*, the speaker finds himself wishing for his homeland in its very ground. Home is more a time than a place, and, once again, that time is other than the present.

The collection is replete with images from the Amazonian town that resemble photographic snapshots in their precision. Such images capture aspects of small-town normality, even ordinariness, and, through the speaker’s association of them to his idealized childhood and youth, are turned into what Susan Sontag, referring to photographs, terms “melancholy objects”: records of the present that “turn the past into an object of tender regard” (71). Whereas in “Moxitania” the idealized past dwelt on the

ethereal quality of an elaborately re-created landscape (the river “no era más que una gota suspendida en el / aire”) (*Triludio* 40) (was nothing more than a drop suspended in mid / air), the scenes presented in *Riberalta* are concerned with the immediacy of everyday experience and speak of “un banco / de la plaza” (13) (a bench / in the square), of how “las flores / de la ceiba / caen / al pie del monumento” (11) (the flowers / of the silk-cotton tree / fall / at the feet of the monument), how “los / peladitos corren por la calle detrás de una / pelota” (7) (the / kids / run down the street after a / ball), and how “en las taperas / de barro y de chuchío / jadean los amantes” (14) (in the mud and bamboo / huts / lovers pant). These glimpses of commonplace life are shot through with the speaker’s nostalgic perception of the returning exile, who appropriates them by turning them into scenes from his own life, lifting them from the present moment and placing them firmly in the past through his photographic rendering. The speaker turns what is instantly accessible to him through sensory experience into figures of a past existence, forcing once again a gaping distance between reality and its perception, between the poetic voice as photographer and Amazonia as a photographic subject that is thus both close and detached. Poeticized memory has a particularly tenuous relationship with reality, and Sontag’s observation that “the photographer is not simply the person that records the past but the one who invents it” (67) is an apt qualification of the poetic gaze’s creative potential in rendering the (present) past. Shimose’s photographer-speaker in *Riberalta* purports to speak partly from immediate experience and partly from memory “el totaí cuenta / lo que fuimos,” (“Ribera Alta,” *Riberalta* 13) (the palm tree tells of / what we were), but through his nostalgic gaze he is actually transforming his perception through the imagining, and thus creation, of an idyllic bygone era comparable to the invented realms of earlier poems. The setting may be more urban, the timescale measurable, the poetic form less overflowing with mythical narratives, but the combined forces of memory and imagination set a distance between the act of writing in the present (its recording as a photograph) and the poem as a melancholy representation of the past (the photographic object). In *Riberalta* “the now becomes past” (Sontag 67), turning immediate sensory and spatial experience into an unreachable temporal domain.

Photographs reunite us with the past while at the same time reminding us of the impossibility of its return. Paradoxically, therefore, the poet’s photographic practice, while underlining a gap between him and his subject, simultaneously allows for a reunion. By embodying a bygone childhood and youth in an external entity (the town itself and its everyday scenes) the past is salvaged from its abstract sphere (recalled through memory) and made sensorially explicit. Indeed, as it becomes progressively evident that *Riberalta* is both a physical location and the embodiment of the speaker’s own past (and thus of his own self), the act of poetically photographing

Riberalta is revealed as both an exploration of self-knowledge and an act of retrospective self-fashioning similar to that first outlined in *Triludio*. In reuniting with and recreating the Amazonia of his youth, the speaker recreates his own idealized history. The closing lines of “Barranca colorada” read as follows:

Al escuchar su nombre [Riberalta’s] veo mi infancia  
 y me despierto dando brincos de alegría  
 como si alguna vez hubiese estado  
 en el paraíso. (10)

(When I hear its name [Riberalta’s] I see my childhood / and wake up  
 jumping for joy / as if I had once been in paradise)

Here, memory, triggered through sound (“escuchar” [I hear]) and sight (“veo” [I see]), is linked to the semi-unconsciousness of sleep; indeed, it manifests itself through a vivid dream that colors the subsequent wakefulness, pointing to the interaction between past and present that pervades *Riberalta*. Whereas in “Moxitania” the emphasis lay on the mournful loss of a mythical past, here the nostalgic recovery of an idealized youth is a source of pleasure. The word *paraíso* (paradise) is crucial. On the one hand, insofar as it refers to the Garden of Eden, it conjures up notions of both harmony and exile. It implies a benevolent, lush natural landscape, the possibility of an existence outside time, and the subsequent loss of both natural haven and timelessness. It thus echoes the Arcadian ideal that Shimose frequently refers to (not least in *Triludio*) and the banishment from which it is contemplated. Conversely, the term is also used in Christian doctrine to refer to the final abode of the redeemed, a locus traditionally placed in the future, hence echoing the poetic speaker’s utopian visions of Amazonia as enunciated in *Poemas para un pueblo*. That future may also be identified in *Riberalta* with the speaker’s present: the physical return and what I have called the poet’s photographing of the actual time, for all the gaps it reveals, also points to a reconciliation and a reunion that were absent in earlier works. The photographic approach evident in *Riberalta* therefore shapes the nostalgic discourse present in Shimose’s earlier collections into a tool that finally allows the exile an emotional return to Amazonia as the home of an idealized youth while paradoxically acknowledging the impossibility of recovering the past—its past, his past.

## Conclusion

In Shimose's work, Amazonia is not an exoticized otherworld, a politicized homeland, or a *costumbrista* backdrop, although its renderings can include elements of all these. Through its various guises, spatial and chronological—as cosmogonic home, utopian future, site of exile, and place of reunion with the past—Amazonia is revealed as a complex figure through which notions of belonging are problematized and explored. The region is less a geographical reality to be sung than it is an intangible, ever-changing entity intimately linked with the poetic speaker; as such, it ultimately proves an ideal vehicle for Shimose's reflections on the self and the elusiveness of its fulfillment. Amazonia always remains at some distance from the poetic speaker: this is sometimes the product or the embodiment of physical and/or temporal alienation, while in other cases it allows for a backward move from fragmentation to wholeness. In either case, Amazonia's poetic rendering through various types of nostalgic discourse woven at the intersection of imagination and memory enables its constant re-creation, whether in an ideal past or an illusory future, keeping it relevant and fresh, and ultimately guaranteeing its preservation in a privileged if unreachable space.

## Notes

1. See cited works by Ortega, Chávez Taborga, Mitre, Wiethüchter, Rivera-Rodas, Salgado, Whittingham and Moore, Sisson, and Iffland.
2. The term "oriental," in the Bolivian context, is used as a geographical label that refers to the administrative departments of Beni, Pando, and Santa Cruz. By extension, it is used as a demonym and to characterize subjects and objects from the region. Shimose does not employ the term "Amazonia," but it will be used in this work as an umbrella term to include all "oriental" referents in the Bolivian context.
3. As other articles in this issue illustrate, there is growing critical interest in the production of writers from the Amazonian basin. The recent anthology by Suárez-Araúz illustrates the wealth of authors working in the region from the early part of the twentieth century.
4. Johannes Hofer defended the classification of the emotional phenomenon of *heimweh* or *desiderium patriae* as a medical term in his 1688 thesis, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia*. The effects of melancholic love had long been recognized as a pathology, but Hofer argued successfully for the creation of a new disease separate from melancholy-love, however similar the triggers and symptoms. Starobinski, 84–88.
5. Kathleen Stewart notes that nostalgia is "a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present"; hence the importance of analyzing Shimose's use of nostalgic discourse diachronically. K. Stewart, 227.
6. The region was tentatively identified by the European colonizers as the potential land of El Dorado. The department of Beni became an administrative entity in 1842,

and Moxos is one of the department's eight provinces. The term *Moxitania* has no administrative recognition. Eder notes that the area is known as "Mojos," yet "Moxitania" appears in a map included in his *Breve descripción de las reducciones de Mojos* (c. 1772), pp. 42 and 428. The name is owed to one of the Arawak tribes that inhabited the area.

7. There are two versions of this poem: the original text published in *Triludio en el exilio* (1961) and a revised version included in *Poemas*, the edition of Shimose's collected works issued in 1988. I have used the 1961 version.
8. Moxitania, also known as the "Llanos de Mojos," attracted the attention of Spanish and Portuguese explorers motivated by mythical beliefs despite its inhospitable living conditions. As the search for golden cities subsided, the Jesuits established the first of an impressive network of missions in Loreto, in 1682. (Livi-Bacci 40 and 92)
9. The epistolary genre is a favorite of exiled writers, from Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Letters from the Black Sea) to Pablo Neruda's "Carta a Miguel Otero Silva en Caracas" (Letter to Miguel Otero Silva in Caracas); it is also one Shimose goes back to during his own physical banishment from Bolivia in his "Carta a Margarita Villka" (Letter to Margarita Villka) in *Quiero escribir*. See McGowan, Neruda, and Shimose.
10. See, for example, Keen.
11. Bolivia has nine administrative departments. The tenth department corresponds to the region of Litoral, lost to Chile during the Pacific War (1879–1883). The area is still claimed by Bolivia, and the department, though it is not Bolivian territory, is recognized in the national coat of arms, which includes ten five-pointed stars, one for each administrative region.
12. In a 1991 interview by Victor Montoya, Shimose recounts how his writing of two or three poems to Bolivian regions led the Spanish editor Ernesto Burillo to encourage him to complete a series encompassing all departments.
13. The poems contain references to various political struggles affecting the Amazonian departments from the point of independence. The Guerra del Acre (1899–1903) with Brazil, in which a large segment of Bolivian soil attached to what then was the Territorio Colonial del Noroeste (Northwestern Colonial Territory) was lost, is mentioned, as is the massacre of Terebinto, which took place in Santa Cruz in 1958, when around ten thousand armed peasants from Cochabamba clashed with the inhabitants of Santa Cruz in a dispute over the distribution of oil royalties.
14. In "Desde el delirio" (Delirium), a section within "Santa Cruz de la Sierra," the conquering Spaniards enter the Bolivian Amazon "[j]urando despedazar tu altivez de princesa India, ingiriendo maldiciones palmo a palmo / poseyéndote de hoja en hoja, de flor en árbol, / catequizándote de alma en alma, / te vencieron sin victorias" (*Poemas para un pueblo* 54) (swearing to tear apart your Indian-princess haughtiness, ingesting curses inch by inch / taking you leaf by leaf, flower by flower, / indoctrinating you soul by soul / they defeated you without victories). In "Océano de savias," the rubber boom leads men to the "cogollo de tu boca, / te punzaron la sangre en la corteza de los árboles / y te azotaron el hijo en el alcohol de torturas" (64) (heart of your mouth, / they pierced the blood in the bark of trees / and they lashed your child through the torments of alcohol).
15. Shimose, personal interview (Madrid, 20 December 2003). Although his formal exile has long been over, Shimose has chosen to live expatriated in Spain since the 1980s.
16. Shimose acknowledges a significant autobiographical element in these works (personal interview, Madrid, 20 December 2003).

17. Ginkichi Shimose died in 1970. "Biografía de mi padre" refers to "mi padre" in the present tense, and it is possible that it was written while he was alive, well before the poem's publication in 1976.
18. Shimose has recently published *Poetas del oriente boliviano*, an anthology of Bolivian Amazonian writers. He traces a general move from the natural to the urban in the work of Bolivian Amazonian writers: "Antes los poetas le han dado mucha importancia al paisaje, pero en las nuevas generaciones se ha roto esa tradición, hay una superación del ambiente campesino, porque el Oriente también se ha transformado en una realidad urbana muy importante. La poesía del Oriente ha superado el paisaje, es urbana" (interview with *La Razón*) (In the past poets considered the landscape to be central, but the new generations have broken with such tradition; they have moved beyond the rural setting because the Oriente has also become a very important urban reality. Poetry from the Oriente has transcended the focus on landscape, it is urban now). Suárez-Araúz notes a move toward a greater concern for themes relating to a urbanized Amazonia since the 1930s (2).
19. The names are essentially descriptive of the physical location of the town, founded in 1894. It is located on a riverside ("ribera") at the top of a red-soil slope (literally a "barranca colorada" as well as a "ribera alta") at the confluence ("cruz") of the rivers Beni and Madre de Dios.

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