

# Rooted Resistance and Vegetal Life in the Poetry of Ana Varela Tafur

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## Abstract

This article explores the vegetal imagery in Ana Varela Tafur's poetry and how it engages with the legacy of colonial violence left by the Rubber Boom—violence that persists in contemporary extractive activities in the Peruvian Amazon. Through an analysis of three recurring plants in her work—the rubber tree, the Ayahuasca vine, and the shihuahuaco tree—I examine how each offers a distinct perspective on human–nonhuman relationships, the enduring cycles of exploitation that shape the region, and the potential of plant life to resist, heal, and foster ecological and cultural regeneration.

**Keywords:** Ana Varela Tafur, Amazonian poetry, Peruvian poetry, Rubber Era, vegetal imagery, interconnectedness, extractivism.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación del mundo vegetal en la poesía de Ana Varela Tafur y su vinculación con el legado de violencia colonial heredado del boom del caucho, una forma de violencia que persiste en las actividades extractivas en la Amazonia peruana. A partir del análisis de tres plantas—el árbol del caucho, la ayahuasca y el árbol shihuahuaco—este ensayo estudia cómo cada planta propone una perspectiva distinta sobre las relaciones entre humanos y más que humanos, los ciclos extractivos que perduran en la región y el rol de las plantas para resistir, sanar y fomentar renovación ecológica y cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Ana Varela Tafur poesía amazónica, poesía peruana, era del caucho, mundo vegetal, interconectividad, extractivismo.

## Ana Varela Tafur's Amazonian Poetics

Born in Iquitos—the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon, located in the northeastern Amazon Basin, Ana Varela Tafur is one of the most important voices in contemporary Peruvian poetry. She has authored several books, including *Lo que no veo en visiones* (What I do not see in visions, 1992) (winner of the Copé Poetry Award, 1991), *Voces desde la orilla* (Voices from the riverbanks, 2001), *Dama en el escenario* (Lady on the stage, 2001), *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* (Stanzas of Emilia Tangoa, 2022) (recipient of the 2023 National Literature Prize in Poetry), and, in collaboration with Leopoldo Bernucci, *Benjamín Saldaña Rocca: prensa y denuncia en la Amazonía cauchera* (Benjamín Saldaña Rocca: media and denunciation in the Rubber-Era

Amazon, 2020), a curated selection of articles by the journalist who exposed the atrocities committed in the Putumayo by Julio Arana's rubber enterprise. Her poetry has been widely translated and included in anthologies such as *Literary Amazonia* (2004) and *Allí donde canta el viento* (There where the wind sings, 2018), among others.

Varela Tafur's poetic trajectory has been influenced by the political and ecological conditions of her time.<sup>1</sup> In "*Urcututu, olvido y memoria desde la amazonía. La poesía de Carlos Reyes*" (Urcututu, oblivion and memory. The poetry of Carlos Reyes, 2010), a short essay that recounts the creation of the cultural collective *Urcututu* with fellow writers Percy Vilchez Vela and Carlos Reyes, she reflects on the group's origins in 1983—a decade marked by violence, economic stagnation, and internal conflict in Peru. Dissatisfied with literary representations that recycled worn-out tropes about the Amazon, the collective published a page-and-a-half manifesto calling for a renewed literature, one rooted in the territory itself and in the wisdom of its Indigenous communities:

Our literary references and readings at the time reaffirmed the urgency of creating and recreating an inclusive literature rooted in our Indigenous identity, fused with other cultures, and reimagining the oral traditions of the peoples who inhabit that multicultural and diverse universe known as Amazonia. It remains an unfinished task to this day. The manifesto concluded with a powerful declaration in favor of creative freedom, for without it—we stated—no form of human expression can truly flourish or reach its full potential. (Varela Tafur, "Urcututu")<sup>2</sup>

Rooted in the social reality of Iquitos and informed by an Amazonian cosmovision and ecological discourse, Ana Molina characterizes Varela Tafur's poetry as "ecofeminismo mítico" (mythical ecofeminism)—an approach in which the feminine experience intersects with ecological and mythical-historical dimensions (76-79). For Molina, the gender difference distinguishes Varela Tafur's poetics from those of other Amazonian writers, including members of the *Urcututu* collective, while simultaneously setting her work apart from dominant themes typically associated

<sup>1</sup> Among the various frameworks scholars have used to classify the history of Amazonian literature, one of the most relevant is that of the region's economic cycles. This approach reflects the enduring perception of the Amazon as a site of extraction, which has repeatedly fueled promises of unparalleled wealth and prosperity. The rubber boom (1870–1920), a pivotal period that profoundly reshaped the Amazon's social, political, and ecological landscape, was subsequently followed by other extractive cycles. Cotton, coffee, rice, oil, timber, gold, and coca are among the commodities that have driven the jungle's extractive economy and culture. This pattern supports the argument advanced by historian Jesús San Román, who maintains that even as the productive economy diversified after the rubber era, extractivism remained its dominant tendency. Furthermore, unlike other literary traditions, literature in the Amazon has developed in proximity to its economic cycles, and these are present in Varela Tafur's poetry. For more information, see San Román 169-170; Torres 238-240.

<sup>2</sup> Nuestros referentes literarios y lecturas de entonces nos reafirmaban en la necesidad de crear y recrear una literatura incluyente de nuestra identidad indígena fusionada con otras culturas y reinventando la palabra oral de las gentes que habitan ese universo pluricultural y diverso llamado Amazonía. Una tarea sin duda pendiente hasta hoy. El manifiesto terminaba con una declaración contundente a favor de la libertad de creación porque sin su ejercicio—dijimos—ninguna expresión humana puede desarrollarse y fortalecerse plenamente (Unless otherwise indicated all translations are mine).

with 1980s poetry (79-83).<sup>3</sup> As an example, Molina references poems from *Lo que no veo*, noting that the celebration of the female body ultimately becomes part of a broader project: the articulation of an Amazonian identity.<sup>4</sup>

While I concur with Molina that the feminine provides a critical lens through which to interpret Varela Tafur's work—exemplified in the gendered and sentient representation of the Amazon in "Madre" (Mother) as a critique of its commodification—I argue that her poetry finds its most potent expression in its direct engagement with Amazonian landscapes, communities, and traditions. This is particularly evident in *Dama en el escenario*, composed between 1986 and 1988 but not published until 2001, a book Varela Tafur herself has since acknowledged she no longer fully identifies with.<sup>5</sup>

From her first book, *Lo que no veo*, Varela Tafur's poetry engages with the multiplicity of voices, temporalities, and traditions that compose Amazonia, portraying it as a pluricultural and multiethnic region. The vastness and interconnectedness of the forest mirror those of its people and their cultural relationships. In her search for an Amazonian identity, she consistently revisits the past to illuminate present challenges. Her second book, *Voces*, dedicated to her paternal grandmother Ana—a survivor of the rubber era, when export wealth was built on Indigenous exploitation and ecological destruction—weaves familial memory, ancestral knowledges, and stories gathered in rural villages to offer an alternative account of that period.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in "Y habito desde siempre" (And I have always dwelt) from her first book, where the poetic voice draws on personal

<sup>3</sup> This thematic and geographic distancing between Varela Tafur and her contemporaries highlights the persistent centralization of literary production and recognition in Lima, often at the expense of other regions and authors. A similar tendency appears in Luis Fernando Chueca's analysis of Peruvian poetry of the 1990s, where Varela Tafur is mentioned only in a footnote, with the observation that her work falls outside the scope of his study. Notably, by that time she had already received the prestigious Copé Prize in poetry, underscoring the limited visibility of regional literary voices even in the face of national recognition. See Chueca, *Consagración de lo diverso*, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that Molina engages with Roland Forgues's anthology *Plumas de Afrodita. Una mirada a la poeta peruana del siglo XX* (2004) in her analysis. In this work, Forgues classifies twentieth-century Peruvian women's poetry into three thematic categories: aesthetic, social, and erotic. The aesthetic addresses female experience in relation to patriarchal structures; the social encompasses politically engaged writing that critiques systems of exploitation; and the erotic explores the female body and sensuality. Forgues places *Lo que no veo en visiones* within the social category, emphasizing its commentary on social realities and affirmation of an Amazonian identity, while overlooking the erotic dimension—present in this work and more explicitly developed in her earlier collection, *Dama en el escenario*.

<sup>5</sup> Published in 2001, *Dama en el escenario* opens with a dedicatory note: "This late release is my first book and was written in Iquitos and Pucallpa between 1986 and 1988. In most of the poems I no longer recognize myself. However, I owe them a great deal of gratitude especially for allowing me to exercise my creativity along the winding paths of poetry" (Esta entrega tardía es mi primer libro y fue escrito en Iquitos y Pucallpa entre los años de 1986 y 1988. En la mayoría de los poemas no me reconozco más. Sin embargo, les debo una holgada gratitud sobre todo por mi ejercicio creador en los sinuosos caminos de la poesía).

<sup>6</sup> The rubber era (1870-1920) constituted a period of significant changes in the Amazon, as the vulcanization of rubber rendered it indispensable to Europe's expanding automotive industry. In Peru, extraction centered in Iquitos, bringing considerable prosperity but also denunciation of grave abuses, most notably the forced recruitment of Indigenous peoples as unpaid laborers.

memories to question what is preserved or erased from the archive, in a Derridean sense, while affirming the value of subjective experiences. Similarly, in “De eso no más me acuerdo” (That is all I remember), from *Voces*, she links the violence of the rubber era to the continued displacement and marginalization of populations excluded from the profits of an export-driven economy.<sup>7</sup>

Two additional themes in Varela Tafur’s poems are Amazonian landscapes and the ecological crisis caused by extractive industries, which threaten to transform the forest into a “zona de sacrificio” (sacrificial zone). *Estancias* stands as her most incisive work, addressing the disappearance of natural environments, riverine communities, situated knowledge systems, and relational ways of being that transcend anthropocentric frameworks. At the forefront of these stanzas is the river, an ecological and symbolic force that connects, regulates, and sustains life in the Amazon. In “Aguas intermitentes” (Intermittent waters), it emerges as an ecological artery, supporting habitats and transporting microcosmic life forms essential to human and non-human existence. The river is also imbued with personhood, home to *Sachamama*, the mythical mother of the forest, often depicted as a giant serpent. Embodying the liveliness and agency of the Amazon, she rewards those who uphold Amerindian principles of reciprocity, and punishes those who disturb ecological balance. In “Guardiana” (Guardian), villagers plead with *Sachamama* to unleash her fury on polluted waterways, absorb metallic waste, and rescue the fish whose backs are “manchadas en líquidos de negro aceite / lotizados Petrol X-Y-Z-Plus” (“stained in black oils, partitioned Petrol X-Y-Z-Plus”; 22)

## Vegetal Life and Decolonial Ecologies

“De un bosque soy, de sus humedales” (“Of a forest I am, of its wetlands”; 13), writes Ana Varela Tafur in the opening verse of “Sabiduría” (Wisdom), from *Estancias*, revealing an intimate bond with the Amazonian landscape and its life forms, a connection that inspires and shapes her poetic voice. Although plants are a ubiquitous presence in her poetry—ranging from centennial trees to intricate lianas and vines, her vegetal imagery has seldom been considered a lens through which to explore the region’s colonial legacies of extractivism and their ties to the ongoing ecological crisis. Nor have plants been recognized for their potential to reimagine relationships with other life forms beyond an instrumentalist framework. As Lesley Wylie argues, plants have long occupied a central role in Spanish American culture, contributing to the production of meaning, fostering counterhegemonic identities, shaping distinctive literary aesthetics, and expressing ecological concerns (3-10). By reorienting attention on the vegetal world, the reader is prompted to reconsider human-nature

<sup>7</sup> The poem reads: “Y como te repito, /he nacido aquí, /entre los azotes de la miseria y / las violentas tardes del saldo. / Todo a cambio de las mercaderías / traídas desde Iquitos” (“And as I said before, / I was born here, / among the scourges of misery and / the violent afternoons of debt / all in exchange for goods / brought from Iquitos”; 15-6).

relations, recognizing plants as active beings with their own interiority and stories to tell.

In the Amazon basin—the most biodiverse forest on Earth and home to the greatest concentration of plant and animal species, plants not only sustain life in all its forms but also carry profound spiritual significance. In dialogue with Emanuele Coccia's view of plants as shaping forces of both ecosystems and the cosmos, Juan Duchesne Winter notes that Amerindian thought rests on a logic of mutual implication, where all existences are interrelated and plants occupy a central role as auxiliaries of knowledge (27). He explains: "Plants are certainly the universal source of most food and artifacts, but they are not valued in the Amerindian world just because they are 'resources,' nor even for their specific healing properties, but mainly because they are teachers, auxiliaries in connecting to the sensible and suprasensible world" (40). Among these teacher plants, the ayahuasca vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) is significant for its abilities to open new forms of consciousness and foster novel connections with the territory and with other species.

In this article, I analyze Varela Tafur's poetry through the lens of plants, or more precisely, plant-thinking—a mode of relational being that foregrounds interconnectedness and non-anthropocentric forms of intelligence. Michael Marder defines plant-thinking as "thinking without the head," an approach that recognizes the unique ways in which plants exist and "think."<sup>8</sup> Unlike animals, plants exhibit what Marder terms as "non-conscious intentionality," manifesting purposeful behaviors—such as growing toward light or seeking nutrients—without self-reflective awareness. In this view, plants possess the capacity to sense, remember, and communicate with their environments through non-cognitive modes, challenging traditional notions of intelligence. This approach to plants not only questions human exceptionalism by framing intelligence as an embodied response but also highlights plant-thinking's inherent interconnectedness and its "ceaseless striving toward the other and in becoming-other in growth and reproduction" (Marder 131). Like the rhizome, defined by alliance and conjunction, plant-thinking calls for a departure from dialectical thought in favor of alternative modes of perception, relation, and knowledge production.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in *The Life of Plants*, Emanuele Coccia argues that plants exemplify interconnectedness through their ability to sustain, adapt, and transform their surroundings, ultimately becoming one with their environment. Recentring

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<sup>8</sup> "Plant-thinking" refers, in the same breath to (1) the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants (hence, what I call "thinking without the head"); (2) our thinking about plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants" (Marder, "What is Plant-Thinking" 124).

<sup>9</sup> Rhizome, a term originally from botany, was adopted by Deleuze and Guattari to conceptualize dynamic spaces of enunciation that transcend the binary logic of center and periphery. This binary is embodied in the metaphor of the tree, which represents the dominant ontological and epistemological order of the West—a structure around which all else is expected to align. In contrast, rhizomes multiply points of entry and connection, creating space for alternative forms of knowledge, such as those found in Amerindian Indigenous cosmovision.

attention on plants, Coccia describes this merging as both physical and metaphysical, that is a *metaphysics of mixture* in which life itself emerges from continual mixtures and connections. This principle of interconnectedness lies at the center of Ana Varela Tafur's poetry, where the Amazon is envisioned as a shared, relational space, a natural assemblage that rejects hierarchical structures of power and the commodification of nature. In her work, the Amazon emerges not as a site of extraction but as a living, plural territory that has long resisted colonial and neocolonial practices of exploitation, dispossession, and cultural erasure. Rejecting universalist and extractive frameworks, her poetry reaffirms the legitimacy of Indigenous ontologies, which propose different ways of knowing and inhabiting the world (Viveiros, 1988; Descola, 1994). This expansion into new ontological references encourages a more ethical, empathetic, and responsible relationship with the environment—one urgently needed in light of the escalating ecological crisis in the Amazon basin. In an interview about *Estancias*, she reflects that it was both a renaco tree (*Ficus schultesii*) and a desire to decolonize dominant narratives about the region that inspired the writing of these poems (Escribano, "Ana Varela Tafur").

To examine how Varela Tafur's vegetal imagery engages with the legacy of colonial violence in the Amazon and offers new insights into the ecological crisis, I briefly discuss three plants that recur throughout her poetry: the rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*), the ayahuasca plant (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), and the shihuahuaco tree (*Dipteryx micrantha*). Each of these plants provides a distinctive perspective through which to consider the relationships between humans and other living beings, the cycles of exploitation that have marked the region's history, and the potential of plant life to resist, heal, and foster regeneration.

### Rubber Trees as Sites of Memory

How do trees bear the historical trauma of the rubber era? What might the forest reveal if it could speak? These are some questions the author appears to consider in her depiction of the Amazonian forest as a living archive—a repository of collective memory in which forgotten stories, fragmented recollections, and the suffering experienced by Indigenous peoples during the rubber years converge to speak to the reader. These memories function as affective traces that elude full articulation or documentation yet persist in trees and decimated landscapes. Patricia Vieira has introduced the concept of plant inscription, or *phytographia*, to describe how plants leave tangible marks on their environment and how these traces can be represented in human cultural production. Vieira writes: "*Phytographia* is the appellation of an encounter between writings on plants and the writing of plants, which inscribe themselves in human texts" (215). Like Michael Marder, Vieira posits that plants can express themselves, specifically in ways that can shape both human perception and ecological experience. While these inscriptions do not equate to plant sentience, the material presence of trees and other enduring remnants of the rubber era act as sites of memory, communicating with and through the poetic word.

In “Timareo (1950),” one of Varela Tafur’s most frequently anthologized poems, the poetic voice foregrounds the significance of oral tradition in riverine cultures, positioning orality as a legitimate vehicle for asserting collective memory, in contrast to the authority ascribed to the written word.

In Timareo we do not know the letters and their writing  
and no one registers us in the pages of government books.  
My grandfather lights up in the candor of his birth  
naming a chronology wrapped in punishments.  
(Many are the trees where inhabited torture and vast are the forests  
purchased among a thousand deaths).  
How far those days, how distant the escapes!  
The relatives sailed a sea of possibilities  
far from the ancestral fatigues.  
But we do not know the letters and their destinies and  
and we recognize ourselves in the arrival of a time of blissful Sundays.  
The city is far and from the port I call all the sons soldiers who never returned,  
girls dragged to movie theaters and bars of bad reputation  
(History does not record our exoduses, the final voyages from restless rivers).  
(*Lo que no veo* 8)<sup>10</sup>

Employing a direct tone and articulated through the first-person plural, the poetic voice highlights the marginalization of a rural community whose inhabitants, excluded from official archives and lacking formal literacy, nonetheless possess stories that demand to be told. These narratives, shaped by the enduring legacy of exploitation and precarity, are preserved and transmitted through lived experience, which serves to interrogate the human and environmental cost of the rubber era for the affected communities and their descendants. In this context, the trees emerge as silent yet evocative witnesses to this traumatic past (“Son muchos los árboles donde habitó / la tortura y vastos los bosques / comprados entre mil muertes”).

Notably, the poem begins and ends with references to untold stories, accounts that resist erasure and endure through their resonance with other voices and temporalities. Interconnectivity appears in the poem’s weaving of past and present, individual to collective memory, subjective experience and official history.<sup>11</sup> By recentring the marginal, the plural, and the forgotten the poem endeavors to recover silenced testimonies, enabling a critical rewriting of history (“La historia no registra

<sup>10</sup> “En Timareo no conocemos las letras y sus escritos / y nadie nos registra en las páginas de los libros oficiales. / Mi abuelo se enciende en el candor de su nacimiento / y nombra una cronología envuelta en los castigos. / (Son muchos los árboles donde habitó la tortura y vastos los bosques / comprados entre mil muertes). / ¡Qué lejos los días, qué distantes las huidas! / Los parientes navegaron un mar de posibilidades / lejos de las fatigas solariegas. / Pero no conocemos las letras y sus destinos y / nos reconocemos en la llegada de un tiempo de domingos dichosos. / Es lejos la ciudad y desde el puerto llamo a todos los hijos soldados que no regresan, / muchachas arrastradas a cines y bares de mala muerte / (La historia no registra nuestros éxodos, los últimos viajes aventados desde ríos intranquilos).

<sup>11</sup> This dynamic interplay recalls what Miluska Benavides describes as “history-memory,” a process through which poetry “hace posible la confluencia entre el tiempo ancestral, el ciclo de la explotación cauchera y un presente múltiple” “makes possible the convergence between ancestral time, the cycle of rubber exploitation, and a manifold present” (102).

nuestros éxodos, los últimos viajes / aventados desde los ríos intranquilos”). The reference to new exoduses may allude to more recent forced migrations, driven by the destruction of habitable environments under extractive industries.

This effort to reclaim the stories of those whose suffering and forced labor sustained the rubber economy resurfaces in “Estación de trueque” (Bartering station), from *Voces*, where the poetic voice adopts a subtly ironic tone to critique the omissions of official records. Such documentation, the poem suggests, is inadequate to account for what was lost or, perhaps what can never be fully accounted for. Reflecting on Roger Casement’s report to Sir Edward Grey, which denounced the death of 40,000 Indigenous people in the Putumayo, the poetic voice asserts: “I don’t know of British sires and lords and consuls / And of transport steamers in unknown docks / Because in the official data my hands don’t appear / Nor my route, ventured in the early hours of insomnia” (36).<sup>1213</sup> The poem closes with the image of the laboring hand wielding the machete to bleed the trees—a commodity deemed more valuable than the worker’s own blood and lives. “[q]ue mi vida no valía nada. / ¿Nada? (That my life was worthless. Nothing?), the poetic voice asks, suspended between astonishment and desolation.

In “Iquitos,” one of the longest poems in *Estancias*, Varela Tafur revisits the rubber period once again, this time centering her focus on the city of Iquitos—a once modest trading post that rapidly transformed into Peru’s primary hub for rubber exportation. Described as “una urbe que creció sin pestañear” (“a city that grew without blinking”; 66), Iquitos emerges a symbol of an extractive system whose infrastructure and memory of past wealth lingers in the decaying remnants of “escaleras ruinosas” (“ruinous stairways”; 67), “memoria de azulejos” (“memory of tiles”; 64), and a “Belle Époque” (68) that has long since vanished. These images speak to a fragile development model built on dependency—to volatile markets and price fluctuation—that, with the collapse of the rubber trade, plunged the region into an economic crisis (San Román 170-1). In its aftermath, rubber workers and their offspring were left in poverty and vulnerable to new forms of exploitation. The poem concludes with the poetic voice gazing at the city’s port, reflecting on stories of violence that are not only remembered but continually reenacted: “I rewrite stories in travel notes and botanical records of looting / I read books of official explorations, newspapers of the 20th century / that update the waves of blood in Putumayo” (68).<sup>14</sup> Here, Varela Tafur underscores the persistence of hollow narratives of progress and

<sup>12</sup> “Desconozco de sires y lores y cónsules británicos / y de vapores de transportes en muelles desconocidos. / Porque en los datos oficiales no figuran mis manos / ni mi ruta aventada en madrugadas de insomnia.”

<sup>13</sup> In 1909, the British magazine *Truth* exposed the enslavement and killings of Indigenous peoples in Julio C. Arana’s rubber stations, run by the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC), a firm registered in London with both Peruvian and British capital. In response, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey appointed Roger Casement—renowned human rights advocate and then Consul in Brazil—to investigate in 1910. Casement’s diaries and report depict the Putumayo region as a lawless territory ruled by violence and terror, where Indigenous lives were treated as expendable.

<sup>14</sup> “Reescribo relatos en apuntes de viajes y botánicas del saqueo. / Leo libros de exploración oficial, periódicos del siglo XX / que actualizan las olas de sangre en el Putumayo.”

national interest—discourses first used during the rubber period to legitimize Iquitos's rapid growth and that, today, continue to justify extractive practices that propel the Amazon toward irreversible ecocide.

### Ayahuasca, the Wisdom of Plants and Market Commodity

Described as “una ciencia con aliento de vegetal” (“a science with the spirit of a plant”; *Estancias* 31), the ayahuasca plant appears in Varela Tafur's poetry as a “mother-root,” a sacred entity endowed with agency, wisdom, and transformative force. Treated with reverence and deep affection, ayahuasca possesses the capacity to heal and offer guidance in times of ecological crisis. Commonly referred to as the “vine of the dead,” ayahuasca is a natural brew of millennial origin in the Amazonian rainforest, whose psychotropic properties are believed to facilitate access to expanded states of consciousness. Consumed exclusively within ceremonial contexts and following rigorous bodily purification, shamans draw on its powers to heighten sensory engagement with the natural world and to mediate between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. More than a hallucinogen or symbolic motif, ayahuasca occupies a central place in Indigenous cosmologies, which attribute sentience and spiritual presence to the vegetal world, recognizing an interconnectedness and kinship with other entities, temporalities, and realities as part of a larger ecological system.<sup>15</sup>

En *Cauces y recorridos* (Watercourses and routes), the second section of *Estancias*, ayahuasca and other plants are prominently featured, highlighting their role in mediating communication with ancestral voices, through which they acquire knowledge and receive consolation amid the intensifying violence of extractivism. In “Persistencia del lenguaje” (Persistence of language), sips of *toé* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*) and the chanting of *icaros*, accompanied by tobacco smoke, awaken the powers of ayahuasca to conjure imagined cartographies and recover the language of the ancestors.<sup>16</sup> Later, in “Fibras de oralidad” (Fibers of orality), coca leaves (*Erythroxylum coca*) help medicine women retrieve extinct words and revive a language that expresses the voice and suffering of the forest: “The healers sing and their voices disseminate calm. / Their cadences are records of the forest that is emptying” (33).<sup>17</sup> Pedro Favaron highlights the role of this *planta maestra* (master plant) in guiding healers, or *maestros visionarios* (visionaries masters), as they safeguard ancestral knowledge and practices vital to the continuity of their communities.<sup>18</sup> These examples reaffirm the legitimacy of Indigenous worldviews

<sup>15</sup> In “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” Viveiros de Castro has also written on such fluid and interconnected relations within the framework of Amerindian perspectivism and the decentering of the human to allow engagement with other subjectivities, realities, and ontologies.

<sup>16</sup> Ícaros are sacred melodies that shamans learn from the spirits of plants while in a trance. These songs serve various purposes, including protection, healing, and guidance

<sup>17</sup> “Cantan las curanderas y sus voces diseminan la calma. / Sus cadencias son registros de la floresta que se agota.”

<sup>18</sup> Pedro Favaron also notes that two other master plants widely used in the Amazon are tobacco (*Nicotina tabacum*) and floripondio or *toé* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*). For further discussion of on

and practices, long marginalized, whose teaching potential has fostered more effective ecological practices (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018).

Ayahuasca and other plants are also invoked in response to immediate and pressing dangers. In “Periferias” (Peripheries), the plant is administered to ease the suffering of a woman who has ingested contaminated water, likely poisoned with mercury, a toxic metal referenced in “Sonidos” (Sounds) and commonly employed in artisanal gold mining to separate the mineral from stone. In “Pasajeros” (Passengers), the smoke of burning tobacco leaves, compared to the pages of an open book, carries warnings of epidemics, illegal timber trafficking, and the invasive presence of dredgers along the riverbanks. The final image of “selvas asediadas por petroleras” (“jungles besieged by oil companies;” 45) captures the rupture of ecological balance, transforming forests, cultural practices, and local knowledge into extractable commodities. This commodification is most evident in “Incongruencias” (Incongruity).

Incongruous lines of docks that are shacks  
announced cartographies of concrete constructions  
hammocks, huts, and advertisement of plant tourism

Yajé,<sup>19</sup> you get lost in the chaos of urban retail  
so frequently reinvented for the living well.  
I see you fractured in geometries of psychedelic paintings.

Yajé—thinking plant—who would have thought that in imagined tropics  
you make the weak, the powerful speak.

(*Estancias* 36)<sup>20</sup>

As the title announces, ayahuasca in this context is stripped of its ceremonial framework and spiritual significance, becoming yet another commodity for export. Iquitos, once the epicenter of the rubber boom, reemerges as a site of extraction and external consumption, now repurposed for vegetal tourism. Amanda Smith has drawn parallels between the rubber boom and ayahuasca’s rise in global markets, noting that this tourism economy disproportionately benefits outsiders while continuing to marginalize local Indigenous communities. These communities contribute “often unacknowledged and uncompensated Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous labor,” which ultimately serves to the consumption by others (Smith 145). Moreover, efforts to make ayahuasca’s teachings accessible to outsiders seeking self-discovery and spiritual healing replicate colonial logics of exploitation and extraction,

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ayahuasca and shamanism, see Andrew Gray, *The Last Shaman* (1997), Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, *Ver, saber, poder: chamanismo de los yagua de la Amazonía peruana* (1998), and Stephen Beyer, *Singing to the Plants* (2009).

<sup>19</sup>Yajé is the term used for the ayahuasca plant in regions of Ecuador and Colombia.

<sup>20</sup> “Varaderos incongruentes de líneas que son caseríos / cartografías anunciadas de progresivos cementos / hamacas, malocas y propagandas de turismo vegetal. / Yajé, te pierdes en un caos de comercio urbano, / tantas veces reinventado para el buen vivir. / Te veo fragmentado en geometrías de pintas psicodélicas. / Yajé —planta pensante—quien diría que en trópicos imaginados / haces hablar a los débiles, a los poderosos.”

now rebranded under the rhetoric of *buen vivir*.<sup>21</sup> In the poem, Varela Tafur interrogates this commercialization, exposing how an experience once sacred has been reduced to a consumable product.

### Trees and Other Sacrifice Zones

The commodification of nature has been a persistent process in Latin America, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing today through large-scale extractive activities, often at significant social and ecological cost to local communities. In “Santa Cecilia,” from her first book, images of raging fires and men weeping over their lost crops capture the struggles of riverine communities, confronted with limited opportunities, and the dramatic reshaping of forestlands to accommodate intensive extractive activities. The poem references the widespread cultivation of oil palm plantations and how it has led to the destruction of primary forests: “The clearing of the forest delayed / endless fires and / illusions were tossed / from the oil palms” (13).<sup>22</sup> The closing image of a photograph of “the gringa Marilyn” hanging on the wall of a dilapidated bar stands as the lone testament to the unfulfilled promises of development in the Peruvian Amazon.

While Varela Tafur has previously written about the extractivist tradition in the Amazon—one that has exploited natural resources and cheap labor for the benefit of others—the imagery in *Estancias* convey a heightened urgency not present in her earlier work. In “Cuerpos de madera” (Wooden bodies), the poem opens with neatly cut and organized tree trunks floating down the river and headed to a local sawmill, where they are transformed into furniture and trinkets to satisfy the demands of a consumerist society: “Men cut trees and manufacture necessities: / municipal armchairs, bedside tables, altars, / pictures, sideboards, souvenirs for tourists” (17).<sup>23</sup> The poem compares the once-living shihuahuacos trees (*Dipteryx micrantha*) to trunks resembling motionless alligators sunbathing downstream or caskets drifting with the current. It concludes with the poetic voice reminding the reader of what these trees once were and represented for their ecosystems before their commodification: “The millenary shihuahuacos were bird shelters. / Now laminated and in order as final links / of an extractive chain” (17).<sup>24</sup> Here, as in “Santa Cecilia,”

<sup>21</sup> Roughly translated as living well, the concept of *buen vivir* originates in the Ecuadorian Constitution, which envisions “a new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature, to reach el buen vivir, el *sumac kawsay*” (cited in Walsh 188). In principle, *el buen vivir* rejects the notion of progress or wellbeing based on consumption, advocating instead for a relational understanding of life grounded in harmony with nature. In her poem, Varela Tafur appears to question this concept by highlighting the commodification of an experience that has been detached from its original meaning and context.

<sup>22</sup> “El desbosque demoró / incendios interminables y / las ilusiones se aventaban / desde las palmas aceiteras.”

<sup>23</sup> “Los hombres cortan árboles y fabrican necesidades: / sillones municipales, mesitas de noche, altares, / cuadros, aparadores, souvenirs para turistas.”

<sup>24</sup> “Eran refugios de aves los milenarios shihuahuacos. / Ahora laminados y en orden son eslabones finales / de una cadena extractiva.”

the poem offers a pointed critique of the relentless exploitation of nature and its impact on the larger ecosystem.

“Nocturno sol” (Nocturnal sun) synthesizes Varela Tafur’s alarm that the rampant deforestation of the Amazon may lead to irreparable ecological loss, a loss that, reaching a turning point, will leave only shadows.

Early in the morning the chainsaws resound.  
Their dynamics work like a storm.  
In their constant high sound there are pieces of clouds.  
The ants build non-timber houses.  
Early the sun hurries the ritual of cutting.  
A flare of lights pierces the trunks as it passes.  
Radiant are the knives sharp in their certainty.  
Men adjust the cutting machines.  
A treeless forest is a nocturnal sun.  
It disappears into the night and we see only its shadow.

(*Estancias* 26)<sup>25</sup>

Here, the early, repetitive noise of chainsaws announces another day of destruction—methodical in its task and rapidly advancing deforestation. In a kind of poetic onomatopoeia, the poem’s acoustic effect evokes the electric buzz of the saws. In the opening line, the repeated *r* in “Temprano las motosierras suenan” mimics the mechanical drone of machinery, amplifying the sound of destruction. Later, the focus shifts to the blades, sophisticated engines of deforestation, highlighting the accelerated pace of extraction as part of a broader exploitative chain flowing through rivers and sawmills and ultimately reaching international markets. The poem concludes with a desolate image of the forest reduced to shadows, suggesting that what was once full of life and sound now lingers only as a memory.

Yet, amid this bleak landscape, a sense of hope emerges. In “Temporada de purmas” (Season of purmas), attention turns to abandoned farmlands and forested areas reduced to wood chips, discarded logs, and ashes following a major disruption in the extractive chain. Over time, these landscapes slowly regenerate as secondary forests, gradually restoring ecological balance and biodiversity. “El suelo necesita tiempo’—recuerdo la lección” (“‘The soil needs time’—I remember the lesson”; 16), notes the poetic voice, highlighting the quiet resilience of plants in restoring balance and life.<sup>26</sup> Varela Tafur’s depiction of the purmas resonates with Emanuele Coccia’s idea of mixture as the basis for ontological infinite regeneration, as well as with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s theory—exemplified in her study of the matsutake mushrooms—that life can reappear in new forms after environmental disturbance, symbolizing adaptability and coexistence forged out of unlikely collaborations.

<sup>25</sup> “Temprano las motosierras suenan. / Su dinámica funciona como una tormenta. / En su alto sonido constante hay pedazos de nubes. / Las hormigas construyen casas no maderables. / Temprano el sol apura el ritual del corte. / Una llamarada de luces atraviesa los troncos a su paso. / Radiantes están los cuchillos álgidos en su certeza. / Los hombres ajustan las máquinas cortadoras. / Un bosque sin árboles es un nocturno sol. / Desaparece hacia la noche y solo vemos su sombra.”

<sup>26</sup> Purmas are unused agricultural lands that undergo a natural process of regeneration, forming secondary forests that help restore native vegetation. They support biodiversity and contribute to soil recovery.

### As a Way of Conclusion: Can Poetry Save the World?

In an essay on Brazilian poet Josely Vianna Baptista, Malcolm McNee revisits John Felstiner's question about the potential of poetic expression to respond to the escalating ecological crisis: "Can poetry save the Earth?" (quoted in McNee 76). While Felstiner's response is ambivalent, McNee considers this question within the broader context of Environmental Humanities to argue the potential of poetry to decolonize ontologies "that inhibit our environmental imagination" (77). In the specific case of Vianna Baptista, McNee contends that her poetry constructs a "pluriversed landscape"—"not as a rejection of a scientific way of environmental knowledge, but as a form of environmental discourse and representation that is resistant to reductive, universalizing notions of the world" (81). I find this idea particularly persuasive, as Varela Tafur engages in a similar endeavor through images and metaphors that reveal countless connections to the territory, extending beyond geographical reference to engage with the stories and experiences of its human and non-human inhabitants. Her work thus develops from an empathetic and experiential approach that expands on conventional views of nature and affirms the interconnectedness of all beings and their shared destiny.

Through a thoughtful interplay of conceptual and poetic language—at times direct and descriptive, at others evocative and sensorial, Varela Tafur's poems invite the reader to rethink dominant paradigms, consider alternative subjectivities and new forms of relationality, and recognize ways of knowing and thinking that elude scientific frameworks or resist reductive representations of the natural world. Her stanzas often return to the rubber period, revisiting the trauma and legacy of violence and dispossession that continue to affect communities, now reconfigured by new extractive industries. Within this entanglement, vegetal life offers a model for open and solidaristic relationships with the environment and with others. Her poems also foreground what is at stake, not only for ecosystems but for humanity itself, as result of these complex and infinite interconnections. "We depend on the life of others" (47), reminds Coccia, underscoring the fragile system that sustains our existence. While poetry may not have the power to save the world, Varela Tafur's work makes visible the magnitude of what is lost through deforestation and ecological degradation: relationships, forms of existence, spiritual practices, and lived experiences whose disappearance would be irretrievable. Her poetry compels us not only to acknowledge this loss but also to respond.

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