

Selection of “This is Not an Apricot” and the Poem “The Umbragiade”

Maria Thereza Alves

Artist

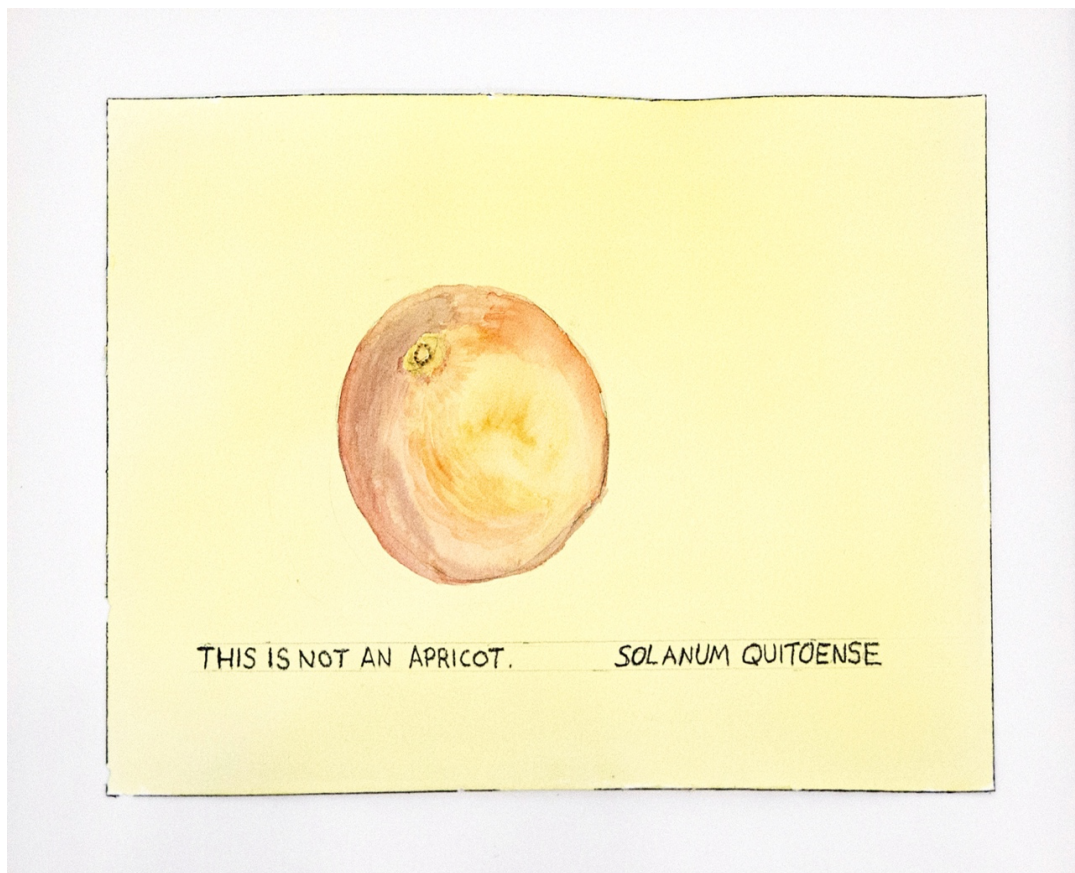
studio@mariatherezaalves.org

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.2.5986>

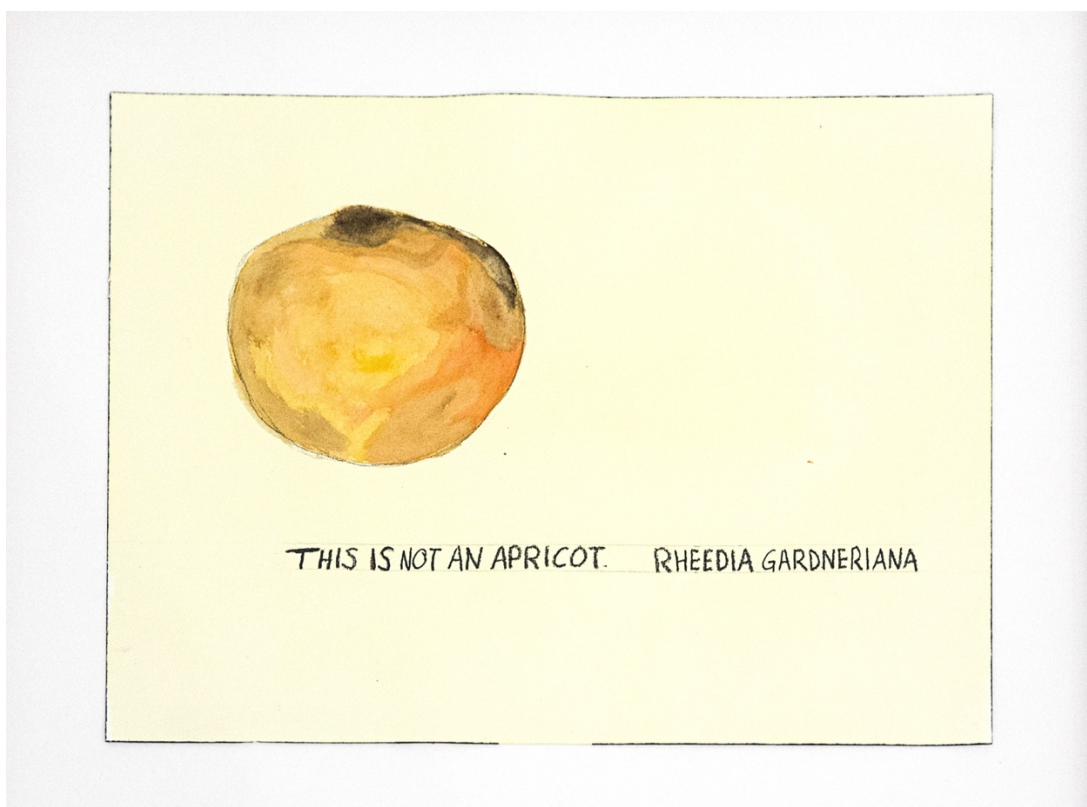
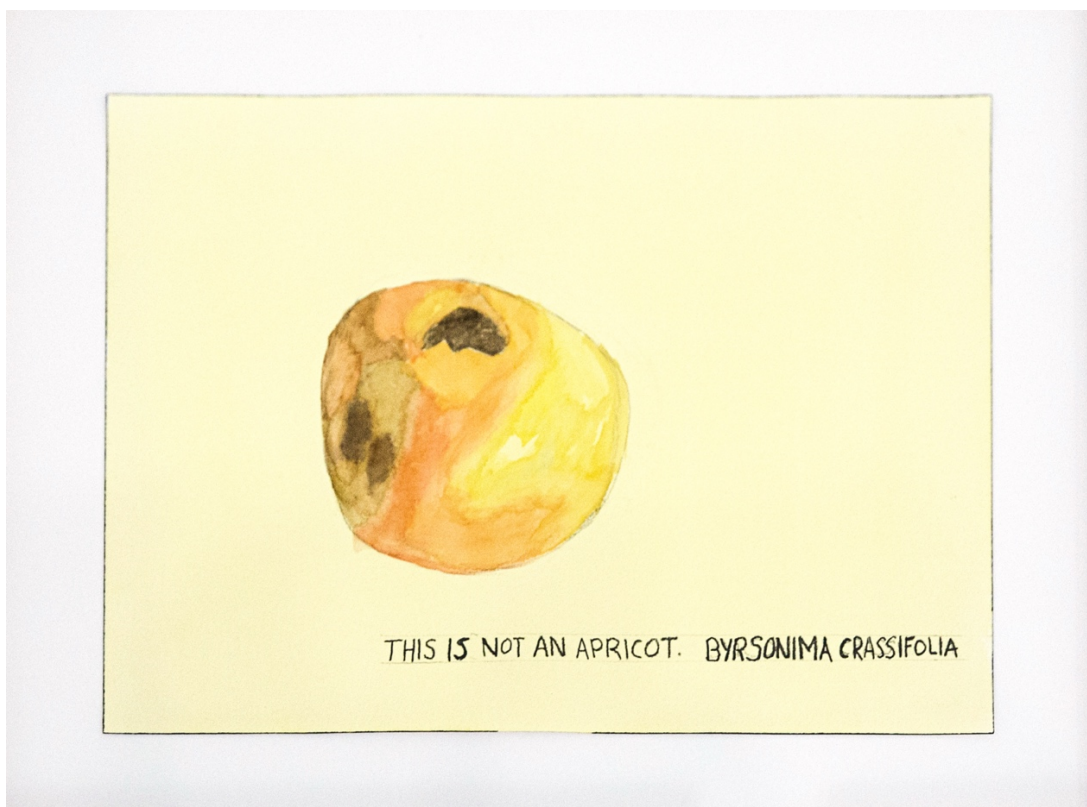
© All rights reserved

Selection of “This is Not an Apricot”¹

In a market in Manaus in the Amazon, Alves asked a fruit marker seller the names of the fruits in his stand. They were round—all very different and each time he said they were apricots. And none of them were. They were all Indigenous fruits, and he had no idea what they might be called.



¹ 20 watercolor paintings on paper; 26 x 36 cm (each), 2009.





THIS IS NOT AN APRICOT. EUGENIA TOMENTOSA



THIS IS NOT AN APRICOT. HEXACHLAMYS EDULIS

The Umbragiade

Prologue

I live in Europe and read the stories, histories, myths, and traditional poems belonging to here. I am particularly fond of the epics and read some of these back in school while living in New York. In contrast to this, there are hardly any epic poems that survived the colonial invasion of the Americas. This has negatively affected the dissemination of Indigenous voices.

In 2017, I went to the Amazonian city of Rio Branco in the state of Acre in Brazil and interviewed thirty-three forest agents and one organizer from the AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of the State of Acre). “The Umbragiade” is an epic poem based on these interviews, which were originally made for the 19-channel video installation To See the Forest Standing, commissioned for the exhibition Disappearing Legacies: The World as Forest, curated by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin.² In 2020, I invited my friend Xanupa Apurinã of the Apurinã people to contribute to this epic poem and she conducted an interview with Lina Apurinã, a student of agroecology at the Federal Institute of Brasília.

The forest agents come from various reservations throughout the state of Acre and belong to different Indigenous peoples, such as the Huni Kuin, the Shanenawa, the Asháninka, the Shāwādawa, the Yawanawá, the Katukina, the Nupiquin, the Poyanawá, and the Nawa, among others. All have survived genocide campaigns, first by the Portuguese and then by Brazilians.

The AMAAIAC’s mandate is to preserve forested areas on Indigenous lands. It is also a place for experimentation and for the exchange of ideas and techniques for more efficient agroforestry methods, particularly for areas that have been heavily deforested and destroyed by non-Indigenous settlers. Many of the peoples of these reservations, particularly those where major highways were built to deliberately divide up land, have continuous confrontations and problems with gold miners, ranchers, loggers, monocrop plantation owners, and hunters, as well as with the ongoing colonization program by the INCRA (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform). Forest agents are elected by their communities and are responsible, through community consensus, for managing reforestation, overseeing animal life, sustainable farming; for the protection of water sources, promoting the biodiversity of fauna and flora, and caring for archaeological sites, as well as for organizing environmental education programs for settlers in order to protect the land from further destruction.

The AMAAIAC has more than 200 forest agents on 204 reservations who are protectors and custodians of 2,439,982 hectares of forest (a land area almost the size of Belgium). Forest agents are not recognized by the Brazilian government and receive no regular income for their labor. Yet they are at the front line for maintaining the possibility that Brazil, and indeed the wider world, might have a future. Some are even killed for their efforts, as Paulo Paulino Guajajara from the state of Maranhão was in 2019. Poá Katukina, previous president of the AMAAIAC, reminds us: “We have dedicated ourselves to seeing that the forest stands.”

The night is the grandmother.
Because at night she comes and enriches the carbon dioxide,
and the trees are glad as well.
The grandmother drinks the morning dew
that comes from the tree, not those close to the creek.
The grandmothers drink the water from the morning dew.
That is how they sustain themselves.
And the grandfather, he is our food,
what we reap, eat, and kill.
They are the animals that give their lives to the ones who are still living.
We kill so that their life can give life to the living.
If you harvest the cassava root,
it was once alive, but we reap it from the earth, cook it,
and eat it, so the cassava gives its life to the human beings. (17)

Before, we thought that the forest would go on forever,
that we would never run out of fish,
and the rivers would never dry up.
It never crossed our minds that the river could become dirty. (16)

When the whites came the Age of *Correrias* [runnings] –
of the many *correrias* began,
where the Indians were massacred.
These *correrias* I am talking about –
what were called *correria* in the past –
were when the white people came to Indigenous areas
and would start to massacre the Indians.
To kill...
They killed the men and took the women away.
This was part of the *correria*. (12)

Then came the Age of Captivity.
It was when the rubber barons arrived.
They brought too many problems for my relatives.
The rubber barons did not want my relatives to do things the way they did,
or to live the way they did.
The rubber barons simply arrived and started bossing around.
You either worked or hit the road,
or else they would try to kill you. (33)

During the Age of Captivity, my grandfather,
he was a leader during that time.
Now, I am of the fourth generation,
my role is to protect and plant on our land,
and to protect our nature and medicine...
so we can make ourselves stronger and learn more and more. (24)

There was great suffering in the Age of Captivity
because Indigenous people were expelled

many times from their localities
to somewhere else.
So much so that nowadays there are many people on other territories,
So much so that they were decimated,
they were...
Yes, they started running away, because of the pressure,
because of the massacre. (19)

And we were forced to speak Portuguese
because they would not let us speak
our language. (21)

And then after the Captivity, they...
they cleared much of the forest
for cattle,
for large plantations,
and they did not use the land more than once.
Just once, and then it was over. (21)

In that past, there were no more plants.
Now we have our plants, the *Cupuaçu* trees. (23)

Without the forest, we are nothing.
The forest is our life, you see?
The forest... (29)

When my grandfather's generation arrived on Indigenous land –
my grandfather is 107 years old –
he arrived here with 70 people.
Seventy people...
Today we have more than 900 people.
But it was a struggle...
There were only 70 Shanenawa people left.
Our elders fought
to take this piece of land.
In the past,
the ranchers lived here,
and there were many hurdles we had to overcome.
Our Indigenous land was poor, because of these ranchers.
But that is a long story.
My grandfather is a great warrior.
I am his grandson. And today we reforest. (12)

I was born and raised in the forest
and I live in the forest to this day.
I really like the forest,
I love it, a lot.
To me, the forest...
is my spirit.

And Indigenous people,
we consider the forest to be our home
because the forest protects us.
The forest is our shelter,
it shades us from the sun,
and allows us to live, drink, and breathe well.
The air is good and it was God who gave it to us.
So, for me, the forest comes first. (33)

We consider the forest to be our home,
the land, our father,
the water, our mother.
And...
the others as well, as I have said –
fish,
the animals we hunt –
they are our family too,
because they live here
alongside us.
We need them,
we use them as well,
but we use them carefully.
As I said,
we have to take them into consideration.
We cannot think only about ourselves,
we have to think about ourselves, our children and grandchildren.
We, Indigenous persons, that is how we think,
that is how we work.
Thinking about all of our families
is the best thing we can do for ourselves. (33)

After the demarcation of Indigenous lands
came the delimitation of the territories,
meaning we could no longer move from one place to the other
even though our land is small.
The entire land is already delimited,
everything is already owned by someone. (16)

Before that, we used to migrate from river to river.
Whenever game or fish became scarce,
we would simply go to a different river, a different place. (27)

We are currently living in a small space,
and so there was a need to plan the use of the forest resources.
We had to think about how to maintain
and how to use
the little land we have,
how to do it wisely,
and, by doing so, how to keep the forests,

the game animals, and the rivers. (16)

We plant
Palm trees, Cashew trees, Orange trees... everything.
We do it
because we want to draw the animals closer.
And if we don't do it,
our children will never know these animals. (32)

Today our biggest problem are the ranches.
People deforest
the land around them. (4)

People come to hunt our game...
come onto our land,
taking our game out, taking our animals from inside,
taking our fish from inside. (15)

In the Indigenous territories...
there is Indigenous land confronted
on the upper side by one ranch
and on the lower side by another ranch.
Our land is right in the middle.
We have been suffering from these environmental impacts. (4)

Particularly around where the riverside peasant farmers live.
Where you need to leave a riparian area for the animals to feed –
turtles, fishes, caimans –
that is where you can find many of the animals of our region.
We are very concerned about this,
because as soon as the farmers receive welfare money,
they buy some cattle.
As they get more cattle, the clearings get larger,
and they are getting bigger all the time. (18)

This also causes the silting of our river,
which for us is our road. (14)

You reap and you sow,
and you will reap,
what you have sown.
Nature is already there, planted.
We just need to know how to take care of it.
But it will make no difference if you take care of it,
if a random person – the white people, the *nawás* –
then illegally extracts timber
to build houses.
So, it makes no difference. (10)

If it were not for the forests, there is no “us,” there is no life.
Without the forests, there is no water. (34)

Although the BR-364, the federal road, has invaded our land,
anyone leaving the city will see
that forests only stand within demarcated Indigenous lands.
Before arriving on Indigenous land, all you see is cattle and pasture.
And then you arrive on Indigenous land and you can see the forest,
preserved. (27)

When I am in the middle of the forest
I am fine,
I am at home, I am with the elements
that are living beings.
There is so much life here;
I am working for life now.
It’s not a life like “us,”
but a life
that gives life too,
that enriches life.
So, all of these are life.
They came from life.
It is not different from any other life.
It needs to be cared for
in order to maintain this
temperature...
which feels so good... doesn’t it?
I feel it. (1)

The women are making things with the seeds from various Palm trees,
such as *Cocão-da-mata*, *Murumuru*, *Urucuri*, *Jarina*, *Pupunha*.
All we think about
is what we see around us. (17)

So, this is a *Cacao* tree.
It gives us food,
you can make a juice out of it
and you can make chocolate with the seeds.
And right beside it, I will plant
a *Cupuaçu* tree
and a *Ceiba* tree, (28)

which we can use to make roofs for our houses.
But it will be useful for the animals too,
because they will feed there and come closer to
Indigenous land. (10)

I will plant a Starfruit tree
and what else...

close to the Açaí palm. (28)

We also have a land-use plan, in our Asháninka community.
We are eighty families and each family can use three plots –
one for cassava, another for bananas, and the other one for vegetables –
to plant these kinds of things.
So each family can use three plots,
planting on two at a time, leaving one fallow.
You use the plots for one year and after the harvest,
you let the forest grow back again.
After three years, you can plant in the same plot again,
without having to clear another area. (3)

Our land, Katukina land, is surrounded by land projects,
by INCRA (the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian
Reform),
by the people from RESEX (Extractive Reserve),
and by the BR-364 federal highway, which cuts
through our land, with
branch roads that encircle our land. (15)

*Come, come warrior,
with your enchantment of the ayahwasca power.
Come, come warrior.
Bring your enchantment.
Come teach us.
She is a warrior
and mother of the forest.
She is a warrior and mother of the forest,
and brings the enchantment of the Nexie and the Kawa.
I am calling the
warrior of the forest.
Her enchantment will cure us.*

Vou chamar a India Guerriera [I Will Call the Indian Warrior]

The land is forever and the people are forever.
It can't be changed, it can't be exchanged for another land.
This is ours... ours.
It is ours. (15)

There is, however, a large portion of society
that still sees the Amazon forest as an opportunity for making money.
They are greedy for iron ore,
for timber
for cattle
for soy
for crude oil

and for hydroelectric dams.
It is really bad for us.
That is really bad for us,
very bad for humanity. (16)

There is a vine called *Pytxuni*.
The plant, the *Rainha* [the Queen], remains far away,
and we are bringing her closer.
We are doing all this...
planting more.
Because there are many things in our village
that are becoming extinct
and we are recovering them. (2)

There are also some health issues
such as malnutrition and others.
Health agents talk to us a lot about malnutrition,
which is a problem of many Puru Indigenous peoples:
Huni Kuin, Kulina, Madija...
And this critical situation is a result of the lack of food.
And the health agents say this is the main reason
for the deaths of children in my area.
When it comes to health issues, many have died because
of this. (30)

The government, it is not even trying
to help the Indigenous population.
It wants to destroy Indigenous lands.
Because we are nature's refuge,
because we plant.
And we don't demand anything from nature.
But nature will demand what is due
if we destroy it. (10)

My grandmother, she wants to teach.
She told us she wants to teach the world
about what her ancestors used to do,
so that we, Yawanaw., don't lose our customs.
So, in order for us to be here today,
our language, our customs,
they are our records.
If I only speak the language of the whites,
I will not be considered an Indian anymore.
I might be enslaved, or hurt,
because I no longer speak my language,
because I lost my tradition. (26)

The demarcation of Huni Kuin land, the Caicho, was a difficult process;
it was really hard to get our own land.

It was by no means easy to secure the Igarapé do Caucho Indigenous territory.
We began with reforestation, replanting some areas.
We did that so that we could attract birds,
bringing some parakeets and other small animals closer to us. (9)

Beyond keeping the plants standing, we need to understand how they function in their environment. How do we work with them in this environment? Our commitment is to study them. I do not mean study them by writing several texts, or making scientific studies, or researching their molecules. No, I mean, to observe how they function. Are the fruits growing? If not, is there a bird that is disappearing due to lack of food? Is something in excess? Our principal commitment beyond maintaining the plants is to study and understand them. How do their cycles work and the interactions around them? So as not to cause any disequilibrium, which would also affect us and our future autonomy. (35)

All this care for the plants comes from popular knowledge. It comes from traditional knowledge that is a science. All this management is a science. It is a science that dates back hundreds of years. It has always been improved by our grandparents, great-grandparents, great-greatgrandparents, cousins, aunts, granduncles. All of this knowledge is there. Based on the observations of the elders we come to conclusions and build other conclusions, but some things you cannot change. You need to observe not only your necessities, but also the surroundings of vegetation of that environment to find out the necessities of their future. You extract without destroying the relationship with the future. (35)

Today... a document comes,
the Brazilian government makes a law, a decree...
making changes
for Indigenous peoples and their lands.
They want to bring an end to our lands, to take our lands,
to get rid of Indigenous people.
Indigenous people belong here... the Brazilians only came here...
Brazilians are not the owners of the land.
We belong to this land.
In that time, the time of Pedro Álvares Cabral,
they found Indigenous people living here already. (15)
But, if we destroy our land, if we destroy the woods, the forests,
we will no longer have native game animals, or native birds like
the macaw.
And we need them... So we are really trying to help, and helping
them to survive.
The smell coming from the forests is clear, we breathe it in.
But where forests have been cut down, the air is too hot –
we cannot handle it, we cannot live well in these conditions.
Nowadays, human beings try to destroy the Earth, to destroy

the forests.

But the Indians, well, the Indians, we... well, we don't even have land. (34)

So, with the new law, they can come in,
come inside with roads... railroads.
And with this comes the hindering of children's social life,
of women's lives,
abuse,
even the rape of Indigenous women, quite often... (19)

If we follow this path, all of us will be...
the whole of humanity will be lost.
So, this is the time for us to learn from the experience
of Indigenous peoples.
We will only be able to live better side by side
if we help one another.
The forest helps us and we help the forest.
I notice that the big cities
in the big countries, they have lost this.
They only see the forest as an opportunity,
not as an exchange. (16)

But this is the fight!
We cannot stand still...
We have to
get ready to fight, to discuss
how we are going to be...
the Brazilian population...
about getting together, in unity, to prevent...
The Indigenous, we Indigenous people... we are human beings.
Indigenous people and the *nawás*
have only one blood. (15)

How can it be?
Why did these politicians make this law
to destroy Indigenous people?
Their land...
to bring an end to their land?
Taking the woods from Indigenous people.
Killing Indigenous people. (15)

I feel sad...
How are we going to be?
How are we going to live?
Are we going to live that time we have already lived?
The Age of Captivity?
Are we going to live like that?
Suffering as in the Age of Captivity.

We have been through that time.
Today... we live in peace. (15)

Many men and women
and children
are joining in,
so we can organize ourselves,
improve ourselves,
survive and stay,
look after, plant, create.
And valorize our culture, our language,
our painting, our dance, our rituals,
our shamanism,
our traditional medicine,
our forest.
Because
we know where we want to live –
inside the forest,
with fresh air, with clean water.
On the good land for planting,
with so many seeds, so much forest,
lots of energy, lots of spirituality.
And we *are* living.
We cannot survive without it,
we cannot live. (6)

That is why we agroforestry agents,
we want to be acknowledged.
We are environmental educators,
we are teachers,
we are tough,
we are a young leadership, prepared
to confront this bigger political culture:
the businessmen, the farmers, the fishermen,
the gold miners. (6)

I believe
that the future we have in mind
involves respect from our government
and from those who support us.
That they would actually consider and begin to respect us,
allow us to have control over the area,
so that we could prevent people
from committing these kinds of mistakes –
of cattle ranching and taking
our timber and animals away. (29)

The land for us is...
the land is like a mother.
A mother is someone you take care of.
A mother is someone you do not trade for anything.
So the land is like this, for us. (19)

And we want to keep our forest standing and to make it larger.
We care because the world is getting more worried about the climate,
there is much concern about climate change.
The people, the white people, they began to worry not so long ago,
while we have been thinking about it for thousands of years.
Until this day, we take care of the forest,
to keep the forest standing – so that we can breathe and
live healthily. (27)

Well, the future I see is these Açaí palms,
these nuts, this Bacaba,
all loaded with fruits,
so as to bring over our bees, and our own food too,
our kids,
and so that whoever comes to our land will see
how we are doing forest recovery work. (21)

The words are from interviews (1-34 and a song) conducted with agroforestry agents from AMAAIAC (The Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of Acre) by Maria Thereza Alves in Rio Branco, Acre, in 2017. Interview 35 was conducted by Xanupa Apurina in Rio Branco in 2020.

Sources

The poem's lines are composed from interviews with agroforestry agents from AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of Acre) conducted by Maria Thereza Alves in Rio Branco, Acre, in 2017 (numbered 1–34). Interview 35 was conducted by Xanupa Apurinã in Rio Branco in 2020. The song extract “Vou chamar a Índia Guerriera” [I Will Call the Indian Warrior] is by Yube Huni Kuin of Terra Indígena (TI) Rio Humaitá

1. Busã
Huni Kuin people
Terra Indígena (TI) Katukina/Kaxinawá

2. Pupua
Nukini people
TI Nukini

3. Pyãko
Asháninka people

TI Asháninka do Rio Amônia

4. Isaka

Huni Kuin people

TI Igarapé do Caucho

5. Ibatsai

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

6. Maná

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

7. Muru Inu Bake

Huni Kuin people

TI Alto Purus

8. Siã

Huni Kuin people

TI Colônia 27

9. Ninawá Huru Bacã

Huni Kuin people

TI Igarapé do Caucho

10. Siã

Shanenawa people

TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

11. Dasu Hurá Bacã.

Huni Kuin people

TI Alto Rio Purus

12. Busã

Shanenawa people

TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

13. Mashã

Huni Kuin people

TI Katukina/Kaxinawá

14. Yuvãna Shãwã

Shãwãdawa people

TI Arara

15. Kaku

Katukina people

TI Campinas/Katukina

16. Yube

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

17. Kakã Kashu Bané

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá de Nova Olinda

18. Yaki Hurá Bacã

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

19. Yaká

Shãwãdawa people

TI Arara

20. Yura

Shawanawá people

TI Arara

21. Yawa Kushu

Yawanawá people

TI Yawanawá do Rio Gregório

22. Shawã Katê

Shawanaw. people

TI Arara

23. Tene

Huni Kuin people

TI Alto Jordão

24. Shamyá

Huni Kuin people

TI Kaxinawá do Seringal

Independência

25. Paka

Katukina people

TI Rio Gregório

26. Tmaií

Yawanawá people

TI Rio Gregório

27. Poá Katukina and Nawá Sharu

Nupikuin people

TI Campina/Katukina

28. Xidu
Poyanawá people
TI Poyanawá

29. Siã
Huni Kuin people
TI Curralinho

30. Naximar
Huni Kuin people
TI Alto Rio Purus

31. Shawã Dxuyda
Shawanawá people
TI Arara

32. Keã Hura Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá Praia do Carapanã

33. Bané Hurá Bacã
Huni Kuin people
TI Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão

34. Yube
Huni Kuin people
TI Rio Humaitá

35. Lina Apurinã
Apurinã people
TI Camicuã