

# The Stanzas of Ana Varela Tafur



Marcos Colón<sup>1</sup>

## BOOK REVIEW

Tafur, Ana Varela. *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa*. Lima: Pakarina, 2022. 70p. ISBN 978612429694

---

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. in Spanish and Portuguese Cultural Studies. Professor at Florida State University. ORCID: 0000-0002-2975-4696. Email: mcolon@fsu.edu

I am from a forest, from its wetlands', says the first line of the first poem of the book *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* [The Stanzas of Emilia Tangoa], by Peruvian poet Ana Varela. Straight away, the lyrical subject situates us in the coordinates of this poem. Forest and wetlands: denseness of trees, greenery, sun and shade, water that breeds life, the myriad of beings that inhabit the forest and wetland, everything we begin as and, despite our excesses, still are, nature itself animated with intelligence and sensibility thanks to this fertile engendering capacity.

This collection of poems is essentially about this, the life that gives us the natural evolution of the earth, the uses and abuses we make of this cardinal gift that is natural existence. This is *ecopoetry*, but in its most powerful sense: one that seeks to restore harmony between humans and non-humans, through the search for 'buen vivir' (good living) and the critique of excesses that disrupt the balance of life. The poems that make up *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa*, as if in a vast mosaic, assemble piece by piece the landscape of a natural environment where Indigenous peoples have existed since time immemorial, with which they have coexisted through the ages, developing an essential culture and knowledge to enable not only their survival and evolution, but the sustenance of the world. However, we have not been able to prevent the invasion of certain hallmarks of civilization that endanger not only the survival of these subjects who have coexisted with nature but also the very subsistence of the latter. With simple, direct language, as if naming what she finds around her in order to establish and preserve it in her memory, the poet offers us an overview of the prolific Amazonian world.

Varela has sought to capture nature in its immense multiplicity, its reciprocity with human beings and at the same time how, due to excessive appropriation, this relationship can lead to the chaotic destruction of the environment and, consequently, of human beings themselves. To achieve this the author essentially relies on two methods: description and enumeration. The first is a verbal paintbrush that produces images of everything around us. Visualization is a key element for us to appropriate this environment with which we are presented:

Passing by an urban riverside I've seen herons  
on the edges of a ditch and lined up on drains.  
On the city margins they spread their wings and wait.  
They devote themselves to the ritual of looking at the sun,  
astute and ready to hurl themselves at leftovers.

The description implies a careful and suspicious gaze (also present in Leopoldo Bernucci's *Un Paraíso Sospechoso* [A Suspect Paradise], 2020) to detect what is significant for what is being said. The poet achieves this through her particular sensitivity to the environmental issues expressed by the poetic voice. Enumeration, for its part, is an effective way of bringing us closer to the multiplicity and vastness of the destructive environment to which she refers. Thus, Varela confronts us with a kind of natural catalogue, a verbal map that leads us through the dark corners of the forest:

Besieged lakes, currents, eddies,  
a confusion of banks, shoals, hollows,  
pools, red zones, high and low zones,  
floodplains, mining zones of permanent contraband,  
multitudes of victims in environmental disorder.

Nature is enunciated as one recites a rosary. Not only because of the transcendentalism of the theme but also because it is a way of drawing attention to the elements that make up this vital world. At the same time it is as if naming were a way of animating, rescuing, preserving the things and creatures of this multifaceted natural space.

Daily threats persist in your lacerated pores.  
Visible scars impregnate your wounded head.  
You are said to be covered in toxic algae  
triggered by oil spills.

The poet speaks to us about nature as an injured being, harmed by the inconsistent actions of the 'man of the Anthropocene'. How can we hurt what gives us life? This is the ethical principle that governs all the verbal recovery. The tension between humans and nature, read as 'nature and culture', is unresolved. It persists in

the process of subjugation or domination of natural forces, recreating and reviving the beginning of the never-ending story.

The poetic voice condemns the desire to ‘eat the world’ as Brazilian philosopher Ailton Krenak and the Yanomani shaman Davi Kopenawa admonishes the excessive consumption that erodes nature and subjugates humans to the consequences of this insatiable capitalist hunger. To top it all, even nature itself is adopted as a symbol to represent the opposite of this relationship. Thus the poet warns us: ‘Amazonas-Yacumama transnational region in danger./ Amazon, a corporate model invading the planet.’ We have reached the point where a company that is slowly devouring the planet goes by the same name as a vital space besieged by misappropriation. The irony of the bleak symbolism is painful. But the ludicrousness of another discrepancy between what is and what should be is even greater. Technology, a resource representing the development of intelligence to improve human well-being, is usually also complicit in environmental destruction.

The digital screen clears the water  
 in a global landscape for sale.  
 I watch the documentary with dead fish...  
 ... ..  
 I cross virtual liquids.  
 I turn off the television and its screen reveals  
 a documentary of agonies.

The natural environment has been assaulted with the spawn of technological advances, but now this simultaneously brings us closer to its devastating end. Aldo Leopold, not without criticism, reminds us: ‘We can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.’ The irony is great since, as Rob Nixon rightly questions in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, can we only be ethical with regard to what we see?

Sadness is a feeling that gradually takes hold of the reader as they make their way through Emilia Tangoa’s *Estancias*. The poet has sought to present us with not only the fertile versatility of nature and its contribution to human life but also the way in which our irrational method of appropriating it has resulted in separation,

sometimes turning us against one another. Thus: 'The ancient shihuahuacos were refuges of birds./ Now milled and stacked they are the final links/ of an extractive chain.' Everything has been transformed, to the detriment of the forest, by utilitarianism.

Nature is not only the origin of life but also of the ancient knowledge of the peoples who inhabit it and thus of culture. In their trade with nature, humans not only got to know it and learned how to use it for good, but they accumulated knowledge – which helped them to be in the world while they kept, and continue to keep, the Amazon rainforest standing.

The natural environment, in the case of this book of poems the tropical Amazon rainforest, has been the ideal context to find out who we are, what we are doing and where we are going. Humans, in their dealings with nature, are capable of deciphering the code of existence, managing to recreate the substance and evolution of the cosmos to turn it into symbols that explain, support and transform it. The forest, 'book of fantasies', says the poet: 'For some is a recycled Greek myth/ from classical antiquity and its radiant imagery,/ epic and word, emerging metaphor, Amazon.' Indeed, because nature conveys not only what it is, but what it can be, and takes us beyond the immediate. It is thus a myth and a metaphor, a symbolic world with which we apprehend and explain everything that is.

*Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* closes with a chilling canto to a city built on the possessive ambition that has overcome many human beings. Iquitos is the result of a company that rose up at the expense of pain and blood, of both humans and the environment. Its evolution is a reflection of much of what has happened on a global scale. So it is no coincidence that Ana Varela ends with a bold statement: 'Your *Belle Epoque* is over. Phantom beauty./ In these fleeting stanzas I am a version of you.' The book leaves us with a sensation of pain and warning. We could not hope for more: the sadness we have inflicted on nature, by interacting with it, we have also inflicted on ourselves. Perhaps this is what this book is trying to tell us.

## REFERENCES

Acosta, Alberto. *Buen vivir Sumak Kawsay: una oportunidad para imaginar otros mundos*. Editorial Abya-Yala, 2012.

Bernucci, Leopoldo M. *Un paraíso sospechoso: La vorágine de José Eustasio Rivera: novela e historia*. Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2020.

Colón, Marcos. “Amazonia, paraíso sob suspeição,” *Revista Cult*, August 26, 2020, <https://revistacult.uol.com.br/home/amazonia-paraíso-sob-suspeicao/>

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. 1949. New York: Ballantine (1970).

Kopenawa, Davi, and Bruce Albert. *The falling sky*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Krenak, Ailton. *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*. House of Anansi, 2020.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Recebido: 04/08/2023  
Aprovado: 08/11/2023