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Phytometamorphosis: An Ontology of Becoming in Amazonian Women's Poetry About Plants

Patricia Vieira

Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, 3000-995 Coimbra, Portugal; patricilmv@gmail.com

Abstract: Metamorphosis is central to Indigenous Amazonian cosmologies, which often posit a period in the past when transformations from one being into another proliferated. This time gave way to the relative stability of the present that always runs the risk of going back to an ongoing process of transmutation. In this article, I highlight the significance of plants in Amerindian ontologies of becoming as catalysts of metamorphic movements through their entheogenic effects, through their curative properties and as the ancestors and teachers of humans. Beyond being the facilitators of other entities' transformations and the virtual grandparents of all beings, plants are also masters of metamorphosis, displaying much more plasticity in adapting to their surroundings than animals. I argue that contemporary Amazonian women's poetry translates the multiple transformations of vegetal life into literary form. In many Amazonian Indigenous communities, women have traditionally been the ones responsible for plant cultivation, while, in Western societies, women are often associated to certain parts of plants, such as flowers, and to nature as a whole. In the article, I analyze the poetry of Colombian author Anastasia Candre Yamacuri (1962–2014) and Peruvian writer Ana Varela Tafur (1963-), who emphasize the metamorphic potential of plants and the ontology of becoming at play in Amazonia. I contend that women's writing on plants reflects evolving views on both plants' and women's roles in Amazonian societies, marked by rapid social transformation and environmental destruction.

Keywords: Amerindian perspectivism; critical plant studies; phyto-ontology; metamorphosis; Amazonian poetry; women's poetry; Anastasia Candre Yamacuri; Ana Varela Tafur

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1. An Ontology of Becoming

In many Amazonian Indigenous cosmologies, the remote past was a time when there were only human beings, who then transformed into all other entities in the world, including plants, animals, rivers, mountains and everything else in between. Present-day humans are those who remained closer to their original shape (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro 87–88) [1]. As Déborah Danowsky and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro point out, humanity was a "polynomic multitude; it presented itself from the beginning under the guise of internal multiplicity, the morphological externalization of which, that is to say, speciation, is precisely the matter of cosmogonic narratives" (92). The corollary to this notion of a primordial humanity is that all beings are, at bottom, still human underneath their more-than-human veneer, an insight that undergirds Viveiros de Castro's and Tânia Stolze Lima's concept of Amerindian perspectivism. For most Amazonian Indigenous peoples, each entity sees itself as human, both culturally and anatomically, and therefore has a perspective akin to that of human beings. All species consider themselves to be a form of humankind and regard all other species as part of the more-than-human realm.

Humanity, then, is only one of multiple humanities that inhabit the cosmos, each with its own take on reality.

Traits of Amerindian perspectivism often come through in contemporary Amazonian poetry. More-than-human beings frequently express their thoughts, concerns and wishes in poetic language, revealing their experiences or, more accurately, showcasing their worlds. More than a figure of speech, the personification of plants, animals and other beings in Amazonian texts points to a fundamental feature of Indigenous thought, namely the understanding of any environment as a community made up of a multiplicity of entities, whose representatives see themselves and their kin as humans. Interaction between species thus becomes an "international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*" and requires a "diplomatic negotiation or a war operation that should be conducted with the utmost circumspection. Cosmopolitics" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro 94, 96) [1]. By articulating the outlook of more-than-human beings in their poetry, Amazonian authors allow them to voice their perspective in a language humans can understand, and thus set the stage for cosmic diplomacy to play itself out. To be sure, humans can only speculate about more-than-human standpoints, but the effort to grasp these other outlooks is regarded as an essential, existential task.

Current humans and more than humans, with their specific points of view, are the result of a relative stabilization that put an end to a "time of regular metamorphosis", so that beings finally acquired the forms they have today: the present world "is conceived in some Amerindian cosmologies as the time that began when pre-cosmological beings stopped their incessant becoming-other (erratic metamorphoses, anatomic plasticity, 'disorganized' corporeality) in favor of greater ontological univocity" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro, 91) [1][1]. Indigenous rituals and practices, including rites of passage and shamanic ceremonies, are meant to reproduce what is, to "*affirm the ethnographic present*, to maintain it or recover it, not to 'grow', 'progress' or 'evolve'" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro, 104) [1]. Development or advancement are not desirable goals, given that they might destabilize the fragile balance of the world.

Reality harbors a "potential of infinite transformability", and it behooves humans to prevent the "regressive and chaotic proliferation of transformations" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro 91, 92) [1]. Danger lurks in the "humanoid latency of non-humans [. . . that] threatens to erupt through the tears opened in the fabric of the everyday [. . .] violently reabsorbing humans in the cosmological substratum where all differences continue to communicate chaotically amongst themselves" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro 92–93) [1]. When the world ends, "animals will again be human, like they were in mythical times: dogs, chicken, wild animals, will all speak our language again, in a regressive de-speciation that will bring us back to the original chaos" (Danowsky and Viveiros de Castro 105) [1]. Present-day humans, then, should aim to stave off the anarchy of the apocalypse, or, in the pithy formulation of Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, to prevent the sky from falling on our heads [2].

Danowski and Viveiros de Castro point out that the rule in Amerindian mythologies is recurring apocalypses (104). Planetary annihilations "are periodic phenomena, part of large cycles of destruction and recreation of humanity and the world" (101). But, if the end of the world is a periodic phenomenon that opens the path towards the formation of new worldly configurations, then the stability of the present is a state of exception, an interregnum in the pattern of constant transformation. Most Amazonian peoples regard metamorphosis as the rule, an unsurprising notion in a region in permanent mutation. The seasonality of floods and the high rate of plant growth and decomposition due to warm temperatures, abundant sunlight and rainfall make for rapidly changing landscapes in Amazonia. The

emphasis on transfiguration in most Indigenous cosmologies narratively and conceptually translates the fluidity of the Amazonian environment.

For Amazonian Indigenous peoples, plants and animals are former humans who may well return to their human condition once the end of the world is nigh, while humanity may regress (or progress) to a state of metamorphic flux. The endless cycle of transmutations of one form of existence into another is the norm, or indeed the *nomos*, of the earth. Ontological classifications and categories are therefore not unchanging, universal realities, but, rather, subject to permanent fluctuations. Amerindian worlds are characterized by ontological instability, whereby entities are engaged in constant transformations. The becoming-animal advocated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* [3] is therefore, in Indigenous cosmologies, part of a larger ontology of becoming that permeates all aspects of reality.

This process of metamorphosis is a salient theme in contemporary Amazonian poetry. Many texts portray the imbrication of various beings, who meld into one another through ingestion, assimilation, or the simple desire to become other and incorporate parts of another existent. Danowski and Viveiro de Castros's insight that there is no being-as-such in Amerindian metaphysics finds expression in poems that cross species boundaries. As they point out, "[e]ach object or aspect of the universe is a hybrid entity [. . .]. There is no being-in-itself [. . .] that does not depend upon its being-other; any being is a being-through, being-for, being-relation [. . .]. Exteriority is everywhere" (98). A decentered world, or a world made of a plurality of centers, is a reality that acknowledges the relationality of existence. Identity is always heterarchical and the (plant, animal, thingly) other is constitutive of the I, evoking the core tenets of post-structuralist philosophy. Each center of perspective, moreover, is always on the verge of turning into something else, of becoming other and thus perpetuating the chain of transmutations ad infinitum. Poems stand for snapshots that articulate a set of moments in an ongoing process of becoming.

Plants play a significant role in Amerindian ontologies of becoming. Amazonian poetry highlights the centrality of plants as catalysts of metamorphic movements through their entheogenic effects, through their curative properties and as the ancestors of humans. Vegetal beings are frequently part of shamanic rituals that involve the shaman adopting the perspective of other entities through the use of vegetal-based, mind-altering substances. By becoming-plant or becoming-animal, the shaman acquires the knowledge of these entities and cures specific individuals or the group, often, again, resorting to plant-based substances, re-establishing the balance between humanity and the rest of rainforest society. The so-called plants of power that contribute to the physical and socio-political well-being of the community feature prominently in many Amazonian poems. What is more, poetry often identifies specific plants as counselors, teachers and wise ancestors. In producing oxygen, plants created the conditions for existence on earth and are therefore responsible for the development of practically all current lifeforms. In honoring plants are ancestors, Amazonian texts implicitly recognize vegetal beings as forebearers of all life on the planet.

Beyond being the facilitators of other entities' transformations and the virtual grandparents of all beings, plants are also masters of metamorphosis. Amazonian poets frequently cast plants as the ultimate shapeshifters, who turn into animals, humans and spirits and voice the insights they gather through these mutations. The ability of plants to drastically change their shape has also fascinated Western scholars and artists for centuries. The development of time-lapse photography in the nineteenth-century and, later, early movies that manipulated time, allowed humans to catch a glimpse of plant metamorphoses and mesmerized audiences throughout the world. The various transformations that occur during the life cycle of plants, together with plant-human transmutations, were a central theme in early films about vegetal beings (see Vieira) [4][2]. Being rooted to the soil, plants

display much more plasticity in adapting to their surroundings than animals. While most animals can move if they find themselves in an unfavorable spot, plants need to modify their shape according to the place where they are: adjust their growth to avoid the shade of neighboring plants and maximize sunlight exposure, spread their roots in particular directions in search of water and other nutrients, and so on. Vegetal beings can lose major parts of their bodies, survive and regrow them, a feat that would be impossible for most animals and, especially, for mammals.

Depictions of plant metamorphoses in Amazonian poetry translate a vital feature of vegetal life into literary form. Poems showcase a phyto-becoming that serves as a blueprint for the pluriversal, heterarchical ontology of Amazonian existence. Authors highlight the metamorphic potential of plants and the ontology of becoming at play in Amazon's worlds. In the rest of this article, I analyze poems by two Amazonian female authors: Colombian Anastasia Candre Yamacuri (1962–2014) and Peruvian Ana Varela Tafur (1963–). Women are traditionally connected to plants and plant cultivation in many Amazonian Indigenous communities, and, in mainstream Western culture, they are often linked to certain parts of plants, such as flowers, and to nature as a whole (see Merchant and Plumwood) [5–7]. Contemporary women's writing on plants reflects evolving views on both plants' and women's roles in Amazonian societies. What are the main features of Amazonian phyto-ontologies of becoming expressed in Amazonian women's poems? How do these differ from depictions of plants in the Western literary canon? And in which ways do women poets engage with traditional views on women and reframe them in the present time of rapid social transformation and environmental destruction in Amazonia?

2. Plant-Persons in Anastasia Candre's Poetry

Amazonian Uitoto writer Anastasia Candre grounds her poetry in the Indigenous practices, rituals and stories she learned from her family and community and conveys these in a language non-Indigenous readers can understand. Candre was fluent in the Múrui, Bue and Minika variants of the Uitoto language (Candre 24) [8][3] and only learned Spanish when she was sent to school in a convent at age six (Candre 29) [8][4]. She wrote her poetry in Uitoto and then translated the texts into Spanish, keeping some of the rhythms and inflections of the original in the translation, and thus Indigenizing Spanish language and Spanish-speaking literature.

Beyond writing poetry, Candre also authored autobiographical and ethnographic texts. She gathered accounts and testimonies from her family members and other Indigenous peoples, transcribed, translated and commented on ritual Uitoto songs as a researcher affiliated to the University of Amazonia in Leticia, and was a performer of poetry, songs and dance (Vargas Pardo, *Poéticas*, 197) [9]. She was also a painter who used canvases made of the bark of the yanchama tree and natural dyes to produce a series of works, mainly depicting scenes from the daily life of the Uitoto (Candre 60–61; 67) [8]. Like that of other Indigenous intellectuals, Candre's poetic production is embedded is a complex cultural matrix that includes several other arts. Camillo Vargas Pardo uses the Uitoto term *kirigai*, or basket, to refer to Candre's oeuvre that encompasses verse, academic research, painting, singing, ritual dance and plant cultivation (198) [9]. Her poetry is, in the words of Miguel Rocha Vivas, a form of *oralitura*, a literary praxis deeply indebted to orality that stands at the intersection of different artistic modes of expression (Rocha Vivas, *Textualidades*, 12) [10][5].

Candre mentions that she did not know at first what the term literature meant, since there is no Uitoto word to designate this specific use of verbal language: "In the beginning, they talked to me about literature and I did not understand because in my language that word 'literature' does not exist and they explained to me that it was like images of what we feel for the earth, the ancestors, the traditions" ("Al principio me hablaban de literatura y

yo no entendía, porque en mi lengua no existe esa palabra 'literatura' y me explicaron que eran como imágenes de lo que sentíamos de la tierra, de los abuelos, de las costumbres", Candre, quoted in Vargas Pardo, *Poéticas*, 244) [9]. Significantly, the author understands what literature refers to when it is described as a set of images of the connection people feel to the earth, the ancestors and their customs. She goes on to state: "Then I said, well, we are literature, since all that we say and feel has literature, and I started to write and the poems came about" ("Entonces dije, pues somos literatura, pues todo lo que hacemos, decimos y sentimos, tiene literatura y empecé a escribirlo y salieron las poesías", 244). For Candre, literature is all-encompassing and permeates many of the activities of the Uitoto. In another passage, she writes: "We are all full of literature, our lips, our language, our mind is full of literature" ("Todos estamos llenos de literatura, nuestros labios, nuestra lengua, nuestra mente está llena de literatura", Candre 68) [8]. She sees literature as embedded in Uitoto culture and their connection to their territory that forms part of everyday existence.

Not only is literature closely tied to the earth for Candre, but plants play a central role in her poetry. The author mentions in an autobiographical text that her traditional Múrui name, Ɨinuango, means "the one who collects moriche palm fruits" ("la que recoge frutas de canangucho", Candre 25) [8][6], and fruit plants feature in many of her writings. Candre acknowledges the significance of plants as a staple food for her community and regards plant life as a relative that cares for the well-being of the Uitoto. In "Juzie/La chagra" (Farm), the community's farm is described as a "[g]randmother of abundance/Grandmother, owner of the fruit ball/It sows the seeds/And takes care of them with maternal love" ("Abuela de la abundancia/Abuela dueña del baile de frutas/Ella, siembra las semillas/Y las cuida con amor maternal", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12][7]. The farm is personified as a grandmother that lovingly cares for the fruit consumed by the community and celebrated in the ritual fruit ball [13][8]. Later in the poem, the farm-grandmother morphs into an actual grandmother, who passes communal knowledge on to her children and grandchildren, in a slippage between plant and human lives.

The long poem "Eiño jiira/Conjuración de la madre" (Conjuration of the Mother) also conflates plants and a relative, in this case the mother, alluding both to a maternal figure and to the Amazonian notion that certain powerful plants have a "mother", "owner" or spirit. Each stanza follows the same structure, and several segments of the text are repeated or paraphrased, evoking the use of reiteration as a basic principle of Indigenous Amazonian chants. The first three verses in each stanza are about a mother, who stands below, as if grounding the daughter's existence above, described in the last two verses of the stanzas. The poem begins by invoking the "[m]other of sweet yuca/There below the mother of sweet yuca/Heart plantation of sweet yuca" ("Madre de yuca dulce/Allá abajo madre de la yuca dulce/Corazón plantío de yucal dulce", Vargas Pardo, *Poéticas*, 365) [9] and, throughout the text, several other mothers/plants are called upon, including the "[m]other of fennel", the "[m]other of basil", the "[m]other of cold herb *dɨrɨma*" or the "[m]other of the herb of transformation *nozeko*" ("Madre de hierba dulce"; "Madre de la albahaca"; "Madre de la hierba fría *dɨrɨma*"; "Madre de la hierba de transformación *nozeko*", Vargas Pardo, *Poéticas*, 365) [9]. The mothers/plants fill the daughters' hearts with energy, sweetness, vitality, peace, happiness and so on. In the second half of the poem, the mothers become associated with qualities attributed to plants, rather than with the plants themselves, including abundance, rebirth and firmness.

"Eiño jiira/Conjuración de la madre" highlights the indebtedness of the material and immaterial life of the community to plants and blurs the separation between these two aspects of existence. As in "Juzie/La chagra", the transmission of knowledge about plants follows a matrilineal path from (grand)mother to daughter, which underscores the centrality of women in planting, harvesting, preparing food and using plants to make

medicine. In fact, as Vandana Shiva argues, Indigenous women's knowledge of plants is key to preserve biodiversity, not only in the Amazon, but throughout the world (passim) [14]. Candre mentions in her autobiographical notes that she faced criticism for researching the Uitoto fruit ritual and for compiling and translating the chants performed during this ceremony, since, in Uitoto culture, women should not have access to this form of wisdom[9]. Still, she reclaims her right "as a woman, as an Okaina woman" ("como mujer, mujer okaina", Candre 55) [8] to register the customs of her people and to make them known outside the confines of her community[10]. While she shows respect for tradition, she is conscious of the significance of Uitoto women's connection to plants, and thus feels empowered to write about these topics, both as a researcher and as a poet[11].

Several poems by Candre, including "Jaigabi/La cahuana" (The Yuca Juice) or "Omai/Ají negro" (Black Chili) honor plant-based foods central in Uitoto diet and cultural life. The yuca-based *cahuana* beverage[12], for instance, is described in the eponymous poem as "our life/The strength and breath of our mother/Like the cradle where our life is reproduced" ("nuestra vida/La fuerza y el aliento de nuestra madre/Como la cuna donde se reproduce nuestra vida", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12], in a language that underscores plants' life-giving role, casting vegetal life, once again, as a mother figure. In "Izɨrede-jifizɨ izoi/Picante como el ají" (Spicy Like Chili) there is also an indistinction between plants and women, the latter being compared to chili since they share several features with the plant: "Flavorful and spicy/Its delicious aroma/Like the heart of the Uitoto woman" ("Sabroso y picante/Su aroma delicioso/Así como el corazón de la mujer uitota", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]. The poem underscores that chili is "the medicinal plant of the Uitoto woman" and "the true teaching and knowledge" and concludes that chili is "the female strength" ("la planta medicinal de la mujer uitota"; "la verdadera enseñanza y conocimiento"; "la fuerza feminina", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]. The transmutation of plants into women and vice versa points to the symbiotic relationship between the two. Women cultivate and tend to plants, while vegetal beings offer food, medicine and function as a source of knowledge for the community.

Plant metamorphosis also comes through in Candre's poems about mind-altering plants, including coca, tobacco and yagé. In "Jibina-diona/Coca y tabaco" (Coca and Tobacco) the two plants are personified and presented as engaged in an "[i]nseparable love" ("Amor inseparable", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12] that points to their complementary usage in Uitoto communities. As Vargas Pardo points out, the negative connotation of both plants in Western culture, associated with addition and illness, contrasts with their depiction in Candre's text (*Poética*, 252) [9]. The poem mentions the "word" of both vegetal beings ("Palabra de la coca/Palabra del tabaco", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12] in an allusion to their ability to elicit words of wisdom from those who smoke or otherwise consume them. In "Corazón noble y sereno del hombre del centro amazónico" (Noble and Serene Heart of the Man from the Center of the Amazon), a wise man uses coca and tobacco plants to cure others and extols the plants' medicinal qualities. He mentions: "My grandparents learned a lot of knowledge from the word of coca and tobacco/The wise grandfather says: I am the essence of tobacco and of coca" ("Mis abuelos aprendieron miles de saberes con la palabra de coca y tabaco/Dice el abuelo sabio soy la esencia del tabaco y de la coca", Vargas Pardo, *Poética*, 362 [9]). The wise man inscribes himself in a long line of Uitoto elders who learned from the tobacco and coca plants and considers himself and his wisdom to derive from these vegetal beings.

"Jibina uai/Palabra de la coca" (Coca's Word) also refers to the "word" of the coca plant that is crucial in many Uitoto rituals. The poem stands out in Candre's corpus by interspersing the Uitoto original and the Spanish translation line after line, instead of presenting both versions side by side. Starting in the second stanza, the text appears

to reproduce a long monologue by the coca plant—or, in an alternative interpretation, by a wise person from the community who consumed the plant—complaining that its "children" forgot plant-based knowledge. The plant/person has been badly burnt and appeals to Uitoto women and men to heal it, since its "word never ends" and it "will remain forever" ("Mi palavra nunca terminará y permanecerá para siempre", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]. The poem seems to allude to forest fires and to criticize young members of the Uitoto community for neglecting the words of their elders and their close connection to plants of wisdom, such as the coca plant.

In the poem "Unao/El yagé" (Yagé) the entheogenic plant/brew—yagé refers both to the plant *Banisteriopsis caapi* and to the mind-altering ayahuasca drink made from this plant in combination with the bush *Psychotria viridis*—speaks in the first person as a "grandfather" with curative powers and a "vine of the science of knowledges" ("abuelo"; "bejuco de la ciencia de los saberes", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]. Throughout the poem, the plant transforms into different animals, such as a boa and a jaguar, in a reference to yagé-induced rituals, during which shamans often metamorphose into powerful animals to bring their knowledge to the community. The plant also identifies as a "spirit" and, in the end of the poem, concludes: "I am the god yagé" ("Soy el dios, yagé", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]. The plant-god reaffirms vegetal life's primordial role in Amazonian Indigenous existence—"I existed since the beginning" ("He existido desde un principio", Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12]—and invites humans to "embrace" the wisdom it conveys ("¡abrázame!" Rocha Vivas, *Antología*) [12].

In Candré's poetry, plants are often humanized and personified as maternal figures or as wise female or male elders that feed, heal and impart knowledge to humanity. At the same time as they metamorphose into animal, human and spirit-like figures, plants also contribute to the transmutation of human bodies and minds in an ongoing process of becoming other that undergirds the balance of existence in the rainforest.

3. Ana Varela Tafur's Imperiled Forest

Born in the Amazonian city of Iquitos, Peru, Ana Varela Tafur incorporates the complex past of her native region in her poetry. She draws parallels between the rubber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that brought prosperity to Iquitos at the expense of the brutal exploitation of Indigenous and other traditional Amazonian communities and present day extractivism in the area. She was the only woman to integrate a local literary movement that sought to move away from hackneyed depictions of Amazonia and its peoples. The goal of the Urcututu group—the name is an onomatopoeic word that evokes the call of an owl, a symbol of wisdom—, founded in Iquitos in 1979, was to integrate social issues and Indigenous perspectives into literary texts about the Amazon. Varela brings a distinct female take onto Urcututu literature that Ana Molina Campodonico calls a "mythical ecofeminism" [16][13]. She adds a female perspective to her commentary on the violent history of Iquitos, combined with references to Indigenous cosmologies and the relevance of plants in these worldviews, and an acute sense of the ongoing environmental aggressions taking place in Amazonia.

Like Candre, Varela highlights the role of plant metamorphosis in Amazonia and the use of entheogenic substances as a source of healing and as a means to get in touch with communal history throughout her oeuvre. The poem "Historia desde la liana" (History from the Point of View of the Vine), from the collection *Voces desde la orilla* (Voices from the Shore, 2000) [17], contrasts the various histories of the Marañón River, from those mentioned in "chronicles" to the ones narrated by "marginal voices" and "anonymous accounts" ("crónicas"; "voces marginals"; "relatos anónimos", 26)[14]. Among the latter

are the memories of Indigenous Cocama elders, who boil roots, presumably those of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, to transform the plant into the ayahuasca brew.

The central section of the poem is a monologue of the "mother of ayahuasca" ("madre del ayahuasca", 26), or the ayahuasca spirit, that exhorts humans to drink it and hallucinate—the line "hallucinate, hallucinate, hallucinating" ("alucina, alucina, alucinante", 26–27) is repeated twice in the poem—to get in touch with the "register" of the "ancestors" ("registro de tus ancestros", 26), that is to say, with old communal knowledge. As stated in the poem: "Thus we recognize ourselves: in the sacred vine that envelops destinies" ("Así nos reconocemos: en la sagrada soga que envuelve los destinos", 27). Only through the mediation of the plant-based ayahuasca brew can humans get to know their past and communal stories. Tellingly, what humans learn from drinking ayahuasca is of the presence of animals within them, as we read in the final lines of the poem: "And we have always been/dots of a boa in the backs/dots of a heron in the faces" ("Y somos desde siempre/pintas de boa en las espaldas/pintas de garza en los rostros", 27). Seen from the point of view of a vegetal being, as the title of the poem intimates, human history cannot be extricated from the stories of the plants and other animals that inhabit the rainforest.

Varela's most recent poetry collection, *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* (Stays of Emilia Tangoa, 2022) [18], awarded the Peruvian National Literature Prize in 2023, also includes several references to plant metamorphosis into substances that transform the human mind. In "Encuentro" (Meeting), ayahuasca is described as a relative—"I name you amongst my relatives" ("Te nombro entre mis parientes" 43)—, a "vine of the dead" that conveys the knowledge "of our ancestors" ("soga de muertos"; "de nuestros antepasados", 43). While the brew allows humans to get in touch with their ancestors, the vine used to make ayahuasca is itself called a relative, pointing to the kinship between humans and more-than-human beings already found in Candre.

The poem "Para estar despiertos" (To Be Awake) mentions "verbs of boiled leaves", "adjectives of moist barks" and "lianas that are boiled" ("verbos de hojas cocidas"; "adjetivos de cortezas jugosas"; "lianas que se hierven", 32), in an allusion to the different parts of plants used to make psychoactive substances. The poem points to a communion between the chemical idiom of vegetal beings and verbal language that, in turn, leads to plant-induced visions, monologues and conversations. It invokes "episodes of stories propagated by plants/with the license of orality" ("episodios de historias propagadas por plantas/con la licencia de la oralidad", 32) by ayahuasca-drinking shamans ("yacereros", 32) who "imagine ficions/with the breath of the spirits of tigers" ("confabulan ficciones/con soplos de espíritus de tigres", 32). As the title of the poem suggests, the Indigenous shamanic practice of consuming ayahuasca to tap into the knowledge of more-than-human beings and pass it on to the community is cast as an awakening that allows one to get in touch with a reality otherwise not available to the senses. In "Pasajeros" (Passengers) it is the tobacco plant that puts humans in touch with "their ancestors, the tigers" and human language is again brought closer to vegetal articulation: "Their [the healers'] grammars are organized from the barks/from the wetlands" ("sus ancestros los tigres"; "Sus gramáticas se ordenan desde las cortezas./Desde los humedales", 45). It is plant life that structures human language and existence, facilitating the process of healing.

The link between plant and human languages comes through in other poems from the book. "Fibras de oralidad" (Fibers of Orality) mentions a universal code that cuts across humans and more than humans: "In the leaves of coca read by healers/there is a code announcing words that are almost extinct [. . .]/In the coca leaves persists a code of the planet/a language that deciphers fibers of orality" ("En hojas de coca leídas por curanderos/hay un código que anuncia palabras casi extintas [. . .]/En las hojas de coca persiste un código del planeta/un lenguaje que descifra fibras de oralidad", 33). The poem refers to

plant inscription in the world in a language that humans can interpret[15]. In the articulation of vegetal life "sound words like usual braids/and a succession of testimonies" that are interpreted by female healers "in their visions" and through "their science" ("Suenan palabras como trenzas habituales/y sucesión de testimonios"; "curanderas"; "su ciencia", 33). The reading of coca leaves recalls a time when all beings shared a common language that, as Danowski and Viveiros de Castro point out, Indigenous communities believe has been lost with present-say speciation. By returning to that time of communion between vegetal and human life with the aid of plants, healers "disseminate calm" ("diseminan la calma", 33).

The transformation of plants to perform Indigenous rituals evokes not only the memory of a distant past when the separation between humans and more-than-human beings was fluid. In several other poems, mind-altering plants are used to remember and come to terms with more recent colonial and neo-colonial aggression. In "Con la soga se cuentan historias" (With the Vine Stories are Told), also from *Estancias*, ayahuasca brings "the spirits of plants/the healing of the body and its nightmares" ("los espíritus de las plantas/la sanación del cuerpo y sus pesadillas", *Estancias*, 32) [18]. One of the ayahuasca-induced nightmares mentioned in the poem is the story of the poet's grandmother, Ana Lozano, an Indigenous Uitoto woman to whom Varela dedicated *Voces desde la Orilla*, describing her as "a survivor of the infamous years of the rubber-boom" ("sobreviviente de los infames años del caucho", *Voces,* 10) [17]. Varela mentions in an interview with Diego Fares that her grandmother fled the violence of rubber slavery in the Putumayo region as a teenager and was the only survivor of her family, all the other members of which were murdered by rubber lords (Fares) [19][16]. "Con la soga se cuentan historias", also dedicated to the author's grandmother, mentions that she managed to recount the events of her youth in the town square only after taking ayahuasca: "It was the narrative of your escape/and you told it with the vine" ("Fue el recuento de tu huida/y tú lo contaste con la soga", 39). The ayahuasca brew is used to get in touch with collective memory and to overcome the traumas of the past.

The role of plants of knowledge in Indigenous healing rituals is adulterated when vegetal-based psychoactive substances are degraded as commercial psychedelic drugs. The poem "Incongruencias" (Incongruences) deplores the "vegetal tourism" ("turismo vegetal", *Estancias*, 36) [18] that offers ayahuasca experiences, demeaning traditional ceremonies by selling the promise to easily promote "a good living" ("el buen vivir", 36). But contemporary violence against Amazonian plants is not limited to tourism. Already in Varela's early poetry collections, vegetal beings and their metamorphoses take center stage in the denunciation of aggression against the rainforest and its peoples. The illegal cutting down and burning of Amazonian trees is one of the main environmental crimes mentioned in the author's texts[17].

The poem "Santa Cecilia" (Saint Cecilia), from *Lo que no veo in visiones* (What I Do Not See in Visions, 1992) [21], depicts the outcome of human-induced forest fires in the Amazon: "The trees lay burnt/one on top of the other [. . .]/The deforestation lasted/countless fires and/illusions aired/from the oil palms" ("Los árboles yacían quemados/unos sobre otros [. . .] El desbosque demoró/incendios interminables y/las ilusiones se aventaban/desde las palmas aceiteras", 13). The text condemns the clearing of the rainforest to plant oil palm, one of the fastest growing monocultures in the Peruvian Amazon. The poem "Trajín de un sueño" (Grind of a Dream), from *Voces desde la orilla*, signals the transformation of members from local communities from "fishermen" into "forest arsonists/Every day working on palm" ("pescadores"; "incendiaries de bosques./Todos los días a trabajar la palma", 64) [17]. Faced with deforestation, Amazonians are forced to abandon a life that depended on the plentifulness of the rainforest and are unwittingly turned into pawns in large-scale monoculture extractivism[18].

In *Estancias*, human-made devastation of Amazonia and its traditional more-than-human and human communities is even more pointedly addressed than in earlier poetry collections[19]. A case in point is "Zonas de sacrificio" (Sacrificial Zones) about the Madre de Dios region in the Southern area of the Peruvian Amazon. The poem describes a series of environmental disasters that plague the region, including "mining areas of permanent smuggling/multitudes of wounded in the environmental disorder/Foresticides, destroyed and deserted jungles,/vacuums of biodiversity, invasion of machinery [. . .]/dispersion of mercury in agonizing watersheds" ("zonas mineras de contrabando permanente,/multitudes de heridos en el desorden ambiental./Floresticidios, arrasadas selvas desertificadas,/vacíos de biodiversidad, invasión de máquinas [. . .]/dispersión de mercúrio en las cuencas agonizantes", 25). The poem lists several other Amazonian regions it describes as "extractible territories" ("territórios extraíbles", 25), that is to say, areas at the mercy of unbridled extrativism[20]. The cutting down of ancient trees, victims of human greed, is highlighted as a sign of the times: "cedars that overcame time are cut down/Presence of the Anthropocence" ("se cortan cedros que sobrepasaron el tiempo/Presencia del antropoceno", 25). A time of "ecocide" ("ecocidio", 25), the Anthropocene, marked by the imprint left by humans on the natural world, is an epoch that completely disregards the time of plants, when humans mindlessly cut down age-old forests[21]. Significantly, the poem ends with the word "Anamei", a reference to a mythical tree that, according to the Harakmbut Indigenous community from Madre de Dios, grows as sign of hope when humans are going through a period of catastrophe. The thriving of vegetal life is seen as a possible path for redemption amidst the chaos wrought by extractivism.

Following in the footsteps of earlier texts, several other poems from *Estancias* address the human harnessing of plants' plasticity for thoughtless economic gain. "Cuerpos de madera" (Bodies of Wood) emphasizes the death of trees, turned into lifeless bodies as commodities for sale: "Humans cut down trees and manufacture needs/municipal chairs, night tables, altars/paintings, sideboards, souvenirs for tourists" ("Los hombres cortan árboles y fabrican necesidades:/sillones municipales, mesitas de noche, altares,/cuadros, aparadores, souvenirs para turistas", 17). The poem decries the transformation of living trees into objects that only fulfill fabricated, artificial needs. It contrasts the vital role of the living plants with their fate after being turned into wood: "The millenarian shihuahuaco trees were refuge of birds/Now laminated and ordered they are the final links/of an extractive chain" ("Eran refúgios de aves los milenários shihuahuacos./Ahora laminados y en orden son eslabones finales/de una cadena extractiva", 17). From being a key element in a thriving ecosystem, the cut down trees are transformed into dead, commodified matter.

"Búsqueda" (Search) also refers to the sale of Amazonian timber as a commodity in a global market. It satirically describes the journey of the renaco tree spirit from the Callao port in Lima, Peru, all the way to New York, in search of illegally cut down trees. Turned into a vagabond, this exiled, motherly tree spirit—"mother of the renaco tree"; "[m]other in exile" ("Madre del renaco"; "madre en exilio", 18)—roams aimlessly outside its forest home trying to find its missing children. "Fabulaciones" (Fabulations) equally places the Amazon within a global context. The poem mentions the mythology surrounding the region, including the imaginary Amazon tribe of women warriors that gave the territory its name, and highlights the significance of the rainforest as "the last lung of the world and postmodern West", a "transnational region in a state of emergency" ("el último pulmón del mundo y posmoderno de Occidente"; "region transnacional en emergencia", 57). The poem ends by noting the irony of choosing the name "Amazon" for a global sales company: "*Amazon*, a model of corporation that invades the planet" ("*Amazon*, un modelo de corporación que invade el planeta", 57). Paradoxically, the very forces of global capitalism epitomized in the

sales conglomerate Amazon are the ones destroying the rainforest from which the company borrowed its name.

The devastation caused by extractivism in Amazonia is poignantly depicted in "Casa" (Home), also from *Estancias*, that opens with the simple but powerful assertion: "There are plants, animals and people here" ("Hay plantas, animales y gente aqui", 60). The areas ruined by the catastrophe of deforestation, monoculture plantations, mining, oil drilling and so on, were once the home of beings in whose "bodies there is a cosmos, a home" ("cuerpos hay un cosmos, una casa", 60). The disappearance of that home leads to the eviction of these entities from their territories and, in many cases, to their death: "they vanish and die/The plants, the animals, the people" ("se esfuman y mueren/Las plantas, los animales, la gente", 60). The poem ends in desolation: "[s]ome bushes and its ants/were burnt this afternoon/A trail was opened and a 4 × 4 passed" ("Algunos arbustos y sus hormigas/fueron quemados esta tarde./Se abrió una trocha y pasó una 4 × 4", 60). The indication that the events took place "this afternoon" suggests that the wreckage is ongoing. The act of destruction begins with the burning down of plant life, which then leads to the death of the animals living off of those plants. The fire was set in order to open a trail for an SUV to pass, which points to further damage as the forces of global capitalist extractivism penetrate deeper into the rainforest.

"Nocturno sol" (Nocturnal Sun), from *Estancias,* goes back to the topic of rainforest destruction through deforestation. It describes the cutting down of trees with a chainsaw that "functions as a storm" ("funciona como una tormenta", 26) and concludes that "[a] forest without trees is a nightly sun" ("Un bosque sin árboles es un nocturno sol", 17). This poem dialogues with the one that follows in the book, "A ti, Emilia Tangoa" (To You, Emilia Tangoa), which ends by mentioning "a planet of living trees" ("un planeta de árboles vivos", 28) that contrasts with a treeless land. There is an intertextual reference in these poems to the 2019 Urcututu Manifesto signed by Varela, together with fellow writers Percy Vílchez Vela and Carlos Reyes Ramírez [24]. The Manifesto decries the "accelerated environmental deterioration due to the irrationality of extractivist culture" that claims to reach "development at the cost of the death of plants, animals and people" ("deterioro ambiental acelerado debido a la irracionalidad de la cultura extractivista"; "desarrollo a costa de la muerte de plantas, animales y personas"). The authors call on "poetry to fulfill a role of denunciation and proclaim the preservation of beauty and of justice" ("la poesía cumpla un papel denunciador y proclame la preservación de la belleza y la justicia"). Varela's writing lives up to the demands of the Manifesto, in that her poems testify against the extractivist devastation of rainforest beings.

The 2019 Manifesto ends with the following sentence: "[p]oetry is a planet of living trees that resist death" ("La poesía es un planeta de árboles vivos que se resiste a morir"). The identification of writing with vegetal life and its resistance to predatory human activity echoes Candre's conflation of plant and human forms of articulation. This connection between literature and plants is a recurring trope in *Estancias*. The first poem of the collection, "Sabiduría" (Wisdom), opens with the identification of the poetic voice with the forest: "I am of a wooded area, of its wetlands" ("De un bosque soy, de sus humedales", 13) and, in the Acknowledgments, Varela states: "the spirit of a renaco tree inspired this poetic voyage" ("el espíritu de un renaco impulsó esta travesía poética, 11)[22]. Throughout her oeuvre, Varela emphasizes that plants, used in healing and in shamanic rituals, are the foundation for communal life in Amazonia. Vegetal articulation and human modes of expression go hand in hand in shaping the network of significations that make up the rainforest.

In her interview with Fares, the poet states that "[o]ur ancestral Amazonian thought feeds on a fundamental concept: people, animals, trees, forests, farms, ponds, rivers, etc.

[. . .] have spirit, mother, feelings and desires". All entities have a specific way of being in the world and their own perspective on reality that connects with the existence of others. As Varela shows in her poetry, the transformation of one being into another—plants are transformed into substances that, in turn, alter the human mind; one body turns into or adopts features from another; modes of expression are shared across different entities, and so on—is part of an ongoing process of becoming in the rainforest. But a different kind of metamorphosis is threatening to put an end to the multiple transformations of life in Amazonia. Beyond Candre's praise of plants, Varela also shows in her poetry how vegetal beings are converted into commodities to be sold in the global market, a treatment of vegetal existence that stands in sharp contrast with the plant becoming that undergirds rainforest life. Her poetry is both a denunciation of the devastation caused by extractivism and a pledge to continue identifying with the rainforest and fighting for a planet of living trees.

Amazonian Indigenous cosmologies underscore the ties binding all rainforest entities. While the constant transmutations of beings into one another that marked the beginning of times have been overcome in the present, metamorphosis continues to play a central role in the Amazonian imaginary. Plants epitomize this ontology of becoming through their role as ancestors to all existing life, through their ability to alter their own physical shape and through their transmutation into psychoactive substances that, in turn, transform the human mind and convey knowledge to human communities. In their poetry, Candre and Varela acknowledge the significance of plant metamorphosis for human and more-than-human existence in the Amazon. The authors offer a woman's perspective on human indebtedness to vegetal metamorphosis in the rainforest and decry the moving away from and devastation of plants in contemporary Amazonia.

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Notes

1 Danowski and Viveiros de Castro explain further: "the unstable anthropomorphs from the origins adopted the current forms and bodily habits of the animals, plants, rivers, mountains, etc., that they would come to be" (91). Quotes from an original in a language other than English are rendered in my translation. Page numbers refer to the original listed in the References. In the case of literary sources, the original is inserted between brackets after the translation.

2 Examples of plant metamorphosis in early cinema can be found in the movies *La Fée aux Fleurs* (The Fairy with Flowers, 1905) and *Les Fleurs animées* (The Animated Flowers, 1906) by French director Gaston Velle. In *La Fée*, the image of a woman is replaced by an expanding, blossoming flower bud, only to reappear again inside the flower. *Les Fleurs* takes metamorphosis even further by depicting dancing flower-women who exact revenge on a man for destroying a flower. They drug him, cover him in soil and water him until he turns into a flowerless plant.

3 Candre's autobiographical text "¿Quiere saber quién es Anastasia Candre? Amigo lector, aquí estoy," was edited by Juan Echeverri based on several published and unpublished sources in Spanish and Uitoto (Candre 78) [8].

4 Even though her father was Okaina, Candre refers that she never learned this language and knows only a few Okaina words (24).

5 The term "oralitura" was coined by Yoro K. Fall and originally applied to ancestral narratives and poems by African peoples. It has since then been adopted by Latin American Indigenous writers such as Elicura Chihuailaf Nahuelpán, Fredy Chikangana and Hugo Jamioy to describe their texts (Favaron and Haya de la Torre, 30) [11]. Candre did not refer to her writings as oralitura, but the term fittingly applies to her poetry.

6 The author's Múrui name was Ṯinuango and her Okaina name was Fatiku, which means the same as Ṯinuango (Candre 25) [8].

7 There are no published poetry collections by Candre. Her poetry can be found in anthologies, such as Miguel Rocha Vivas's *Pütchi biyá uai. Puntos aparte. Antología multilingüe de la literatura indígena contemporánea en Colombia* and compiled as an annex in

Camilo Vargas Pardo's PhD thesis *Poéticas que germinan entre la voz y la letra: Itinerarios de la palabra a partir de las obras de Hugo Jamioy y Anastasia Candre*.

8 Candre's last research work, titled *Los alimentos de nuestra gente* (The Foods of Our People, 2014) focused on farming in her community. In this work, she explains: "The farm is the thought, the heart and the strength of the Uitoto woman" ("La chagra es el pensamiento, el corazón y la fuerza de la mujer uitota," quoted in Vargas Pardo, "Anastasia," 137 [13]).

9 Candre compiled and translated a series of chants used in the Uitoto fruit ritual under the title *Yuaki Muina-Murui: Cantos del ritual de frutas de los uitoto*. The work remains unpublished. She wrote about her research: "The chants of the fruit ritual are very important, and they have many meanings related to the beings of nature and their surroundings" ("Los cantos del ritual de frutas de los uitoto son muy importantes y tienen muchos significados con los seres de la naturaleza y su entorno," Candre 38) [8].

10 Candré writes that "[t]he project of Uitoto tradition and songs is, more than anything, to make the Amazon state and Uitoto culture known" ("El proyecto de tradición y canciones de cultura uitoto es para dar a conocer a la gente, más que todo, el departamento del Amazonas y la cultura uitoto," Candre 38) [8].

11 As Laura Areiza Serna points out, "Anastasia's production reflects an [. . .] integration of male and female Uitoto knowledge" (164) [15].

12 There is no direct English translation of *cahuana*, which is a non-alcoholic Amazonian beverage made of yuca starch.

13 For Molina Campodonico, Varela's work "reformulates previous Amazonian poetry (reduced to the praise of the landscape or to social commitment), as well as the poetry of her contemporaries from the Urcututu group, by including a gender perspective that adds to the social-mythical one" (92).

14 The poem "Historia natural" (Natural History), from *Estancias*, also contrasts the stories and knowledge of Amazonians with those of foreign visitors, naturalist explorers in this case. The poem defines natural history as "[n]aturally natural almost history almost fiction" ("Naturalmente natural casi historia casi ficción," 52), pointing to the fact that many scientific endeavors involve imagination and fiction. The text states: "Your lost notebooks get covered in fungi/[. . .] You disappear without a trace, naturalist" ("Se cubren de hongos tus cuadernos perdidos/[. . .] Desapareces sin dejar huella, naturalista," 52). The naturalists' endeavors are depicted as futile when compared to the vastness of the rainforest and the knowledge of its inhabitants.

15 The connection between plant and human language is mentioned in several other poems. "Temporada de purmas" (Time of Fallows), from *Estancias*, states that "In the forests of fallows there is a tapestry of voices" ("En las florestas de purmas hay un tejido de voces," 16), implying that the signs in a forest of fallows are like human voices that can be heard by those who try to interpret them. In "Floripondio" (Angel's Trumpet), the poet writes: "To reach visions I drink your root and your leaves [. . .]/your colors expand metaphors in seconds/and I only drank a fraction of your essence" ("Para alcanzar las visiones bebo tu raiz y tus hojas [. . .]/tus colores expanden metáforas en segundos/y apenas he bebido una fracción de tu esencia," *Estancias* 42). The poetic I addresses the angel's trumpet plant and describes the effects of ingesting a drink made of the plant's root and leaves, which include a transformation of language through metaphor.

16 The poem "Estación de trueque" (Exchange Station), from *Voces*, evokes the rubber boom years, when the lives of rubber tappers had no value: "my hand with the tip of a blade and a machete/opened a bleeding wound on the tree/which by then had so much value/that my life/was worth nothing" ("mi mano a punta de filo y machete/abría una herida sangrante en el árbol /que por ese entonces tenía tanto valor/que mi vida/no valía nada," 57).

17 For Gerard Rodríguez Noriega, "Varela shows [...] the Amazon affected by the violence of time, of humans, of those who only see profit in it" (142) [20].

18 As Malcolm Ferdinand points out in *Decolonial Ecology* [22], colonialism, extractivism and ecocide are closely linked. This was the case in the Amazon, where colonialism, neo-colonialism and internal colonialism accelerated extractivism and the exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

19 As Miluska Benavides mentions [23], *Estancias* portrays "a world that fell apart due to extraction and depredation. A world animated by life is suddenly consumed in the extractive chain" (103).

20 The poem "(The sigo nombrando Nora Saurín)" (I Go on Naming You Nora Saurín) also criticizes mining in the Amazon and calls for its ending: "Let the Mining Companies no longer drag" ("Que no draguen más las Mining Companies," *Estancias*, 51).

21 In the poem "Guardiana" (Guardian), from *Estancias*, Sachamama, or the Mother Forest, is called upon to save the Amazon from environmental destruction. The poem mentions the metal residues and oil spillages that affect the rainforest's rivers and points to the folly of demanding that nature regenerate itself in the face of constant human aggression.

22 Already in "Breve paisaje" (Brief Landscape), from *Voces*, the poetic voice identifies with plants and animals: "Skin of a serpent/cross of a mashco,/dreams of a hearon/tongue or flippers of a renaco tree:/who enumerates this trace of my body/open to clear skies?" ("Piel de sierpe,/cruz de mashco,/sueños de garza,/lengua o aletas de renaco:/¿quién enumera este trazo de mi cuerpo/abierto a cielos despejados?" 36). The body of the poetic subject is made of a mix of plant and animal features that go back to the communion of plants, animals and humans in the beginning of times found in most Indigenous cosmologies.

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