

# “La selva no tiene nada de inesperado”: Amazonian Disillusionment in Álvaro Mutis’s *La Nieve del Almirante*

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## *Abstract*

This article examines Álvaro Mutis’s *La Nieve del Almirante* (1986) within the context of literary representations of Amazonia. It argues that the novella exemplifies the transformation of the region in literature from a utopian site of possibility to a dystopian landscape over the course of the twentieth century. Through the diary of his protagonist Maqroll el Gaviero, Mutis employs a tone of ironic nostalgia to express disillusionment with the economic and aesthetic potential that previous writers ascribed to Amazonia. Mutis uses an indigenous Amazonian woman and a sawmill on an unnamed river in the rainforest as metaphors for the degradation of the region’s economic and aesthetic potential. In underscoring the gulf between previous literary depictions of Amazonia and its lawless, exploited reality, Mutis responds to both the literary tradition of the *novela de la selva* and to historical and economic changes in the Colombian Amazon in the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, the occupation of the region by militant groups and drug traffickers complicates the traditional representation of the forest as a literary *locus amoenus* or as a source of potential wealth for the Latin American individual. This article ultimately shows how Mutis’s novella engages with the Latin American literary tradition and then interrogates that tradition’s validity in the late twentieth century.

*Keywords:* Álvaro Mutis, *La Nieve del Almirante*, jungle novel, Amazon, Colombia.

## *Resumen:*

Este artículo examina *La Nieve del Almirante* (1986) de Álvaro Mutis en el contexto de las representaciones literarias de la Amazonía. Mantiene que la novela corta ejemplifica la transformación de la región en la literatura latinoamericana desde una utopía paradisíaca en el siglo dieciséis hasta un terreno explotado a fines del siglo veinte. Por medio del diario de su protagonista, Maqroll el Gaviero, Mutis expresa su desengaño con las capacidades estéticas de la selva sudamericana. En la narrativa, una indígena no asimilada y un aserradero ribereño se convierten en metáforas de la degradación de la región y provocan una nostalgia irónica en el protagonista. A lo largo de la obra Mutis responde sutilmente a la tradición literaria sobre la selva latinoamericana, especialmente *La vorágine* de José Eustasio Rivera y *Los pasos perdidos* de Alejo Carpentier. El artículo concluye que *La Nieve del Almirante* rinde homenaje a estas novelas a la vez que las pone en tela de juicio en la época contemporánea.

*Palabras clave:* Álvaro Mutis, *La Nieve del Almirante*, novela de la selva, Amazonas, Colombia.

In 1986 Álvaro Mutis published *La Nieve del Almirante*, his first work of prose featuring Maqroll el Gaviero, the melancholy mariner who had populated Mutis's poetry since the 1950s<sup>1</sup>. The novella opens *in medias res*, as a frame narrator indicates that he has found Maqroll's travel diary written on scraps of ledger paper and tucked into a nineteenth-century volume of French history in an antiquarian bookstore in Barcelona. The narrative device of the found manuscript echoes Cervantes' framing of the *Quijote*, in which the narrator buys a portion of the novel written in Arabic on the backs of old papers from a boy on the street in Toledo (I, IX, 85). In this meta-literary beginning, Mutis signals that his tale will be as much about literature itself as about the travels of its protagonist. Indeed, in the story that follows, Maqroll recounts a journey that traverses both the geographical terrain and the literary history of Amazonia, the vast forested area drained by the Amazon River that shares borders with Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, and Peru.

The majority of the novella consists of Maqroll's diary, written in a shaky hand as he voyages up the fictional Xurandó river in the hopes of becoming wealthy by exporting lumber from a sawmill in the forest. Yet the sporadic entries also delve into Maqroll's vast readings, and, on an extratextual level, into Mutis's engagement with literature about the Latin American wilderness in general, and about José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924) and Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) in particular. In a narrative of less than one hundred pages, Mutis critically reinscribes the foundational Western myths of Amazonia, namely the search for El Dorado and the legend of Amazonian warrior women, into contemporary Latin American literature. In doing so, he responds to twentieth-century Latin American literary writings about the wilderness and ultimately questions their validity in the contemporary era. While Mutis pays homage to the Latin American literary tradition, he ultimately moves beyond it by vitiating the wilderness as a site of personal enrichment and literary creativity.

In what follows, I will show how Maqroll's resulting disillusionment draws on and responds to the works of Rivera and Carpentier, both of which also narrate a wilderness journey in diary form<sup>2</sup>. Despite their differences in tone, style, and historical moment, both Rivera and Carpentier present the Latin American wilderness as a site of artistic possibility: the poet Arturo Cova draws lyric inspiration from the *selva*, while Carpentier's protagonist composes a new musical work in the forest settlement of Santa Mónica de los Venados. Mutis, in contrast, develops a literary aesthetic based on a nostalgic lament for the time when Latin American narrative could be inspired by the prospect of a voyage into the unknown of portions of the continent. Mutis's evisceration of the vision of the South American forest as a locus of artistic creativity is evident in his manipulation of several elements common to Latin American literature about the wilderness: the possibility of a journey through a virgin,

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<sup>1</sup> Mutis wrote a total of seven novellas featuring Maqroll, which are compiled in *Empresas y Tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* (2001). All further citations refer to page numbers in *Empresas*.

<sup>2</sup> Like Carpentier's protagonist, Maqroll quickly runs out of paper and is forced to beg it from others (37-8). As in *La vorágine*, Maqroll's diary is later found by a frame narrator. These purposeful similarities to previous works indicate Mutis's desire to reinvent the *novela de la selva* in his own work.

untrammelled forest, the search for El Dorado, the depiction of Amazonian women, and the role nostalgia plays in the novella.

*La Nieve del Almirante* marks a shift in Mutis's *oeuvre*, not merely from poetry to prose, but also in his presentation of travel. In his early poetry, the author evokes the possibilities of new discoveries that voyages offer. In "Programa para una poesía" (1952), the poetic voice declares:

Es menester lanzarnos al descubrimiento de nuevas ciudades [...] Faltan aún por descubrir importantes sitios de la Tierra: los grandes tubos por donde respira el océano, las playas en donde mueren los ríos que van a ninguna parte, los bosques en donde nace la madera de que está hecha la garganta de los grillos, el sitio en donde van a morir las mariposas oscuras de grandes alas lanudas con el color acre de la hierba seca del pecado. Buscar e inventar de nuevo. Aún queda tiempo. Bien poco, es cierto, pero es menester aprovecharlo. (31-32)

This thirst for the new has been a major motivation for travel writers for millennia. Among poetic works about travel, one clear antecedent to this poem is Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), which had a major impact on Mutis (Hernández 73). In "Le Voyage," Baudelaire similarly expresses the appeal of travel as "Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?/Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*" (127). Mutis' poetic voice echoes Baudelaire as it seeks to "buscar e inventar de nuevo," yet it also has a particularly Latin American significance. In stressing the appeal of discovering new cities, this poem resonates with the early chronicles of travels in Latin America, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo's descriptions of Tenochtitlán. Moreover, Mutis's evocation of the natural and fantastical wonders of the earth in this poem, such as large butterflies and woods made of cricket's throats, is similar to the sense of marvel writers used to describe South America beginning in the sixteenth century. As Neil Whitehead has shown, travel writing about Amazonia up to 1700 was characterized by a discourse of the imagination, especially tropes of vast natural and mineral riches (127). Writers who emphasize the marvelous in Amazonia include the Spanish friar Gaspar de Carvajal, who chronicled Francisco de Orellana's descent of the Amazon River in 1542, and Sir Walter Raleigh, who sought El Dorado in 1595<sup>3</sup>. The Western vision of Amazonia evolved over the course of centuries from being a site of a golden city to an ecological, anthropological, and scientific treasure trove<sup>4</sup>.

The sense of wonder evoked by new travels informs subsequent narratives about South America, which often take the form of the quest romance, in which

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<sup>3</sup> My spelling of the explorer's name reflects the contemporary work of experts such as Whitehead, who demonstrates that Raleigh spelled his own name without the "i".

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead gives examples of Amazon women, El Dorado, and cannibalism to illustrate how travel writing about Amazonia up to about 1700 was described as marvelous. He then traces its transitions to a scientific paradise and a site of ethnographic nostalgia, and shows how these representations are united by the theme of the marvelous in Amazonia.

explorers leave home, face challenges and foes, and ultimately return home.<sup>5</sup> Twentieth-century Latin American writers extend and at times parody the quest motif in their *novelas de la selva*, or jungle novels<sup>6</sup>. For example, Rivera famously opens *La vorágine* with Arturo Cova's departure from Bogotá for the Colombian interior with the exclamation: "Antes que me hubiera apasionado por mujer alguna, jugué mi corazón al azar y me ganó la Violencia" (79). While Carpentier's unnamed protagonist at first views his travels in South America as a vacation, he becomes consumed by his search for indigenous musical instruments and a refuge from urban life in *Los pasos perdidos*. Both of these fictions mimic the narrative trajectory of the hero's quest and resonate with European accounts of travels in the South American wilderness<sup>7</sup>. In his early poetic work, Mutis emphasizes that the opportunity to discover new places still exists, thus echoing the quest motif and evoking the sense of wonder found in previous depictions of South American travel.

*La Nieve del Almirante* similarly follows the format of the quest narrative, but the tone of Maqroll's diary presents a major departure from earlier writings about the wilderness, including the poetic voice of "Programa para una poesía". In stark contrast to Rivera's and Carpentier's texts, Maqroll's prose diary reveals a listless ambivalence regarding his travel up the Xurandó river. Rather than expressing enthusiasm or wonder at his voyage, the mariner questions the rationale of his journey in the wilderness. Although he is ostensibly seeking wealth in the transportation of logs, Maqroll doubts both the pecuniary and philosophical motivations of his venture: "Todo esto es absurdo y nunca acabaré de saber por qué razón me embarqué en esta empresa" (19). Later in the novel, he continues:

[T]oda la vida he emprendido esa clase de aventuras, al final de las cuales encuentro el mismo desengaño. Termino siempre por consolarme pensando que en la aventura misma estaba el premio y que no hay que buscar otra cosa diferente que la satisfacción de probar los caminos del mundo que, al final, van pareciéndose sospechosamente unos a otros. Así y todo, vale la pena recorrerlos para ahuyentar el tedio y nuestra propia muerte, esa que nos pertenece de versa y espera que sepamos reconocerla y adoptarla. (73)

In this passage, Mutis underscores the fact that contemporary travel offers not a chance for great achievements, but rather a brief respite from human mortality. Indeed, the principal feature that distinguishes the tone of *La Nieve del Almirante* from previous adventure novels is the paradoxical lack of adventure. In the thirty years

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell's classic study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* examines three phases of the Hero's journey: the departure from home, a battle that results in triumph, and the return home. While Campbell's work compares hero myths from around the world, Northrop Frye focuses on the Western quest romance, whose history he traces from chivalric romances to the contemporary age.

<sup>6</sup> Lesley Wylie discusses the destabilizing and anti-hegemonic aspects of postcolonial parody in *Canaima*, *Los pasos perdidos*, and *La vorágine* (*Colonial* 15-18).

<sup>7</sup> As Roberto González Echevarría has shown in *Myth and Archive*, in the nineteenth century, scientific travel narratives by Europeans like Alexander von Humboldt provided a discursive model for Latin American narrative, while in the twentieth century anthropology fulfilled a similar role (11-12). Amazonia is a key region in both of these historical moments and types of writing.

since “Programa para una poesía”, Mutis has exchanged his early enthusiasm about travel for disillusionment in the Maqroll saga. What explains this change?

Previous scholarship on this topic by Gerald Martin, Gabriele Bizzarri, and Myrta Sessarego maintains that the advent of literary postmodernism coincides with this paradigmatic shift in *La Nieve del Almirante*; they argue that Maqroll's disenchantment with adventure and with himself as adventurer make him a postmodern protagonist. Bizzarri argues that Mutis's Maqroll series is postmodern in that it recognizes its antecedents in the adventure narrative and its impossibility in the contemporary era: “Con su protagonista consciente de su papel de pálida repetición del héroe tradicional, de su condición de falsario, y la acción convertida en espectro regresivo de sí misma, Mutis participa de la reflexión generalizada de la posmodernidad sobre la irremediable caída de los grandes relatos” (171). Bizzarri's analysis adheres to postmodern literary theory about the adventure novel genre as expressed by J. F. Lyotard, who argues that this sense of epic adventure is absent from many texts in the postmodern era: “The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (xxiv). Sessarego calls Maqroll a postmodern “abrumado héroe contemporáneo” (479), while Martin argues that Maqroll's postmodernism lies in his skepticism regarding “all myths of origin, all master narratives” (25). All of these critics therefore align Mutis's prose works with a shift in cultural production in the latter half of the twentieth century away from the ideals of progress, binarisms, master narratives, and cultural cohesion, and towards social, literary, temporal, and geographic fragmentation<sup>8</sup>.

Mutis's depiction of Maqroll as a listless and unwilling anti-hero undeniably forms part of a global postmodern literary landscape. Yet previous critics have not presented the novella in its Latin American literary context. Maqroll's *desengaño*, that characteristic Cervantean sentiment, stems from the novella's response to earlier canonical texts, principally *Los pasos perdidos* and *La vorágine*. In the latter novel, the poet Arturo Cova embarks upon his journey into the wilderness with the idea that the landscape might inspire his poetry: “Para qué las ciudades? Quizá mi fuente de poesía estaba en el secreto de los bosques intactos...” (161). Cova becomes disillusioned with the gulf between his experience of the Latin American wilderness and its depiction in literature when he cries “¿Cuál es aquí la poesía de los retiros, dónde están las mariposas que parecen flores translúcidas, los pájaros mágicos, el arroyo cantor? ¡Pobre fantasía de los poetas que sólo conocen las soledades domesticadas! ¡Nada de ruiseñores enamorados, nada de jardín versallesco, nada de panoramas sentimentales!” (296). Maqroll and Cova share a disenchantment with previous writings about the wilderness, including Rivera's own *Tierra de promisión* (1921), which extolled the beauty of the landscape of the South American continent. The main difference between the

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<sup>8</sup> As Natoli and Hutcheon put it, postmodernism is characterized by a “shift away from modernity's universalizing and totalizing drive - a drive that was first fueled, in the seventeenth century, by Descartes' foundational ambitions and his faith in reason. Postmodernity's assertion of the value of inclusive ‘both/and’ thinking deliberately contests the exclusive ‘either/or’ binary oppositions of modernity” (ix).

two is that while Rivera ultimately creates a lyrical work based in the capacity of the wilderness to overwhelm his protagonist, Mutis creates an aesthetic of ironic nostalgia based in the hollowing out of that former source of inspiration. As I will demonstrate shortly, this postmodern emptiness underscores the lack of exceptionality of Amazonia in the contemporary era.

The end of the Baudelairean opportunity for new travel in Amazonia expressed in the Maqroll series originates in Latin American literature in *Los pasos perdidos*. On an allegorical scale, Carpentier's novel dramatizes the process through which future unique voyages in Amazonia become impossible. Within the text, this moment occurs when the tranquility of the forest settlement Santa Mónica de los Venados is shattered by the sound of an aircraft passing overhead. The plane ruptures the narrator's fantasy of living in an earlier era, and it represents the collision of modernity and the Neolithic era for him:

Es como un largo trueno percutiente que entra en el Valle por el norte y nos pasa encima. [...] Bajo el avión que gira y regresa, huyen, aterrorizados, los hombres del Neolítico. [...] El avión está, acaso, a unos ciento cincuenta metros del suelo, bajo un pesado techo de nubes prestas a romperse en lluvia nuevamente; pero no son ciento cincuenta metros los que separan la máquina volante del Capitán de Indios, que la mira, desafiante, con la mano aferrada al arco: son ciento cincuenta mil años. Por vez primera suena, en estas lejanías, un motor de explosión; por vez primera es el aire removido por una hélice, y esto que repite su redondez, paralelamente, donde los pájaros tienen las patas, nos trae nada menos que la invención de la rueda. (289)

The incursion of an airplane into a community that does not use the wheel collapses a distance of 150,000 years, according to the narrator. The arrival of the plane heralds the end of an ideal Amazonian existence in *Los pasos perdidos*. It also marks a shift in the protagonist's perception of the South American wilderness. Before the landing of the rescue operation, Carpentier's narrator-protagonist envisions himself as a pioneer in the founding of a settlement. Alongside priests and gold prospectors, he imagines himself to be the first outsider to live among indigenous peoples and adopt their ways. The rumble of the plane, however, foreshadows the forced entry of Santa Mónica into the modern era. Santa Mónica is destined to become an established town when Yannes, a Greek fortune seeker, finds gold in the vicinity. The protagonist realizes he will now be the last Westerner to inhabit Santa Mónica in its ostensibly inviolate state. In the juxtaposition of the airplane and the simple bow and arrow, Carpentier makes the shift from prehistory to the twentieth century instantaneous and irrevocable.

This scene presents in microcosm a larger pattern in Latin American literature. Set in 1950, *Los pasos perdidos* is an important signpost in the transformation of literary representations of the South American wilderness over the course of the twentieth century. Before Carpentier, Hispanic American novelists such as Rómulo Gallegos and Rivera depicted the jungle as a wild site to be tamed by civilization, even as those regionalist writers based the drama of their works in the resistance of both peoples and landscapes to subjugation. The discovery of Santa Mónica de los Venados by the airborne rescue team, however, is a metaphor for the domestication of all of

Amazonia. While at first Carpentier's protagonist likens his journey to a trip back through time, he eventually realizes that Amazonia has entered the modern era. At the end of *Los pasos perdidos*, Carpentier inaugurates the aesthetic stance of nostalgia for the perceived cultural purity of Amazonia. Mutis's *La Nieve del Almirante* is written in the wake of this shift in the adventure novel protagonist's status from first to last adventurer, and as such it marks a new development in the Latin American literary tradition. It is not, therefore, merely the postmodern age that results in the listless tone of *La Nieve del Almirante*. Rather, Mutis extends the sense of disillusionment with South American travel expressed by Carpentier.

The commonplace of getting lost in the forest illustrates the transformation in representations of the wilderness from Rivera to Mutis. When Cova and his companions lose their way in the wilderness, Rivera describes "el embrujamiento de la montaña" and "el misterio que nos trastorna cuando vagamos en la selva" (294). Similarly, Carpentier's protagonist finds that in the forest "con el trastorno de las apariencias, en esa sucesión de pequeños espejismos al alcance de la mano, crecía en mí una sensación de desconcierto, de extravío total, que resultaba indeciblemente angustiada" (223). In contrast, the notion of traveling through terra incognita is absent in *La Nieve del Almirante*. Maqroll presents his journey as a passage between fixed, known points, including a military base and a sawmill. Mutis thus debunks the notion that the wilderness is any different from the city: "La selva [...] no tiene nada de inesperado, nada de exótico, nada de sorprendente. Esas son necedades de quienes viven como si fuera para siempre" (53). Mutis thus dissolves the exotic aura that previous writers consistently projected onto the wilderness. The possibility of traveling and getting lost in an unknown land has vanished.

The second motif common to Latin American writings about Amazonia with which Mutis engages is the portrayal of native women as a threat to the survival of Western men. Gaspar de Carvajal's 1542 narrative fuels the myth of Amazon women as fierce warriors who require men only for procreative sex and kill Europeans as well as their own indigenous followers (55). As Astrid Steverlynck has shown, while information about indigenous women was gathered from native sources, the descriptions of Amazons in colonial texts were presented in such a way as to be "useful in the European discourse of conquest" (695). The vision of the Amazonian woman as a menace to the European male contributed to depictions of the wilderness as a site of female sexual voracity, and to the notion that the feminine earth itself had the power to destroy or consume outsiders in literary texts.

Drawing on the colonial tradition, twentieth-century novels depict Amazonian women as both attractive and menacing. In *La vorágine*, Rivera's Cova views contact with indigenous women as dangerous and resists their advances:

Cuando me retiré a mi chinchorro, en la más complete desolación, siguieron mis pasos unas indias y se acurrucaron cerca de mí. Al principio conversaban a medio tono, pero más tarde atrevióse una a levantar la punta de mi mosquitero. Las otras, por sobre el hombro de su compañera, me atisbaban y sonreían. Cerrando los ojos, rechacé la provovación amorosa, con

profundo deseo de liberarme de la lascivia y pedirle a la castidad su refugio tranquilo y vigorizante. (211)

As Charlotte Rogers has mentioned, Cova's hesitance to have sex with native women reveals the socio-medical context in which the novel was written (112). The sexual desire of these nameless women and the Turkish Zoraida, with whom Cova does have sex, contrast sharply with the pregnant Alicia, who embodies the racial future of Colombia. Yet it also responds to long-standing historical presentation of Amazon women as libidinous (Steverlynck, 2005: 19). Moreover, these non-European women are dangerous and seductive like the earth itself (Magnarelli, 1987: 335). The association of the physical forest with the bodies of Amazonian women continues through *Los pasos perdidos* and into *La Nieve del Almirante*.

Mutis's depiction of women resonates deeply with Rivera's. Maqroll writes to and pines for his lover Flor Estévez, who has paid for his trip up the Xurandó. He hopes to return to Flor and her bar in the highlands, whose name gives the novella its title, once he has made his fortune. Like Alicia, Flor represents ideal womanhood, and Maqroll yearns for her in his dreams. In contrast, an indigenous woman becomes a sexual menace to Maqroll when a Slavic passenger and an indigenous family of four board the river boat. Like Cova, Maqroll finds Amazonian women abhorrent. In a long passage set on board the watercraft at the beginning of the journey, Maqroll writes in his journal:

Esa noche, mientras dormía profundamente, me invadió de pronto un olor a limo en descomposición, a serpiente en celo, una fetidez creciente, dulzona, insoportable. Abrí los ojos. La india estaba mirándome fijamente y sonriendo con malicia que tenía algo de carnívoro, pero al mismo tiempo de una inocencia nauseabunda. Puso su mano en mi sexo y comenzó a acariciarme. Se acostó a mi lado. Al entrar en ella, sentí como me hundía en una cera insípida que, sin oponer resistencia, dejaba hacer con una inmóvil placidez vegetal. El olor que me despertó era cada vez más intenso con la proximidad de este cuerpo blando que en nada recordaba el tacto de las formas femeninas. Una náusea incontenible iba creciendo en mí. Terminé rápidamente, antes de tener que retirarme a vomitar sin haber llegado al final. Ella se alejó en silencio. Entretanto, en la hamaca del esclavo, el indio, entrelazado al cuerpo de éste, lo penetraba mientras emitía un levísimo chillido de ave en peligro. Luego, el gigante lo penetró a su vez, y el indio continuaba su quejido que nada tenía de humano. Fui a la proa y traté de lavarme como pude, en un intento de borrar la hedionda capa de pantano podrido que se adhería al cuerpo. Vomité con alivio. Aún me viene de repente a la nariz el fétido aliento que temo no habrá de abandonarme en mucho tiempo. (20-21)

The extreme negativity of this encounter echoes the trope of indigenous sexual voracity in literature about Amazonia from the time of Carvajal's writing to *La vorágine*. Mutis portrays the indigenous couple as deracinated and inhuman in several ways: first, he does not mention to which ethnic group the couple belongs, thus denying them even the most basic identity within a community of other individuals. Second, the Amerindian woman's fetid scent of rot explicitly associates her with the decomposing plant matter around her, as María Eugenia Rojas Arana has shown (59). Furthermore, the emphasis on scent and sound in this description magnifies the

extreme bestiality of the indigenous pair. She gives off a stench like a serpent in heat, whereas the man releases inarticulate shrieks during the sexual encounter. She looks carnivorous, while he is an endangered bird. The reversal of traditional attributes, in which men are considered to have the aggression typical of a meat-eater and a woman is avian and fragile, contribute to the atmosphere of perversion in the scene, as does the homosexual act of non-reproductive copulation. Yet it is the procreative coupling that Maqroll finds most repellant. This nauseating act contrasts sharply with Maqroll's idealized love of the absent Flor, who presumably smells as sweet as her name suggests. Finally, the reptilian motif plays on the biblical associations between women, snakes, and evil.

The sexual encounter with the indigenous woman infects Maqroll with a "fiebre del pozo," and he nearly dies (50). An indigenous crew member informs him that his fever "ataca a los blancos que se acuestan con nuestras hembras. Es mortal" (50). Again, Mutis's depiction of his protagonist's illness mirrors that of Rivera's. For example, Arturo Cova also suffers from fevers during his relationship with Zoraida: "Calamidades de cuerpo y ánima se han aliado contra mi vida en el sopor de estos días viciosos. Mi decaimiento y mi escepticismo tienen una causa que los germina: el cansancio lúbrico, la astenia del vigor físico, succionado por las caricias de la madona. Cual se agota una esperma invertida sobre su llama, acabó presto con sus besos mi virilidad" (356). Maqroll's fever, in which he trembles uncontrollably, loses track of time, and feels overcome by an "inerte demencia mineral" is similar to Cova's illness (49). Both Rivera and Mutis thus present Amazonian women as endangering white men in the tropics.

Carpentier, however, engages with the trope of the Amazonian woman as a symbol of the region's purity. In a well-known colonial example, Walter Raleigh created an explicit parallel between the loss of virginity in women and the forced entry into ostensibly undiscovered territory in his *Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana* by informing Queen Elizabeth that: "Guiana is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought" (196)<sup>9</sup>. The inherent economic and sexual value of Amazonia, according to Raleigh, lies in its untouched state. This concept linking an untapped wilderness of riches with the virginal bodies of Amazonian women appears in *Los pasos perdidos*. In Santa Mónica de Venados, the utopian atmosphere is destroyed when the leper Nicasio sexually violates a young indigenous girl<sup>10</sup>. The horrific crime and the execution of Nicasio by the Adelantado are indicative of the inviability of the protagonist's aspiration to live in a place untouched by evil. Moreover, this event and the fact that Rosario, his *mestiza* lover, refuses to accompany him or await his return, reveal that the protagonist's projection of idealized purity onto both the landscape and the women that surround him is an

<sup>9</sup> In his reading of the *Discoverie*, Louis Montrose shows how the "discursive power of the inviolate female body serves an emergent imperialist project of exploration, conquest, and settlement" (8).

<sup>10</sup> Regarding Nicasio's manual rape of the young girl, Guillermina de Ferrari has argued that this moment destroys the facade of Santa Mónica de los Venados as a place without suffering or crime (223).

illusion. They serve as metaphors for the trajectory of the region as a whole. Like the young girl abused by Nicasio, Amazonia is also despoiled in *Los pasos perdidos* when the settlement is discovered. Rosario, whom the protagonist imbues with the characteristics of idealized, archaic womanhood, becomes the wife of another man and bears his child. All three narratives enter into dialogue with earlier tales of conquest because they feature the temptations and dangers of Western men penetrating virgin Amazonian forests and maidens. In *La Nieve del Almirante*, however, the consequences of sex with Amazonian women suggested by Carvajal and Rivera are brought to their destructive fruition.

The third motif that Mutis addresses and debunks within the context of Latin American writing about the wilderness is the legend of El Dorado. The quest for El Dorado dominated discourse about Amazonia beginning in the early sixteenth century. In 1539, Gonzalo de la Peña established the El Dorado legend when he declared that the Spanish adelantado Sebastian de Benalcázar “salió en demanda de una tierra que se dice el Dorado e Paqua e de muy gran noticia de oro e de piedras” (Gil, 1989: 66)<sup>11</sup>. While the idea of El Dorado lost its sense of physical possibility in the 1700s, the concept broadened into a metaphorical Amazonian utopia for many writers, as Fernando Aínsa and Jorge Nelson Trujillo have written<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, the search for El Dorado established the pattern of European incursion into Amazonia, the forced labor and enslavement of indigenous peoples, and the appropriation of Amazonian resources by outsiders. Twentieth-century Latin American literature stresses the negative impacts of the search for gold on Amazonia. For example, Carpentier’s protagonist explicitly compares the Greek gold-hunter Yannes to Felipe de Utre and others who searched for El Dorado in the Southern hemisphere for centuries (327). In his eyes, this discovery condemns the region to exploitation by missionaries, miners, scientists, and anthropologists, thus repeating the pattern of forced contact he has witnessed throughout his journey.

Mutis uses Maqroll’s upriver journey towards the sawmill as an allegory for the El Dorado myth in the late twentieth century. After recuperating from his illness, Maqroll reaches the sawmill and finds not a mythical source of wealth, but rather an enormous, modern, impenetrable structure. The vocabulary Mutis uses to describe the building evokes the legend of El Dorado. For instance, Maqroll calls the sawmill an “espejismo” and a “pesadilla estrafalaria” (77). The afternoon sun gives it “un halo dorado que le daba aspecto irreal, como si estuviese suspendido en el aire” (77). The structure’s golden halo definitively connects it to the lost kingdom of gold imagined in colonial chronicles. Its floating appearance shows it to be a mirage similar to visions of

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<sup>11</sup> There have been too many failed ventures to mention here, but both Demetrio Ramos Pérez and John Hemming give detailed accounts of the search for El Dorado.

<sup>12</sup> Aínsa argues that Latin America has been construed as a utopian space by Europeans and Latin Americans because it contains “territorio donde fundarse y una historia con un pasado a recuperar o un futuro donde proyectarse con facilidad” (10). Jorge Nelson Trujillo argues that the utopian myths of El Dorado flourished at a time in which global conceptions of space were being formed, making Manoa both a local and a universal utopia (23).

wilderness utopias in the vein of Columbus's terrestrial paradise, Antonio de León Pinelo's New World Garden of Eden, and the kingdom of El Dorado in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). This private sawmill of glass and steel, built by Finnish engineers, is guarded by marines because of the threat of guerrilla warfare in the area. On a symbolic level, it is a contemporary El Dorado because it contains great wealth inaccessible to the traveler. For Maqroll, the sawmill is a "gótica maravilla de aluminio y cristal que flota iluminada con esa luz de morgue, arullada por el manso zumbido de su planta eléctrica" (78). By comparing its light to a morgue Mutis links it to death - specifically to the death of Maqroll's ambitions and the promise of El Dorado for Latin America.

The guards turn Maqroll away from the site and threaten to kill him if he returns. The mariner realizes that his dreams of getting rich quick were "vagas maravillas de riquezas al alcance de la mano y golpes de suerte de los que, en verdad, jamás le suceden a la gente" (73). This mirage of wealth and power proves illusory for Maqroll as an individual and, metaphorically, for Amazonia as a whole. Maqroll's encounter with the sawmill strips the wilderness of its connotations of a Garden of Eden or the location of El Dorado. In the novella, the boat's captain tries to impress the utilitarian, quotidian reality of Amazonia upon Maqroll: "Aquí no hay nada, no habrá nunca nada. Un día desaparecerá sin dejar huella. Se llenará de caminos, factorías, gentes dedicadas a servir de asnos a esa aparatosa nadería que llaman progreso" (53). Mutis thus destroys one of the most enduring tropes of post-Independence Latin America - the idea that the wilderness must be tamed for the region to progress and develop. Indeed, the South American wilderness has long been a realm in which authors explore the relationships between humanity and nature, the autochthonous and the foreign, civilization and barbarism, and Latin America's past and future<sup>13</sup>. In one sense, Mutis follows in the footsteps of José Enrique Rodó, who in his seminal *Ariel* (1900) critiqued the emphasis on industrial production and progress in late nineteenth-century Latin America as a trend that impoverished aesthetics and made Latin Americans into poor imitations of their North American counterparts. The ship captain in *La Nieve del Almirante* echoes this viewpoint when he condemns jungle travelers serving as "asnos" for the material "nadería" of capitalism (53).

Rivera and Mutis both critique the exploitation of Amazonian resources in their respective historical moments. Rivera decried the abuses of the rubber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, condemning the rubber baron Tomás Funes and others like him who enslaved indigenous peoples and destroyed the Amazonian landscape: "Funes es un sistema, un estado de alma, es la sed de oro, es la

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<sup>13</sup> Several scholars of the Latin American regional novel have highlighted its engagement with economic modernization. Carlos Alonso argues that in the *novela de la tierra* "the preoccupation with an autochthonous cultural expression represents a particular resolution to the difficult relationship that Latin America has consistently entertained with modernity" (163). Jennifer French shows how texts published between 1910 and 1930 demonstrate "many Latin Americans' rude awakening to the deleterious effects that [British] investment was having on their human and natural landscapes" (37).

envidia sórdida” (348). Moreover, Rivera accuses the Colombian state of corruption and complicity in the mistreatment of its citizens: “Ni creas que delinquía el Gobernador al pegar la boca a la fuente de los impuestos, con un pie en su despacho y el otro en la tienda [...] El gobernador de esa comarca es un empresario cuyos subalternos viven de él” (348). Rivera’s pointed denunciation of historical figures in his fictional text makes *La vorágine* a novel of social protest as well as a literary evocation of the wilderness.

In Maqroll’s encounter with the sawmill, Mutis offers a more oblique but equally damning critique of the complicity of the military, the government, and the global economy. After Maqroll is ejected from the sawmill, an army major explains:

Esas instalaciones van a revertir al Gobierno dentro de tres años. Alguien, muy arriba, está interesado en ellas [...] Cuando llegue la fecha de la reversión y se entreguen los aserraderos al Gobierno, es muy posible que la guerrilla desaparezca como por ensalmo. ¿Me entendió? Es muy sencillo. Siempre hay alguien más listo que uno, ¿verdad? (81)

The major implies that the Colombian government actively supports the presence of guerrilla forces in the area in order to justify its isolation and management of the sawmill. As a result, the profit from the mill is destined to remain either in the hands of foreigners or in the highest levels of government. This depiction of the collusion of government with corporations and even guerrilla forces echoes the political and military situation of Colombia in the second half of the twentieth century<sup>14</sup>. While Mutis, like Carpentier, refuses to pinpoint the geographical location of his fiction, the guerrilla presence, the El Dorado-like nature of the sawmill, and the corruption of government officials suggest a harsh critique of the Colombian Amazon region in general. More specifically, Mutis may be inspired by the Putumayo border region, as was Rivera. Lesley Wylie has shown that the Putumayo has been a site of violence from 1541, when Hernán Pérez de Quesada passed through seeking El Dorado, to the twenty-first century, as the Putumayo continues to be the site of drug trafficking, kidnapping, and guerrilla violence<sup>15</sup>. Maqroll’s obvious disenchantment with the visible effects of corruption and resource extraction in the wilderness mirror Rivera’s protest of the rubber boom nearly sixty years earlier. In this sense both novels are works of protest literature in that they make the injustices perpetrated upon average Colombians clear.

What sets *La Nieve del Almirante* apart from earlier works, however, is that whereas regionalist authors of the first part of the century celebrated the literary possibility of Latin America’s unique forested core, Mutis depicts the region as an

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<sup>14</sup> According to Marco Palacios, “A crisis of legitimacy came over the political system in the 1970s, which in the following decade was aggravated by financial scandals, the emergence of drug trafficking, and the strengthening of the guerillas” (171).

<sup>15</sup> In *Colombia’s Forgotten Frontier*, Wylie shows that “With its rich reserves of tropical products the Putumayo has long been an important economic resource for Colombia, but few of these profits have been reinvested in the region and today its residents complain of government neglect, just as they did a century ago under the Peruvian Amazon Company” (11).

unexceptional part of contemporary society. For example, in *Canaima* (1935) Rómulo Gallegos shows how his protagonist Marcos Vargas is transformed by nature in the chapter “La Tormenta”. In *La vorágine*, Cova finds his poetic voice in the evocation of the forest: “Oh selva, esposa del silencio, madre de la soledad y de la neblina! ¿Qué hado maligno me dejó prisionero en tu cárcel verde?” (189). Carpentier similarly presents the South American forest as an inspiration to his protagonist, who creates a musical work inspired by an indigenous ritual he witnesses. Rather than a wellspring of creativity, all Maqroll finds in the wilderness is the monumental, monolithic presence of civilization. The new ground broken by Mutis lies in his disenchantment with the illusion of Amazonia as a site of literary potential. The novella nostalgically laments the lost possibilities of the region for artistic creation and despairs at the empty Amazonian present. Unlike *Canaima*, *La vorágine*, and *Los pasos perdidos*, which celebrate the Latin American wilderness as a new source of artistic creativity, Maqroll reveals that Amazonia is one more of the “caminos del mundo que, al final, van pareciéndose sospechosamente unos a otros” (73). The destruction of the opposition between urban and rural environments in *La Nieve del Almirante* allows Mutis to shed the binarisms that traditionally characterize writings about Latin America: civilization and barbarism, native and foreign, exotic and cosmopolitan<sup>16</sup>. By engaging the traditional motifs of the *novela de la selva* and then fracturing its foundational assumption of Amazonian literary exceptionality, Mutis creates a uniquely postmodern *novela de la selva*.

The final theme of *La Nieve del Almirante* that resonates with the *novela de la selva* and yet underscores its break with that tradition is the presentation of nostalgia in the novella. The longing for a previous time or place is as old as human existence, though the Greek neologism “nostalgia” was invented in 1688 by Johannes Hofer to mean “the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land...” (381)<sup>17</sup>. More recently, scholars such as Jennifer Ladino have shown how authors consciously mobilize a discourse of nostalgia as a form of social critique<sup>18</sup>. Both

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<sup>16</sup> As Santiago Colás states, the postmodern debates in Latin America seek to “move beyond the stagnant standoff between assimilationist espousal and nativist rejection of European and North American theories. These antagonistic positions, based on clear demarcations of the ‘native’ and the ‘foreign,’ are considered obsolete in the face of global flows of capital, goods, culture, and people” (12). In this sense, Mutis exemplifies the fracturing of these antagonistic positions. In making this argument, I contest the statement by Camacho Delgado that “en la novelística de Mutis, y muy especialmente en esta obra, la dicotomía civilización y barbarie da paso a un nuevo binomio: centro-periferia” (169). Rather, in Mutis contemporary life is marked by the incursion of the ostensibly civilized center, embodied in the European sawmill owners, into the Latin American periphery, with the result that existence becomes banal and disillusioning.

<sup>17</sup>In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, nostalgia is enjoying a resurgence in critical attention from scholars analyzing the modern era. To give just one example, in an influential essay, Renato Rosaldo described “imperialist nostalgia” as repressive colonial powers exhibiting “mourning for what one has destroyed” (107).

<sup>18</sup> In a description of nostalgia in North American fiction, Ladino writes, “Especially after the closing of the western frontier in 1890, many American nature narratives are tinged with nostalgia—for that very frontier, for untouched wilderness, for a preindustrial agrarian society, for pastoral communities in

Carpentier and Mutis offer an implicit negative judgment of the contemporary era by having their protagonists yearn for an earlier historical moment<sup>19</sup>. This sentiment pervades *Los pasos perdidos*, and is especially evident in the protagonist's relationship to music: he rejects Wagnerian style as being complicit with Nazism, and seeks to return to pre-historic forms of music in his own composition. The ultimate disillusionment of *Los pasos perdidos* lies in the protagonist's realization that he cannot inhabit the earlier era Santa Mónica de los Venados represents: "Fui un ser prestado [...] Hoy terminaron las vacaciones de Sísifo" (329-330). The bitter irony at being doomed to a Sisyphean task despite having lived briefly in utopia forms the central disillusionment of the novel.

Similarly, Mutis's protagonist states that he exists "en un tiempo por completo extraño a mis intereses y a mis gustos" (45). In his dreams Maqroll imagines himself as living in the Napoleonic era, in which he envisions great battles won through heroism. Yet instead of exhibiting an uncomplicated nostalgia for a previous historical time or a place he has known, as in *Los pasos perdidos*, Mutis's protagonist demonstrates an ersatz nostalgia for a time and place he never experienced<sup>20</sup>. Whereas Carpentier's narrator only realizes that his new life in Santa Mónica is an illusion when he is unable to return, Maqroll begins his journey in the knowledge that the illusion of opportunity in Amazonia will end in his failure:

Siempre se me ha sucedido lo mismo: las empresas en las que me lanzo tienen el estigma de lo indeterminado, la maldición de una artera mudanza. Y aquí voy, río arriba, como un necio, sabiendo de antemano en lo que irá a parar todo. En la selva, en donde nada me espera, cuya monotonía y clima de cueva de iguanas, me hace mal y me entristece. (23)

In this passage, Maqroll is painfully aware of the fruitlessness of his quest. His nostalgia for another time is ironic because it reverses the expectation the reader has for Maqroll as an adventure hero. This ironic nostalgia establishes Maqroll as an antihero in *La Nieve del Almirante*. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon has shown that irony and nostalgia are closely linked in post-modern writing, which enacts: "an ironizing of nostalgia itself, of the very urge to look backward for authenticity, and, at the same moment, a sometimes shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends the fulfillment of that urge" (205). Mutis similarly presents his protagonist's sense of

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which humans and nature coexist in peace, or simply for a time when 'nature' was easier to define" (10). John Su also contends that nostalgia is employed for ethical purposes in Anglophone fiction. In South America, the tradition of nostalgia in nature writing is much more complex than in North America because of the varieties of countries, imperial powers, processes of independence, methods of resource extraction, and distributions of indigenous peoples. The similarities of this trend with the *novela de la selva*, however, reflect a universal longing for an imagined wilderness utopia.

<sup>19</sup> Mutis's social critique goes beyond his fiction. For example, he expressed his disenchantment with contemporary sensibilities in a 2002 manifesto "Contra la muerte del espíritu" published in *El Cultural* questioning the *raison d'être* of his era. Rivera condemned the rubber trade in the Colombian political arena.

<sup>20</sup> In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai calls this type of nostalgia for an unlived past "ersatz nostalgia" or armchair nostalgia (78).

nostalgia with self-reflexive irony, in which Maqroll yearns for the past but recognizes that he has never had a successful journey. Consuelo Hernández interprets nostalgia as a result of Maqroll's "estética de deterioro", in which the artist despairs at a damaged contemporary world and is nostalgic for a mythical time when chaos was ordered (266). This nostalgia for an imagined time of unity echoes Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*, in which the protagonist seeks to found cities, discover unknown musical instruments, and escape the modern world. In the Maqroll saga, however, Santa Mónica de los Venados no longer exists; Maqroll has never inhabited an Amazonian forest to which he longs to return. Martin links Maqroll's postmodern disillusionment to his nostalgia for illusions, rather than actual places or experiences: "[Maqroll's] particular 'postmodern' philosophy leads him to a nostalgia for old illusions but not to the illusion that illusions can ever again be sustained" (25). Maqroll is therefore distinct from Carpentier's protagonist because he knows the illusion for what it is, but is nostalgic for a time when the illusion was maintained.

Quest narratives typically conclude with the hero's return home. In the *novela de la selva*, this return is often impossible; for example, Rivera's Cova never emerges from the wilderness, and Carpentier's protagonist can remain neither in Santa Mónica nor in the North American city (Rogers, 2012: 19). Yet in *La vorágine* and *Los pasos perdidos*, the protagonists convert their journeys into art: Cova leaves his diary behind as a testament to the brutality and beauty of the forest; Carpentier's protagonist composes a musical score, invents a newspaper article about his voyage, and ultimately crafts the novel the reader holds in his hands. Both novels establish a literary legacy in which Amazonia is a source of inspiration.

Like Cova and Carpentier's protagonist, Maqroll also finds that a return to his point of departure, the bar "La Nieve del Almirante," ends in failure. When he arrives at the bar he finds it abandoned and Flor Estévez gone. Maqroll's diary concludes with a subtle comparison of his voyage to those of previous jungle novel adventurers: "Algo ha terminado. Algo comienza. Conocí la selva. Nada tuve que ver con ella, nada llevo. Sólo estas páginas darán, tal vez, un desteñido testimonio de un episodio que dice muy poco de mi malicia y espero olvidar lo más pronto posible" (83). In *La Nieve del Almirante* the jungle does not offer an autochthonous literary aesthetic based in the evocation of the foliage, as in *La vorágine*, nor does it provide a path back through time to a golden past, as in Carpentier. Instead, *La Nieve del Almirante* is a testament to the extinction of master narratives about Amazonia, ranging from colonial texts by Carvajal to the *novela de la selva*. The adventure narratives of previous eras no longer have a place in a postmodern, domesticated Amazon. In his characterization of Amazonia as a desolate artistic landscape, Mutis engages and then critiques the tropes of Amazonia as a site of potential wealth, adventure, and inspiration. In Maqroll, Mutis creates a self-reflexive protagonist who documents the destruction of the literary promises of Amazonia.

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