



## ***EL SECRETO DE LA TIERRA: ENTANGLED POETICS AND THE VENEZUELAN AMAZON in UNA OJEADA AL MAPA DE VENZUELA (1939) BY ENRIQUE BERNARDO NÚÑEZ***

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To cite this article: Gianfranco Selgas (2023): *EL SECRETO DE LA TIERRA: ENTANGLED POETICS AND THE VENEZUELAN AMAZON* in *UNA OJEADA AL MAPA DE VENZUELA (1939)* BY ENRIQUE BERNARDO NÚÑEZ, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13569325.2023.2214502](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2023.2214502)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2023.2214502>



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Published online: 27 Jun 2023.



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## EL SECRETO DE LA TIERRA: ENTANGLED POETICS AND THE VENEZUELAN AMAZON IN *UNA OJEADA AL MAPA DE VENEZUELA* (1939) BY ENRIQUE BERNARDO NÚÑEZ

*In the beginning of the twentieth century, after its rapid insertion into the vortex of oil and mineral extraction, Venezuela was forced to re-think its relationship with nature. This process of rethink, characterised by an eagerness for modernisation, resulted in a series of discourses focused on Venezuela's Amazonia as a repository of possibilities. This paper analyses how these possibilities were channelled through the metaphor of el secreto de la tierra, tracing an early reading of the ideological configuration of Venezuela and its Amazonia as a land of inexhaustible material and poetic richness. This metaphor was voiced by a set of socio-ecological discourses written about the Venezuelan Amazon, including the essay on Venezuelan geography and culture by Enrique Bernardo Núñez *Una ojeada al mapa de Venezuela* (1939). The paper focuses on the representation of this region as a set of discursive constructions entangled with the naturalisation of the modernising ideal that has fuelled the imaginaries of material growth and rentier capitalism in Venezuela. The concluding remarks will point to how such a reading can help us to understand a discursive and poetic radicalisation embedded in conflicting approaches to the nature-culture confluence in the Venezuelan Amazon.*

**Keywords:** Amazonia; Enrique Bernardo Núñez; environmental humanities; Latin American literature; Venezuela

### Entangled poetics in the Venezuelan Amazon

The birth of the oil industry in Venezuela coincided with the efforts of Juan Vicente Gómez, dictator of the Republic, in different periods between 1908 and 1935, to consolidate control over a fractured national and political system. In his attempt to diminish the power of regional elites, Gómez succeeded in asserting the authority of the national government, sustained by the economic benefits of the transnational oil companies which were established in the country after the exploitation of the first fossil-fuel deposits in 1910. By the end of the 1930s, John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil and Henri Deterding's Royal Dutch Shell controlled 85% of Venezuela's oil extraction (Coronil 1997, 76). This symbiotic relationship

forged between the oil industry and the state gave Gómez, and after 1935 his successor Eleazar López Contreras, political legitimacy and economic resources to consolidate and lay the foundations for the rentier model that characterised the Venezuelan petro-state throughout its history (Arráiz Lucca 2007, 124–129; Tinker Salas 2009, 2–14). For Venezuela, the irruption of oil implied a rapid transition from an agriculture-exporting economy, to an energy- and, later, mineral-exporting power (Coronil 1997, 69–84). This forced the nation to re-think its relationship with nature. As Fernando Coronil puts it, during Gómez’s time, “the entity called Venezuela came to be seen as constituted not only by its people but also by its main source of wealth—not just by its social but by its natural body” (1997, 88).

However, petroleum extraction would not only lay the foundations of the Venezuelan rentier model but would also give free rein to all kinds of fantasies induced by the official idea that fossil fuel and mineral extraction would give the country the definitive push towards modernisation. Extractivism and oil production would have a multifaceted effect in Venezuela. On the one hand, these activities embraced the production of goods, while on the other they encompassed the social agents involved in the process of production, unifying in a single field the material and cultural orders upon which the idea of the Venezuelan nation was built. The strengthening of the rentier model sustained the economic, political, and social bases of Venezuela, reinforcing the interconnectedness between a pattern of productivity and the imaginary idea of endless growth as threads in the construction of the national identity. In this way, the developmentalist discourse built around the extraction of fossil fuels and minerals in Venezuela transcended its political framework and became a master narrative, shaping the organisation of Venezuelan society, political regime, and culture as repositories of material possibilities. Twentieth-century Venezuelan culture, for example, engaged substantially with the representation of different modes of extractivism and its impact on society. Even though this engagement has been characterised as marginal (Carrera 1972, 29), several fictional and non-fictional works addressed Venezuela’s relationship to resource extraction relationship. Oil was prominent in fictions such as Núñez’s *Cubaqua* (1931), César Uribe Piedrahita’s *Mancha de aceite* (1935), and Miguel Otero Silva’s *Oficina no. 1* (1961), avant-gardist art and cinema by El Techo de la Ballena (1961–1969) and Arturo Uslar Pietri’s essayistic and opinion pieces *Sembrar el petróleo* (1936) and *Los venezolanos y el petróleo* (1990), to name but a few.

In this paper, I analyse how these possibilities were channelled through the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*, a figure of speech employed by Venezuelan novelist, journalist and diplomat Enrique Bernardo Núñez in his essay *Una ojeada al mapa de Venezuela (lectura ante un auditorio ausente, un día cualquiera del año)* (1939). Núñez used *el secreto de la tierra* to refer to the Latin American identity concealed in the endogenous forces of the Amazon, which he saw as the key to retrieving lost autonomy after colonisation and the growing power of transnational oil companies in Venezuela. An alternative to the most enduring metaphors used to depict the Amazon – namely, its representation as a green hell or as an earthly paradise (Slater 2002, 1–22; Vieira 2016, 120–123; Martínez-Pinzón and Uriarte 2019, 3) – I read *el secreto de la tierra* as an ambivalent socio-ecological discourse written

about the Venezuelan Amazon. It is my contention that Núñez's piece goes back to an early reading of the ideological configuration of Venezuela and its Amazonia as a land of inexhaustible resources and poetic richness deeply rooted in the geography and culture of this region.<sup>1</sup> The linkage Núñez establishes between the geography and culture of the Amazon and poetic language is what I would like to call *entangled poetics*. More specifically, I will analyse the representation of the Amazon as an entanglement of historical, environmental, and poetic constructions, alongside the naturalisation of the modernising ideal that has fuelled the imaginaries of material growth and rentier capitalism in Venezuela. This will allow me to flesh out and make resonate the ambivalent possibilities contained in this metaphor.

My reading of *entangled poetics* situates itself in a twofold, interrelated theoretical framework. It is indebted to Jason W. Moore's (2015) notion of world-ecology, understood as the entanglement between humans and nonhumans that accounts for the environmental and social transformations within the historical frame of capitalism. World-ecology emphasises capitalist accumulation as a form of organising nature and the relations between work, reproduction, and life conditions. It understands human relations of power, production, and environment-making without dissociating nature from social relations. As a result of this, an understanding of human and nonhuman relations in the web of life must encompass and emphasise "nature as a whole: *nature* with an emphatically lowercase *n*. This is nature as us, as inside us, as around us. It is nature as a flow of flows. Put simply, humans make environments and environments make humans—and human organization" (Moore 2015, 4; italics in the original). World-ecology operates here as "a framework for unifying the production of nature, the pursuit of power, and the accumulation of capital" offering "a way of re-reading the diversity of modern human experience as unavoidably, irreducibly, socio-ecological" (Moore 2015, 291). *Entangled poetics* also takes into consideration Karen Barad's notion of entanglement of matter and meaning. According to Barad, to be entangled is "to lack an independent, self-contained existence" (2007, ix). Given that existence is not understood as an individual affair, an entangled intra-relating process takes place between beings. Barad (2007, 33) defines the notion of intra-action as the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. In contrast to the usual descriptions of interactions between separate individual agencies, the notion of intra-action recognises that distinct agencies do not precede but rather emerge through their intra-relation. The entanglements pointed out by Moore and Barad, accounting for a complex network and bundle of human and nonhuman agents which exceed the rational and modern notion of the individual, resonate with the reading I am postulating in this paper.

From that point of departure, a novel way of interpreting Venezuelan identity unfolds as I read in Núñez's essay a form of *amazoning* Venezuela. Juan Duchesne Winter (2019) has identified in the verb *amazoning* a way of thinking and writing with the territory "onto the unexplored convergences of Amazonian thinking with traditions and emergent expressions of agroindustrial societies that also develop modes of territorial thinking" (2).<sup>2</sup> More than considering the Amazon basin as a place, *amazoning* considers it as a bundle of species, experiences, and cultures to *act* and *think-with*. It puts forward territory-making connections advanced by Amazonian traditions as auxiliaries for thought and action. By doing that, it engages with writing as an aesthetic action and a cosmopolitical praxis that enacts

interspecies alliances: “representation (as aesthetic action rather than vicarious symbolization) is (...) an animation procedure capable of continuously re-enchanting the life world by motivating reciprocal interactions between the multiple species of existents (biotic and abiotic, organic and artifactual) that *make up* the territory and thus make life possible” (Duchesne Winter 2019, 5; italics in the original). Emphasising the symbiotic connections between species, the action word *amazoning* “connects existents in their difference and singularity, and negotiates their symbiotic connection rather than crunching them into one-sided, unqualified quantifications and abstract axioms” (Duchesne Winter 2019, 5). In this paper, I show how the essay can enact a similar action from the vantage point of literary representation, focusing on *el secreto de la tierra*.

Lastly, the notion of *entangled poetics* I expound upon here can account for the construction of a poetic form related to the so-called mystery underlying the Venezuelan Amazon in relation to the inherent connection between language and the environment that has been particularly poignant in twentieth-century Spanish-American regional literature. As Carlos J. Alonso (1990, 18–20) noted, this relationship was rooted in a discursive and geographic meditation on cultural autochthony that discussed Latin America’s problematic relationship with modernity. In that regard, Núñez’s essay can be related to a series of geo-interpretative essays flourishing in Latin America during the 1930s–1940s. Argentine Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933) or Chilean Benjamín Subercaseaux’s *Chile o una loca geografía* (1940) put forward an understanding of the nation and its human component through the lens of their intrinsic relationship with its geography and the environment – whether on the Argentine pampas or in the Andes Mountains. As a geographical and cultural space, the Amazon basin has also spurred many discursive representations: from colonial idealisations of the jungle and its bioecological resources to travel narratives and later literary approaches to the region (Rodríguez 1997; Marcone 1998; Pizarro 2005; Martínez-Pinzón and Uriarte 2019).<sup>3</sup> However, the Amazon’s biodiverse environments, its (ongoing) configuration as a commodity frontier, and the cultural Amerindian-Western confluence that takes place in the region have also accounted for the multispecies world-making processes that occur *in* and *through* it (Sá 2004; Wylie 2013; Andermann 2018; Smith 2021). My conceptualisation of *entangled poetics* is attentive to this multispecies perspective on the Amazon, as it evokes a socio-ecological discourse observant of the way materialisations are entangled with other materialisations; that is, where matter and discourse, nature and culture, are allied with alternative ontologies fostered in the Venezuelan hinterlands.

The following two sections of this essay analyse the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra* in *Una ojeada ...* I will identify the entanglement between geographic and poetic discourse put forward by the metaphor as a form of *amazoning* Venezuela, as well as a poetic entanglement focused on the relationship between the environment and human-nonhuman beings in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, my concluding remarks will point out how such a reading can help us better understand a discursive and poetic radicalisation embedded in conflicting approaches to the culture-nature confluence in the Venezuelan Amazon.

## Unearthing *el secreto de la tierra*

*Una ojeada ...* was written between 1933 and 1934 and published in installments in the Venezuelan press over a span of ten years, between 1935 and 1945 (Larrazábal Henríquez 1971, 11). In 1939, the essay was published as a monograph by Editorial Élite, and, in 1949, a definitive version of the book appeared, accompanied by a series of journalistic opinion pieces and other short essays. *Una ojeada ...* presents Núñez's vision of the confluence between nature and culture as based on the geographic traces left by Amerindian and European civilisations in Venezuela. The essay is structured in four parts: "Hacia una interpretación", "La curva de la historia", "La tierra y el tiempo", and "Horizonte". In these chapters, the author describes the dichotomy between the cosmovision of the Amerindians and that of the European colonisers, as well as urban and rural, traditional and modern. These tensions and dichotomies are poignant in Núñez's discourse, torn between a contradictory allegiance between Western notions, such as *landscape* and *nature*, and Amerindian engagements with the nonhuman environment.

For Núñez, these issues not only played a significant part in understanding the history of Venezuela and its attempts to achieve modernisation, but they were also useful to highlight a so-called spiritual disorientation and the persistence of colonial structures overshadowing a cultural identity rooted in the soil of the Venezuelan Amazon. He witnessed first-hand the centralisation of power by the *Gomecista* administration and the increasing industrial exploitation of oil fields by foreign capital, which was central in the process of de-ruralisation experienced in Venezuela (Torres Iriarte 2006, 31–32). Even though Núñez belongs to one of the most relevant cultural generations of the country – e.g. Rómulo Gallegos, Teresa de la Parra, José Rafael Pocaterra, Mariano Picón Salas, Mario Briceño Iragorry, and Arturo Uslar Pietri, among others – his position in Venezuela's literary and intellectual field was relatively peripheral. Núñez has been characterised as an eclectic intellectual without concrete political affiliations (Torres Iriarte 2006, 49–56), an "indiscreet writer who, in a society of compromises, overcame weaknesses until he verticalised a solitary commitment to his truth about the world and himself" (Araujo 1972, 79).

*Una ojeada ...* begins with a stratigraphic and geographical description of Venezuela, putting forward a discussion based on the emergence of a post-colonial national conscience grounded in an alternative understanding of the nature-culture relationship.<sup>4</sup> The context for such an understanding is that of neo-colonialism and the establishment of transnational companies in the Americas for the extraction of natural resources. According to Alejandro Bruzual (2010, 815–816), Núñez's argument is based on retrieving the harmonious relationship between man and nature lost after colonisation took place. However, this awareness can also be read as an entanglement between nature and culture, no longer from a harmonic standpoint but from an interrelation, conveyed through the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*. Using language to entangle nature and culture, the essay highlights an entangled perspective between the nonhuman environment and humans that opposes the denaturalisation process and the indifference with which the modernised nation looked at the Venezuelan Amazon.

For Núñez, the developmentalist and modernising path promoted and fostered by the national government and aided by foreign capital, as well as the denaturalisation of space by its reconstitution as an extractive zone, had given rise to a world view that needed to be nuanced. The problem was not the nation's development based on the exploitation of natural resources. In various opinion pieces, Núñez encourages different types of sustainable development – e.g. his proposal to turn Venezuela into a regional paper-producing country (Núñez [1939] 1949, 107–108) – as well as his position against foreign intervention and state mismanagement of mineral and petroleum production – e.g. expressed in a reportage series published by the author on the extraction of oil (Núñez [1939] 1949, 69–94; 145–146) and tin (Núñez [1939] 1949, 146–147). Rather, it was the imposition of capitalism as a “form of civilisation as opposed to another one”, where “the machine took over and made her [the human being] a slave” (Núñez [1954] 2017, 17). Without disregarding the modernising processes associated with the abovementioned, Núñez proposes to embrace “a new humanity” ([1954] 2017, 32) by rethinking the Amazon in relation to the nation. The latter can be related to a vision of the world that is both cultural and natural, for, as the author points out, in order to have a new humanity, one must go beyond the imposition of the capitalistic civilising model to create a “new world [that] sometimes emerges independent of human will” ([1954] 2017, 70).

In *Una ojeada...*, this new world will imply the contestation of the civilising model associated with the Portuguese-Spanish colonial system and its later reproduction by British and US American neo-colonialism in Latin America. Núñez's essay stresses the importance of a Latin American cultural expression that belongs to Amerindian communities – but that is also the product of subsequent transculturation with European and African communities (Núñez [1939] 1949, 5–7) – and highlights its potential to enable another world view through the lens of human and more-than-human entanglements that will set in motion a “generative virtue” that “must fill its hands with soil” (Núñez [1939] 1949, 21). This phrase should be read in the context of Venezuela's modernisation during the 1930s, a call to retrieve a connection with *la tierra* as an environment with which the human is entangled in the face of growing technification and denaturalisation of the national geography. This entanglement and the land-being intra-action that it brings to the fore can be interpreted in the essay from the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*. This metaphor not only shows a thematic link between beings – human and non-human – and the land, it also enables, rhetorically speaking, a double meaning. *El secreto de la tierra* mainly conveys the idea of “something that escapes our senses” (Núñez [1939] 1949, 4) and which is rooted in the relationship with the environment. Núñez represents this as a symbolic and experiential interrelationship between the environment and Amerindians, who found in *la tierra* “images, symbols as vital as those that shine with purer forms on the altar of other civilisations” ([1939] 1949, 6). At the same time, the metaphor underlines the existence of a richness that can be located on and under the earth, highlighting a secluded potential associated with the historical commodification of natural resources. This double meaning brings to the fore the fusing of the symbolic and the material, something Moore (2015, 80) has identified in the origins of the conceptualisation of nature

and its fetishisation. What I want to highlight with this is how the metaphor convenes an understanding of *la tierra* and its secrets as both *being* and *resource*. It puts forward the fetishistic idea of the secret as something that can be capitalised and commodified, but it also reframes it by recognising how it goes beyond human sense and desire, insinuating the earth as an endogenous actor in relation to the web of life. In that sense, *el secreto de la tierra* alludes to the cultural and natural entanglement of the Amazon and this becomes evident in the ways Núñez portrays the environment by emphasizing its geography through poetic imagery. As the following example shows, the essay conveys this as an entanglement where humans – i.e. culture and poetic discourse – are both related and affected by nonhumans – the land and the geological force:

Above all, the land before us demands an interpretation. (...) The territories of Guyana; the immense region of the rivers; the grasslands of Cuyuní, Atabapo and Río Negro; the mountains that separate the Orinoco from the Amazon, later carved by the layout of the straight borders, emerged long before the edges of the coast in their current appearance over the Caribbean. ... We are thus witnessing the story of a fabulous work (...). It is not enough to know the geological periods in the formation of the land (...) We want to understand the artist's intention; the religious and poetic sense of her creation (...) We do not have (...) monuments that can guide us in our purpose. But there is silence and solitude. There are the mountain ranges that are always surpassing themselves, and the horizons. In all of this we can find images. It is believed to perceive things that exist or have existed. Something that escapes our senses. In short, something the conquistadors, when they felt their souls troubled in the midst of the solitudes, called the secret of the land. (Núñez [1939] 1949, 3–4)

As the paragraph cited shows, the geographical component of Amazonas predominates. The succession of specific elements of the environment – e.g. mountains, rivers, and meadows – can be related to a regionalist-naturalist aesthetic, but in *Una ojeada* ... the geographical component does not necessarily fulfil a landscape-scenery function. On the contrary, the environment in the text reveals itself as a sort of acting character, a geological force shaping the world. Venezuelan geography, in this case, is a *fabulous work*, an acting materiality. Behaving as an artist, the environment embodies the form of a divine maker, creating a work with multiple interpretations. Moreover, the environment has a decisive rhetorical effect in the essay. It does not only function formally, i.e. making the Amazonas region the subject of the action – a quality it receives through its designation in the essay as the creator of the world that demands an interpretation. Rather, it communicates a sensitive approach to the land that, on the one hand, highlights a cultural essence and acting power embedded in it, and on the other hand, separates it from the technical reduction associated with extractive activities that commodify and scientifically scrutinise the environment as a commodity. The essay thus seeks to decipher another linkage between human and natural history, no longer from the precepts of nature as an exploitable good, nor in terms of a dichotomous



reiteration of the cultural representation of nature as a green hell or an earthly paradise landscape. On the contrary, it expresses a relationality in which both figures – the environment and the human, geography and culture – are configured as a world-ecology (Moore 2015, 3), grasping humans and geological formations as a flow of flows in the web of life. In other words, the poetic language of the essay conveys the idea of a geographic environment that simultaneously *calls for* an interpretation and *creates* the world, thus placing itself on the same agential level as the human being who inhabits it. By stating the agency of the environment, language displaces the discursive trope of the natural landscape from a threatening, commodifiable or paradisiac place, to another of transformative and relational qualities: a place of multispecies entanglement.

At the same time, *el secreto de la tierra* articulates an important ideological ambivalence in Núñez's essay. Returning to the geographical references in the passage cited above, the Amazon region is presented as a space of primeval formation, opposed to that of the Caribbean coast, where the nation's intelligentsia and capital city Caracas are located. In doing so, the essay resonates at first with the trope of the foundational value of the Amazon. As Lúcia Sá (2004, xiii–xxviii), Lesley Wylie (2009, 1–13), and Charlotte Rogers (2012, 1–28) have noted, the discursive retrieval of the Amazon rain forest by *novelas de la selva* such as José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924) and Rómulo Gallegos's *Canaima* (1935) performed an act of re-encounter of *authentic* and *unspoiled* sites of national foundation, while writing into it a transcultural relationship with, and appropriation of, native Amazonian cosmologies. However, following what Amanda Smith has identified as the counter-discursive capacity of the Amazon, I am interested in highlighting how the Venezuelan Amazon can be read differently in Núñez's essay. Amazonia is "a region that serves both as the quintessential playground for the developmentalist imagination and the archetypal impediment to modernization" (Smith 2021, 13). To read this ambivalence, and its resonance with the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*, implies bringing to the fore the forces at play that are made explicit in the text – e.g. geological, animal, human – in relation to the historical appropriation of the Amazon as an instrument for capitalist development. Instead of locating cultural authenticity, the *entangled poetics* highlight a complex, biological entanglement of human and nonhuman forces.

Moreover, although the Amazonas State in Venezuela turned out to be a strategic area for geopolitical, economic, and developmental purposes, national disdain for the province was entrenched in discourses that imagined these spaces as "unreal" and "unworthy of being inhabited" (Núñez [1939] 1949, 11). Taking this into consideration, the geography described by Núñez at the beginning of the essay reads as a reinterpretation of the Amazon region in order to question the idea upon which the Venezuelan nation was built. Thus, one can read in Núñez ([1939] 1949, 13) a denunciation of the prevailing indifference towards Amazonia and its instrumentalisation as an extractive zone, grounded in on the idea of the modern nation cultivated by the intellectuals of the urban coastal area:

That is why we will say that the poems of our thoughts are our problems. That is to say, the problems of the land and those of the man to whom it is attached to (...) For us the autonomous reality is present in the reality

that we must conquer – located beyond immense efforts, charged by the same passionate insinuations –, wide landscape of sun and distant jungles, over which the bird of the seven colours sparkles in its flight, inviting us to follow it. (Núñez [1939] 1949, 14)

This paragraph continues to rhetorically link environmental elements with the cultural discourse. Núñez reiterates the need to relate thought and aesthetics – *the poems of our thoughts* – to the territory and the problems the country faces, ascribed to capitalism, Venezuela’s colonial past, and its post-colonial and neo-colonial present. The text puts forward the need to *conquer* the land, but under a precept that alludes to passion – semantically opposed to rationality – in order to recover Venezuela’s *wide landscape of sun and distant jungles*. Here, the coupling between *conquer* and *landscape* is reminiscent of the contradictory allegiances put forward by Núñez’s essay. As with the metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*, the conquest of the land exposes a tension between the fetishisation of nature – i.e. a *landscape* that should be possessed for a specific gain – and the possibility of unearthing a different interaction between human culture and the nonhuman environment to uncover the autonomy of that space. However, this tension is also representative of a more complex dynamic that, according to my reading, highlights the world-ecology and the multispecies entanglement depicted in the essay. This is particularly poignant when Núñez focuses on the *siete colores*, a bird that lives south of the Orinoco River. In Caribbean mythology, the rainbow and its seven colours represent the *Youlouca* or plume of God. The Indigenous myth associates this representation of God with the plumes of their *caciques*, formed by a feathered diadem associated with the variety of colours of the *siete colores* and its documented relationship with the natives of the Orinoco region (Rojas 1907, 203). Based on this alternative relation between humans and nonhumans, to *conquer* the Amazon from the hands of capitalism, Venezuelans must follow the path of a human and nonhuman entanglement – i.e. to become the Amerindian who wears the feathers of the bird on her chest and makes herself God – and which would stand in direct contrast with the conquest of immense efforts – i.e. capitalism and the modern civilising model.

This poetic construction contrasting words such as *conquer* and *landscape* with a multispecies entanglement puts the essay in direct relation to the dialectal unity of “the coproduction of earth-moving, idea-making, and power-creating across the geographical layers of human experience” (Moore 2015, 3). It also enables a contrastive reading with the technocratic discourse of the Venezuelan petro-state. Coupled aesthetically and politically with the capitalist civilising model, the nation and its intellectuals are placed at the centre of the implicit critique of *Una ojeada . . .* :

When one considers that the instruments of culture have remained useless in the hands of the man of the city, one is ready to think that these cities became incapable of fulfilling their destiny, and the impulse that came from afar – which one day threatened with profound transformation – provoked events within their walls (. . .) The struggle between the city and the countryside; the hostile village and the disdainful city; the abandonment of the land; urban problems; the cult of progress.

Everything has been faithfully represented. But the foundations have not been removed and the old structure remained the same, covered, however, with reinforced concrete. (Núñez [1939] 1949, 14)

In the paragraph quoted, Núñez explicitly examines the ways in which both the nation-state and the cultural representation of the Amazon deployed by the urban intellectuals are incapable of looking differently at the region. The essay criticises the unfulfilled promise of modernisation: the failed destiny promoted from afar, was reflected in the cultural instruments that have been unable to account for the historical reality of Amazonia. This is “the divorce between the so-called cultured men and those who call themselves men of work”, which is, for Núñez, “one of the outstanding features of Venezuelan life” (Núñez [1939] 1949, 13) that signals the historical tension between the modern and the traditional. This situation, which Núñez sees as the basis of the dichotomy between urban and rural societies in Latin American political and literary tradition, is related to the processes of accelerated modernisation that Venezuela was undergoing at the time: a vertiginous flow of worker-peasant migration from a rural to an urban-industrial setting, due to the economic transformation taking place in the country. According to Núñez, the urban intellectuals neglected the historical reality of the Amazon by not realising that “in the city we are still rural or peasant farmers” ([1939] 1949, 129). “We are all Indians after all”, continues Núñez, and “civilisation is not just about wearing shoes and going to the cinema. There is another way of proceeding, of understanding life worthy of being called a civilisation” ([1939] 1949, 119). This position not only places the discourse in favour of peasantry and Indigenous communities, but sets in motion an ideological thinking that reacts against the intellectual-modernised component of the nation and capitalism as a civilising model. More explicitly, in the essay, Núñez distances himself from the urban intelligentsia, which is isolated and removed from *el secreto de la tierra*, through a writing that, in its entanglement between culture and the environment of the Amazon, articulates an alternative discourse.

Núñez’s critique is then aimed at both the political and aesthetic levels. The dichotomies used and discussed in the essay point to the decline and failure of the modernising project and the Western thought reproduced in the politics, economy, and culture of Venezuela. *El secreto de la tierra* articulates a socio-ecological discourse mapping the space of the region in an ambivalent political and cultural tension with the idea promoted by the nation.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Núñez’s textual representation of the Venezuelan map is interpreted as a call to abandon the stratigraphic view of the technocrat – represented in *Una ojeada* by the figure of the intellectual and the capitalist exploiter – in favour of a geographical-cultural view that calls for an intra-action and the recognition of the entanglements between the environment and human beings.

### *Amazonizing Venezuela*

After arguing in favour of a distinct interpretation of the Venezuelan map – that is, instead of looking *at it* with stratigraphic eyes, it urges us to look *into* its entangled

essence – Núñez contends that the Venezuelan map is shaped like a tree. The metaphor acts suggestively: it roots the vegetal image in the configuration of an alternative way of imagining a relationality between nature and culture, and it disrupts the spatial flattening entailed by the map and driven by the modernisation process launched by the oil industry. Here, I interpret this metaphor as a way of *amazoning* the map of the nation: it addresses an image of Venezuela beyond the territorial determination and categorisation of its natural wealth, taking it to the realm of poetic imagination, observant of the native traditions that seem to convey another way of dealing with Venezuelan reality. As the passage below shows, Núñez engages in a practice of mixture, embedding poetic discourse with speculative and mythic constructions, shifting the reading of geographical space from stratigraphic representation to the sentient reading propelled by the territory itself:

She appears on the map in the form of a tree. This tree shape is now like the sign of a horoscope. A beautiful horoscope. A tree is immediately associated with the idea of heaven and is a frequent symbol of old and wonderful visions (...) The roots of our tree sink into the Amazonian lands coloured by the tribes – gyres of the ancient race – and splendid with silence (...) Silence is the spiritual sap. The word that ascends to the top. It is the flower and the fruit of that tree. Thus, that outline we contemplate offers us more than the simple reliefs of its physical aspect and we find ourselves before an intelligence; a thought abandoned to the earth. (Núñez [1939] 1949, 5)

This *pensamiento abandonado a la tierra* resonates with the forms of *amazoning* and matter entanglement that re-imagine the configuration of the Venezuelan map. In the socio-political and extractivist context of Venezuela at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Una ojeada...* dialogues with novels such as Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929) and Uslar Pietri's *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931). Unlike these well-known foundational and modernising fictions (Bruzual 2010, 813), Núñez's *Una ojeada...* presents a discourse explicitly opposed to the idea of reordering and modernising the nation.<sup>6</sup> During the 1930s-1940s, the modernising transition resulting from oil exports, as well as the process of national rehabilitation used to contain Venezuela's *caudillista* insurgency during the dictatorship of Gómez at the beginning of the century, instituted an account of the nation that revolved around the notion of progress and development driven by the economic benefits of the oil industry and the insertion of Venezuela into the international market. The tree-shaped map inscribed in *Una ojeada* modifies this story, which foundational fictions such as Gallegos's or Uslar Pietri's reproduced. That is, through a literary construction that looks at the environment and culture of the Amazon in such a way as to challenge the configuration of national space which placed Caracas on the central axis of Venezuelan modernity, a new spatiality is articulated.

As shown in the passage, the *pensamiento abandonado a la tierra* emphasises a connection between the roots of the tree and the Amazon that makes visible a hidden link between the land and Venezuelan identity. By recognising the agency of the vegetal world – the earth thinks, has an intelligence – an eminently human cultural abstraction such as thought is interpreted as a nonhuman construction. This

assembly of meanings, rendered through language, rhetorically mobilises the land-being intra-action in the entanglements of the web of life, putting the focus on a human-nonhuman relationality, as well as problematising the national identity corresponding to the political-territorial delimitation of the nation. Moving beyond the sole physical properties of the territory and its resourcefulness for the development of the nation, the essay signals a form of intelligence and insight inherent to the more-than-human environment that points at other forms of relationality with the earth. The tree, and for that matter the Amazon, triggers a relational process in which words and plants, culture and nature, tune in and entangle each other. In other words, a mutual implication within which Amazonian thought moves – where all existents are potentially involved with each other (Duchesne Winter 2019, 39) and in a flux of constant transformation into human and nonhuman forms (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 469–470) – emerges and gives way to an alternative configuration of Venezuelan identity.

On a different note, in *Una ojeada ... , el secreto de la tierra* can be read as the acknowledgement of an intrinsic relationship between nature and human beings beyond an anthropocentric point of view. It conveys the possibility of unearthing a secret attuned with the environment and historically overshadowed by colonisation and its successive reiterations in the continent due to the logic of coloniality and the Western construction of the Americas. As Jens Andermann (2018, 27) explains, the Western verbal and visual construction of *landscape* and *nature* in the Americas was premised on a split between subject-object, culture-nature, and human-nonhuman categories, traditionally reinforced by modern aesthetics and its objectified vision of nature inherited from the colonial standpoint. In contrast, identifying the entanglement between Núñez's discourse and the modes by which the essay addresses the intelligence and insight of the nonhuman environment propels a critical perspective beyond the anthropocentric idea of *landscape*; that is, a world that has assumed new forms of inscription and co-agency *in* and *with* the nonhuman, disrupting Western and modern conceptualisations.

Contesting the modernising ideal established in the Americas since colonial and neo-colonial times, the *entangled poetics* I identify in the essay evaluate with other eyes *el secreto de la tierra*.<sup>7</sup> Anchored in an attention attached to the origins of the earth, matter and meaning come out as entangled in ways that suggest an alternative attentiveness to the Venezuelan hinterland. Instead of rhetorically supporting the modernising ideal in twentieth-century Venezuela, *Una ojeada ...* can be read from the standpoint of a poetry entangled in the linguistic and multispecies profusion of the Venezuelan Amazon, channelled through *el secreto de la tierra*. As described above, the metaphor is an ambivalent one, putting forward the fetishistic idea of a discursive capitalisation based on the Amazon's imaginary richness, but also reframing it by giving weight to the nonhuman environment as an endogenous actor in relation to the web of life. Fleshing out this ambivalence is important, as the metaphor both contests and contributes to the naturalisation of the modernising ideal that has fuelled the cultural imaginaries of material growth and rentier capitalism in Venezuela. This is the critical potentiality I want to emphasise in Núñez's essay, as I understand it as "a site of inquiry into how mimetic relations change in light of environmental transformations"

(Saramago 2020, 184). As Victoria Saramago has shown, literary works have become sites for the production of knowledge, imagination, and intervention in Latin American environments. The task of contemporary readings lies in making these relations perceptible, understanding how environments inspire engagements with literary production.

### **Concluding remarks: a discursive materialisation of an intangible reality**

In Núñez's *Una ojeada al mapa de Venezuela*, the metaphor *el secreto de la tierra* becomes a discursive materialisation of an intangible reality for the historical present. Núñez manages to discursively render another side of Venezuelan identity, transfixed in the depiction of Amazonas as a site rich in both natural and cultural resources. In order to render such a metaphor, the author turned to the Venezuelan Amazon as a repository of possibilities. In what I have described as *entangled poetics*, Núñez appeals to the endogenous forces of the Amazon – its geographic situation and the culture of the Indigenous populations – in an attempt to retrieve the American autonomy lost after colonisation took place.

Read as an ideological stand, positioned against the modernising ideal prevalent in twentieth-century Venezuela, I read the Amazon in the essay as a discursive means to express Núñez's perspective on the country's situation, constructing an idea of the Venezuelan Amazon with a marked anti-imperialist and post-colonial position. In this case, however, the driving force of the prose seems to be a clear determination to associate the idea of the Amazon with the ambivalent metaphor of *el secreto de la tierra*. The double meaning this metaphor bears can be read as a subtle reiteration of the national discourse that found in the profusion of natural resources an articulating element for the construction and modernisation of Venezuela. Even though literary language rhetorically mobilises a land-being intra-action and the world-ecological entanglement that puts the focus on a human-non-human relationality, it also echoes the imaginary idea of richness by turning the secret of the land into a literary trope that accommodates a reinterpretation of Venezuelan identity. In that regard, the *entangled poetics* I read in the examples cited above re-elaborate the visions of the Venezuelan Amazon as a space that opens up new material and poetic possibilities.

Finally, the reading of the entanglement of linguistic and geographic matters in the essay shows a cultural discourse attentive to the ways matter and language, nature and culture, are associated with alternative ontologies fostered in the Venezuelan hinterlands. Nevertheless, this intellectual exercise, in what can be taken as a form of discursive alterity, enters into tension with its own means, as the modernising ideal traverses the very idea of the poetic richness of the state of Amazonas. Put differently, the *entangled poetics* I identified in *Una ojeada...* can be read as embedded in the cultural and environmental profusion of the Venezuelan Amazon. Here, poetic richness mirrors natural abundance, echoing at times the contested discourse of modernisation.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Patrícia Vieira for her comments during the writing process. Many thanks to the external reviewers for their observations on the first version of this paper.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. In addition to *Una ojeada*, the Amazon region is well represented in Núñez's work. In his novel *Cubagua* (1931) and the essays *Orinoco: Capítulo de una historia de este río* (1943) and *Tres momentos en la controversia de límites de Guayana* (1947), the Amazon-Guianese region appears as a determining and strategic space in cultural and geopolitical terms, both for the Venezuelan state and for Great Britain and the United States, as it is an area rich in mineral resources. Similarly, in Rómulo Gallegos's *Canaima* (1935), Natalio Dobson's *Diamante [...] Llanto de minero* (1957), Kathleen D. Phelps's travelogues of her expeditions to the Jimé and Yaví mountains (1947 and 1954), Manuel Henríquez's *Amazonas: apuntes y crónicas* (1994), as well as the rich oral and written mythical tradition of the Venezuelan Amerindians, the Venezuelan Amazon has been featured from different perspectives – from mining and rubber tapping to scientific explorations and historical accounts of this region. Although the literary engagement with the Amazon has received important critical attention (Marcone 1998; Sá 2004; Wylie 2009, 2013; Andermann 2018; Smith 2021), a systematic study of the Venezuelan Amazon's cultural representation is still needed. In that regard, by focusing on Núñez's *Una ojeada*, I propose to both expand on a topic overshadowed in Venezuelan literary history and contribute to studies on the representation of the Venezuelan Amazon in twentieth-century literature.
2. Even though Duchesne Winter's argument revolves around vegetal-oriented thinking in the Amazon, his arguments are useful to point to a practice of mixtures, as he calls it, "to thinking with diverse cultural expressions acting in plural world-contexts, expressions that adopt identities as mixing potentials, overcoming categorical boundaries" (2019, 2).
3. As Felipe Martínez-Pinzón and Javier Uriarte have indicated, the Amazon was "since colonial times, subject to frontier narratives that carried with them, as is usually the case, fantasies of immense wealth lying on the other side of 'civilization'" (2019, 3). Similarly, Ana Pizarro has described the Amazon as a discursive construction (2005, 61), and even speaks of a "poetic imagination of the Amazon" (2005, 73) as a form of aesthetic and ethical relationship between culture and nature.
4. According to Orlando Araujo in a conversation with Núñez, the latter was interested in the relationship between Amerindians and the territory as a means to understand cultural identity. For Núñez, the transculturation between Spaniards and Amerindians should consider the role played by the territory in the cultural and racial clash. In Núñez's words, the cultural tension in America took place in the face of a "telluric force, invisible to the naked eye, which has been hidden for four and a half centuries" (Núñez in Araujo 1972, 39).
5. As Raquel Rivas Rojas noted, by the end of the 1930s the imagination of the Venezuelan nation was facing a transformation. Attempts were made to reconstruct a national narrative based on

the recovery of links with the past in order to develop a national project for the immediate future. In light of these events, the literature produced during this period attempts “to highlight a tension that opens a gap in the imagination of the nation that no longer trusts linear narratives and the unifying devices of the discourse of modernisation” (Rivas Rojas 2001, 514).

6. For a comprehensive analysis of Núñez’s oeuvre, specifically of his novel *Cubagua* compared with Gallegos’s *Doña Bárbara* and Uslar Pietri’s *Las lanzas coloradas*, see Bruzual (2010).
7. For example, Alejandro Bruzual (2010, 2014) has read the metaphor *el secreto de la tierra* as related to a harmonious relationship with nature. Although attentive to Bruzual’s reading, in this paper I contend that *el secreto de la tierra* highlights an ambivalent material and poetic richness that procures an alternative attentiveness to the Venezuelan hinterland.

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