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Lee Joan Skinner
Claremont McKenna College

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Identity, Engagement, and the Space of the River in *Cumandá*

Lee Joan Skinner

In Juan León Mera's *Cumandá, o un drama entre salvajes* (Ecuador, 1879), the River Pastaza and the journeys the novel's characters take on it form the centerpiece of the narrative. The novel presents rivers as problematic, problematized spaces of shifting meanings. The river is a space of mediation between humans and the natural world, a landscape that both supports humans and is inimical to them. Thus the eponymous, indigenous heroine of Mera's novel at first navigates the Pastaza with exceptional grace, and yet, once she rejects her clan and tribe, she is unable to traverse the river as easily as she once did, and, ultimately, the "savage," pagan Indians are more adept at using the river. Although Cumandá attempts to hide from her pursuers along the riverbank, the river no longer protects her, and she is captured and sacrificed. Using concepts from ecocriticism and cultural geography, I explore the ways in which this foundational novel deploys and represents the fluid space of the river as a means of commenting on and framing discourses of race, gender, and national identity. Indeed, an ecocritical analysis helps reveal ways in which Mera's text reformulates, even displaces, such issues and offers fresh possibilities for a national future, one in which whites and indigenous peoples can meet peacefully and co-exist in nature rather than struggling for dominance over the river and one another.

Cumandá takes place in 1808, seventy years before the novel's publication. When the book begins, Cumandá, a beautiful Indian maiden, is already involved with Carlos Orozco, son of Father Domingo Orozco, a former landowner who turned to the priesthood after his wife and other children were killed in an Indian uprising. Cumandá's tribe and others journey along the various tributaries of the Amazon to Lake Chimano for a

ceremonial gathering in which Cumandá plays an important part as the “virgen de las flores” (virgin of the flowers), paying tribute to the aged chief Yahuarmaqui. During the days-long gathering, Cumandá is promised in marriage to Yahuarmaqui and then, when he dies, is to be sacrificed. She escapes, but returns to her doom and dies by Yahuarmaqui’s tomb. The Orozcós discover that she was, in fact, Domingo’s long-lost daughter, kidnapped during the Indian uprising and, thus, Carlos’s sister. Bereft, Carlos dies several months later, and the novel concludes when Domingo leaves the riverside settlement of Andoas and returns to a monastery in Quito.

Multiple critics have written about *Cumandá*’s complicity in the nineteenth-century Ecuadorean nation-building project. Hernán Vidal analyzes the ways in which Mera constructs a discourse in support of a conservative, Church-dominated government, while Ricardo Padrón links the novel to a contemporary cartographic project establishing Ecuador’s national boundaries. One of the most persuasive readings is that offered by Doris Sommer, who sees in *Cumandá* an effort by Mera to preserve and promulgate the legacy of the assassinated dictator Gabriel García Moreno. Sommer stresses the importance of the novel’s ending, in which Domingo Orozco, Cumandá’s biological father, forgives and attempts to convert the dying Tubón, Cumandá’s adoptive father. In Sommer’s reading Cumandá becomes “the woman over whose dead body Spanish and Indian fathers can love each other” (240). *Cumandá* thus offers a model of national reconciliation for whites and indigenous peoples, but it is an unproductive one given that both Cumandá and Carlos die—“unless, of course, the conversion leaves an inky trace of love and conciliation on Ecuador’s national purpose,” concludes Sommer (240). Other critics assess the influence of Romanticism on Mera’s depiction of the natural world, and Edmond Cros and Paul Goldberg, most notably, have written of the representation of rivers in *Cumandá*; I will refer to their work more extensively later in this essay. While numerous articles and books make reference to the role nature plays in the novel, very few studies have focused exclusively on nature in *Cumandá*, and, to the best of my knowledge, an ecocritical analysis has not yet been conducted of representations of the river. Yet, as we shall see, an ecocritical reading sheds light on the ways in which Mera deploys a particular set of rhetorical strategies to mobilize and, later, undermine discourses about race and gender in the novel.

Ecocriticism, in Cheryll Glotfelty’s now famous definition, “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Within this broad and flexible framework, critics have adopted a variety of approaches too numerous to summarize here; this study will make use of ecotheory that principally aims to bring textual representations of the natural world to the forefront without privileging authorial intent. Literary ecocriticism in the North American academy is best known for its

examination of contemporary texts by writers who consciously take on the task of representing the environment in the hopes of raising readers's awareness about conservation and other green topics, and this speaks to the political commitment that many ecocritics advocate. For example, writers such as Bill Devall and George Sessions, co-authors of the seminal *Deep Ecology*, advocate a complete lifestyle dedicated to preserving the natural environment. These beliefs and precepts form the starting point for literary environmental criticism, but, when we turn to texts produced before the modern-day environmental movement, it is crucial to avoid an anachronistic imposition of our contemporary expectations.

In this light, Scott Slovic's formulations are helpful. Slovic states that ecocriticism "means either the study of nature writing by way of *any* scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in *any* literary text, even texts that seem (at first glance) oblivious of the nonhuman world" (27). Slovic's definition has the advantage of opening up texts, such as *Cumandá*, that were not originally written with such intentions.¹ An ecocritical approach emphasizes the representation of the natural world, calling critical attention to the ways in which texts deploy and create narratives about the physical, lived environment. Ecocriticism decenters the human from the narrative, either in the writing or the reading of that narrative. That is, while Mera most likely did not intend to construct a text in which humans are secondary to nature, an ecocritical reading of *Cumandá* sees the novel's representations of nature—and, here, of rivers in particular, as the river is the primary natural element present throughout the novel—as important in and of themselves. Previous critics have seen the river as reflecting the human characters in a Romantic pathetic fallacy in which the river mirrors and reacts to human emotions. Ecocriticism demands that we understand the river as important in and of itself rather than as an adjunct to human emotions. This in turn provides another perspective on the ways in which Mera constructs and manipulates riverine imagery in *Cumandá*.

Theorists of ecocriticism also suggest ways in which ecocriticism as well as textual representations of the physical environment can potentially affect readers. For Slovic,

[two of the] central facets of environmental literature [are] how this writing guides us to pay deeper attention to our physical senses and enables us to appreciate our own embeddedness in the world, and also how this writing enables us to develop and clarify and articulate our feelings about the world's meaning, its value. (136)

He also urges critics to "consider how literary expression challenges and directs readers to decide what in the world is meaningful/important to them" (28). Given ecocriticism's often uncompromising stance on ecological

engagement, an approach that considers the effects of environmental literature on readers is more than germane. Lawrence Buell also addresses the question of readerly engagement and of the purpose and possible results of ecocriticism, commenting in *Writing for an Endangered World*:

A text that evokes a physical environment may not be so exclusively “about” that particular environment as first appears, yet it may also reflect a deeper, more complex engagement with it than one might initially think. . . . acts of writing and reading will likely involve simultaneous processes of environmental awakening—retrievals of physical environment from dormancy to salience—and of distortion, repression, forgetting, inattention. (18)

Buell’s remarks here do two important things: they encourage us to read below the surface, as it were, when engaging with texts that describe or make use of a physical environment, and they encourage critics to envision environmental literature and ecocriticism as occurring in a context of writers and readers rather than in an aseptic critical vacuum. An ecocritical approach to *Cumandá*, then, strives to bring to the forefront the text’s representations of the physical world, setting aside the question of authorial intention as Slovic notes, and to assess and understand the text’s own engagement with the physical world in the “process of environmental awakening” that Buell describes. Multiple participants are involved in ecocritically focused readings, and, as critics and readers, we must negotiate complex layers of meaning, comprehension, and engagement.

Cumandá famously begins with a description of the natural setting in which the novel takes place, describing the union of the Pastaza from the Patate and Chambo rivers. Mera personifies the Chambo, which becomes the Pastaza, with a series of short, direct phrases using active verbs: “se golpea,” “salta,” “se hunde,” “vuelve a surgir,” “se retuerce,” (87) (it strikes, it leaps, it delves, it re-emerges, it struggles) and so on, until at last “toma el nombre de Pastaza” (88) (it takes the name Pastaza). These active verbs imbue the river with agency, in effect making it a character that will, and does, take action through the novel. The use of the present tense conveys the idea that the landscape is unchanging; although *Cumandá* is a historical novel whose action takes place at least seventy years in the past, the river is the same now, at the time of writing, as it was then. Mera also deploys comparisons (“como un condenado,” “como cien toros heridos,” “como la tempestad” (87) [like a condemned man, like a hundred wounded bulls, like the storm]) which progress from the human, to the animal, to the inanimate worlds, thus directing the reader farther and farther into the natural environment. At the same time, however, a human being is always implicitly present, often even explicitly present: this is the spectator(s) who view(s) the river, “quienes le contemplan” (87) (those who contemplate it), and who hears its roars, “cuyo

estruendo se oye” (88) (whose roar can be heard). Mera leaves this spectatorial presence without a specific race or gender at this point in the narrative although, as we shall see, future information may lead to a rethinking of what constitutes the textual observer. This human, be it male or female, white or indigenous, absorbs, contemplates, and perceives the river in what may be seen as a passive attitude that contrasts with the river’s highly charged actions of pounding, leaping, shaking the earth, and so on. This potentially has the effect of privileging nature over the human, but one could also read it as an affirmation of the importance of the human in making nature understood to others. Nature exists, but Mera’s readers only know about it because a human is there to witness and represent it.² The presence of the human can be read as subordinating humans to nature or the reverse: without a human interpreter, nature is meaningless. Following Buell and Slovic, the process by which a human being makes the natural world meaningful to others is a crucial part of the ecocritical process of environmental awareness. In this regard, the presence of the human spectator who inscribes nature in a way understandable to those who do not or cannot witness the river’s flow in person is indispensable.

Mera’s personification of the Pastaza continues in a lengthy description in which the river is personified yet again, now as a “rey” (king) and “soberano” (sovereign), while its tributaries and streams engage “en violenta lucha” (88) (in a violent struggle) with the Andes. Both Vidal and Padrón note that the “monarchical metaphors” (Padrón 224) of this passage associate the fluvial system of eastern Ecuador with the conservative ideology of Gabriel García Moreno’s dictatorship (Vidal 59–60, Padrón 223–24). The presence of numerous oxymora—“groseramente bellas,” “mentado pueblecito,” (88) (grossly beautiful; famous little town)—point toward other contradictions that will appear later in the novel; notably, Cumandá herself is coded as both white and indigenous, characterizations that shift depending on her own relationship to the river.

The passage closes with a description of the riverbank that reproduces the effect of the panorama:

El cuadro, o más propiamente la sucesión de cuadros que ellas [las orillas] presentan, cambia de aspecto, en especial pasado el Abitahua hasta el gran Amazonas . . . Podría decirse que todos ellos [los arroyos] buscan con desesperación el término de su carrera seducidos y alucinados por las voces de su soberano que escucharon allá entre las breñas de la montaña. (88–89)

(The picture, or better the succession of pictures which they [the rivers] present, changes in aspect, especially past Mt. Abitahua to the great Amazon . . . One could say that all of them [the streams] seek the end of their course desperately, seduced and bewitched by the voices of their

sovereign which they hear from among the rocky thickets of the mountain.)

The panorama, a phenomenon which Alison Byerly discusses with reference to nineteenth-century English literature, was a moveable scenery piece, often presented in a full circle (360 degrees), allowing the viewer to experience the effect of being in the landscape depicted rather than just in front of it. At other times the panorama was unfurled before the viewer, as if the viewer were moving past the scene and looking at it from a train window (Byerly 79). In either case, panoramas were explicitly labeled as “substitutes for real travel experience” (Byerly 80). As in Europe, panoramas were popular in nineteenth-century Latin America (González Stephan 106), and Mera and his elite readers would have been familiar with them. In this scene, Mera evokes the panorama with his reference to “the succession of pictures.” The narrator specifies that what is being represented is not just one image, but a *succession* of images, as in the succession of images presented by a panorama. By utilizing an image and a technology that would have been familiar to his elite audience of readers, Mera continues the process of making nature understandable, literally making it “see-able” or viewable. He inserts the river into the panorama—as Byerly notes, river journeys were “the most popular subjects of panoramas” (78)—and then he reduces it successfully for human consumption.

In the concluding section of this description, the omniscient narrator places in the scene not just a spectator but also a traveler. This traveler replaces the spectator, signaling a shift from passive viewer to active participant in and on the river: “El viajero no acostumbrado a penetrar por esas selvas, a saltar esos arroyos, esguazar esos ríos, bajar y subir por las pendientes de esos abismos, anda de sorpresa en sorpresa, y juzga los peligros que va arrastrando mayores de lo que son en verdad” (89) (The traveler unaccustomed to penetrating those jungles, to leaping those streams, to fording those rivers, to descending and ascending the slopes of those abysses, goes from one surprise to another, and judges the risks he runs as greater than what they truly are). The process of traversing the riverside landscape turns the once-passive viewer into an active participant in the physical environment, one who learns how to negotiate and traverse the fluvial landscape. This traveler transforms from an inexperienced spectator to an actively leaping, climbing, balancing, and sliding person who expertly journeys alongside the river.

The reason for this traveler’s intrepid expedition is not given, leaving the reader to imagine himself (or herself) in the subject position of the anonymous and ahistorical traveler. The traveler, I surmise, is so transparent that he, and I use the pronoun advisedly, is a stand-in for the narrator and an empty(ish) signifier that the reader can also occupy; “empty(ish)” because, considering the social and historical limits to both literacy and leisure travel

at that time, the presumptive narrator/traveler is a privileged white male. That is, in nineteenth-century Ecuador, a lone traveler in the Amazonian region capable of reporting back about those travels to a literate audience would have necessarily been a man, given the social constraints on female autonomy and travel. The traveler's audience, equipped with reading skills, leisure time, and disposable income for—and easy access to—periodicals and books, would have been predominantly, although not exclusively, male and urban, putting him in Quito or Guayaquil, where the country's small upper and middle classes tended to concentrate. The urban centers, too, were sites where print materials circulated more readily, given the concentration, albeit small, of potential readers.³

Because of the possible slippage between the traveler and the reader, the reader, too, engages with the physical environment and can situate himself in the place of one who comes to know and understand the riverine landscape. The traveler, imagined by Mera and filtered through the reader's perceptions, passes over and through the landscape without marking or altering it, further marking the transitory nature of human presence in the natural world. Mera's description of the bridge over the river only underscores this fact. Supported on two enormous rocks in the middle of the riverbed, the bridge is described as "más extraordinario que se puede forjar con la imaginación" (89) (the most extraordinary bridge that one's imagination could construct), and as "lo ideal de lo terrible realizado por la audacia de la necesidad" (89) (that ideal of the terrible, brought to reality by the audacity of necessity). While humans have added constructed material to the landscape in an effort to negotiate, if not navigate, the river more successfully, the narrator carefully specifies that this addition is simply that: a superimposition on the landscape rather than a transformation of it. The bridge simply passes over the river; man's creation does not control or restrain the river. Moreover, while the bridge is described with the language of the sublime so frequently invoked by Romanticism, one would assume that it is the experience of crossing the bridge, rather than the bridge itself, that should inspire this reaction in the traveler and, by extension, the reader. Here, then, the spectator of the panorama entertains the possibility of entering into the panoramic scene, embodied as an actor and participant, in turn to be viewed by others during this (sublime, ideal, terrifying, necessary) engagement with the river.

Mera concludes the natural description that initiates his novel by addressing his reader: "Lector, hemos procurado hacerte conocer, aunque hartamente imperfectamente, el teatro en que vamos a introducirte" (95) (Reader, we have attempted to let you know, albeit imperfectly, about the theatre in which we are going to introduce you). The reader's possible introduction into the panorama is made real, and that reader will now explicitly occupy the place of the spectator whose presence has been implicit throughout the opening chapter. Most crucially, this reader will bring to his (or her) reading

of the narrative that follows the lessons learned from this introduction. With specific reference to the river, the chapter figures the Pastaza as a source of both beauty and violence, a contradiction already signaled by the oxymora used to describe the river and its environs as “groseramente bellas” (grossly beautiful), for example. These tropes play a vital role in the novel, as the lovely title character is insistently associated with the river in distinct ways: the river nourishes her and her relationship with Carlos Orozco, but also carries many characters—including Cumandá herself—to violence and to death. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the opening descriptions of the river, which insert a human being, implicit and explicit, into the natural scene, establish the importance of human engagement with the environment and make that scene “consumable” for the educated, Western(ized) reader.

To continue this discussion of the intersection of humans and narrative in the landscape, it is useful to turn to Joel Bonnemaïson’s insights in cultural geography. Bonnemaïson has identified three aspects of landscape: first, as a political territory with boundaries established by governments; second, as an anthropomorphized “geographical setting”; and third, as “[a] geosymbolism: the symbolic structure of a geographical setting; its signification . . . Human beings inscribe and illustrate their values in landscape. Geosymbols . . . represent the spirituality of a place—what we call the spirit of a place” (39). This definition sheds light on Mera’s descriptions of the river system in the first chapter of *Cumandá* and, indeed, throughout the novel. The chapter begins with references to the ways in which mountains and rivers delineate borders and frontiers as well as to the provinces in which those natural elements are located; here are Bonnemaïson’s “geopolitical stakes.” Next, through the device of placing the human into the narrative about the landscape and then into the landscape itself via the panorama metaphor, Mera makes the landscape a “geographical setting,” a place inhabited by humans and anthropomorphized through the narrative voice, focalized through the spectator-turned-traveler. Finally, with the invocation of the discourse of the sublime, the river becomes a geosymbol, both beautiful and terrifying, and begins accreting meanings that are pertinent to the rest of the novel.

Another tripartite definition, this one courtesy of cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, also works to illuminate the structuring and occupation of landscape in *Cumandá*. Tuan affirms, “space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and—more abstractly—as the area defined by a network of places” (12), and goes on to stress the importance of human experience in understanding and constructing spatial relations. In *Cumandá*’s opening chapter, the narrator identifies and situates the rivers and also maps out their courses; in later chapters, the ways in which Cumandá, Carlos, and different indigenous groups traverse the river establish a “network of places” (e.g., Andoas/Lake Chimano/the lovers’

palm trees) connected by the river. For Bonnemaïson and Tuan, landscape depends on human interaction with the physical environment, as it does for Denis Cosgrove, who writes: “Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world” (13). On this point, cultural geography and ecocriticism intersect: humans create a meaningful version of the natural world by interacting with it and, in the case of literature, constructing a written account of those interactions.

Mera’s anonymous and abstract spectator/traveler’s engagement with the fluvial landscape is the precursor—textually and conceptually—to the engagement of his characters with the river. Those who use and journey on the river in *Cumandá* fall into three general categories: groups in the form of the native tribes who travel for the tribal conference at Lake Chimano; anonymous individuals, such as the Andoas Indians, who accompany Carlos Orozco; and several specific, named characters, notably Cumandá and Carlos. Cumandá herself has superior river skills, of course: “Aprendió desde muy niña a burlarse de las olas” (104) (Ever since she was very young she learned to scoff at the waves) and “se la admiró manejando el remo con tanta destreza, que competía con sus hermanos” (105) (she was admired for handling the paddle with such skill that she competed with her brothers). While critics such as Cros, Padrón, and Goldberg have written perceptively of Cumandá’s connections with the river, attributing her special abilities to her supposed race, few have noted that her white lover/brother, Carlos, is also an expert navigator and canoeist. Indeed, given his numerous trips from the settlement of Andoas to visit Cumandá, he spends at least as much time on the water as Cumandá. When he began living at Andoas, the narrator specifies, Carlos immediately obtained a canoe and “aprendió a manejarla con sorprendente destreza” (138) (he learned to paddle it with surprising skill). His skill is surprising because he is not an Indian; Cumandá’s, because she is not male. Here we may well note that the omniscient narrator makes few comments about the skills of indigenous men in navigating the river, which presupposes that, if the anonymous spectator/traveler of the opening chapter is a white male representative of urban civilization, the implicit default character who “should” negotiate the Pastaza is an indigenous male. This assumption also further highlights Cumandá and Carlos’s strange familiarity and comfort with the water. In either case, the two lovers defy expectations and become expert boaters from an early age. Carlos even regularly spends nights sleeping in his canoe (138). The rivers nurture, carry, and support him; at one point, floating downriver, Carlos entrusts himself and his canoe completely to the gentle current. “[E]l remo, de bajada, era innecesario y Carlos se arrellanó en su asiento, cruzó los brazos, cerró los ojos y se abandonó a la tumultuosa corriente de sus pensamientos . . . mientras la canoa se deslizaba por el curso apacible del Palora” (119) (Paddling, on the way down, was unnecessary and Carlos

curled up in his seat, crossed his arms, closed his eyes, and abandoned himself to the tumultuous current of his thoughts . . . while the canoe drifted down the peaceful course of the Palora). He does not even need to steer.⁴ There is a striking parallel in both syntax and meaning between the “tumultuosa corriente de sus pensamientos” (tumultuous current of his thoughts) and the “curso apacible del Palora” (peaceful course of the Palora); Carlos’s thoughts run like the river itself (or, privileging the river, the Palora runs like Carlos’s thoughts), albeit tumultuously rather than calmly.

Cumandá’s and Carlos’s relationship is nourished by the river. The first time Carlos catches sight of Cumandá, she is getting out of the water (138); they meet by the palm trees, which are watered by streams; and Carlos uses the river to journey to see Cumandá. Here we see more specifically Tuan’s “network of places” that constitutes a meaningful space. In *Cumandá* the characters are almost constantly in transition, traveling up and down the river. The novel’s centerpiece is the journey of the various tribes to Lake Chimano to celebrate a religious festival, and there is continual movement between the lake and the settlement of Andoas. Edmond Cros states that Mera’s representation of the river system “conveys a conception of social organization which, in itself, transcribes a theocratic vision of Universal law” (46), claiming that the novel enacts a “passage from geographic to symbolic” (46) through the depiction of the river and its tributaries. Of the significance of the riverine journeys, Ricardo Padrón argues that Mera’s emphasis on the Amazonian region, and the movement of rivers and people to the Amazonian basin, is related to the Conservative agenda associated with Gabriel García Moreno, which Mera also advanced. As Padrón notes, “[t]he down-river movement of Carlos and Orozco finds a counterpart in the down-river movement of the area’s indigenous tribes . . . Different tribes come down different rivers, and meet their allies at the confluence of the rivers, underscoring the association between political unification and down-river movement” (225). Both Cros and Padrón interpret the river and the journeys the various characters make on it as political allegories, while a reading based on ecocriticism and cultural geography, such as the one conducted in this essay, strives to understand the space of the river itself, both as a physical entity and as Bonnemaïson’s geosymbol, a real space imbued with human emotion and meaning.

The ways in which different characters use and interact with the river ecosystem are clearly essential to the novel. Carlos voyages to see Cumandá, and Indians frequently travel on the rivers between Andoas, the Christianized mission village, and the tribal settlements along the riverbanks. Journeys are undertaken for peaceful and violent reasons alike: while Cumandá and Carlos travel by canoe to meet one another and renew their love, warring tribes use river journeys to arrive at battlefields later in the novel. The river takes Cumandá and Carlos both to safety and to danger;

early in the book they meet by the banks of the river in a pastoral epyllion, but by the novel's end the once-nurturing Pastaza is contaminated by dead animal parts and even "amenaza de muerte a su amiga de ayer [Cumandá]" (239) (threatens its friend of yesterday [Cumandá] with death). Mera represents the river as a welcoming, nurturing space when, for example, characters stay within their socially assigned roles, but when they deviate from those roles by revealing their hybrid natures, or by attempting to cross racial lines, the river is represented as inimical and threatening. When Cumandá flees the Indian encampment after Yahuarmaqui's death in an effort to save herself from being sacrificed, for example, she finds no nourishment in the river: "En vano prueba repetidas veces las aguas del Palora; este río no es querido de los aves a causa de lo sulfúreo y acre de sus linfas" (233) (In vain she tasted the Palora's water over and over again; birds do not love this river because of the sulfur and bitterness of its waters). Much of her escape route is on land, but, when she finally manages to get in a canoe, she no longer displays the dexterity that made her a source of admiration earlier in the text; "el remo es inútil . . . Cumandá tiembla de terror: ya no es la dominadora de las olas" (240–41) (Paddling is useless . . . Cumandá trembles with fear: she is no longer the mistress of the waves). At the beginning of the novel Carlos did not bother to paddle because he could trust the current to take him where he wished to go; here, Cumandá's efforts to paddle are useless because the violent river rips the canoe from her control. Words such as "choca" (clashes), "giros violentos" (violent turns), "anormal carrera" (abnormal race), "terror," "enfurecido" (enraged), "brama" (roars) and "se agita" (gets rough) form a semantic chain that builds a characterization of the river not only as animate but also as actively angry at Cumandá.

It is certainly possible, even productive and illuminating, to read Mera's opening description of the wild, untamed river as his attempt to emphasize the savagery of the indigenous peoples who live beside it and, ultimately, to comment on the need to convert and "civilize" those peoples in order to advance a coherent national project (see Vidal and Cros, for example). But an ecocritically based reading sheds light on Mera's imposition of a human-centered framework of values. When the narrator sees the river as "enraged," or when Cumandá opines that the river has "turned against her" because its storm-fed waters are too dangerous for her, the river is perceived as having betrayed its human inhabitants. On the other hand, an ecocritical reading sees that humans fail to understand the river and its natural processes; the river is forceful as it descends through the Andes because it gains momentum, and it is turbulent after the storm because rain has swelled it and winds have pushed in tree limbs. The river does not fail or betray Cumandá; she fails to live up to her own natural knowledge of the fluvial system. Rather than Cumandá being punished for crossing racial lines, abandoning her tribe, and daring to love Carlos, she suffers the consequences of not

applying her own understanding of the river. This ecocritical analysis does not so much sidestep the question of race and miscegenation as it disassociates nature, and the river in particular, from the issue of racial identity.

Cumandá is frequently figured as enjoying a pure, pre-civilization, Edenic connection to the river; a virgin, she lives in pure grace, free from lust and, thus, from original sin. Several critics have commented perceptively on this aspect of her character. Amalia Garzón indicates, for instance, that the character of Cumandá reflects contemporary beliefs that civilization is a contaminating force for women (47). As Paul Goldberg notes, Cumandá becomes alienated from nature as she grows closer to Creole Christian culture; indeed, Goldberg argues that the river symbolizes religious syncretism, and the limits of liminality: “The river becomes the geographical equivalent of the slash (/) in the civilization/barbarism paradigm” (385). He insightfully analyzes the ways in which the mixing of waters in the river, and the journeys of people along the river, represent the mixture of cultural and, particularly, religious traditions and practices. As Cumandá becomes closer to Carlos and to Christianity, she departs the liminal space of the river and can no longer sustain her balancing act; following Goldberg, it is this very alienation that kills her when, in Mera’s dualistic scheme of Christian vs. pagan, it should save her. If we extend the readings offered by Garzón and Goldberg to the character of Carlos, he would seem to offer another possibility of racial crossing, as he represents the privileged Creole ruling class and yet is capable of adapting almost completely to life on the river and in the forest; he crosses the river in the opposite direction from Cumandá, as it were. Yet his abandonment of a possible life in the wilderness, or at least in the Edenic riverine village of Andoas, and his death at the end of the novel decisively close off that possibility. The novel’s message seems to be that attempts to cross racial divides and to incorporate indigenous peoples into the national project result in a punishment enacted by the natural world, and this is certainly Doris Sommer’s interpretation in *Foundational Fictions*.

Here, however, I want to invoke ecocriticism once more to investigate another reading, another “act of engagement,” in Buell’s terms, in which present-day readers of the novel participate. In this reading, Cumandá and Carlos’s involvement with their physical environment represents what Bill Devall and George Sessions define as “deep ecology”: “a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities and all of Nature” (7). Devall and Sessions, drawing on Arne Naess’s work, present biocentric equality as a highly desirable goal for the environmentally aware (66), defining it thus: “The intuition of biocentric equality is that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger Self-realization” (67). Cumandá’s literal, fond embrace of the palm trees that grow on the banks of

the river, her ability to move over and through the water (as well as an expert canoeist, she is also an adept swimmer), and her skill in sensing her physical location and knowing where she is in relation to the river at any given time (see, for example, 194) demonstrate her respect for the physical environment and her immersion in her natural surroundings. In addition, she is frequently compared to animals. At least twice, she is likened to a squirrel (118, 147), and she is also associated with birds (160, 247). When she rescues Carlos from drowning, the two “salen [a la orilla] cual dos patos” (163) (swam [to the riverbank] like two ducks). The narrator often calls her “la hija del desierto” (150) (the daughter of the desert) and she is, of course, “la virgen de las flores” (the virgin of the flowers) in the Lake Chimano festival honoring Yahuarmaqui. Such references construct Cumandá’s identity as based in and intimately connected with her natural environment, and, as we have already seen, her ability to interact with the river is an integral part of her character.

Carlos is perhaps an even more striking example of a human adapting to the natural world rather than forcing the natural world to adapt to him via physical modifications to that world of a lesser or greater degree. Carlos is a white foreigner/stranger, a fact underscored by Cumandá’s frequent references to him as “blanco” (white) or “extranjero” (foreigner) instead of by his given name, and he did not grow up in the jungle or by the river, but his successful acclimation to the region suggests that he, too, has achieved biocentric equality, as articulated by Devall and Sessions. It is not that Cumandá and Carlos lose this state through their own actions, then, as readings by those such as Goldberg and Sommer assert, but that human interference by the warring tribes and by Cumandá’s adoptive family remove them from the natural environment to which they are so well suited. The novel provides significant examples of characters living in a state of biocentric equality, demonstrating that it is possible for whites as well as indigenous people to achieve it. As a poet, Carlos has a close connection with the natural world as well. For Lawrence Buell, such engagement is crucial because of “the centrality of physical environment as a ground of personal and social identity” (18). Pensive, intelligent, and sensitive, Carlos finds in the jungle his ideal atmosphere: “Cuando se halló en el corazón de las selvas, creyó hallarse en su elemento” (137) (When he found himself in the heart of the jungle, he believed he was in his element). His “element” is the water, and he finds intellectual and creative satisfaction in his river journeys. His identity as a poet and as Cumandá’s beloved are inextricably entwined with the physical environment of the river to the extent that, I would argue, his river-based identity is, if not more important, at least as important as his racial identity. That is, Carlos-as-river-dweller signifies equally as Carlos-the-white-man. Cumandá may frequently address Carlos as “hermano blanco” (white brother) but the voiced epithet does not override the significance of Carlos’s love for, and ease in, the fluvial environment.

The question remains, then, what the possible outcomes of these representations of characters' engagement with the river environment might be. Scott Slovic urges us to "consider how literary expression challenges and directs readers to decide what in the world is meaningful/important to them" (28). Do *Cumandá*'s readers find themselves thinking about the physical environment outside the novel? Does a reading of the book lead people to contemplate the Amazonian basin as something other than an aesthetically pleasing setting for Cumandá and Carlos's doomed love story? Lawrence Buell's description of what he calls "acts of environmental imagination" allows for a productive consideration of these issues. Buell argues that such acts "potentially register and energize at least four kinds of engagement with the world" (2). These engagements consist of enabling readers to form vicarious connections with the experiences of others, both human and nonhuman; connecting readers with places, including places "where they would otherwise never physically go" (2); helping readers think about alternative futures; and spurring more consideration (in the sense of "being considerate") of the physical world. *Cumandá*, then, stimulates the reader to engage in several of these acts of environmental imagination, if not all of them. Here it is important to note that the novel has engaged multiple audiences, including the readers who greeted the book's first publication in 1879 and its present-day readers. Buell's "acts of environmental imagination" should not be limited to one audience or the other, nor should the concept be applied anachronistically.

Mera's contemporary readers valued nature for what it could provide for them; while the novel would have enabled such readers to participate vicariously in the lives of its riverbank-dwelling characters, and even to connect with the untrammelled wilderness of eastern Ecuador, it is less likely that these readers would have pondered an alternative future or devote more "caring," in Buell's term, to the natural world, especially since most *quiteño* readers saw the eastern portion of Ecuador as an untrammelled and untamable wilderness of little or no immediate benefit to the nation, as Padrón explains. *Cumandá* ends with a decisive rejection of the fluvial Eden populated by Indians and whites alike at the beginning of the novel; marred by tribal and interracial violence, human riverside settlements are abandoned, as Mera's nineteenth-century readers, versed in the well-known episode of the expulsion of the Jesuits, would have known even before beginning the novel. The characters who were best adapted to the environment of the river, Carlos and Cumandá, and who could have connected the world associated with indigenous peoples and with nature with the "artificial," constructed world of the white Creoles, are dead at the novel's conclusion. Domingo Orozco returns to his monastery in Quito and "no quedan ya ni los vestigios" (120) (not even the remains are left) of Andoas, the ideal and idealized village inhabited by the Catholic Indians. These decisive erasures, not to mention the fact that *Cumandá* is first and

foremost a historical novel, always looking backwards, would have made it difficult, even impossible, for the 1879 reader to engage in the last of Buell's acts of environmental imagination.

In conclusion, an ecocritical reading redirects our attention to the text's environmental components and to the ways in which both the characters and we as readers engage with the river. That, in turn, illuminates Mera's blind spot: his inability to imagine a future in which that river environment would be a desirable element of Ecuadorean national identity. He may have wished for Ecuadorean territorial expansion, as Padrón cogently argues, but his novel does not envision that territory as being a meaningful addition to the nation for anything other than, simply, square mileage. That is, the environment contains nothing—not even its rivers—that would offer a benefit to Ecuador, either materially or spiritually. The characters who would connect this territory to the rest of the nation have, by novel's end, died or disappeared from the river. The alternately terrifying and enchanting rivers of the beginning of the novel only carry the main characters who most enjoyed the waters to their deaths. At any rate, that is the reading afforded to us within the novel, and the reading most readily available to nineteenth-century consumers of the text, because another act of environmental imagination offers the potential to see the river as endlessly giving of life when human intervention is most limited. The river is destructive and the landscape around the river ceases to grow and produce when humans, be they white or indigenous, attempt to make decisive, damaging alterations to that landscape (e.g., constructing permanent settlements, burning the *palmeras*). The bridge referenced in the novel's first chapter skims over the river, making use of preexisting stones to allow humans to navigate and traverse the river; this is the model the river's inhabitants should have followed, and one which, possibly, future inhabitants such as the remaining tribal members could follow in order to coexist with their landscape. One of the messages *Cumandá* offers would be not to abandon an unproductive environment but to negotiate ways in which to travel that environment's rivers, and even inhabit the landscape, without enacting permanent transformations or damage. The capacity to do so in turn provides alternative ways for warring groups—be they divided by race or politics—to reconcile and work together for national consolidation. Because, as shown by both Carlos's and Cumandá's comfort in the river environment, the ability to engage with the landscape is not dependent on race or gender, this approach offers a vision for national consolidation that eschews racial conflict—at least if the humans concerned manage to negotiate the river appropriately. The fact that an indigenous-identified white woman and a white man can successfully build identities based on their connection with the river means that such identities are contingent and non-essentialized and that anyone is capable of engaging in similar maneuvers. Thus *Cumandá* affirms an identity politics outside of, or in addition to, the racial and political ruptures

that threatened Ecuador's national stability. This identity politics based on engagement with the river also furnishes an alternative to hierarchical structures in which one group must dominate another: whites over indigenous peoples, men over women, Conservatives over Liberals. Ultimately, then, one of the novel's messages, and perhaps the most hopeful one, is that discord stemming from racial and political divisions may not be inevitable if citizens can construct environmentally engaged identities contingent upon their actions rather than upon the supposedly innate characteristics of race and gender.

Notes

1. Other ecocritics put this idea in similar terms. As Jonathan Tittler avers, "if necessary, ecological criticism attempts to go beyond an author's conscious intentions, for writers do not necessarily share our values where the priority of the relation between nature and culture is concerned" (19). Similarly, Beatriz Rivera-Barnes and Jerry Hoeg call ecocriticism "a way of scrutinizing the ecological implications and relationships between man and nature, or nature and culture" (1); again, this definition directs us not to authorial intention, but to the critic's analytical focus. Rivera-Barnes and Hoeg pose a series of questions that ecocritics may ask: "How does a text represent the physical world? What moral questions are raised relative to man's interaction with nature? How does a text direct the reader's awareness to a specific ecosystem?" (1).
2. Of this convention Vidal writes, "el narrador adopta la perspectiva del civilizado que se interna en el mundo 'caótico' de la selva con actitudes de admiración, maravilla y sobrecogimiento" (63) (the narrator adopts the perspective of the civilized man who enters the "chaotic" world of the jungle with a sense of admiration, awe and being overwhelmed). For Vidal this contrast between the human and natural worlds signifies that Mera is advocating that nature and its inhabitants, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, must be incorporated and subjugated to the supposedly superior world of the whites and, specifically, to a government headed by Conservatives.
3. Some elite women did have access to education and women readers throughout nineteenth century Spanish America were frequently coded as readers of novels in particular, so we can suppose that some Ecuadorean women also read the novel. However, men were more likely to purchase novels simply by virtue of the fact that they had more disposable income.
4. Canoes in general are depicted as a mode of transiting the river that is in harmony with nature. At one point the narrator explicitly describes the canoes as floating like natural, not man-made, objects: "Las canoas que los indios dejaron amarradas a la boca del canal se mecían silenciosas como grandes hojas caídas de los árboles de la orilla" (194) (The canoes that the Indians left tied up at the mouth of the canal rocked silently like enormous leaves fallen from the trees on the bank).

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