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Water, Extractivism, Biopolitics, and Latin American Indigeneity in Arguedas's *Los ríos profundos* and Potdevin's *Palabrero*

Ignacio López-Calvo and Hugo Alberto López Chavolla

Is it not possible to imagine matter quite differently: as perhaps a lively materiality that is self-transformative and already saturated with the agentic capacities and existential significance that are typically located in a separate, ideal, and subjectivist, realm? . . . Is it possible to understand a process of materialization and the nature of its fecundity, to grasp matter's dynamic and sometimes resistant capacities, without relying upon mysticisms derived from animism, religion, or romanticism? (Diane Coole 2010, 92)

This chapter studies the significance of water for Latin American Indigenous communities at two different levels. First, using the theoretical perspective of new materialism (the agency of objects), it concentrates on the symbolic, cultural, magical, and salvational significance of water (of montane rivers in particular) for Quechua communities in Peru, as re-created in Peruvian José María Arguedas's (1911–69) novel *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, [1958] 2004). This worldview is contrasted, from an ecocritical perspective, with the importance of water from a sustainability perspective for the Wayuu Indigenous group in the Guajira Peninsula of Colombia, as represented in the Colombian Philip Potdevin's (1958–) *Palabrero* (2016). This novel re-creates the real-life fact that, since an international mining company began to steal water resources from the Wayuu's ancestral lands three decades ago, suicide rates have grown exponentially among the members of this Indigenous group.

This chapter looks at both novels from the perspective of neomaterialist theory. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in the introduction to their 2010 edited volume

New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, propose to acknowledge the agency of things:

Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no-longer as simply passive or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature. (10)

Neomaterialism, therefore, takes for granted that, along with humans (and independently from humans), things are also agents and can offer resistance through an existing “sociocultural territory composed by relations among the people and earth-beings, *and* demarcated by a modern regional state government” (de la Cadena 2015, 5).¹ In fact, these theorists argue that it is precisely the Western division between the human as agent and the thing as object (or instrument) that has served as a veiled justification for the centuries-long ecological destruction of the planet. In the same vein, Marisol de la Cadena, in her 2015 book *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*, asserts:

Conjuring earth beings up into politics . . . may indicate that nature is not only such, that what we know as nature can be society . . . Representation can make the world legible as one and diverse at the same time by translating nature (out there everywhere) into the perspectives of science (the universal translator) . . . To be able to think ‘earth-beings,’ the world that underwrites the distinction between nature and humanity requires a translation in which earth-beings become cultural belief. (99)

From this perspective, they explore the potential role of materiality for political constitution. In our **view**, this theory is certainly reminiscent of traditional native worldviews throughout the Americas in which humans are conceived of, without exceptionalisms, as an intricate part of the natural world, rather than as an owner who can use its resources at will. The organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman are, therefore, situated on an equal footing in terms of political agency, against the assumption that only the rational human is capable of it: “While new materialists’ conceptualization of materialization is not anthropocentric, it does not even privilege human bodies. There is increasing agreement here that all bodies, including those of animals (and perhaps certain machines, too), evince certain capacities of agency” (Coole 2010, 20). Things evince not only agency but also political agency because, as Frost and Coole explain, they can affect the structure of political life. From this perspective, we will now analyze the potential agency of water as seen by Indigenous worldviews in two Latin American novels.

NEW MATERIALISM AND *LOS RÍOS PROFUNDOS*

In the novel *Los ríos profundos* (1958), José María Arguedas presents the semiautobiographical story of the protagonist Ernesto and his journey into becoming a young man, after his father, a traveling lawyer, leaves him for boarding school

in the town of Abancay, under the direction of Father Linares, a Catholic priest. As Ernesto becomes immersed in the boarding school, a microcosm of Peruvian society, alongside other children and teenagers, he engages in a process of observation, followed by deep reflection, which will shape his conscience as he discovers his place in the world. Although, due to the structure of the novel, it is difficult to fully grasp with precision the origins of Ernesto and his father, Arguedas makes it clear that Ernesto is a Mestizo who spent most of his early childhood traveling alongside his father through the different regions of Peru and in close contact with Quechua communities. In the process, he learned their language, Quechua, and developed a deep respect for Quechua traditions and culture.

In the same manner, and following the Quechua Indigenous worldview, Ernesto develops an awareness of his own interconnectedness with the rest of nature, including rivers, animals, plants, and mountains. These experiences, rooted in Ernesto's early years, allow him to serve as a bridge—or rather as a river—between cultures: the Criollo and the Indigenous ones. In this sense, he becomes “a composition (perhaps a constant translation) in which the languages and practices of [his] worlds constantly overlap and exceed each other” (de la Cadena 2015, 5). At the same time, however, both Quechua people and Criollos marginalize him, as his transculturated nature prevents him from being fully able to insert himself into either culture. Ultimately, however, Ernesto attempts to position himself on the side of the Indigenous cause and, in many aspects, he ends up rejecting the Western heritage that has been violently imposed upon the Quechua communities. This rejection of Western culture grows with his increased awareness of Indigenous oppression, as the novel follows the cadence of a *bildungsroman*. Here, it is important to note that Ernesto's growth of conscience appears to be linked to the communal indignation of groups, one Mestizo and one Indigenous, that appear in the novel: the *chicheras* and the *colonos*, respectively.²

Beginning with the title, water, generally in the form of rivers, is a significant and recurrent element that is presented not solely as part of the scenery but also as an actor with its own agency. In this sense, through the symbolic presence of water (Andean deep rivers), Arguedas evokes the depth—the solid, ancestral roots and matrices of the national identity of Peru—of the Andean culture, as opposed to the superimposed character of a Western and cosmopolitan culture behind the thousand-year-old historical legacy of native Peru.³ These rivers that shape and configure Peruvian topography then become markers that delineate the cultural contours and historicity of the Andean region. Furthermore, as the story progresses, the presence of rivers in the novel becomes charged with promises of a future in which Quechua people will recover the dignity that has been suppressed by centuries of marginalization at the hands of their oppressors. Arguedas hints at this message, among other times, when he chooses the title of “Yawar mayu” (Blood River) for the tenth, penultimate, and longest chapter of his novel. In it, the native *colonos* revolt for the first time, demanding that Father Linares hold mass and pray after a disease similar to the Black Death scourges Abancay as well as nearby towns and villages.

Although an earlier revolt led by the *chicheras* has already taken place in chapter 7, “*El motín*,” not only is it unsuccessful but it also provokes the militarization of Abancay in order to prevent further revolts. Notwithstanding the failure of this first revolt, by insisting on a second revolt taking place in chapter 10 with a Quechua title, and also by implying a connection between nature and human life, Arguedas urges for the recognition of both Indigenous and Western visions of the universe. Thus, the title “*Yawar mayu*” and the occurrences within the chapter remind us that our existence depends from one moment to the next, not only on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives, but also on a myriad of microorganisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment (Coole 2010, 1).

Using Ernesto as both bridge and river between Quechua and Criollo cultures, Arguedas “alludes to the fact that social and cultural constructions that are truly solid and authentic must be nourished (as the coastal rivers that drink from montane rivers do) of Andean, Indigenous elements, which represent the fertile and synthesizing miscegenation of Peru.”⁴ In other words, just as Andean rivers bring the essence of Quechua indigeneity to the rest of the country, so will Ernesto fight for the survival of Indigenous cultures and for the respect they deserve in Peru. As the protagonist learns his place in the world, his confusion about who he is and where he stands is a constant trope that is often associated with the manner in which he interacts with his surroundings, rivers in particular, which once again connote Indigenous cosmivision and reiterate notions of the agency of nature: “I did not know if I loved the bridge or the river more. But both cleared my soul, flooding it with strength and heroic dreams. All weeping images, doubts and bad memories were erased from my mind.”⁵ Here, the bridge and the river provide Ernesto with peace of mind because both of them represent the unification of two cultures.

On the one hand, the river, whose existence within Peru is undeniably legitimate, can represent the very life of the Andean cultures running through the earth, like blood through our veins; on the other, the bridge, which was forced into existence by human action, was constructed with materials and techniques of Spanish origin, and represents the Spanish cultural heritage imposed on Peru. Even though they might represent opposites in a cultural sense, the fact that Ernesto is at ease while contemplating them and cannot make up his mind about which one he loves the most, suggests an attempt by Arguedas at synthesizing a discourse that exalts the virtues of Indigenous cosmivision, while still being intrinsically connected with Spanish heritage and tradition.

In the same vein, Ernesto’s childhood experiences with Quechua communities and his being rejected by some of his schoolmates because of his Indigenous cultural background encourage him to adopt Indigenous worldviews in order to make sense of his own confusing reality. As Ernesto is left in school and his father

leaves once again, Arguedas writes: “[Ernesto] would receive the powerful and sad current that hits the children, when they must face alone a world full of monsters and fire and great rivers that sing with the most beautiful music when hitting stones and islands.”⁶ The music of rivers, then, consoles the aching teenager. The disheartening description of Ernesto’s entrance into an unknown world by himself is promptly soothed by the reassurance of the presence of rivers that sing the most beautiful melodies. These rivers, thus, become both hope and life for Ernesto. As his father departs, Ernesto, through a song, enters into a dialogue with nature, where the presence of water is crucial:

Do not forget, my little one, do not forget!
 White hill, make it come back;
 Mountain water, spring of the pampa that never dies of thirst.
 Falcon, carry it on your wings and make it come back.
 Immense snow, father of snow, do not hurt it on the road.
 Bad wind, do not touch it.
 Storm rain, you do not reach it.
 No, precipice, atrocious precipice, do not surprise him!
 My son, you must return, you must return!⁷

Through this prayer-like song, Ernesto engages with nature and asks it to be kind to his traveling father. Simultaneously, the presence of water is significant, as it appears as both a curse and a blessing. For one, water could serve his father as sustenance so that he does not suffer thirst, but at the same time it represents imminent dangers, as it could present itself as snow or storm, which could be deadly. As in this passage, in several others we see Ernesto addressing nature and speaking directly to sacred rivers, immersed in a world of magic and myth. This act, in and of itself, suggests that the Andeanized Ernesto believes in the agency of a dynamic natural world. In neomaterialist terms, it “means returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world” (Frost and Coole 2010, 3).

Arguedas, therefore, inserts elements of Andean culture (mythical-magical mentality, Quechuanized Spanish, oral tradition, folk music and dance) within Western cultural forms (including among them the Spanish language and the genre of the novel), to a degree of transculturation greater than that achieved by other authors linked to the Indigenista or Neo-Indigenista literary movement.⁸ In other words, rather than using fantasy as a conduit to understand the reality of the Andean region, Arguedas takes the fluid reality of Andean language in concert with an Indigenous cosmovision, and then juxtaposes it with the traditions brought by the Spanish in order to highlight the inevitable clash between the two cultures. By the same token, this contact, simmering over five centuries, has led to a mixture of cultures that, for Arguedas, is key to understanding Peru’s cultural present and, perhaps more important, to build an inclusive and harmonious cultural future for the nation.

From the perspective of Quechua cosmovision, in *Los ríos profundos* natural elements, and montane rivers in particular, empower the protagonist and narrator, Ernesto, to fight against the oppression of Indigenous groups. Rivers also become tools for self-identification, since—living between two worlds (the Indigenous and the Criollo) but not entirely belonging to either one—Ernesto opts for an Indigenous worldview, as opposed to the Criollo worldview of his father and mainstream Peruvian society. As will be seen in the next section, with the presence of the Ranchería River in the novel *Palabrero*, in *Los ríos profundos*, rivers—and especially the majestic Apurímac (figure 4.1)—are also conceived as living beings whose dynamism (they seem to talk to Ernesto) contains agency that affects nearby humans (themselves part of the same natural network or web of life, rather than its masters).

In spite of not being of Indigenous descent, the semiautobiographical fourteen-year-old Ernesto rebels against the mistreatment suffered by Indigenous people at the hands of the landowners who exploit them. The bildungsroman delineates how, through introspection and with the help of his dreamlike communication with rivers and other natural elements, Ernesto learns to interpret the surrounding reality and to make ethical choices: eventually, unhappy with the outcomes of modernity and westernization in the Andean world, he chooses the side of subaltern Indigenous groups.

Through the re-creation of the Andean worldview, Arguedas then vindicates Quechua culture and its way of being in the world. This is particularly evident whenever the adolescent Ernesto leaves the boarding school to chat with Andean nature during his lonely walks. Unlike the Mestizo groups in the *chicherías* (chicha bars) of Huanupata or the Indigenous colonos in Patizamba, the natural world accepts Ernesto with open arms for who he is; in the protagonist's view, rivers and plants are the only ones who understand him, his only friends. This mentality responds to his early adoption of an Indigenous belief system that sees human beings as integrated with nature and with the universe as one. Toward the denouement of *Los ríos profundos*, after leaving Abancay, a conscientious and idealistic Ernesto feels proud to have decided not to meet El Viejo (the representative of Criollo oppression against Indigenous people, but also of economic security for Ernesto), joining instead the Quechua people in their march, while he waits for his father to return.

The novel, as is well known, was Arguedas's way to protest the idealized and exoticized representation of Andean people in the Indigenista novels of his time, mostly written by Mestizos. As a man who grew up among Quechua people, he felt more informed and entitled to represent their world from within. With that goal in mind, the author Quechuanizes the Spanish language to better address the representation of Andean culture, all the while reaching a large readership. Both the author and his alterego, Ernesto, believe in the ethical and moral superiority of native people, and more important, in their capacity for self-emancipation. In fact,



FIGURE 4.1. Apurímac River in Peru. Photo courtesy Robert Bradley.

the novel has an implicit liberationist and revolutionary message that, to Arguedas's dismay, was ignored by most critics: even though toward novel's end, the Indigenous colonos' uprising responds to their belief that a Catholic mass will help the souls of their plague-ridden and recently deceased brethren reach salvation in heaven, it is still an epic demonstration—along with the previous, failed rebellion

of the chicheras led by the indomitable and messianic leader Doña Felipa, who demanded the sharing of the salt with the native population—that they will not continue to remain submissive to the unjust status quo.

Bordering on what the West would perhaps perceive as a type of magical realism, the novel tries instead to depict Andeans' Indigenous culture and their struggle against epistemicide. In this sense, like neomaterialist theory, the novel proposes the existence of a harmonious continuity between humans, animals, rivers, and the natural world in general. Ernesto's communication with nature begins early in the first chapter, when his conversations with the ancient Inca stones that have survived in the buildings of the city of Cuzco. As happens when he is in the presence of Andean rivers, the protagonist senses the energy of these stones and feels that perhaps one day they too will start walking. It is apparent that for him these stones are not simply inorganic objects; rather, they are living, organic repositories of history willing to communicate their knowledge to humans. Moreover, those buildings, which blended Inca construction at the bottom and Spanish at the top, like the church bell built with Inca gold, embody the *mestizaje* that Arguedas saw as the essence of Peruvianness.

It is not surprising, then, that Arguedas chose to center the novel's titles on rivers, those deep rivers at the top of the Andean Mountains that preserve the deepest roots of native Peruvian culture. Tellingly, also, his first short-story collection was titled *Agua* (*Water*, 1935). Following native cosmogony, for Ernesto, the swelling of the Pachachaca, the Apurímac, and other montane rivers, breaching their banks, represent and announce the final awakening and liberation of Indigenous people. The agency of deep montane rivers purifies the protagonist's hurting soul, reminds us of the native roots of Peru, and announces, when flooding, the upcoming emancipation of the Quechua.

"IS IT POSSIBLE TO STEAL A RIVER?" WATER,
EXTRACTIVISM, AND INDIGENOUS GENOCIDE

To continue with Latin American Indigenous worldviews and the agency of rivers, Philip Potdevin's novel *Palabrero*, published almost six decades after *Los ríos profundos*, opens with a question posed by the Wayuu Indigenous protagonist, Edelmiro Epiayú, to a Spanish lawyer who is taking care of him: "Is it possible to steal a river?"⁹ The protagonist's denunciation of this theft and of the genocide of his own people appears early in the first paragraph of the novel: "Among the ways to exterminate a people, the most despicable is to drown it in its thirst. When the only source of water is removed, the connection with life, what can one do?"¹⁰ As if foretelling the victorious denouement of the novel, Edelmiro evokes past collective struggles, literary and historical, against injustice, such as Antigone, Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, and the Wayuu historical hero Juan Jacinto.

The Ranchería River, which in the novel is about to be displaced by a mining company, becomes synonymous with the physical survival of the Wayuu Indigenous community in the peninsula of La Guajira (also spelled La Wajira, as Potdevin does in the novel), in northeastern Colombia.¹¹ In hopes of improving his economic situation, Edelmiro had initially planned to work as a lawyer for a coal mining corporation that maintains a huge operation in the region. Yet not only is he rejected and discriminated against for being Wayuu, but he also realizes that coal mining is destroying his community.

The protagonist has a chance to observe the mine's huge *tajos* (gashes) that eviscerate Mother Earth in order to extract the coal, all of them with phosphorescent, green, contaminated water at the bottom. He then opts for fighting the mining corporation, instead of working for it, upon realizing the magnitude of the ecocide being committed, as well as the environmental racism his people are suffering: water contaminated with mercury and coal powder in the air are rendering both Indigenous children and adults sick with cancer, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, diarrhea, vomit, and silicosis (which local doctors refuse to diagnose, as it would justify the protestors' demands). Eventually, Edelmiro sues the corporation, demands that they produce the permission for their coal extraction, and exposes the double standards of foreign shareholders, who seem satisfied with abiding by the Colombian environmental legislation, even though they are aware that it is much less demanding than the prevailing environmental legislations in their own countries. When the corporation attempts to buy the protagonist out by offering him a job as director of one of its foundations, he vehemently refuses it.

At one point, Edelmiro receives a message from the spirit of his deceased uncle and mentor, the *palabrero* (Wayuu type of lawyer or conflict mediator with great moral authority) Fulvio Epiayú, declaring him the chosen one who is to save the Ranchería River from being diverted, thus preventing its death as well as the decline of the Wayuu community. From that moment on, the protagonist sees himself and his community as the people in charge of defending Mother Nature from their "younger brothers," the "civilized," non-Indigenous people. Edelmiro and other Wayuu leaders see the diversion of the Ranchería River as a nail in the coffin of an Indigenous community already displaced and decimated by a gigantic coal mine run by a multinational corporation without scruples.

From the world of fiction, therefore, *Palabrero* exposes real-life, neoliberal appropriation and contamination of rivers and underground waters, as well as air pollution by coal dust and other pollutants, which is causing the deadly silicosis. In the novel, local miners, together with Wayuu children and elderly people, are dying in great numbers as a result of environmental racism. Initially, many Wayuu and their goats are being accidentally killed by a train with more than one hundred cars used for transporting thirty tons of coal a day. However, the protagonist later discovers that, for other desperate members of the Wayuu Indigenous community,

including his beloved palabrero uncle Fulvio, this same train, a symbol of how modernity has failed the Wayuu, has simply become their chosen way to commit suicide: they can no longer cope with drought, disease, and dire poverty. Tellingly, Edelmiro sees this huge train as the shadow of the *Titanoboa cerrejonensis*, a fossil found in a coalmine in Cerrejón, La Guajira, in 2004, the largest fossil of a snake ever found in the world (thought to have been between forty-two and forty-nine feet long and weighed twenty-five hundred pounds).

The young Wayuu protagonist and hero of the novel is of uncertain origin, as he was found abandoned in a well when he was only a few hours old. This provides him with a sort of mythical and messianic aura, as if he were a new biblical Moses. That his adoptive mother immediately noticed his resemblance to the historical Wayuu hero Juan Jacinto, who led an uprising against the Spanish colonizers, hints at the baby's future heroism. Edelmiro narrates, in the first person, his long and arduous process of preparation, receiving first training as a lawyer at the Universidad de La Guajira in Riohacha (against his beloved uncle's wishes, who fears that he will lose his Wayuu identity) and then as an Indigenous palabrero. He basically becomes twice a lawyer with the goal of contesting political and judicial corruption in La Guajira, which has allowed the mining company to commit environmental crimes with impunity for almost three decades.

In this way, Potdevin places Indigenous, oral, ancestral knowledge on an equal footing with Western, written knowledge. Edelmiro's learning process includes, besides a university degree, access to ancestral Indigenous knowledge in Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, at the very source of the Ranchería River. He is trained by the *mamu* (the Kankuamo version of a palabrero or shaman) Don Eleuterio, who reconnects the protagonist with Mother Earth (or the Universe) and teaches him the native *Ley de Origen* (Law of Origin), which is described in the novel as wisdom emerging from Mother Earth and as the only law that the Wayuu and other Indigenous groups have, which is connected with the concept of seeking harmony with nature. Through meditation, Don Eleuterio helps him, over the course of more than half a year, to become one with the Ranchería River. Later, Don Eleuterio sends him to become familiar with the vallenato music of the city of Valledupar. Completing his professional and ethnic education is his sentimental education, thanks to his sexual experiences with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous or *alijuna* women. Eventually, this training turns into a sort of initiation, almost a rite of passage that opens his eyes to the immense challenge ahead of him: the "reborn" protagonist realizes that he will need all the collective help he can gather in order to face the powerful and heartless multinational coal mining corporation that is strangling his community and drying up its natural resources, including the most precious of all: water.

Potdevin, who received a law degree from the Universidad de San Buenaventura in 1984, takes advantage of his familiarity with the field to re-create the protagonist's legal challenge to a ruthless mining corporation that ignores

international environmental regulations and manipulates legal processes through bribes. Guided by love for his community and culture, and surviving attempts at framing him for theft, mail threats, and even two assassination attempts (possibly carried out by landowners, smugglers, the owners of La Guajira, who have lucrative contracts with the corporation and fear that Edelmiro's protest may end up damaging their businesses), his resilience ultimately leads him to a victory that provides temporary relief for his people. With the help of like-minded, sympathetic people, he is eventually able to combat corruption and extortion.

In the happy denouement of the novel, supported in a huge demonstration on the World Water Day (March 22) not only by other Indigenous leaders and organizations but also by the entire country (including its opportunistic president, who seeks political capital with his participation) and even European activists and lawyers, the mining company is forced to close down its operations in La Guajira, and the Ranchería River is never displaced, thus assuring the Wayuu's cultural and physical survival. All things considered, the demonstration against the diversion of the Ranchería River ultimately becomes a national plebiscite in defense of Indigenous peoples.

Along the way, *Palabreiro* delineates the intimate connection between Indigenous culture (not only of the Wayuu but also of other Indigenous groups in La Guajira, such as the Paraujanos and the Kusina) and the main source of water in the Guajira Peninsula: the Ranchería, its only river. Throughout the plot, we learn that water shortages and the displacement of Indigenous communities are accelerating the progressive loss of cultural identity, with young Wayuu moving to the cities or choosing to work for the main perpetrator of their community's demise: the mining company. To the protagonist's surprise, for instance, one day he realizes that his own long-time absent father has become one of the company's train conductors.

Although in the epilogue Potdevin acknowledges that all the characters except for the historical Wayuu leader Juan Jacinto are fictional, he is also careful to clarify that the coal mine does exist. In fact, the novel is modeled after the real fact that the mining company Cerrejón Limited (carbon extraction in the region began in 1985) indeed tried to divert the only river in La Guajira, the Ranchería, to mine the 550 million tons of coal under it. Potdevin, who is not of Wayuu ancestry, lived for almost five years in their land, La Guajira, where he was in both direct and indirect contact with the Wayuu and had a chance to familiarize himself with their customs, religious beliefs, and legends. In La Guajira, Potdevin witnessed firsthand their suffering and hopelessness, their struggle for survival, for recovering their pride in their heritage and ethnicity. The author also acknowledges reading sociological and anthropological studies by both Wayuu and non-Wayuu scholars Weidler Guerra, José Polo Acuña, and Michel Perrin, dealing with Wayuu history and culture, syncretic religious beliefs and mythology, and colonization by Europeans, all the way to today's oppression by non-Indigenous groups, Colombian authorities, and multinational corporations.

As the author clarified in a personal conversation, the novel was inspired by the horror of witnessing, while working in La Guajira, the collective self-extermination of an Indigenous community silenced by the media: the constant suicides by throwing themselves to the railways that have plagued the Wayuu community for the last three decades. He was also inspired by the 2012 real-life Wayuu opposition to the attempt by a mining company to divert twenty-five kilometers away the only river in La Guajira, the *Ranchería*—which the Wayuu consider sacred—in order to mine a huge amount of coal lying under it. As explained in the novel, also in real life the *Ranchería* has a natural system, an aquifer or sort of enormous sponge, to store water under it during the rainy season, thus preventing it to run dry out entirely during the dry seasons, from January through March and from June through August:

The river is a living being, it wants to avoid overflowing, to damage the inhabitants of its banks, for that reason, it begins a loving act of giving, of receiving: it shares the water that it is carrying in excess at that moment with its deep bed, because it does not need it all to advance to his destination in Riohacha, where it will pour the sweet liquid onto the salty Caribbean. That way, therefore, it gives that excess water to the sponge, nature's gesture of generosity and love, of a harmonious pairing between river and sponge.¹²

The river's diversion, therefore, would have caused its disappearance for months at a time, since it could not resort to the ancient aquifer during dry seasons. In 2012, real-life local Indigenous communities demonstrated their awareness of the terrible consequences that such an ecocidal act would have had for the environment as well as for their people's physical and cultural survival. Still, the presence of the largest coal mine in Latin America and the tenth largest in the world continues to put at risk the survival of more than sixty thousand Indigenous people in the municipalities of Maicao, Barrancas, Hatonuevo, and Albania, among others, who continue to be displaced and made sick.

Palabrero includes additional sociopolitical criticism, all of it inspired by real-life facts. It denounces, for instance, the decades-long malnutrition and numerous deaths of Indigenous children due to respiratory infections, diarrhea, and diseases transmitted through food or water. It also bemoans the desecration of Indigenous family cemeteries and sacred lands (such as temples and “payment sites” for diseases, controlling death, etc.) by the mining corporation, as well as their frequent refusal to pay for a fair compensation. Thus, one of the Indigenous women living near the mine whom the protagonist meets describes the chilling scene of the destruction of one of the family cemeteries:

When we thought they were finished, we heard a new haul of the machine. My mother cried out desperately when a new body came out of the earth: “It's my mom, baby, it's my mom!” And, indeed, it was the torn-apart body of my grandmother. I recognized it upon seeing the blanket with which we had buried her two or three

months earlier. We could not see this spectacle anymore and returned to the rancharia, our heart torn to pieces and rage in the blood.¹³

In addition, the novel celebrates the protagonist's victory against the opprobrious practice of changing the birth dates (they assign December 31 as the birth date of almost all the Wayuu) and Wayuu names to grotesque-sounding ones (such as Pescado [fish], Teléfono, Mariguano, or Chorizo) in their identity cards, and then taking all these identity cards away in order to manipulate political elections. Logically, all these affronts were affecting the Wayuu's identitarian self-esteem, dignity, and ancestral ethnic pride.

Besides coal burning's irrefutable contribution to climate change, *Palabrero* criticizes yet another dark side of the relative economic wealth produced by mining for a few people in the region: social pathologies such as child prostitution, theft, and drug trafficking. The novel also exposes generalized Colombian racism, when Edelmiro is discriminated against as a lawyer, despite his brilliance, only because of his native blood: "This nation is more racist than the United States or European neo-Nazis. It does not like indigenous people, it despises the Wayuu, the Uwa, the Aruhaco, the Kogi, the Nasa, the Wiwa, the Nukak-Makuk. They do not want to see their daughters married to someone who can generate a jump back for the race."¹⁴ He goes as far as to compare it to a caste system. As the novel progresses, the reader finds out that this day-to-day racism is translated into a systemic environmental racism that is openly tolerated, if not encouraged, by the Colombian government and by foreign shareholders.

Potdevin has expressed in several interviews his interest in providing a voice for the subaltern Wayuu people and in improving their pride and self-esteem through this novel. Thus, in an interview with the Colombian journal *El Heraldo*, he states:

The novel gives voice to Wayuu pride, which has long been affected by various social, political, cultural, and administrative factors. The Wayuu have a glorious past that has largely been forgotten and is unknown to new generations. *Palabrero*—which takes the title from the role played by the *palabrer*os, bringing the word back and forth in order to reach an agreement between the parties—is a cry, a literary one of course, for the Wayuu to be heard, dignified, and given back their autonomy, values, and rights. All of this belongs to them, as they have lived in La Guajira Peninsula much longer than the alijuna.¹⁵

Thus, through his fiction, the author denounces the Colombian government's complicity with mining corporations and its indifference toward the long-lived Wayuu suffering in La Guajira. He also encourages the Wayuu community to follow the example of their historical hero Juan Jacinto, to wake up and use the peaceful but powerful word, as the *palabrer*os do, in their struggle for survival.

The implicit message of the novel is that the Wayuu should try to recover their greatness, strength, pride, and tradition of bravely facing adversity by imitating the

pride of the indomitable Juan Jacinto. It even suggests how to do it when Edelmiro, emulating his uncle Fulvio, goes to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to seek advice from a mamu from a different Indigenous group: “He [Edelmiro’s uncle] did what many Wayuu palabrerros have never done or if they do it, they do not admit it: leaving La Wajira and looking for affinities with our blood cousins, the inhabitants of the Sierra. The Wayuu will be strong if we join the communities of our brothers. The peninsula begins in the Sierra Nevada.”¹⁶ Therefore, learning from the heroes of the past and seeking unity and solidarity among all the Indigenous groups in La Guajira Peninsula are presented as the path to survival.

As a warning, the signs of impending sociocultural doom for Indigenous communities are apparent throughout the text. For instance, in the Sierra Edelmiro finds out that the last speaker of the Kankuamo language died three years earlier. Soon after, he learns that entire forests have been cut down to use the land for coca fields that will supply the narcos. He is also appalled to see that even the traditional palabrerros of his region now wear fake Ray-ban sunglasses: “In short, its appearance was a sample of the overwhelming cultural syncretism, of how far Westernization destroys the original cultures of America.”¹⁷ In other words, traditional Indigenous culture is dying before Edelmiro’s eyes.

The title of the novel, *Palabrero*, is taken from the profession of key members of Wayuu society: men who are in charge of solving interfamilial conflicts by going back and forth between the clans involved, taking “the word” in a sort of give and take, including offers for reparation. Known as *Putchipuu* in the Wayuu culture, this person, a sort of Indigenous lawyer and moral authority, mediates in conflicts using the word as his only tool for justice. In the novel, we learn about the mythical origin of the palabrero profession: the Utta bird was the first palabrero among the Wayuu people and the one who taught them how to live in harmony. As the novel explains, some palabrerros consult with elderly Wayuu women about preestablished norms by asking how similar conflicts were resolved in the past.

Potdevin dignifies this ethnic community in *Palabrero* by bringing to life its glorious past and treating its culture with respect in the novel. Thus, the narration is intercalated—in a way reminiscent of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*, 1987)—with short chapters or passages devoted to the Wayuu’s origin myths, belief system (we learn, for instance, that the Wayuu die twice,¹⁸ as announced in the epigraph), and the story of Juan Jacinto, the little-known, historical, Wayuu hero who fought the Spaniards during colonial times. The author found the story of this Wayuu hero in a historical study by José Trinidad Polo Acuña. According to Potdevin, most Wayuu and, by extension, most Colombians are unaware of the story of this real-life wajiro cacique, Juan Jacinto, who in 1769—ten years before José Antonio Galán’s Insurrection of the Comuneros against the Spaniards—expelled the Capuchino orders who were forcing Indigenous women to live with them, taking Indigenous children to orphanages, and even abusing

them. Juan Jacinto then led seven hundred warriors and twelve other caciques (many of them his relatives) to a seven-year uprising against the Spanish colonizers in the northern section of La Guajira Peninsula, north of Riohacha. The historical hero functions as an eighteenth-century doppelgänger and role model for the protagonist in his struggle for the survival of the Wayuu and Mother Earth. Potdevin establishes, therefore, a parallel between the historical Wayuu leader and Edelmiro Epiayú, his fictional protagonist, underscoring along the way the centuries-old, continuous Indigenous struggle against the abuses committed by the alijuna or non-Indigenous people in this region. Likewise, the Wayuu in the novel learn not to make the same mistake that brought down their ancestors' rebellion: just as the Spaniards managed to divide and conquer by compensating one by one the Wayuu leaders who supported Juan Jacinto for their losses, the mining company is now attempting to buy out with gifts several Indigenous communities or *rancherías* one by one.

The committed nature of this novel is apparent once the fictional account is compared with the real-life events that inspired it. Thus, Alejandra Correa, in her 2017 article “Al pueblo wayúu se le agota el tiempo,” questions the pro-environment promises made by Lina Echeverri, vice president of communications and public affairs for the coal mining company Cerrejón Limited, upon the company's improvement in a “best practices” ranking:

We have been in La Guajira for more than three decades under the premise of building transparent relationships with our stakeholders, being a good employer, complying with the law, and applying the highest social and environmental standards. Concomitantly with positioning ourselves as a leading producer and exporter of coal worldwide, we are focused on continuing to be a key ally for the progress and sustainable development of La Guajira, strengthening the capacities among its authorities and communities to lead the social transformations of its territory.¹⁹

As *Palabrero* makes clear, however, the mining company is not known for its efforts at sustainability. Along these lines, Correa points out that, even though the company continues to claim a commitment with the Wayuu and the local environment, arguing that they mostly use contaminated rainwater, in reality it is precisely because of the coal company that the contaminated rainwater falls all over La Guajira, adversely affecting the Wayuu's health and agriculture.

Similarly, *Palabrero* denounces another case of environmental injustice, the fact that while local Indigenous people have to withstand constant drought, it never affects the mining company: “Water is never scarce. They do not know what a drought is, a summer, a water cut, let alone an energy cut. The creeks Bruno, Palomino, the Ranchería River are its inexhaustible source. For them, there will always be water.”²⁰ Indeed, more than anything else, the theft of the scarce water in the region and the displacement of the Ranchería River are the main complaints by the Wayuu in the novel.

Correa likewise questions the environmental plans announced by León Teicher Grauman, former president of Cerrejón Limited, once coal mining activities end:

When the mining activity concludes in the future, we would like to see this laboratory of tropical dry forest developed by Cerrejón, turned into a fundamental element within the main ecological structure of La Guajira, which guarantees the provision of ecosystem services and sustains the prosperity of this noble department.²¹

In Correa's opinion, by the time mining activities cease in 2034, as planned, the land will be ecologically unrecoverable; and even if it were to be rehabilitated, it would still be privatized rather than returned to the Wayuu. Potdevin's novel also addresses these purported recovery plans and exposes the small, already rehabilitated areas as a mere publicity stunt:

"It's for the photo, Édel, do you understand?"

"Nope."

"When visitors or journalists arrive, or the president or ministers, they take them to that area of rehabilitation, they show them the handful of hectares they have rehabilitated, they express their commitment; of course, these guys, if they are naive, are happy, proud to see a responsible handling of the environment."²²

Correa also laments the fact that the official reports about mortality in La Guajira are not trustworthy. Also contesting official statistics, when in the novel *Edelmiro* visits two Indigenous communities near the giant coal mine, Provincial and Cerro Hatonuevo, the first scene he observes is one with three weeping Wayuu women in mourning clothes and carrying the dead bodies of their children. Likewise, although the Colombian state recognizes the existence of 270,413 Wayuu, in reality there are 800,000 Wayuu (Correa 2017). This fact is also twice reflected in *Palabrero*. First when a character named Lucho uncovers the ruse:

But there have been, and continue to exist, more subtle ways to prevent prior consultation. One of them is to ignore the existence of indigenous communities in the territory. Remember I mentioned that the first step is to request a certification from the Ministry of the Interior; you will be surprised, but in many cases the Ministry itself has denied that existence, arguing that there are peasants or settlers but not indigenous people as such.²³

And later, *Edelmiro* finds evidence of the way in which the corporation has ignored national and international environmental norms, as well as the laws for the protection of Indigenous communities: "We found that the Ministry of the Interior had certified, in an absurd way, that there were no Wayuu settlements on the banks of the Ranchería River, so that the entire consultation process could be omitted on paper."²⁴ Fiction is, therefore, not that far from the sad reality of La Guajira.

In a similar vein, the protagonist of *Palabrero* reminds us that the Colombian constitution of 1883 gave Indigenous communities the status of underage children, incapable of deciding for themselves. Only the new constitution of 1991 changed

that status, giving them their constitutional rights. Don Eleuterio, the mamu from the Sierra Nevada, advises the protagonist to take advantage, as a lawyer, of these new protections for Indigenous peoples, even if they are being currently ignored. This is indeed the strength of the “word” that is recurrently evoked in the novel: Edelmiro must use both his Indigenous knowledge and his training as a lawyer to make sure that the written word in the new constitution is respected and applied against the existential threat that has been imposed on his people. In addition, Indigenous groups must convince the government that native law must prevail within the black line where they live.

Echoing the novel’s denunciation, according to Correa, by 2016 the coal corporation had diverted more than seventeen bodies of water and had already begun studies to divert one of the most important creeks in northern La Guajira: the Bruno Creek. In the novel, by contrast, the diversion of the Bruno and Palomino Creeks has already taken place: “That the Ministry of the Environment had not established any type of study for the diversion of the Bruno and Palomino Creeks, that these had already been intervened and modified in their original channels and that none of them had prior consultation processes.”²⁵ In real life, as a result of the plan to divert the Bruno Creek, local Indigenous communities (more than twelve thousand Indigenous people live in the area) collected signatures against the diversion, an action that received national and international attention. Yet Cerrejón continues planning new diversions of bodies of **war** to take advantage of the thirty-five million tons of coal sitting under the Bruno Creek. This is particularly problematic because, as Edelmiro points out in the novel, the rainy season, which used to be in April and September, has virtually disappeared as a result of climate change.

The connection between the water of the Ranchería River and Wayuu identity is a leitmotif throughout *Palabrero*. Thus, at one point Edelmiro travels to the river mouth of the Ranchería and suffers upon realizing how polluted his sacred river has become:

The waters looked dirty, stagnant, infested with garbage on both banks; the stench that I felt breaking my bones as soon as I left the house came largely from this place. The river is wounded, I thought, as if its sinuous body was a single great purulent wound. It is the only one in the Wajira.²⁶

The personification of the river (it is “wounded”) in this passage once again points at the different ways in which Indigenous groups view the natural world.

In the final analysis, the official and unofficial uses of water as a mining resource or its consideration as an obstacle (i.e., when the corporation plans to change the course of rivers and other streams to mine the land under it) bring us to the concept of *biopolitics*, coined by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* and elaborated in another of his books, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. In this last book, Foucault, somewhat ambiguously, defines biopolitics as “the attempt, starting from the

eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race . . ." (2008, 317). Later, Giorgio Agamben would define it as "the growing inclusion of man's natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power" (1998, 119). Altogether, most understandings of the term address the phenomenon of seeing human life (population, administration of life) as a key element of political problems, as a tool for power. Likewise, another concept coined by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, that of biopower, addresses how nation-states resort to sociopolitical power to control human bodies and lives:

During the classical period, there was a rapid development of various disciplines—universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops; there was also the emergence, in the field of political practices and economic observation, of the problems of birth-rate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration. Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of "biopower." (1978, 140)

These disciplinary institutions and mechanisms are, therefore, used to regulate large human groups or populations. In turn, Achille Mbembe (2016) defines biopower as "that domain of life over which power has taken control" (12), which "appears to function through dividing people into those who must live and those who must die" (16).

It is this last meaning of the term that we find more useful for the analysis of *Palabrero*. With its tolerance—or even encouragement—toward the ecocide and genocide being committed in La Guajira by the mining corporation and its acolytes, the Colombian government actually decides who will live (alijunas or non-Indigenous people, including foreigners, with their incessant appetite for economic enrichment) and who will die (the Wayuu and other Indigenous groups in the region who can no longer withstand the drought and misery). *Palabrero*, therefore, delineates the connection between institutional and day-to-day racism and the environmental racism that is impoverishing the Wayuu and making them sick to the point where many have lost any desire to continue living. Legal and extralegal decisions about who owns the water and how it can be used are a form of biopower that ultimately deems Indigenous life unworthy or disposable. The Colombian state's management of health and food hygiene—or lack thereof—together with its permissiveness toward Indigenous deaths points precisely toward this material aspect of power that the novel exposes: society is not only socioculturally but also materially constructed and, as a result, water management is power over life.

In neomaterialist terms, the disrespect for the agency of water as a living being (as it is repeatedly defined by Indigenous characters throughout the novel) in La Guajira, and of the Ranchería River in particular, ends up affecting human lives. The dynamic quality of the river, a sacred living being for the Wayuu, affects the human beings around it, who have to contend with its agency. In this sense, Jane

Bennett explains, “Thing-power is a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans” (2004, 351). Bennett adds that thing-power materialism is a (necessarily speculative) onto-theory that presumes that matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with varying degrees of stability. Here, then, is an affinity between thing-power materialism and ecological thinking: both advocate the cultivation of an enhanced sense of the extent to which all things are spun together in a dense web, and both warn of the self-destructive character of human actions that are reckless with regard to the other nodes of the web (Bennett 2004, 354).

Like humans, therefore, nonhumans, including things, form networks by making connections with their surroundings. In the novel, the Ranchería River and its aquifer are the abused thing-power with the agentive force (it is not simply a cause) to affect the life or death of the Wayuu community. The river’s survival equates the survival of the Indigenous community and empowers it to continue their struggle against neoliberal internal colonialism. The Ranchería ultimately helps the protagonist and his social group to engender subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Both novels, Arguedas’s *Los ríos profundos* and Potdevin’s *Palabrero*, suggest that rivers and, by extension, the natural world are more than inorganic objects for their Indigenous or culturally Indigenous characters. Albeit written by non-Indigenous writers, both novels try to incorporate an Indigenous perspective of nature, which provides agency (or at least symbolic agency) to rivers as dynamic living beings. Rivers talk to the protagonists, calm them down, remind them of the deep native roots of national culture, or hold the key for the survival of Indigenous communities. Whether guided by cultural or existential survival, Indigenous characters also conceive of rivers in Peru and Colombia as a central part of their cultural and national identity. Their flooding may symbolize the future liberation of an oppressed people; their pollution or disappearance, the end of an Indigenous culture. A colonial bridge over it may symbolize the mestizaje of Spanish and Indigenous bloods. That is perhaps the essence of their sacred nature.

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NOTES

1. In her book, de la Cadena explains that in Andean cosmovision "earth-beings"—or *tirakuna* in Quechua—are entities that blur the lines between human and nature (rivers, mountains, lagoons, etc.) as they have agency and the power to influence the course of everyday life decisions for both human and nonhuman entities.
2. In the novel, *las chicheras* (criollas) and *los colonos* (Indigenous people) are the two groups that represent the Andean Quechuan peoples. Two revolts occur in the novel. The first one takes place in chapter 7 and is led by Doña Felipa and other chicheras to avenge the abuses of the hacendados in the region and take back the salt that was stolen from the Quechua communities. Although this first revolt is unsuccessful, it triggers Ernesto into action and induces him to position himself on the side of the Indigenous cause. The second revolt, in chapter 10, is led by the colonos, who seek salvation through prayer and demand that Father Linares conduct mass after a disease has spread through Abancay and the nearby towns. This second revolt is successful and reinforces Ernesto's loyalties as he intercedes for the colonos and urges Father Linares to pray for them.
3. "Arguedas connota la profundidad—las sólidas, ancestrales, raíces, matrices de la identidad nacional del Perú—de la cultura andina, en contraposición al carácter sobreimpuesto—violencia de la dominación, actitud de dependencia de una metrópolis extranjera, desprecio y marginación de las raíces autóctonas—de una cultura occidental y cosmopolita a espaldas de legado histórico milenario del Perú" (González Vigil 2004, 75).
4. "Alude a que las construcciones sociales y culturales realmente sólidas y auténticas deben nutrirse (conforme hacen los ríos de la costa que descienden de los ríos serranos) de elementos andinos, indígenas, siendo ello un mestizaje fecundo y sintetizador del Perú" (González Vigil 2004, 76).

5. “Yo no sabía si amaba más al puente o al río. Pero ambos despejaban mi alma, la inundaban de fortaleza y de heroicos sueños. Se borraban de mi mente todas las imágenes plañideras, las dudas y los malos recuerdos” (*Los ríos profundos*, 232).

6. “Recibiría la corriente poderosa y triste que golpea a los niños, cuando deben enfrentarse solos a un mundo cargado de monstruos y de fuego y de grandes ríos que cantan con la música más hermosa al chocar contra las piedras y las islas” (*Los ríos profundos*, 196).

7. “¡No te olvides, mi pequeño, no te olvides!

Cerro blanco, hazlo volver;

Agua de la montaña, manantial de la pampa que nunca muera de sed.

Halcón, cárgalo en tus alas y hazlo volver.

Inmensa nieve, padre de la nieve, no lo hieras en el camino.

Mal viento, no lo toques.

Lluvia de tormenta, no lo alcances.

¡No, precipicio, atroz precipicio, no lo sorprendas!

¡Hijo mío, has de volver, has de volver!” (*Los ríos profundos*, 202–3).

In the novel, Arguedas provides both the Quechua and Spanish versions of the song next to each other, but writes the Quechua original version on the left in order to emphasize its true Quechua origins and the importance of language.

8. “Arguedas inserta elementos de la cultura andina (mentalidad mítico-mágica con sincretismo cristiano, quechuización del español, tradición oral ligada a la música y la danza) dentro de formas culturales occidentales (incluyendo entre ellas el propio género de la novela), en un grado de transculturación mayor que el logrado no sólo por los restantes autores vinculables a la corriente *indigenista* o *neo-indigenista*, sino por otros grandes cultores del *realismo maravilloso* hispanoamericano” (González Vigil 2004, 12).

9. “—¿Es posible robarse un río?” (González Vigil 2004, 13).

10. “—Entre las formas de exterminar un pueblo la más indigna es ahogarlo en su sed. Cuando se quita la única fuente de agua, la conexión con la vida, ¿qué se hace?” (González Vigil 2004, 13).

11. Philip Potdevin Segura, a novelist, essayist, and poet, was born in Cali (Valle del Cauca, Colombia) in 1958. Among many other literary awards, he won, in 1994, the Premio Nacional de Novela de Colcultura with the novel *Metatrón*. He has taught literary creation at the Universidad Central and also works as a literary coach of new writers. He has published the novels *Metatrón* (1995), *Mar de la tranquilidad* (1997), *La otomana* (2005), *En esta borrasca formidable* (2014), *Palabrero* (2016), *Y adentro, la caldera* (2018), and *La sembradora de cuerpos* (2019). He has also published the short-story collections *Magister Ludi y otros relatos* (1994), *Estragos de la lujuria (y sus remedios)* (1996, extended edition in 2011), *Solicitud en confesión* (2015), *Los juegos del retorno* (2017), and *Quinteto*. In addition, he has published the poetry collections *Cantos de Saxo* (1994), *Horologium* (1995), *Mesteres de Circe (Opus Magnum)* (1996), *25 Haikus* (1997), *Cánticos de éxtasis* (1997), and *Salto desde el acantilado* (2001). He has also published the literary translations *El ritmo de la vida y otros ensayos* by Alice Meynell (2001), *Voces Áureas*, by Pitágoras de Samos (2002), and *Oración por la dignidad humana* (2002).

12. “El río es un ser vivo, quiere evitar desbordarse, hacer daños a los habitantes de sus riberas, por ello, comienza un amoroso acto de dar, de recibir: el agua que lleva en ese momento en exceso la comparte con su lecho profundo, pues no la necesita toda para avanzar a su destino en Riohacha, donde verterá el dulce líquido en el salobre Caribe. Así, entonces, entrega a la esponja ese exceso de agua, en un gesto de generosidad y amor de la naturaleza, de armonioso maridaje entre río y esponja” (*Palabrero*, 96).

13. “Cuando pensábamos que habían terminado, un nuevo lance de la máquina, mi madre gritó desesperada, cuando salió un nuevo cuerpo de entre la tierra, ‘¡Es mi mamita, hijita, es mi mamita!’

y, en efecto, era el cuerpo despedazado de mi abuela, lo reconocí por la manta con a que la habíamos enterrado hacía dos o tres meses, no pudimos más presenciar ese espectáculo, nos devolvimos a la ranchería, el corazón vuelto pedazos y la rabia en la sangre” (*Palabrero*, 159).

14. “Esta nación es más racista que Estados Unidos o los neo-Nazis europeos. No gusta lo indígena, se desprecia al wayuu, al uwa, al aruhaco, al kogi, al nasa, al wiwa, al nukak-makuk. A sus hijas no las quieren ver casadas con alguien que pueda generar un salto atrás en la raza” (*Palabrero*, 29).

15. “La novela da voz al orgullo wayuu, tan afectado desde hace mucho tiempo por varios factores sociales, políticos, culturales y administrativos. El wayuu tiene un pasado glorioso que en gran parte se ha olvidado y es desconocido para las nuevas generaciones. Palabrero—que toma por título el rol principal que ejercen los palabreros para llevar y traer la palabra hasta lograr un acuerdo entre las partes—es un grito, literario por supuesto, para que el wayuu sea escuchado, dignificado y restablecido en su autonomía, en sus valores, en su derecho; por todo lo que le corresponde, por haber estado en la península de La Guajira mucho antes de los alijuna.”

16. “Hizo lo que muchos palabreros wayuu nunca han hecho o si lo hacen no lo confiesan: salir de la Wajira y buscar sus nexos con nuestros primos de sangre, los habitantes de la Sierra. Los Wayuu seremos fuertes si nos unimos a los pueblos hermanos. La península comienza en la Sierra Nevada” (*Palabrero*, 59).

17. “En fin, su apariencia era una muestra del avasallador sincretismo cultural, de hasta qué punto la occidentalización destruye las culturas originarias de América” (*Palabrero*, 135).

18. The Wayuu believe that they die twice. When a Wayuu dies on Earth, first he or she becomes a *yoluja*, a spirit of the dead that can communicate with the living, often through dreams. At one point, they leave for Jepira through the path of the dead Indians, the Land of the Dead, in Cape Vela, by the Caribbean Sea, where they become *juya* or rain, dying again and being buried for a second time.

19. “Hemos estado por más de tres décadas en La Guajira bajo la premisa de construir relaciones transparentes con nuestros grupos de interés, ser un buen empleador, cumplir con la ley y aplicar los más altos estándares sociales y ambientales. Al tiempo de posicionarnos como un productor y exportador de carbón líder a nivel mundial, estamos enfocados en continuar siendo un aliado clave para el progreso y desarrollo sostenible de La Guajira, fortaleciendo las capacidades entre sus autoridades y comunidades para que lideren las transformaciones sociales de su territorio.”

20. “—Nunca escasea el agua. No saben lo que es una sequía, un verano, un corte de agua, ni mucho menos de energía. Los arroyos Bruno, Palomino, el río Ranchería son su fuente inagotable. Para ellos siempre habrá agua” (*Palabrero*, 150).

21. “Cuando la actividad minera concluya en el futuro, quisiéramos ver este laboratorio de bosque seco tropical desarrollado por Cerrejón, convertido en elemento fundamental dentro de la estructura ecológica principal de La Guajira, que garantice la provisión de servicios ecosistémicos y sustente la prosperidad de este noble departamento.”

22. “—Es para la foto, Édel, ¿entiendes?

—No.

—Cuando llegan visitantes o periodistas, o el presidente o ministros, los llevan a esa zona de rehabilitación, les muestran el puñado de hectáreas que han rehabilitado, manifiestan así su compromiso; por supuesto, los manes, cuando son ingenuos, quedan felices, orgullosos de ver un manejo responsable del medio ambiente” (*Palabrero*, 155).

23. “—Pero ha habido, y sigue habiendo, formas más sutiles de impedir la consulta previa. Una de ellas es desconocer la existencia de comunidades indígenas en el territorio. Recuerden que mencioné que el primer paso es solicitar al Ministerio del Interior una certificación; ustedes se sorprenderán, pero en muchos casos el mismo Ministerio ha negado dicha existencia aduciendo que allí hay campesinos o colonos y no indígenas como tal” (*Palabrero*, 259).

24. “Encontramos que el Ministerio del Interior certificó, de manera absurda, que en las riberas del río Ranchería no había asentamientos wayuu, con lo cual se podía, en el papel, omitir todo el proceso de consulta” (*Palabrero*, 276).

25. “Que en el Ministerio de Medio Ambiente no se había radicado ningún tipo de estudio para la desviación de los arroyos Bruno y Palomino, que estos ya habían sido intervenidos y modificados en sus cauces originales y que en ninguno se realizaron procesos de consulta previa” (*Palabrero*, 276).

26. “Las aguas se veían sucias, estancadas, infestadas de basuras en ambas orillas; la fetidez que sentí penetrarme los huesos tan pronto salí de la casa provenía en gran parte de este sitio. El río está herido, pensé, como si su sinuoso cuerpo fuera una sola gran llaga purulenta. Es el único de la Wajira” (*Palabrero*, 57).