

Book Proposal

The Putumayo: Colombia's Forgotten Frontier

Lesley Wylie

The Putumayo River, which forms the border between Colombia and Peru and Colombia and Ecuador, is a major tributary of the Amazon, running some 1000 miles from the Colombian Andes to Brazil. Although geographically isolated, the river, and the region to which it gives its name, has been of great strategic and economic importance throughout Latin America's postcolonial history. During the rubber boom the Putumayo witnessed mass-immigration of workers from around the world, including the Caribbean, North Africa, and Europe. At the same time many of its indigenous inhabitants fled from their ancestral homes into neighbouring regions to escape slavery. As a result, writing on and from the Putumayo is characterised by themes of exile and return: the journey is a recurring topos of literature on the region. Although canonical literary forms are well-represented in *The Putumayo: Colombia's Forgotten Frontier* travel writing, testimony, diaries, journalism, and oral poetry dominate—in-between genres for in-between spaces, situated often on the borders of fact and fiction. There are many stories of conflict as well as of cultural fusion and hybridity. Although established as a region of Colombia since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Putumayo remains physically and culturally estranged from Bogotá, a place of contraband and political radicalism and a site of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity with close ties to Amazonian centres in Peru and Brazil.

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Series Preface

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List of illustrations

Introduction

The introduction will give an outline of the location and characteristics of the Putumayo and the major trends of writing on and from the region.

Chapter 1

In 1876 a future president of Colombia, Rafael Reyes, made a groundbreaking journey along the Putumayo River in a steamship—a journey that not only encouraged a wave of naturalists, geographers, and traders to visit the little-known region but which also inspired a rich vein of travel writing. The account of the river journey given in Reyes's memoirs will be considered here, alongside Miguel de Triana's *Por el sur de Colombia*, Alfred Simson's *Travels in the Wilds of Ecuador and the Exploration of the Putumayo River*, and Jules Crevaux's *Voyages dans L'Amérique du Sud*. Whilst many of these accounts appeal to the conventions of tropical travel writing (tropes of superabundance, savagery, and tropical diseases abound) there is a notable aesthetic shift in the representation of the Putumayo from a *locus amoenus* to a *locus terribilis*, culminating in the account of the North American traveller Walter Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: the Devil's Paradise*, with an account of which the chapter will end.

Chapter 2

In the first decade of the twentieth century the Putumayo was at the centre of an international polemic regarding the abuses of a British-owned rubber company, the Peruvian Amazon Company, which was responsible for the enslavement, torture, and murder of tens of thousands of indigenous people in the region. The chapter begins with the discussion of a short story by the German Jewish émigré writer Vicki Baum, 'Death of an Indian', before going on to examine two real-life accounts of the atrocities—the journal of the British Foreign Office investigator

Roger Casement, kept during his trip to the rubber district in 1910, and the testimony of Caribbean labourers in the region. Although all of these texts purport to be documentary, the chapter will explore how accounts of the Putumayo atrocities often blurred the line between fact and fiction, seeking analogies in literature, including—most notably—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Chapter 3

The native body has been fundamental to the western imagination of the Putumayo since the region was first colonised by missionaries in the sixteenth century. Ethnographies and—from the late-nineteenth century on—photographs of the Putumayo's indigenous communities testify to the desire of outsiders to observe, classify, and render spectacular the racial and cultural Other. This chapter will focus on two parallel cases, separated by some fifty years, whereby the Putumayo native is reduced to 'spectacle'. The first is the story of two Bora Indians taken by Roger Casement to London in the summer of 1911 to publicise the plight of the Putumayo rubber workers. This investigation will draw on a variety of materials including diaries, letters, journalism, photographs, and a painting. The second story, drawn from accounts by the Colombian journalist Germán Castro Caycedo and the French journalist Yves-Guy Bergès, relates to a family from an 'unknown' tribe who were accused of killing a missing man and who were incarcerated and put on public display in the Colombian town La Pedrera in 1969.

Chapter 4

Two landmark Colombian novels published in the decade from 1924 to 1934—José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* and César Uribe Piedrahita's *Toá: narraciones de caucherías*—were set in and around the Putumayo River. Both novels, which describe fictional journeys to the Colombian Amazon in the first decade of the twentieth century, embody a strong geographical drive and were an important source of information for contemporary readers about the notorious Putumayo region. Nevertheless, despite their apparent attempts to map Colombia's geographical periphery, both novels end in the failure of the frontier myth of the Putumayo as a promised land for the Colombian nation. This chapter explores how, far from being models for Colombian colonisation of the nation's borderlands, *La vorágine* and *Toá* present the Putumayo as an indomitably wild region which defies the urban traveller's spatial and aesthetic coordinates and the centralising discourses of the Colombian nation.

Chapter 5

In 1932-33 a war between Peru and Colombia was fought along the Putumayo River giving rise to a large body of writing which included not only testimony, but novels, poetry, and a satirical play. This chapter will explore three accounts of the 1933 conflict: *180 días en el frente*—a testimonial narrative by the Colombian war correspondent Arturo Arango Uribe, the 1986 novel *Río Putumayo* by the Peruvian writer Jaime Vásquez Iquierdo, and the short testimony of a Colombian soldier native to the Putumayo. Whilst the horrors of the military conflict form the backdrop to all these accounts, a common fascination with place and, in particular, the persistent inclusion of indigenous myths, problematises military themes by suggesting that the environment of the Putumayo is more compelling than the war.

Chapter 6

The rituals surrounding the imbibing of indigenous hallucinogens such as yagé or coca is an important feature of many narratives on the Putumayo. As essential parts of shamanistic ritual, the takers of both yagé and coca consistently report (super)natural visions of the Amazon rainforest, including metamorphosis into jaguar form, the glimpsing of aquatic underworlds, and sentient vegetation. This chapter will open with the discussion of an indigenous account of coca, as narrated in the Huitoto language by the Putumayo shaman Hipólito Candre, before exploring the more recent phenomenon of yagé tourism, which largely began with William Burrough's account of a journey to the Putumayo in search of 'kicks' in his epistolary novel, *The Yagé Letters*.

Chapter 7

From Roger Casement's notorious 'Black Diaries' to recent fiction from the Colombian and Peruvian Amazon, the Putumayo and the urban centres surrounding it have been figured as places of sexual promiscuity and, in particular, of homosexuality. This chapter will revisit Casement's 'Black Diaries' by way of William Bryant's *Iquitos 1910*—a 2003 novel about the journey of the aspiring author Memo Strozzi, who travels to the Putumayo in the footsteps of Casement and attempts to relive many of his erotic encounters. Other erotic fiction to be discussed includes the 2006 collection of short stories *Hostal Amor* by Cayo Vásquez, set in the sex-tourism capital of the region, Iquitos.

Chapter 8

As we approach the centenary of the atrocities which led to the Putumayo's world-wide notoriety in 1910, the region remains a no-man's land, geographically and culturally isolated from the central administration in Bogotá. The region's present-day reputation as one of the poorest and most dangerous regions of Colombia, and a centre of cocaine production and FARC activity, has led to a wave of journalism and testimony. This chapter will compare the often melodramatic accounts of witnesses of the region's conflict with two recent popular novels, Jay McLarty's *Bagman* and Sandro Meneses Potosí's *El último guerrero de' Aruwa: misterio en las selvas del Putumayo*.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

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Lesley Wylie

CURRICULUM VITAE

Current position Senior Research Officer on the AHRC-funded project, 'American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography', Department of Literature, Theatre, and Film Studies, University of Essex

Home address 94 St John's Road, Ely, Cambridgeshire, CB6 3BE, UK

Education

B.A. Hons. (Spanish and English Literature), 1st Class (Gold Medal): Trinity College, University of Dublin (2001)

M.Phil (European Literature), Distinction: University of Cambridge (2003)

Ph.D (Spanish): University of Cambridge (2006)

Awards and scholarships

Arts and Humanities Research Council Scholarship, A & B (2002-2006); Newton Trust Award, University of Cambridge (2003-2006); External Research Scholarship, Emmanuel College, Cambridge (2002-2006); Memorial Fund Scholarship from the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland (2005); Scholarship from the Fundación Carolina (2004); Henry Hutchinson Stewart Literary Prize, Trinity College, Dublin (2001).

Publications

Books and articles

Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks: Rewriting the Tropics in the 'novela de la selva' (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming 2009)

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Under consideration:

'"Rare Models": Roger Casement, the Amazon, and the Ethnographic Picturesque', *Irish Studies Review*

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Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonora Desert and the Forests of Amazonia: From Colony to Republic, by Cynthia Radding. *The Latin Americanist* (2007)

Teaching

- (Essex) M.A. 'War, Violence, and Conflict in the American Tropics'.
B.A. Latin American Literature in Translation; Introduction to Latin America
- (Cambridge) M.Phil. 'Marginalities' (European Literature and Culture)
B.A. Topics in Spanish-American Culture and History; Translation from Spanish; Introduction to Spanish Literature