

*Amazon Journeys and Poetic Re-Discoveries in
Jan Conn's Jaguar Rain and Malu de Martino's
Margaret Mee e a Flor da Lua*

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Abstract. The year 2023 marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of botanical artist Margaret Mee's final expedition to the Amazon. On this trip, she was at last able to paint the rare night-flowering of *Selenicereus wittii*, commonly known as the Amazon moonflower. Such an accomplishment was not only significant due to the rare nature of the event, but also because it was the final piece created by an artist who renewed the practice of botanical painting. Originally from Britain, Mee lived in Brazil for more than thirty years, embarking on fifteen expeditions to the Amazon region between 1956 and 1988, painting while travelling in dug-out canoes deep in the forest and becoming a fervent activist for the protection of the environment. Her work has influenced many artists, ecologists, and biologists, and has served as inspiration for literary and filmic creations. In 2006, Canadian poet Jan Conn published *Jaguar Rain: The Margaret Mee Poems*, in which she poetically recreates Mee's journeys to the Amazon. As both a scientist and a poet who has also extensively travelled in the region, Conn reimagines Mee's wondrous encounters while situating them as part of a tradition of travel and exploration in South America. A few years later, in 2012, the documentary *Margaret Mee e a Flor da Lua*, directed by Brazilian filmmaker Malu de Martino, was premiered. In the film, Martino reconstructs Mee's final journey to the Amazon in search of the moonflower while also reinstating the artist's important contributions as an artist, environmentalist, and contemporary explorer. The connections between the biographical, poetic, artistic, and professional Mee are closely woven throughout the documentary, which can be seen as inserted in a new documentary tradition, less analytical and more poetic, in which notions of truth, history, and reality are problematised and rendered through different lenses. Bearing in mind that both Conn and Martino re-read Mee's journeys through the tropes of exploration and discovery, which are commonly associated with imperial practices and colonial narratives of the New World, in this paper,

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we propose to discuss in which ways these tropes are brought into context and problematised, especially in relation to the depiction of Amazonian nature.

Keywords: travel writing; Amazon representations; Margaret Mee; Canadian poetry; Brazilian documentary

The crossing of borders and the exploration of new routes, meanings and definitions permeated the history of the Americas even before the arrival of the first European colonisers. Yet, it was with colonization that the question of how to represent the “new” and “different” other became so emblematic. This is, still today, one of the most intriguing questions in critical and literary debates as writers continue to address the issue of cultural representation in their works, re-creating new meanings for the varied experiences of cultural encounters in the Americas. As many scholars have already suggested, contemporary narratives addressing geographical crossings are invariably rooted in the past. For Tim Youngs, “travellers follow, literally and figuratively, in paths laid down by their prior exposure to [other] cultural representations of a place” (Youngs 2013: 152). In that sense, travel narratives or poetic reconstructions of a geographical location often engage with the ways this space has been historically (and literarily) constructed, even if, as argued by Youngs, many travellers will attempt to distinguish their accounts from previous ones (Youngs 2013: 152).

Considering travel narratives in the Americas in the 20th and 21st centuries, it is possible to notice that not only have specific destinations been more visited than others, but also certain narratives of Latin America have travelled more widely and been more frequently adapted to different media within our geopolitical relations. According to Corseuil (2022: 32, 33), when one considers foreign narratives on Latin America, four major inter- and trans-hemispheric geopolitical processes stand out: (1) the Good Neighbour Policy (from the 1940s through to the 1950s), which was a diplomatic pathway fostered by the US to promote cultural proximity with Latin American countries for economic and political reasons mainly through the creation of Nelson Rockefeller’s office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (1940–1945); (2) the military take over in Latin American countries (from the 1960s on), which achieved international attention and has been explored in many narratives that focus on American intervention and the exile of Latin American intellectuals and politicians worldwide; (3) massive migration movements from South to North (from the 1970s on), which focus on the social, economic and political struggles faced by many Latin American countries; (4) ecological awareness *vis à vis* the Amazon forest and climate change (from the 1980s on). These narrative clusters have been widely circulated in various media and have significantly

influenced cultural representations of specific locations in the Americas.¹ However, for the sake of the present work, we will focus specifically on the fourth cluster, as we look at how the Amazonian space has been addressed and re-signified in the context of travel and discovery.

As suggested by Neil Whitehead, since the first travel accounts produced by European explorers in the Americas, the Amazon region has been largely imagined and represented through a particular aesthetics which “reflects a deeply historical sense of the epistemological disjuncture involved in encountering a ‘new world,’ coupled with the persistent experience of an intractable ecology” (Whitehead 2002: 123). For Whitehead, travel accounts of the Amazon have been persistently permeated not only by scientific description and observation, but also by what the author calls an “aesthetic of extremes” in which discovery has been associated with the encounter with the marvellous or fantastic other (Whitehead 2002: 127). For the author, although the accounts of 18th and 19th century explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt, Henry Bates, Richard Spruce, Russel Wallace, among others, produced the Amazon as a scientific object that was “de-historicised and recreated as a field for the play of new kinds of knowledge” (Whitehead 2002: 131), from the 20th century on, it is possible to observe what Whitehead has called “a counter-narrative of the rediscovery of marvel” (Whitehead 2002: 135). Such counter-narratives usually focus on the wild qualities of the forest and are marked by the search for what was left hidden in scientific discourse.

Beyond those thematic approaches, towards the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, concerns about climate change and the greenhouse effect started to influence narratives on the Amazon, especially those produced outside Brazil. Brazilian scholar Miguel Nenevé has also critically analysed how the diversity of the Amazon Forest has been represented in travel narratives, especially in regards to ecological preservation. In one of his articles discussing works such as *Amazon Watershed*, by George Monbiot, *The Burning Season*, by Andrew Revkin, *The World is Burning*, by Shoumatoff, among other works published in the 1990s, Nenevé demonstrates how the discourse of preservation tended to reproduce colonial views of South America as if in an attempt to authorise various kinds of local and international intervention in the region, even in the name of progress (Nenevé 2011: 102).²

¹ For a discussion of these major inter- and trans-hemispheric geopolitical processes in foreign narratives on South America, especially in film, see Corseuil (2022).

² Nenevé, together with other scholars, has also critically addressed the discourse of progress in the Amazon region as well as the stereotype of the Amazon as a “green hell”. Eg., see Nenevé, M., Gomes, M. L. (2015) or Nenevé, M., Silva, R. B. (2020).

In this context, it is interesting to perceive that, in the 20th and 21st centuries, a variety of travel narratives on Latin America, specifically on Brazil, focus on the Amazon Forest and continue to recover some of the thematic elements mentioned above. Examples of fictional and non-fictional filmic and literary narratives are Theodore Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914), which describes his expedition to the Amazon;³ *The Amazon Awakens* (1944), produced by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and Disney Studios; Nicholas Guppy's *A Young Man's Journey* (1973); *Fitzcarraldo*, by Werner Herzog (1982); *Embrace of the Serpent* (2016), a coproduction by Colombia, Argentina and Venezuela; James Gray's *The Lost City of Z* (2016); Margaret Mee's *In Search of Flowers of the Amazon Forests* (1988); Jose Barahona's *Nheegantu* (2020), among many others.

Moreover, contemporary narratives on the Amazonian Forest are closely associated with studies on biology, ethnography, ecology, ecocriticism and the environment.⁴ Yet, despite this close connection with scientific knowledge or ecological awareness, as Bérta Perez points out, "It is already well established in anthropology that cultures and societies can no longer be ethnographically studied as ahistorical and self-contained – isolated local islands – nor can their interactions and relations with national and global power (or vice versa) be analyzed only from a unidirectional and unidimensional perspective" (Perez 2003: 81). Such recognition places contemporary narratives on the Amazon in a dual position: they show enchantment by the forest and its wonders, and at the same time they acknowledge the various discourses in which otherness is inscribed as part of a discourse of travel and exploration.

It is through this conceptualisation of travel within Latin America as re-reading or reencountering that we propose to elaborate on how the work of British botanical artist Margaret Mee (1909–1988) has been re-signified by two contemporary artists, Canadian poet Jan Conn and Brazilian filmmaker Malu de Martino, who choose to depict Mee's unique experience travelling through and painting the Amazon Forest. Conn's *Jaguar Rain: The Margaret Mee Poems* and Martino's *Margaret Mee e a Flor da Lua* foreground the subjectiveness and interrelatedness of the Amazonian Forest and Mee's identity as an artist, which help them to challenge this seemingly dual approach of either scientifically objectifying, or exotifying, the Amazonian other.

Originally from Britain, Mee lived in Brazil for more than thirty years and embarked on fifteen expeditions to the Amazon region between 1956 and 1988, painting while traveling in dug-out canoes deep in the forest and

³ For an analysis of Roosevelt's writings see Wasserman (2009).

⁴ For an analysis of the topic see Yoza-Mitsuishi (2023).

becoming a fervent activist for the protection of the environment. Her work has influenced many other artists, ecologists, and biologists and her legacy includes four hundred folios of gouache illustrations, forty sketchbooks, and fifteen diaries, many of which are now archived at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in England. Moreover, several plants she painted had not been painted or recorded before and nine of them were unknown to the scientific community.⁵

Apart from her accomplishments, Margaret Mee is a fascinating character since she was already 47 years old when she first travelled to the north of Brazil, more specifically to the state of Pará, on the northern edge of the Amazon Forest. She continued travelling to the Amazon region until she was 79, an experience unknown to a woman. Furthermore, she only painted from living plants, usually sketching them *in loco*. It could be said that one of her great motivations was the sheer pleasure of seeing, or gazing at, the wonders of the forest. However, her interest went beyond pure appreciation. Her engaged gaze seemed to be focused on trying to record, or even witness, the diversity of a place which, for her, was very much alive, inhabited and in constant transformation. Many are the passages in her diaries in which she describes the movements of the forest, from the various water cycles flooding *igarapés* or river banks, to the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the forest and their relations with it. In this context, even if her work was still very much informed by the classificatory impulse of scientific discovery, she was also a precursor in pondering about the interrelations of ecosystems and about human and nonhuman interdependences.

Mee's perspective, back in the 1950s and 1960s, can be seen as an antenna to the future, a poetic and avant garde one due to her artistry and to her ecological sensibility. And it is exactly this multifaceted aspect of Mee's legacy, her strength, resilience, ecological awareness, delicacy and acute sense of the wonders of the Amazon Forest that has served as inspiration for re-readings of her work in literary and filmic creations. In Jan Conn's poem collection, for example, Conn poetically recreates Mee's journeys to the Amazon. As both a scientist and a poet who has also extensively travelled in the region, Conn reimagines Mee's wondrous encounters while situating them as part of a tradition of travel and exploration in South America. In the same vein, in the documentary *Margaret Mee e a Flor da Lua*, Brazilian filmmaker Malu de Martino reconstructs Mee's final journey to the Amazon while also reiterating her important contribution as an artist, environmentalist, and contemporary

⁵ Information gathered from different sources, such as <https://www.botanicalartandartists.com/about-margaret-mee.html> and <https://www.huntbotanical.org/exhibitions/show.php?28>

explorer. The documentary weaves together Mee's various facets: the feminine, poetic, artistic, and professional. Due to the subjective and sensorial elements of the documentary, it can be seen as inserted in a new documentary tradition, less analytical and more poetic, in which notions of truth, history, and reality are replaced by a more personal and sensorial perspective.

Bearing in mind that both Conn and Martino re-read Mee's journeys through the tropes of exploration and discovery, which are commonly associated with imperial practices and colonial narratives of the New World, in this paper, we propose to discuss the ways in which these tropes are brought into context and problematised, or re-signified, especially in relation to the depiction of Amazonian nature. If the Amazon has been traditionally depicted as a space of wonder and infinite possibilities for the mesmerised traveller, in Jan Conn's poems, such images are re-visited in an attempt to create a new web of intertextual relations that challenges the traveller's desire to 'know' the travelled space. In the specific case of Martino's film, the explorer becomes so engaged with its subject of study that the separation is no longer possible. To know Mee is only possible through her connection with the forest. She is inscribed in it as Martino and Conn are inscribed in her work – as a form of palimpsest, fully aware of its inscriptions.

Travelling within and without

At the age of 79, almost 35 years ago, Mee embarked on her final expedition to the Amazon. During this trip, she painted the rare night-flowering of *Selenicereus wittii*, commonly known as the Amazon moonflower. Such an accomplishment was not only significant due to the rare nature of the event, but also because it was the final piece created by an artist who renewed the practice of botanical painting. In her journals, published in *Margaret Mee: In Search of Flowers of the Amazon Forest* (1988), Mee describes the moment she and a small group of friends approach the Rio Negro river basin, where they celebrate her 79th birthday and where they will look for the moonflower: "At dusk the wind dropped and we entered Paraná Anavilhanas, where on the left bank magnificent forests lined the river. Huge trees were draped with philodendrons, bromeliads clung to the branches and an occasional orchid glowed against the green curtain" (Mee 1988: 283). Such short and almost poetic excerpt is just one example of Mee's delight in absorbing (and being absorbed by) the forest around her. Indeed, the forest for Mee is almost like a second home, a place she gets to know intimately, a location that, more than peril, offers her the opportunity to become the artist she is now known to be.

Later, in that same year, Mee unfortunately died in a car crash in Leicester while travelling through England. A few days before the accident, Mee was interviewed by Robert MacNeil, for the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, a news program on PBS. In this interview, MacNeil asks her: "Did it ever occur to you that it was a slightly unusual occupation for a delicately built lady to be going into the jungles of the Amazon...?" To which Mee replies: "Well, I don't know, I'm not really so delicate perhaps as I look, if I do look delicate. But I have a great deal of resistance" (MacNeil 1988: online transcripts).

Resistance might be an appropriate word to address not only Mee's impulse to journey through the forest, but also the kind of work she produced and the repercussions of her findings. Yet, more than resisting moments of food deprivation, sickness, or even dangerous encounters in the forest, especially with miners who roamed the region in search of gold or other precious metals, Mee, with her pencils, her gouache, and her sketchbooks sought to resist, and fight against, the premise that nonhuman lives were less worthy of care or attention than human lives, a premise that usually sustained the unrestrained economic advancement that devoured extensive portions of the forest.

In the same interview, Mee describes her desire, but also her fear, of going back to the Anavilhanas region: "I am not frightened for my life or anything like that ..., but what I shall see, the horrible destruction which I have already seen on the Rio Negro. It was almost unrecognizable.... I almost knew the trees as friends, individually. Not one of them is left" (MacNeil 1988: online transcripts). Mining and the clearing of large forested areas to raise cattle or produce fuel are just some of the human activities witnessed by Mee during her journeys through the Amazon, activities that still greatly affect the different ecosystems of the forest.

In 1984, Mee appeared twice on Brazilian television reporting on what she was witnessing in the forest. After that, she was invited by the rector of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro to stay at a medical station in Oriximiná, by the Trombetas River, from where she travelled to the Trombetas Reserve, which had been created by the Brazilian government in the same year that the *Mineração Rio do Norte* company was established in the region (in 1979). Mee had great hopes for the preservation of the forest in the reserve. Yet, along the way, she was able to observe what was happening due to bauxite exploitation. In her diary, she describes the state of Batata lake:

Great trees, species extinct in many areas, are being exterminated, and this 'dead sea' extends for seven miles down a valley of considerable width.... Dead and bleached trees stand by the thousand warning of what is to come when the seeping tide envelops other areas. Not only the trees, but with them animals and other plants have perished. It is a valley of death. (Mee 1988: 279)

Due to the nature of her work and her passionate fight for the protection of the forest, Mee's contributions as an environmentalist are widely remembered and greatly appreciated. Yet, if Mee's experience in the forest is to shed some light on how to re-signify our current moment and chart new paths for the future, it is not only by narrating the dying forest, but also because she opened herself up to an intimate encounter with the space of the other. The forest is, for Mee, more than a place of wonder or enchantment, it is a living, inhabited space marked by intra- and interspecies relations and dependencies. It is exactly Mee's unique way of looking at and embracing the forest that is recovered by artists such as Conn and de Martino. If, on the one hand, they situate Mee's travelling experiences as part of an archive of travel and exploration in the so-called New World, on the other, they show the singularity of Mee's intimate encounter with the travelled space.

Jan Conn's Margaret Mee poems

In Conn's book *Jaguar Rain: the Margaret Mee Poems*, published in 2006, Conn re-writes Mee's 15 expeditions in the Amazon region. Her choice of writing or recovering Mee's experience in the Amazon is significant as Conn has travelled to the region as both a writer and a scientist. In fact, she is a biologist, whose fieldwork on malaria mosquitoes has led her to many places in Latin America, including the Amazon.⁶ For Beck (2011: 130, 131), Conn's retracing of Mee's steps inserts her own writing in a tradition of scientific travel and exploration in the Amazon region. In this context, it is not by chance that the names of well-known naturalists such as Alexander von Humboldt, Henry Bates, among others, are brought to the fore in her poems, as if reminding the reader that Mee's journeys were inevitably informed by the trope of discovery in colonial travel and exploration.

As Canadian scholar Mary Louise Pratt suggests, the trope of discovery has been repeated in many travel narratives through the years. In her seminal work *Imperial Eyes*, she shows how travel texts produced by Victorian British explorers in the second half of the 19th century still associate discovery with 'finding' and 'unveiling' unexplored lands. Describing a kind of narrative she calls "the monarch of all I survey", Pratt suggests that discovery, in such a context, meant transforming local knowledge into European, along with associated questions of gender. As she points out, in a monarch-of-all-I-survey scene, "Explorer-man paints/possesses newly unveiled landscape-woman"

⁶ For a discussion of Jan Conn's poetics of travel and her work as a scientist see Beck (2011).

(Pratt 2008: 209). In this context, the feminised land is uncovered by the masculinist gaze, a process also observed in 15th and 16th century narratives, when the act of exploration was commonly associated with the act of revealing virgin bodies of land (McClintock 1995).⁷

In Jan Conn's poetry collection and in her re-reading of Mee's journeys, although the act of "unveiling" the land permeates Mee's drive to see and to know Amazonian flora, the concepts of mastery and possession are challenged through the juxtaposition of the traveller's desire for the marvellous and the recognition that the forest is not passively waiting to be 'discovered'. In a poem titled "Aripuana", for example, the fictional Margaret Mee seems to recognise that her own life as a traveller and painter depends much more on the forest than the forest depends on her presence. After staying in camp for many days, waiting for a boat ride that would take her back to the city, Margaret notes the vivacity of life around her, which constantly interrupts the dream of possession. As the poem tells us, the threats Mee faces in the forest do not come from possums that steal her fish, or from the shark that hides under the river waters, but from leaf-cutting ants, which might eat the rare plants she has found there:

When the jaguar appears
I am nearly fearless: on the river bank I have discovered
the rare lemon-yellow beauty, *Oncidium cebolleta*. My terror now
is leaf-cutting ants. If they find the wooden racks I've built
for my orchids and bromeliads, they'll devour my life. (Conn 2006: 34)

In poems like these, Conn elaborates on the appeal of discovery in Mee's journeys, showing not only how the traveller's desire frames the travel experience, but also how this same desire might be disrupted by the most quotidian element of the travelled space. What the fictional Margaret seems to realise is that discovery, in the context of the forest, is devoid of meaning, and as Pratt reminds us, seeing is not enough – discovery will only mean something when the representations, or the sketches, of what is seen are sent "back home". As we can perceive from the poem, leaf-cutting ants do not necessarily threaten the recently-found flowers, but Mee's project itself. If the speaker feels that her life is threatened, it is because it is acquiring a new meaning in the travelling search.

⁷ In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock dedicates a chapter to the analysis of how the colonial imagination used to feminize the land. One of the examples she presents is a discussion of the famous engraving by Thomas Galle based on a drawing by Jan Van Straet, from the end of the 16th century. In this image, we see the European traveller Américo Vespucci arriving on the new continent, which is represented by the image of a naked indigenous woman.

This ambivalence between the appeal of discovery and the materiality of the travelled place permeates many of Conn's poems in the book as if reminding the reader that such ambivalence can hardly be reconciled in the context of travel writing. This is particularly evident in a group of poems in which Conn reconstructs Mee's attempt to be the first non-indigenous person to reach the summit of the highest Amazonian Mountain, Pico da Neblina. In Conn's recreation of this journey, the tension behind cultural encounters is re-played. To reach the peak of the mountain, Mee needs the guidance of indigenous people, thus replicating a well-known colonial practice of using local knowledge for external purposes. In the poem titled "Mountain of Mist and Cloud", the focus is on Mee's own desire to reach the summit and on the sense of accomplishment such an expedition would bring her:

...
 No one ascends Pico da Neblina
 without the requisite guides—
 recklessly I invoke secret charms.

Richard Spruce never climbed this one:
 I shall be the first European
 up the southern approach.

But south—bad luck?
 I fear the crimson of the road to the south,

How the tint of it drowns,
 Dissipates in still water.
 Our whole expedition slowly

Submerging.... (Conn 2006: 44)

In this poem, Mee's position as a traveller and explorer gives her some kind of empowerment. On the other hand, as the poem anticipates, desire for accomplishment is not enough to guarantee recognition, and the expedition in fact fails to get Mee to its final destination. However, while a failure in exploratory terms (too much rain impedes them in getting to the summit), Mee's sense of frustration at not accomplishing her goal is re-contextualised by Conn in subsequent poems. In a second poem about this expedition (now titled, in Portuguese, Pico da Neblina), the focus is no longer on the traveller's drive to reach the summit, but on the damage caused to indigenous communities, such as the Waika, by external contact:

On the steep climb to the summit, the faces
of Waika killed by influenza
float, blue among the clouds.

The ambrosial fruit of the papaya, planted
at the borders of the maloca, couldn't save them. God

is in the clearings, not the forest. (Conn 2006: 46)

By recovering yet another aspect of travel and contact, which involves not a sense of accomplishment, but of interference and destruction caused by the presence of foreign travellers in the region, Conn recasts the meanings of success and failure in scientific expeditions. As her fictional Margaret Mee realises, her own frustrated desire does not mean much when contrasted to the violence of previous encounters in the Amazon.

Another important aspect of Conn's poems is the emphasis she gives to the fact that Mee's portrayals of nature challenge the stillness of representation, especially as they are embedded in the recognition that the region is, in fact, inhabited, very much alive, and historical. As Conn points out, "[Mee] was the first botanical artist to begin to put exuberant background details into her formal botanical paintings. These serve as a reminder that whole ecosystems give rise to such diversity [and] species richness..." (Conn 2006: 107). For Conn, Mee challenged a botanical tradition of painting flowers and plants as separated from their environments. In paintings such as *Cattleya violacea*,⁸ one of the images used on the cover of Conn's book, the flower, object of desire, is not uprooted from its context but it is still connected to the tree that hosts it and which is surrounded by a rich group of trees, deep in the forest.

To illustrate such symbiotic interconnection, Conn includes in her collection a series of ekphrastic poems that dialogue with Mee's paintings. Ekphrasis, as defined by Elizabeth B. Loizeaux (2008), is "a poem that addresses a work of art" (1). In a study of 20th century poetry and the visual arts, Loizeaux emphasises the social dynamics of ekphrastic poetry since, for the critic, it "opens the lyric into a network of social engagements within and across the boundaries of the poem" (Loizeaux 2008: 1). For Loizeaux, what she calls the "ekphrastic situation – the poet engaging the work of art and representing it to an audience" (Loizeaux 2008: 5) leads the reader to, in her words, "engage in the conversation of interpretation" (Loizeaux 2008: 6) especially because of the

⁸ A reproduction of this painting can be found at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation website, reproduced there with the permission of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew –<https://www.huntbotanical.org/exhibitions/show.php?28>

fact that the ekphrastic poem is inevitably a response to someone else's work. In such dynamics, the observing gaze is called into question, and its partiality emphasized. As Loizeaux suggests, "[l]ooking is not, never has been, ethically neutral, and ekphrasis stages relations lived under that fact" (Loizeaux 2008: 8).

It is in this context that Conn's poems can be read. One example is the poem "Cattleya violacea", which reads:

Down the trunk parade queens of the prom
in luscious violent-magenta—these femme fatales
are no one's corsage!
Swish, swish of their silk underskirts, their
perfume magnified in this decadent heat
like promises in a darkened hallway,
the whole forest watching. (Conn 2006: 68)

In Conn's ekphrastic poem, the association between the flower (*Cattleya violacea*) and the feminised body is once more re-installed, and desire for this other, feminised, space is explicitly brought to the fore through the choice of adjectives or the sensuality conferred on the flower's contours and its personified movements. However, what one also notices in Conn's act of re-reading Mee's portrayal of nature is that, in the poem, there is an emphasis not only on the desire for the land, but also on a subtle resistance to this lustful gazing, since there is no yielding of the land, no domestication. If, as Loizeaux (2008: 21) suggests, ekphrastic poetry "takes the poet [back] into history", in responding to Mee's illustration, Conn suggests, once again, that discovery, or complete possession of the other, is a lure "like promises in a darkened hallway", and in this encounter between observer and observed, the observing gaze is now returned to the observer, since "the whole forest [is] watching".

By recognizing Margaret Mee's significant contributions to her field, Conn not only recovers the history of an important artist, but also gestures towards her own project when depicting the Amazon through Mee's eyes: in Conn's poems, the traveller's representations of place (be they Mee's or her own) are never in isolation, but are informed by local history as well as by how other narratives have created and reinvented this place.

Malu de Martino's *Margaret Mee and the Moonflower*

In 2012, Malu de Martino released the documentary *Margaret Mee e a Flor da Lua*, in which Mee's last expedition to the Amazon is recovered. Cinematography is by Julia Equi and the sound track is by Arthur Barreiros. It is interesting to note that documentary, as a kind of audio-visual production, has been

associated with the real world and the sciences as a form of document capable of registering reality and recognised for its close association with technology, read here as photography (Bazin 1960). Indeed, documentaries have served ethnography and historical accounts. However, not only has the alleged immediacy of the documentary been questioned, but its aesthetics has also changed. As Michael Renov points out,

if many of the founding ambitions of non-fiction filmmaking were congruent with those of the natural or social sciences ... the work of later practitioners bears the marks of a radical shift of values associated with the emergence of second-wave feminism by the early 1970s. A new foregrounding of the political everyday life encouraged by the interrogation of identity and subjectivity and a vividly corporeal rather than intellectualized self (Renov 2004: 171).

As suggested by Renov, the contemporary documentary has not only become more subjective in terms of perspective, becoming further disconnected from its characteristic techniques, such as the Voice of God, linearity, and contextualised framings, but it has also exposed its sensorial nature, more tactile in its cinematography, in what Laura Marks (2000) has defined as “haptic visuality”. Mariana Baltar (2013) and Erly Vieira Jr (2011), among other theoreticians, point out the sensorial aspects in contemporary documentary and film. For Vieira, the spectator is invited to experience reality in its minutia in a gradual process of discovery through the stimuli offered by the sensory organs.⁹ This aesthetics based on subjectivity and tactile image can be seen as characteristic of Martino’s documentary on Mee. The film unites various interviews with friends and colleagues of Mee, botanists, illustrators, as well as photos and videos shot throughout Mee’s life and excerpts from her diaries.¹⁰

⁹ Our paraphrase from the original quote: “o corpo do espectador é convidado, sim, a experimentar o real em suas minúcias, em suas quase imperceptíveis modulações, deixando-se atravessar/afetar aos poucos pelas zonas de intensidade que migram pelos corpos e espaços filmados, num processo de gradual descoberta através dos estímulos oferecidos aos órgãos do sentidos” (Vieira Jr. 2011: 21).

¹⁰ Recent articles on the documentary call attention to Mee’s ecological activism and to her courage due to her age. See Carlos Alberto Matos’s and Joyce Paes works at (<https://criticos.com.br/?p=3638>) and (<https://cinemascope.com.br/criticas/margaret-mee-a-flor-da-lua/>), or the review published at *O Estado de São Paulo* (<https://www.estadao.com.br/sustentabilidade/flores-de-lulu/margaret-mee-e-a-flor-da-lua-e-destaque-na-mostra-internacional-de-cinema-de-sp/>). Another academic piece discusses the use of the documentary to teach young adults and youth of a prison house in Paraíba – https://www.editorarealize.com.br/editora/anais/conapesc/2016/TRABALHO_EV058_MD1_SA93_ID305_27042016084155.pdf

It also presents an overall perspective of Mee's earlier life in Britain through photos and earlier home videos in which Mee appears, interviews, and Mee's legacy as a botanic illustrator ahead of her time due to the techniques she used. In addition, Mee's journals are presented through voiceover. As Malena Barreto, a botanic illustrator interviewed in the documentary, says: "Mee drew the plants as if she were inside it" (Martino 2012). That is because Mee used to paint with vivid details, giving a tactile sense of the forest and including the context surrounding the plants.

The documentary makes use of some traditional narrative techniques, such as readings from Mee's diaries and journals, interviews and the proposal of a narrative goal, which is Mee's desire to register the moonflower before it is lost to our human eyes, as the flower not only flourishes and dies only at night, but it is also in danger due to deforestation. On the other hand, the film can also be part of an aesthetics that differs from traditional documentary due to its subjective and sensorial presentation of Mee and the Amazon Forest. As the trailer for the documentary says in voiceover: one will be able to see the Amazonian Forest as if from Mee's eyes. Indeed, right in the beginning of the documentary (Martino 2012) we are first shown Mee's illustration of a bromeliad species with voiceover from botanist and illustrator Carmen Fidalgo, who is being interviewed. As soon as the drawing is shown in a tilt movement, from bottom-up, Fidalgo's voiceover is accompanied by noises of the forest such as crickets and insects. It is as if the camera were inside the flower, in what could be seen as a haptic image. The soundtrack of birds and insects further enhances one's sense of being inside the forest. The images are supported by Fidalgo's statement, as she declares that Margarete Mee's paintings were different from anything she had seen before. At that point, the viewer sees the drawing as if they were inside the plant, a modernist way of painting botany at that time. By adopting this closeness to its subject, the camera enters the bromelia and the film enters the forest, as if we were sensorially placed in Mee's eyes.

At the beginning of the film, we see a home video of Margaret Mee's commemoration of her 79th birthday at the margins of the Rio Negro. Her elegance contrasts with the scenes of the forest: she wears a chignon, a laced Victorian blouse in royal blue, and makeup, and her voice as well as her gestures are soft. There is a cut to an extreme long shot of the Rio Negro at dawn and a voiceover by Patricia Pillar (famous Brazilian actress) reading one of Mee's letter, the voiceover accompanied by the sounds of birds and insects from the forest. The soundtrack is not only suggestive of Mee's intimate relationship with the forest but also appeals to the audience's senses.

Apart from showing this intimate encounter with the forest, Mee's aesthetic vision (and an ecological one for that matter) is reiterated in the documentary by various perceptions of the botanical illustrators and art collectors of Mee's work who are interviewed in the film, as illustrated by Simon Mayo's interview (Martino 2012). As he says, quoting Roberto Burle Marx, Mee brought the experience and magic of the Amazon by "bringing it [the plants and the Forest] to life again ... it is not just science with Margaret, it is I suppose, magic, an extra dimensional spirituality..." (Martino 2012). One possible way of approaching Mee's drawings could be through their insistence on life being lived again. It is this sensorial experience that is further clarified by the documentary when the film shows Mee's drawing in closeup. After Mayo's interview, a travelling shot that shows Margaret drawing in the Forest moves to a closeup of an illustration of a bromeliad. The filmic sequence suggests that the real and the representational become one and the same. The documentary, thus, inscribes the real bromelia with its illustration, as an experience of transcendence, from the representational to the real and vice versa. In this sense Martino meets Mee and the reader meets the forest through a sensorial experience that is foregrounded by the documentary as it re-enacts the painting of the bromeliad.

Overall, the documentary highlights many contrasts: the exuberance of the forest with scenes of a burning Amazonia; the femininity of Mee's gestures and style, and the jungle; the activist Mee and the artist; and the delicate lady versus the political and pragmatic Mee. Nonetheless, these perspectives are filtered through an aesthetics that call to our senses and sensibilities: we can feel the forest as Mee and Martino have felt it.

In terms of weaving a narrative, the documentary calls attention to its non-linear pattern. One of the final sequences of the film revisits the house in England where Mee lived as a child, reminding us of her childhood. A crane shot quickly shows the façade of the house and, as the front door opens, the camera moves inside towards the back door from which we are shown the Amazon Forest and the river in her garden, positioning us where the film began. The shot shows us no English Garden, but the Amazon River, the forest, as if they were all part of Mee's imagination and had been since she was a child. Throughout the documentary the cinematography adds to the imaginary and to the personal, subjective, view, using Mee's point of view as a window to her imagination. In this sense, Mee's soul is entangled with the forest. This is the poetic entrance or portal through which the two artists (Mee and Martino) meet.

In this documentary there is no Voice of God, a technique largely associated with a final truth or with cinema vérité. Moreover, there seems to be no

conclusion to the dichotomies between the exuberant forest and its destruction, although the audience feels and hears the forest, seeing its beauty in tactile ways. Through its open and fluid form, characteristic of contemporary documentaries, the audience hears many voices, thus understanding the ruptures and synchronicities between Mee and the Amazon Forest. This openness of the text can be associated with an aesthetics of resistance to closeness, in which reality is shown as multifaceted. Thus, the return to the symbolic: to the imagination of the child, of the artist, where everything converges, allowing so many readings, registers, perceptions, from Mee to Conn to Martino and to us, the audience. Mee's work allows for this expanded, open text, which is her love of the forest in which we are all imaginatively and collectively inscribed.

Concluding Remarks

As travelling continues to occupy the poetic imagination of many contemporary writers and artists, it is significant to perceive that the Amazon is once more re-read and re-signified as a travelled location, not only by Margaret Mee, who chose to visit the Amazon many times in an incessant quest to paint Amazonian flora, but also by Jan Conn and Malu de Martino, who re-read the forest through Mee's eyes. What is interesting to note is that, despite the differences in genre and media, the new artistic and poetic maps produced by Conn and Martino involve not only a reading of place, but also an engagement with previous representations of exploration and journeying. Such engagement, in Conn's poetry, surfaces in her attempts to respond ekphrastically to Margaret Mee's work, recreating an intimate connection between Mee's Amazonian travels and her identity as an artist while also revisiting the concept of discovery, which is deferred and recontextualised in her poetics. In Martino's documentary, the emphasis on seeing the forest through Mee's eyes leads us to resist gazing at the Amazon as an objectified space, apart from the observing subject. More than another voice silencing the forest in the name of its protection, Mee is portrayed, both in Conn's and Martino's works, as intimately connected with it. And it is in the representation of such profound encounters that we might find new ways to re-signify our future.

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