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Ecocritical Reflections on Fiction Written by Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa

Abstract: This article examines anthropocentric and ecocentric tendencies in two major works written by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller* and *The Dream of the Celt*, to identify the value of those novels in ecocritical terms. I provide this analysis in the context of recent academic dialogue which notes an apparent contradictory relationship between the presentation of abuses of Amazonian people and their environment, and the portrayal of Westernized protagonists as their saviors in fiction written by Vargas Llosa. This essay provides a solution to this paradox and other apparent contradictions in his narratives and posits that even though the anthropocentric literary discourse concerning the environment has declined throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, in part, due to the rise of the environmental movement, this type of discourse has changed in Vargas Llosa's literature, rejecting early twentieth century misconceptions of the natural world but holding onto technocentric neoliberal beliefs.

Keywords: ecocriticism, environment, Mario Vargas Llosa, Peruvian literature, *The Dream of the Celt*, *The Storyteller*

Reflexiones ecocríticas sobre ficción escrita por el premio Nobel Mario Vargas Llosa

Resumen: Este artículo examina tendencias antropocéntricas y ecocéntricas en dos novelas escritas por Mario Vargas Llosa, *El hablador* y *El sueño del celta*, para identificar el valor de esas obras en términos ecocríticos. Proporciono este análisis en el contexto de un diálogo académico reciente que observa una relación aparentemente contradictoria entre la presentación de abusos en contra de pueblos amazónicos y de su entorno natural, y la representación de protagonistas occidentalizados como sus salvadores en la narrativa escrita por Vargas Llosa. Este ensayo ofrece una solución a esta paradoja y a otras aparentes contradicciones en la ficción vargasllosiana y postula que a pesar de que el discurso literario antropocéntrico sobre el medio ambiente ha declinado a lo largo de la última parte del siglo XX, en parte, debido al auge del movimiento ambientalista, este tipo de discurso ha cambiado en la obra del premio Nobel, rechazando concepciones erróneas del mundo natural de principios del siglo XX pero aferrándose a creencias neoliberales tecnocéntricas.

Palabras clave: ecocrítica, *El hablador*, *El sueño del celta*, literatura peruana, Mario Vargas Llosa, medio ambiente

Reflexões ecócritas sobre ficção escrita pelo ganhador do prêmio Nobel Mario Vargas Llosa

Resumo: Este artigo examina as tendências antropocêntricas e ecocêntricas em duas grandes obras escritas por Mario Vargas Llosa, *O Falador* e *O Sonho do Celta*, para identificar o valor dessas obras em termos ecocríticos. Apresento esta análise no contexto de um diálogo acadêmico recente que observa uma relação aparentemente contraditória entre a apresentação de abusos do povo amazônico e seu meio ambiente e a representação de protagonistas ocidentalizados como seus salvadores na narrativa escrita por Vargas Llosa. Este ensaio fornece uma solução para esse paradoxo e outras aparentes contradições na ficção de Vargas Llosa e postula que, embora o discurso literário antropocêntrico sobre o meio ambiente tenha declinado ao longo da última parte do século XX, em parte devido ao surgimento do movimento ambientalista, esse tipo de discurso mudou nas obras de Vargas Llosa, rejeitando os equívocos do início do século XX sobre o mundo natural, mas se apegando a crenças neoliberais tecnocêntricas.

Palavras-chave: ecocrítica, literatura peruana, Mario Vargas Llosa, meio ambiente, *Falador*, *O Sonho do Celta*

“In the long term, the economy and the environment are the same thing. If it is unenvironmental, it is uneconomical. That is the rule of nature.”

—Mollie Beattie 43

According to the Swedish Academy, the selection of Vargas Llosa as 2010 Nobel Prize winner was based on “his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual’s resistance, revolt, and defeat.”¹ Since then, his writings continue to be read by many; some of them, however, provoke much controversy due to the apparent conflict between his fictional work that has strong environmental themes and his extraliterary discourse. As scholar Victoria Saramago points out, part of this conflict centers on “his view of Indigenous peoples and, at times, their connections to environmental struggles” and also on the fact that “a consideration of his longer history of theorization on literature and fiction, as well as his portrayals of the Amazon, may prove instrumental in elucidating the puzzling place he has occupied for decades.”² These views of Indigenous peoples and of their environments as portrayed in two of Vargas Llosa’s Amazonian novels, *The Storyteller* (1989) and *The Dream of the Celt* (2012), are precisely what this essay examines. Furthermore, this article identifies the value of *The Storyteller* and *The Dream of the Celt* in ecocritical terms and analyzes the cartography of structures of power and imagery portrayed in both novels while focusing on the constant tension between economic growth and the preservation of the environment. These two novels were selected for this type of ecocritical reading because of the variety of environmentally related themes found in them and for the apparent contradictory discourse concerning the environment that they provide. The first pages of this article provide a presentation of relevant criticism of *The Storyteller* and *The Dream of the Celt* and examines the ecotheory that I employ, while the second portion of the essay grants solutions to apparent contradictions noted in recent academic dialogue concerning Vargas Llosa’s literary works. This second portion also brings to light the perspectives and projects concerning the environment that both novels evidence.

1 While examining *The Dream of the Celt* and the designation of Vargas Llosa as Nobel Prize winner, Benjamin Prado asserts that “los miembros del jurado podrán presumir triple, por haber galardonado a un creador genial, por haberlo hecho justo cuando coronaba otro de los ochomiles de su carrera y porque este libro [*El sueño del Celta*], como los mejores suyos o de cualquier maestro, tiene la virtud de simbolizar más de lo que cuenta.” Benjamin Prado, “El nuevo ojo mil de Vargas Llosa,” *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos*, n° 725 (2010): 7.

2 Victoria Saramago, *Fictional Environments, Volume 37: mimesis, deforestation, and development in Latin America* (Northwestern UP, 2021), 179-180.

Examining *The Storyteller*, a novel that centers primarily on the topic of economic growth and the environment, scholar Emil Volek, a recognized authority on Latin American literature, proposes that Vargas Llosa develops a literary form that expresses the voice of the Indigenous.³ Volek further posits that using colloquialisms of the Peruvian Amazon region is part of this literary form.⁴ That novel raises a strong ideological debate which Volek denotes as a confrontation between modernity and pre-modern alternatives. It is precisely this confrontation that this article examines.⁵

3 Concerning *The Storyteller*, theorist Keith Booker suggests that the novel contains postmodernist questioning of the myth of progress and highlights the question of “whether change is necessarily good and whether modern technological know-how is necessarily superior to ancient wisdom.” Keith Booker, *Vargas Llosa Among the Postmodernists* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 126. In Peru, postmodernism is associated with neoliberalism, an ideological movement that is often identified with Mario Vargas Llosa; concerning this association, scholar Lynn Walford affirms that “it is no accident that elements of what we are calling the postmodern narrative have been disseminated . . . by neoliberals and disenchanting leftists seduced by anarcho-capitalism.” Lynn M. Walford, *A Matter of Life and Death: José María Arguedas, Mario Vargas Llosa, and the Postmodern Condition*, Doctoral dissertation, (Louisiana State University, 2000), 7. Along with Walford, Raymond L. Williams, a scholar of Latin American studies, also examined postmodern characteristics in the writings of the Peruvian Nobel laureate; for more on his study on Vargas Llosa’s postmodern literary traits, see Raymond L. Williams, “Los niveles de la realidad, la función de lo racional y los demonios: *El hablador* y *Lituma en los Andes*,” *Explicación de textos literarios*, n°25 (1996-1997): 151; *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America: Politics, Culture, and the Crisis of Truth* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 17-18, 59-61; *The Twentieth-Century Spanish American Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003) 187. To discuss neoliberalism, this article uses the following definition: “The philosophical view that a society’s political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist, but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and a modest welfare state.” Kevin Vallier, “Neoliberalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, (Summer 2021), 1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/neoliberalism/>.

4 In addition to Volek, academic John McGuire has also examined Vargas Llosa’s fiction, namely *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1985), *The Storyteller* (1989), and *Death in the Andes* (1996), and finds “not only a ‘rereading of the past’ [in these novels] but also a constant ‘undermining and underlining’ of its representation through provisionality and ‘parodic self-reflexivity,’” all of which are characteristics of the narrative form of historiographic metafiction and the postmodern novel. John W. McGuire, “The Postmodern Turn in Vargas Llosa: *Historia de Mayta*, *El hablador*, *Lituma en los Andes*,” Doctoral dissertation, (University of California, 2000), vi & vii. Although this essay does not focus on postmodern tendencies in Vargas Llosa’s fiction, it does take into consideration this prior research. For more on historiographic metafiction, a concept coined by Canadian Scholar Linda Hutcheon, see “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History,” in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Patrick O’Donnell and Robert Con Davis, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3; *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 40; and Ihab Hassan, “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” in *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Linda Hutcheon and Joseph Natoli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 280-1.

5 Scholar Emil Volek proposes the following concerning the ideology behind *The Storyteller*: “El debate ideológico se centra en la confrontación de la modernidad y las alternativas pre-modernas. El viejo drama del enfrentamiento entre la ‘civilización’ y la ‘barbarie’ se vuelve a (re)presentar en sus nuevos avatares.” Emil Volek, “*El hablador* de Vargas Llosa. Del realismo mágico a la postmodernidad,” *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos*, n° 509 (1992): 100. Examining this ideology and various literary representations of current practices and perspectives concerning the environment and individuals portrayed in *The Storyteller* and *The Dream of the Celt*, this article presents that the conflict of ideas concerning what is an ideal relationship between humans and their natural environment in the works studied, goes beyond traditionally defined perspectives and, in *The Storyteller*, moves to internal aspects within the work that pose to present divergent views without being able to provide a convincing answer to either position, leaving this internal conflict as a portrayal of the continual academic dialogue.

Upon closer examination, *The Storyteller* reveals an unreliable narrator. At the end of the fabula, Vargas Llosa exposes that the Machiguenga storyteller and an apparent second narrator named Saul Murata are the same character, thus relegating the seemingly Indigenous voice that narrates most of the work to the status of the unreliable since it does not represent the voice of a true Machiguenga storyteller. As a result, my analysis considers the discourse of the narrator-protagonist, the context in which such discourse is presented, and the type of narrator the work reveals. Furthermore, as evidenced by Peruvian scholar José Miguel Oviedo, most of the narrative work written by Vargas Llosa has been “una elaboración imaginaria de los datos de su memoria, preferentemente de sus recuerdos de adolescencia y primera juventud”.⁶ This type of elaboration is evident in the way Vargas Llosa employs the Machiguenga oral tradition and testimonies as sources to shape the voice of the Constitutive Other in *The Storyteller*, while using Saul Murata as the character who becomes the Other, one who is portrayed as the voice of Indigenous discourse but often attempts to change Machiguenga culture.⁷ According to literary scholar Lucía Sá, Mascarita actively tries “to make changes in the Machiguenga culture by questioning, for instance, their custom of killing the babies with physical deformities right after birth.”⁸ Since the novel manifests attempts to accomplish a transformation in an Indigenous culture through the voice of Mascarita, this essay infers that the discourse that he defends in the text belongs predominantly to Western thought and will be evaluated as such, and not as a discourse of the Other nor as the voice of the Indigenous.

In an analysis of *The Storyteller*, *The Dream of the Celt*, and other novels by Vargas Llosa that form part of his Amazonian fiction, scholar Charlotte Rogers points out that these narratives “retain a contradictory relationship to Western culture: while they decry its abuses of Amazonian peoples, they also portray Westernized protagonists as their saviors.”⁹ This seemingly contradictory representation has been examined by Rogers, scholar David Wiseman, and other academics who study Vargas Llosa’s political literary views; nonetheless, as recognized Latin Americanist Sara Castro-Klarén notes, “even though so much has been said and repeated about Vargas Llosa’s

6 José M. Oviedo, *Mario Vargas Llosa: la invención de una realidad* (Seix Barral, 1982), 76.

7 Sá, Lúcia. “Perverse Tribute: Mario Vargas Llosa’s El hablador and its Machiguenga Sources.” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 4, n° 2 (1998): (Sá 150-154 & 156).

8 Sá, “Perverse Tribute,” 157.

9 Charlotte Rogers, “Mario Vargas Llosa and the novela de la selva,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 93, n° 6 (2016): 1057.

politics we still do not have a good idea of how he thinks, in novels, on the question of power as Foucault and other theorists have reconceptualized the problem.”¹⁰ Concerning the relationship between Western culture and its surrounding natural environment in the context of the question of power, Poststructuralist Michel Foucault states the following in his foundational work, *The Order of Things*: “[Man] has a right to a development quite as positive as that of beings and things, one no less autonomous – and perhaps even more fundamental: is it not a historicity proper to man, one described in the very depths of his being, that enables him to adapt himself like any living being, and to evolve like any living being, that enables him to invent forms of production....”¹¹

In the *The Order of Things*, Foucault expresses that after the 19th century shifts in scientific paradigms, such as the universal acceptance of Darwinism, the human right to evolutionary development is as autonomous as the right of any other species in the world. Within the context of his discourse, Foucault shows an implicit value for the development of other species, and of living beings in general, consistent with ecocentric perspectives.¹² Using ecocritical theory that focuses on anthropocentric and biocentric literary tendencies, the following section provides an examination of the relationship between humans and their environment as represented in select works by Vargas Llosa to identify the type of environmental tendencies that these works evidence.

10 Sara Castro-Klarén, “Mario Vargas Llosa: A Retrospective Look,” *MLN* 131, n° 2 (2016): 548. Latin Americanist David Wiseman also explores the political transformation in the Nobel Laureate’s literary political discourse and concludes that “Vargas Llosa’s theories on literature have completed a complicated literary cycle from Sartre’s original declarations on the revolutionary potential of literature to his own disillusionments with literary impotency to a new position for his writing based upon the post-colonial theories that he formerly denounced during the Algerian War for Independence.” David P. Wiseman, “Mario Vargas Llosa and the Politics of Literature,” Doctoral dissertation, (Vanderbilt University, 2010), 231. Also examining Vargas Llosa’s novels, academic Cecilia Policsek finds that his narratives are often considered a referent of Latin America to European readers. Cecilia Policsek, “El forjamiento de ‘lo latinoamericano’ en moldes editoriales: sobre el caso rumano en el período 2004–2015,” *Neophilologus* 103 (2019): 95.

11 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) 369.

12 The modern environmental movement has as part of its foundations the Philosophy of Deep Ecology which originated mainly by American Sociologist Bill Devall, Norwegian Philosopher Arne Naess, and American Philosopher George Sessions. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 97-108. This philosophy is characterized by eight basic principles. The first of these principles states that “the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.” Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985), 70. My essay exposes an agreement between Foucault’s appreciation for the respect of all living things and a key principle of the philosophy of deep ecology while examining environmental tendencies in Vargas Llosa’s works.

In *The Storyteller*, part of Mascarita's discourse is the rejection of first wave conservationist mentality; this mentality defines the environment as every space that remains in its natural or non-urbanized condition. Furthermore, concerning the distinction between first and second wave mentalities, Harvard environmentalist Lawrence Buell notes that "significant divisions separate first-wave projects to reconnect humans with the natural world from second-wave skepticism."¹³ Thus, first wave mentality presents a return to a pre-urban past as the ideal as opposed to second wave mentalities which portray how urban and rural spaces are intrinsically interconnected within the current globalized reality. In what follows, I examine whether the works analyzed suggest a reconnection with the natural environment as the ideal or if the works support a different type of project.

In *The Storyteller*, during a dialogue with the character named Vargas Llosa, the main character Mascarita reveals that humans destroyed the harmony between humanity and the environment in an irreparable manner: "The relationship between man and Nature, for instance. Man and the trees, the birds, the rivers, the earth, the sky. Man and God, as well. We don't even know what the harmony that exists between man and those things can be, since we've shattered it forever."¹⁴ Although the text reveals how Machiguenga people co-exist with the natural world, the work nonetheless rejects first-wave mentality by explicitly declaring the impossibility of returning to an idealized version of the past, where Indigenous relationships to nature are romanticized. This essay suggests, therefore, that Mascarita's discourse rejects a return to a pre-urban past as the ideal; nevertheless, *The Storyteller* goes beyond a simple rejection. The project of the work can be fully appreciated by examining the actions and voice of the character named Vargas Llosa. In the plot, when Mascarita becomes a Machiguenga storyteller, the character that bears the name of the novelist criticizes this conversion and questions Mascarita's intention.

The character Vargas Llosa's criticism of Mascarita's conversion is important because it manifests a rejection to returning to a pre-urban past, a return that is represented by the conversion of Mascarita. This conversion is ironical because it goes against Mascarita's own discourse, and this criticism that the character Vargas Llosa provides holds even greater relevance because it can be interpreted to be consistent with the intent of the novel since the

13 Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism*, 23.

14 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, translated by Helen Lane (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 100.

character that bears the name of the author is the omniscient narrator in the text. Some of the characteristics of that character that elevate him to the position of omniscient narrator are visible in the following quote:

From the first journey to Quillabamba, where the farmer who was related to his mother lived, Mascarita encountered a world that intrigued and attracted him. What must in the beginning have been a feeling of intellectual curiosity and sympathy for the customs and conditions of life of the Machiguengas became, with time, as he got to know them better, learned their language, studied their history, and began to share their existence for longer and longer periods, a conversion, in both the cultural and the religious meaning of the word, an identification with their ways and their traditions, in which, for reasons I can intuit but not entirely understand, Saúl found spiritual sustenance, an incentive and a justification for his life, a commitment that he had not found in those other Peruvian tribes--Jewish, Christian, Marxist, etc.--among which he had lived.¹⁵

In this passage, the character Vargas Llosa describes Saul's thoughts and the intention that carries him to a progressive conversion into Machiguenga storyteller. Because only an omniscient narrator can delve into the reasoning of a character and provide motives for decisions made by this character, I propose that the character Vargas Llosa is the omniscient narrator of the novel; as such, that character is a primary narrator capable of influencing the reader while his discourse holds the intention or dominant perspective of the book. Upon analyzing the discourse of the character Vargas Llosa and thus of the work itself, the cautious reader encounters a series of rhetorical questions that portrays the conflict between the preservation of natural habitats and financial progress, between the preservation of the Amazonian environment and its maximum exploitation for the economic benefit of the majority of Peruvians. At the same time, the character that bears the name of the Nobel laureate states the project of the text: the exploitation of the "natural resources" -- a term used by the anthropocentric view concerning the natural world -- in particular the exploitation of "the agricultural, cattle-raising, and commercial potential of the [Peruvian Amazon] region."¹⁶ In the project that the text delineates, *The Storyteller* does not offer great significance to the fact that the overexploitation of the Amazonian region would alter the lifestyles and beliefs of Aboriginal people. In other words, the text gives

15 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 241.

16 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 21.

Peruvian Indigenous people only one alternative: assimilation into Western culture and of urban lifestyles. As scholar Misha Kokotovic points out, for Vargas Llosa Indigenous cultures are “a ‘primitive’ obstacle to the full realization of his Western model of modernity. Vargas Llosa sets up a false dichotomy by opposing Western modernization to the straw man of cultural ‘preservation,’ by which he means literally freezing ‘primitive’ indigenous cultures in time.”¹⁷ This is the portrayal of Indigenous people in *The Storyteller*, but also a portrayal of dominion and neoliberal exploitation that is evidenced in the project of the text and not the apparent environmental wisdom of the latter Mascarita who becomes Machiguenga storyteller and adopts a life of utopian coexistence with the environment.¹⁸

As *The Storyteller* (1989) addresses the theme of exploitation of the Amazon region, this theme is also present in other novels written by Vargas Llosa. From them, the following pages examine representations of the environment and Indigenous populations in *The Dream of the Celt* (2012). Concurrently, this article studies this more recent novel because of its focus on the abuses that Indigenous people and their environment suffer in the nations of Congo, Peru, and Ireland. The descriptions of these abuses often include grotesque imagery of tortured and mutilated bodies such as in the following description of killing Indigenous individuals and mutilating their bodies for sport:

“Each time they fire they cut off the hand or penis of the man they shot,” the captain explained. “To confirm that bullets are not being wasted on hunting. . . .” “[But] these shits found a way to get around the decree. Can you guess how?”

“I have no idea,” said Roger.

“Very simple. By cutting off the hands and penises of the living to make us think they’ve fired at people when they’ve shot monkeys, snakes, and the other

17 Misha Kokotovic, “Mario Vargas Llosa Writes Of(f) the Native: Modernity and Cultural Heterogeneity in Peru,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 25, n° 3 (2001), 449.

18 Environmentalist Nicols Fox provides the following definition for environmental wisdom in the context of deep ecology philosophy: “Within the deep ecology philosophy, human needs no longer take priority but are placed in the context of the needs of the planet. Luddite in spirit, deep ecology questions the assumptions and domination of the technological culture; defends low-tech cultures against the imposition of these technologies; and encourages soft and appropriate technologies that require fewer resources and less energy and that produce less environmental, social, and cultural damage.” Nicholas Fox, *Against the Machine: The Hidden Luddite Tradition in Literature, Art, and Individual Lives* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002), 218. For further information concerning environmental wisdom, see *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. In this book, Buell examines the European, North American, Caribbean, Asian, and African literary masterpieces; see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-6. Non-Caribbean works are, however, excluded in this analysis providing therefore a gap that this analysis attempts to fill as part of the greater goal of the development of a global environmental conscience.

filth they eat. Do you understand now why all those poor devils are there in the hospital without hands and pricks?”¹⁹

The Dream of the Celt describes the evils of colonization using irony which is omnipresent throughout the text. Although the description of the abuses of Indigenous people and their environment is more grotesque and detailed in that novel, and although this description holds a predominant discourse of condemnation of such abuse, a discourse not found in *The Storyteller*, *The Dream of the Celt* still presents a project that is like the one in *The Storyteller* and that the following passage explains:

That business about “civilization” had a good deal of truth in it. Weren’t the natives’ living conditions atrocious? Didn’t their levels of hygiene, their superstitions, their ignorance of the most basic notions of health mean they died like flies? Wasn’t their life of mere survival tragic? Europe had a great deal to offer to bring them out of primitivism. So they would end certain barbaric customs, the sacrifice of children and the sick in so many communities, for example, the wars in which they killed one another, slavery, and cannibalism, still practiced in some places.²⁰

In this passage, as well as in others, *The Dream of the Celt* provides an anthropocentric rationalization for the cultural assimilation of native peoples, which I suggest is a project in the text, one that is consistent with Vargas Llosa’s well-known neoliberal extraliterary discourse.

Along with *The Dream of the Celt*, *The Storyteller* criticizes a return to a pre-urban past as the ideal, thus manifesting a characteristic of second wave environmental mentality. The work as a whole, however, does not manifest this type of mentality. While first wave environmental mentality highlights the value of rural areas, second wave mentality attributes equal importance to both the urban and rural spaces. Second wave mentality recognizes that rural and urban spaces are inextricably linked; therefore, it is necessary to value both spaces equally.²¹ The project that *The Storyteller* provides does not value rural areas except for its utility for urban development. Instead of supporting sustainable development that is in line with the need not to worsen the current

19 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt*, translated by Edith Grossman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 64.

20 Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt*, 44.

21 Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism*, 22.

global environmental dilemma, that novel supports a plan that is consistent with neoliberal anthropocentric practices that have dominated international politics for most of the twentieth century, ignoring the environmental crisis.²²

The project contained in *The Storyteller* is consistent with neoliberal anthropocentric perspectives portraying the natural world as if it were only a set of resources or supplies that must be exploited regardless of the somber consequences that this type of exploitation carries, such as the environmental destruction that would occur if much of the Amazonian jungle was transformed into areas of “agriculture, cattle-raising, and commercial potential of the [Peruvian Amazon] region” as proposed by in *The Storyteller*.²³ Concurrently, that novel cannot be considered a work of second wave mentality due to the lack of concern that it portrays for the future of Indigenous communities. The book only references that this project would “change the way of life and the beliefs” of Indigenous communities (Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller* 21) but then presents the need for a gradual acculturation that Indigenous populations would suffer to assimilate to Western culture, a process of cultural and geographical deterritorialization that these populations must endure according to the novel. This lack of consideration for the future of Indigenous people is apparent in the following response that the character Vargas Llosa gives to the discourse of Mascarita:

Do our cars, guns, planes, and Coca-Colas give us the right to exterminate them because they don't have such things? Or do you believe in “civilizing the savages,” pal? How? By making soldiers of them? By putting them to work on the farms as slaves to Creoles like Fidel Pereira? By forcing them to change their language, their religion, and their customs, the way the missionaries are trying to do? What's to be gained by that? Being able to exploit them more easily, that's all. Making them zombies and caricatures of men, like those semi-aculturated Indians you see in Lima.²⁴

By using a second series of rhetorical questions through the voice of Mascarita, the author declares the ethical problem that the project of the work

22 Vargas Llosa's neoliberal political affiliation is well known, as Saramago points out, “Vargas Llosa, notably, was not a reclusive writer but one of the most engaged public intellectuals Latin America has seen in the past half century. He expressed his neoliberal positions ardently in numerous essays, newspaper articles, and talks.” Victoria Saramago, *Fictional Environments, Volume 37: mimesis, deforestation, and development in Latin America* (Northwestern UP, 2021), 150.

23 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 21.

24 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 26.

gives in relation to the cultural deterritorialization of Indigenous populations and the resulting semi-adaptation that occurs when they are forced to leave their natural habitat and relocate to Peruvian cities.

Although the character Vargas Llosa does not directly respond to the question posed in the text concerning the cultural deterritorialization of Indigenous people, he responds in an indirect way giving little significance to the negative aspects related to the proposed displacement as presented in the following response: “A zombie? A caricature? Would it have been better for him to have stayed in his Andean village, wearing a wool cap with earflaps, leather sandals, and a poncho, never learning Spanish? I didn’t know, and I still don’t.”²⁵ This is the type of response that *The Storyteller* provides concerning the social injustices that Indigenous populations suffer when they are forced to immigrate to the cities, an ambiguous response that only creates doubt about the benefits that they gain with their migration to the cities. Nonetheless, the text presents the project of exploitation of the Amazon along with the resulting geographical deterritorialization of its populations, which leaves the project without any mention of a realistic plan that would focus on the future well-being of the native populations, a different plan than their compulsory acculturation and assimilation into Western society.

Some of the Peruvian Nobel laureate’s literary perspectives reject the utopian message of environmental reconnection; however, by rejecting this message, there are some specific ecocentric beliefs that are also rejected. In *The Storyteller*, Mascarita presents a position that aims for a low environmental impact in the following manner: “The only way to respect them is not to go near them. Not touch them. Our culture is too strong, too aggressive. It devours everything it touches. They must be left alone. Haven’t they amply demonstrated that they have the right to go on being what they are?”²⁶ The construct of culture used in this passage could be understood in the discourse of Vargas Llosa as follows: “cultura siempre significó una suma de factores y disciplinas que, según amplio consenso social, la constituían y ella implicaba: la reivindicación de un patrimonio de ideas, valores y obras de arte, de unos conocimientos históricos, religiosos, filosóficos y científicos en constante evolución y el fomento de la exploración de nuevas formas artísticas y literarias y de la investigación en todos los campos del saber.”²⁷ The character Vargas

25 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 27.

26 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 98-9.

27 Mario Vargas Llosa, “Breve discurso sobre la cultura,” *Letras Libres* 139 (2010): 48.

Llosa does not respond to the reasons and proposals put forth by Mascarita in this passage; instead, the narrative continues to unfold providing only respect for this position. Conversely, at the end of the text, the character that bears the name of the novelist scorns Mascarita's position and proposal by ridiculing his conversion to Machiguenga storyteller.

In presenting the atrocities that occur with the exploitation of the environment and natives while still proposing such abuse as the ideal, but not including an alternative proposal that would consider the future and well-being of Indigenous populations as well as a sustainable utilization of areas of the Amazon, both *The Storyteller* and *The Dream of the Celt* provide neoliberal anthropocentric projects of exploitation of living beings that outline the environmental and social problems of the Peruvian Amazon region, but paradoxically, suggest the continuity of this practice as necessary. Other beliefs that are rejected by the text through the rejection of Mascarita's discourse are those related to reducing the impact that human beings have on their natural environment as well as the conception of man as one more element in the complex mechanism in which the survival of human and non-human beings in general can only be achieved when human beings learn to live respectfully with the rest of the natural world. In the text, the Machiguenga populations achieve this ideal of living by constantly moving from place to place thus limiting the impact on their environment.

Mascarita's discourse emphasizes a lifestyle of relinquishment as seen in the following passage: "So as to live walking, they had to travel light, stripping themselves of everything that was theirs. Dwelling, animals, seed, the abundance of all round them. . . . They kept what was essential and started walking" (Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller* 39). In its context, the "they" in this passage are the Machiguenga portraying the lifestyle of deprivation of material goods as well as of sedentary desires that often produce a harmful impact on the environment. The paradox of *The Storyteller* consists, therefore, in the constant negative description that Mascarita's discourse provides throughout the text of the exploitation of natural spaces, only to have that discourse rejected by the text itself toward the end of the fabula by unraveling that Mascarita is not a true Machiguenga storyteller but rather a university student who portrays himself as an Indigenous person. The novel

also rejects Mascarita's views by the textual mocking of his conversion into a Machiguenga storyteller.²⁸

Following an ecocritical tradition and having explored how seemingly environmental projects and ecosophies are portrayed in the works studied, this essay concludes that the texts studied evidence ecocentric perspectives that are first outlined in the texts only to then be rejected to provide proposals that are more consistent with anthropocentric views concerning the natural world rather than manifesting ecocentrism. In *The Storyteller*, this analysis finds a project of policies that attempt to assimilate Peruvian Indigenous culture into Western society and identifies that Mascarita's discourse belongs predominantly to Western thought and does not represent the voice of the Constitutive Other. Although the discourse portrayed by the supposed Machiguenga storyteller of the text is pro-indigenous, that portrayal does not grant voice to the Indigenous populations, keeping these populations without representation throughout the work.

Both texts reject a return to a pre-urban past as the ideal. While *The Storyteller* praises how Machiguenga people co-exist with the natural world, Mascarita's discourse rejects a return to a pre-urban past, thus rejecting first wave mentality. The project of the book, however, goes beyond a simple rejection; it focuses on the exploitation of the Peruvian Amazon region under the pretext of progress, a non-sustainable exploitation that would transform the Amazon region into "agricultural, cattle-raising, and commercial" areas.²⁹ This analysis suggests that the discourse of the character Vargas Llosa is one that holds the intention of the text and not Mascarita's proposal since the

28 While this essay focuses on diverging perspectives toward the environment, literary critic Eloy Urroz examines Vargas Llosa's political transition from Marxism into neoliberalism, a transition that resembles the discourses portrayed in *The Storyteller* since in this novel the localist pro-Indigenous discourse of ideal coexistence with the environment and of a life of relinquishment that derives from the natural world only what is necessary is replaced by the predominant anthropocentric perspective that proposes the exploitation and transformation of natural spaces for economic development and the cultural assimilation of natives as a must for their social inclusion and progress. Examining Vargas Llosa's transition from Marxism to neoliberalism, Urroz focuses on the internal conflict that the novelist had during the seventies and eighties with the ideals of economic equality and individual freedom; Urroz presents this conflict in the following manner: "No puede el Estado, bajo el ardid de imponer la felicidad a los individuos, quitarles su libertad. Esa nunca ha sido su tarea. Acaso sea su deber tan solo lograr una 'racionalización de la sociedad,' una 'planificación con miras a la libertad.' Todo lo anterior, supongo, lo entendió Vargas Llosa profundamente hacia 1980, si no es que antes." Eloy Urroz, "Karl Popper y Mario Vargas Llosa: ¿igualdad o libertad?" *Revista de la Universidad de México* 88 (2011): 40. "En otras palabras, Vargas Llosa sufre, primero, un cambio paulatino, y luego, a mediados de los setenta, un cambio mucho más drástico y definitivo." Urroz, "Karl Popper y Mario Vargas Llosa," 33. Urroz poses that it is Vargas Llosa's defense of individual freedom that compelled him to lean toward neoliberalism by 1980. In correlation with Urroz's argument, this essay also finds a change in Vargas Llosa's perspectives toward the environment during and around the same approximate date.

29 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 21.

character Vargas Llosa is the omniscient narrator-protagonist of the work; consequently, the project that this character supports is the project of the book.

Concurrently, the textual intent expressed in *The Dream of the Celt* through the voice of its main character Roger Casemant reveals a neoliberal anthropocentric project like the one found in *The Storyteller* in its conceptualization of the environment as resources and in its defense of the cultural assimilation of natives with the exception that *The Dream of the Celt* emphasizes the importance of not abusing natives as presented in the following quote: “Amazonia is a great emporium of resources, no doubt,” Roger agreed, without becoming agitated. “Nothing more just than that Peru should take advantage of it. But not by abusing the natives, or hunting them down like animals, or forcing them to work as slaves. Rather, by incorporating them into civilization by means of schools, hospitals, and churches.”³⁰ Abuse of power is portrayed throughout *The Dream of the Celt*. In fact, the work is a continuation of the anthropocentric proposal of *The Storyteller* with the exception that in *The Dream*, a stronger ecological consciousness and resolve to denounce abuse is ubiquitously evident in the text.

This analysis has thus highlighted that in presenting the atrocities that the overexploitation of the environment produces while at the same time proposing the exploitation and transformation of the environment as the ideal without including an alternative proposal that would respect the well-being of Indigenous populations in their natural habitat and a sustainable utilization of natural areas, both novels portray anthropocentric projects of exploitation of the environment. What is surprising about the environmentalism of Vargas Llosa in these two novels is that while they outline environmental and social problems, these texts, paradoxically, propose the continuity of this exploitation as necessary. In the Latin American context, this type of pseudo-environmentalism is consistent with neoliberal anthropocentric perspectives that are part of Vargas Llosa’s extraliterary discourse.³¹

Apart from presenting an emphasis on utopian lifestyle in ecological terms, a lifestyle reached by the Machiguenga in the case of *The Storyteller*,

30 Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt*, 162.

31 Concerning the imagery of exploitation in *The Storyteller*, academic Doris Sommer highlights that the novel proposes “to sacrifice the Indian cultures, since they interfere with modernity’s fight against hunger and need” and that “Vargas Llosa exercises his own freedom by making authoritative, enlightened, and despotic choices for others; he tends to speak for them in general.” Doris Sommer, “About-Face: The Talker Turns,” *boundary 2* 23, n° 1 (1996), 126-127.

the discourse of the storyteller in the novel highlights an ecosophy based on an ideal coexistence with the environment and on a life of relinquishment that derives from the natural world only what is necessary for survival. With these ecocentric concepts presented in Mascarita's proposal, the discourse of the character Vargas Llosa attempts to fit Mascarita's proposition within the parameters of a localist, subjective, and outdated perspective.

In conclusion, the predominant discourse of the novels, instead of providing an environmental perspective, proposes a greater exploitation of "the agricultural, cattle-raising, and commercial" potential of the Peruvian Amazon region.³² The paradox consists, therefore, in the constant negative descriptions of exploitative practices in the text, only to have the text itself reject ecocentric discourse and discredit pro-Indigenous voices at the end of the narrative. This paradox can be understood as the "I did not know, and I still don't"³³ that the character Vargas Llosa states in the present tense in *The Storyteller*; but in the past tense in *The Dream of the Celt*: "It was pointless to ask whether colonization was good or bad, whether, if left to their fate, the Congolese would have been better off without Europeans."³⁴ These parallel quotes of doubt can be interpreted as if during the seventies and early eighties, when *The Storyteller* was written, the novelist suffered this doubt or internal conflict; but as presented in this analysis, he ended up leaning toward the anthropocentric view of the natural world. Understanding these parallel quotes and the environmental paradox in these texts enables the readers to contextualize the novels, not as pro-Indigenous narratives nor as postcolonial literary discourse as may appear to be, but rather as neoliberal anthropocentric narratives that while vividly portraying exploitative practices also affirm and display an apology of several of these same practices.

32 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 21.

33 Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, 27.

34 Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt*, 44-45.

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