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1

The poetic work of José Antonio Mazzotti in the USA: *Declinaciones latinas* and *Las flores del Mall*

Eva Valero Juan
Universidad de Alicante

Abstract: In José Antonio Mazzotti's poetry, it is of special relevance to study the impact of his exile to the United States since 1988, the year in which this distinguished Peruvian-American writer began a new life journey marked by displacement. Such impact is especially visible in his collections of poems *Declinaciones Latinas* [Latin Declensions] (1999) and *Las flores del Mall* [The Flowers of the Mall] (2009). Regarding the first one, this study focuses on the perspective with which it transmits deterritorialization, the reflection on Peru and its destinies carried out from a distance; a perspective in which hybridity occurs in the decentring of the "migrant subject" (Cornejo Polar, 1996). The study analyzes Baroque, Gongorean, Sorjuanesque, and Renaissance keys, as well as mythological, colonial and contemporary references. It examines *Las flores del Mall* under the desacralizing and critical vision of the United States, selecting some poems and fragments which exemplify the different objectives of criticism, and analyzing the mechanisms for their poeticization. This work highlights the relevance of Mazzotti's poetry in the panorama of Latin American migrant writing of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and concludes with a detailed list of translations of his poems into English.

Keywords: José Antonio Mazzotti, exile, cultural hybridity, *Declinaciones latinas*, *Las flores del Mall*

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1. Introduction¹

The paths of the Peruvian exile, which took place since the bloodiest years of political violence in Peru during the 1980's, expanded until the end of the 20th century. These paths were both wide, due to the large number of displaced citizens; and diverse, due to the many destinations in which the exile has materialized. Among the displaced groups, many writers can be found who have made this experience the subject of their literature, putting together what has been named 'exile fictions'. Within the wide framework of this theme, related to hybridization processes, whether cultural or idiomatic, experienced in written literature by Hispanic authors who emigrated to the USA or were born there, I propose an approach to the figure and poetic work of José Antonio Mazzotti, and specifically, to two of his collections of poems: *Declinaciones latinas* and *Las flores del Mall*, written after his exile to the USA in 1988; the first published in 1999 and the second, a decade later, in 2009.

3

To begin this analysis, let us depart from the location of the author within the following framework: Mazzotti belongs to the so-called "generación de los 80" (80s generation) in Peruvian poetry (he began his career as a poet with the foundation of the group called "*Tres tristes tigres*"). This generation succeeded the generation of colloquial poetry of the 1960s (the so-called 1968 generation) from which it draws inspiration and which it reworks, on the basis of the disillusionment and disappointment of political failure. The succession of collections of poems that begin in the 1980s, specifically from *Poemas no recogidos en libro* (1981), has resulted in the creation of a verbal dimension which has been synthesized to perfection by Luis Fernando Chueca: "Intertextual vocation, a similar and complex polyphony, a manifest erudition in cultural and poetic references, both classical and

¹ A shorter version of this article appeared in the journal *Ínsula*, n. 885 (Spain, September 2020), pp. 29-33. This essay substantially expands the arguments and examples presented there with the analysis of new poems by Mazzotti.

contemporary, a close critical approach to the surroundings, a similar deconstructive vocation of stories solidly set in the imagination (or in a certain) collective imagination”* (Chueca, 2009, n.p.). The metaphysical theme appears already in this collection of poems which will be further developed in the following book: *Fierro curvo (órbita poética)* (1985), as will the impossibility of love, in this book and the next, *Castillo de popa*, published in 1988, the year in which Mazzotti moves to the USA to work on a MA degree at the University of Pittsburgh and then obtain his PhD at Princeton University with a thesis on his major topic: Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. We are before a writer born in Peru and who migrated to the USA at the age of twenty-seven, in whose cited works, a process of cultural hybridization takes place, a poetic expression of the feeling of migration is developed, and a view of the sheltering country is offered together with a reflection on Peru from a distance; all expressed in Spanish, although English is present in some of the poems, via quotes from other authors or in some of his own interspersed verses.

4

Before approaching poetic content, it is necessary to introduce perfunctorily a series of thoughts, categories and concepts with which explanations have been sought from Peru of the migration phenomenon and its consequences in the derived literary processes; conceptualizations, which have also been fundamental in the configuration of Mazzotti’s critical and cultural discourse as a literary theorist and critic and which are present in his poetic work.

In 1996, eight years after Mazzotti’s departure, the critic Antonio Cornejo Polar, who had also emigrated to the USA, published an article which is fundamental for this topic, “Una heterogeneidad no dialéctica: sujeto y discurso migrantes en el Perú moderno” [A Non-dialectical Heterogeneity: Migrant Subject and Discourse in Modern Peru]. Having the migrant peasant as the focus of reflection and his/her

* Editors’ note: All the English translations of the citations and poems are provided by the author of the study, unless indicated otherwise. The originals can be found in the Spanish version (089-01/2024SP).

depiction in the discourse of displacement, Cornejo Polar proposed the idea of a narrator-character who speaks from various places—those of his different experiences, resulting in the fragmentation of the subject and in the fluctuating identity of the speaker: “Migratory displacement doubles (or more) the territory of the subject and offers or condemns him/her to speak from more than one place. It is a double discourse or a discourse placed in multiple locations at once” (Cornejo Polar, 1996, p. 841). More than 20 years later, this proposal still prevails if we adapt it to specific works of Peruvian literature of the twenty-first century in which the environments of the migrating subject are amplified through the great migration from the country in the eighties—the one which Mazzotti experienced, once again having an effect on the segmented discourse which a diverse *locus* produces, as well as in the transformation of the subject’s identity. All in all, some literary works of the twenty-first century renew and produce literary forms for “the multiple voices of the many memories that reject oblivion” (Cornejo Polar, 1996, p. 843). Among them, *Declinaciones latinas* and *Las flores del Mall*.

5

This migratory process materialized intensely in the decade of the 1990s and especially in the Peruvian literature of the new millennium, marked by the diaspora caused by the armed conflict with the guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso and the national crisis derived from it (Altamirano, 1992). Cities such as Paris, Berlin, New York, Patterson, Miami, Madrid, and Barcelona became favorite destinations, as well as other US enclaves whose universities were poles of attraction for many writers. From those host locations, the assimilation of the new living space blends in many cases with the reflection on the country of origin, producing works that are paradigmatic examples of the proposal initiated by Cornejo Polar regarding the “fragmented speaker” and the identity transformation of the subject. Such experience is the motivation for a substantial part of current Peruvian literature which delves into living abroad and into the experiences of exile and/or return (Terrones, 2018, p. 178). In relation specifically to Peruvian migration to the USA, Mazzotti himself co-edited a compilation in 2007 with the title *The Other Latinos: Central and*

South Americans in the United States, dedicated to those “other” Latinos in the country in the north who are not Cuban, Mexican or Puerto Rican, but citizens of the Andean countries, Central America and Brazil. In this book we find a section on the “Andean Latinos”. When asked about his position in such a panorama, Mazzotti clarifies: “While it is true that all of us belong in some way to the group of the ‘other Latinos’, the tendency of those born in Peru and who arrived in the USA as adults is to continue to write in Spanish. Hybridization would occur if anywhere, in the perspective, decentralization, estrangement, and not so much in the use of language” (May/07/2019; epistolar exchange with the author).

In order to classify the constellation of authors, Ulises Zevallos starts with the notion of archipelago used by Arguedas, Cornejo Polar and Wise, to speak first about an Andean cultural archipelago, and later about a trans-Andean cultural archipelago (Zevallos, 2015, p. 963). The texts encompassed within this label would no longer be written solely in Quechua, Andean Spanish or Spanish, but also in English. To this, Zevallos adds the specificity of the trans-Andean label in the USA: “Finally, intellectuals residing in the USA, one of the foreign islands of the Andean archipelago, have retaken the term in a dimension which is not strictly literary or international. They have taken an additional step with the formulation of the trans-Andean term” (*ibid.*). Among these last intellectuals we find Mazzotti, who replies in regard to this term and its validity in tackling some of his works:

Yes, to some degree, given that part of the new migrant identities become transnational in the sense that they identify with two or more national and cultural poles of identity. The same can be said of the regional and cultural identification with the Andean, which in the USA acquires new, sometimes even anglicized forms, and which depend on new networks of solidarity and agency. At a literary level, this can be observed in bilingual and even trilingual (Quechua-Spanish-English) publications. In my case, the “trans” duality occurs through Spanish and English. I feel comfortable in both languages, although, without a doubt, my preference and higher emotional and expressive expansion happens in Spanish. (Jan./13/2020; epistolar exchange with the author)

With such statements, we find ourselves facing an author located in a trans-Andean archipelago of the USA, with a notion of exile that not only deals with physical displacement, but that goes much further to establish itself in the own essence of the literary work linked to it: “The poet travels around the world in his/her readings and experiences and it is that perpetual exile which provides his/her voice with a nomadic character (remember the term used by Seamus Heaney) and a diasporic one, which greatly complicates the notion of homeland itself as a stable point of reference or illustrative locus” (Mazzotti, 2002, p. 178). From such physical, cultural, idiomatic, identity-based and strictly literary notions, let us observe their materialization in the books analyzed in these pages.

2. *Declinaciones latinas*: the traveler between the “homeland in ruins” and the USA

7

Mazzotti’s arrival in the USA in 1988 gives rise to a poetry pierced by the nostalgia of the country left behind, just as in *El libro de las Auroras Boreales* (*The Book of the Northern Lights*, 1994) and *Señora de la Noche* (*Lady of the Night*, 1998), until we reach the key collection of poems for the topic that concerns us: *Declinaciones latinas*, dated between 1995 and 1999, and published in 1999 as the last section of Mazzotti’s anthology *El Zorro y la Luna* [*The Fox and the Moon*]; written therefore in the final years of the twentieth century, which Roger Santiváñez reads with “a sense of balance and end of an era” (2018, p. 223) in Mazzotti’s career.

The main topic in *Declinaciones latinas* revolves around deterritorialization, estrangement, and a reflection on Peru made from a distance (from the USA). The collection contains two groupings, each of them composed of ten sections or “cantos”: “Himnos nacionales” (National Anthems) and “Declinaciones latinas” (Latin Declensions). In the middle, we find two poems dedicated to two distinguished exiles, Inca Garcilaso (Peruvian) and Luis Cernuda (Spanish), under the title “Exilios dos poetas” [Exiles Two Poets]. “Himnos nacionales” is, in a sense, a “generational song”

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(Santiváñez, 2018, p. 223), and it is dedicated to the victims of violence in Peru, as well as to the view of the exiles regarding their homeland and its tragic history in the 1980s and 1990s (Chueca, 2010). This is to say, just as Vitela Cisneros comments, “the experience of emigrating” is “considered as a profound reflection on the country, its identity and the identity of its citizens” (2011, p. 105).

For example, section IX of “Himnos nacionales” is a reconstruction of the native country in a disenchanted, critical and even (self) lacerating key:

IX

That’s why how many young people would have wanted to see like me
the old roads again paved,
a clean country
shaking its slave’s indolence, between its legs.
These are the boys and girls with whom I cross
through the walls of the earth, and we always wonder
about the same park,
its swollen veins, its concave and convex limbs
and its immense height tiny in infinity.

Imagining the house becomes like waking up
sleepwalking and walk through it, from East to West,
with hurt shoulders, broken ears, and the lips
pronouncing the most beautiful words
in a hidden language.

So stick out your tongue at me, my Ariadne, make fun
of me and make me kiss the ground.
I communicate with you through irregular channels,
you smile at me
and we are a tiny point in infinity
there where infinity is fatigue

every day

crossing the cretinous walls
of my homeland.

(Mazzotti, 2018, p. 162)

The poetic speaker assumes himself as a new Theseus, penetrating the labyrinth of the “homeland of mine” and its “cretin walls”, in clear allusion to the sonnet by Francisco de Quevedo that begins with “Miré los muros de la patria mía, /

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si un tiempo fuertes, ya desmoronados” [I looked at the walls of the homeland of mine, / once strong, and now crumbled.]² The image of the labyrinth appears in Mazzotti from his poem “Dante y Virgilio bajan por el Infierno” [Dante and Virgil Go Down Through Hell], in his second book, *Fierro curvo (órbita poética) (Curved Iron. Poetic Orbit)*, published in 1985. In that poem both characters descend through the Peruvian hell-labyrinth of the 80s, but without a break in continuity, because instead of taking Dante to the Earthly Paradise, bringing him closer to his beloved Beatrice, Virgil abandons him in the third world hell, thus condemning him to eternal suffering.³

However, it is the second block, “Declinaciones Latinas,” that I wish to focus on, for the theme that involves the view of the USA. The first poem begins with the flight of the poetic subject on the airplane “a 33 mil pies de altura” [at 33 thousand feet high], from which “el arte de la memoria” [the art of memory] begins its “canto” (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 169). It is preceded by a few relevant verses in English by Walt Whitman: “Allons! We must not stop here / however sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling we / cannot remain here. / However shelter’d this port and however calm these waters we must not anchor here / However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us we are permitted to / receive it but a little while” (p. 169, from “Song of the Open Road” in *Leaves of Grass*). This is how the second section of the collection begins, with a negotiation to stay in the country of sweet shops, of comfortable housing, of the sheltered port and the calm waters. In the ten sections of the poem, the national problem continues to be a reason for reflection, but, as Santiváñez has noted, now this meditation “is pierced by a reading of the travel of Aeneas, a comparison with the foundation of a new place to live, in other words, in the USA” (2018, p. 224). The second poem begins with two verses in

² Two more detailed analyzes of “National Anthems” as a whole can be seen in Cisneros, 2011, and in Chueca, 2010.

³ For a detailed analysis of this poem, see Valero, 2022. Giancarla Di Laura reproduces the article in her compilation *Cazando al zorro: aproximaciones críticas a la poesía de José Antonio Mazzotti* (2021 and 2023, pp. 443-458). The book can be downloaded from:

https://www.academia.edu/108087238/Cazando_al_zorro_libro_completo_2023

English (“With a banjo in my lips and an arrow in my tongue”) in which the poet, with his musical instrument and the arrow between his lips restarts the song, he sets himself the goal of achieving “el sosiego” [the calm] and escaping the “bárbaro naufragio” [barbaric shipwreck] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 172). That said, this section pivots between that imposition and the unease which appears in poem III, placing the poetic subject before “los vecinos / mudos” who “se acercan arrastrándose / con ganas de mirar al extranjero” (p. 173) [the mute / neighbors who come crawling / wanting to look at the stranger]. This is when Mazzotti’s corrosive view draws up the superficial outlines of the northern country: “patos rellenos y mantas de colores / y fúlgidos collares y afiladas lanzas”, “las avenidas fluorescentes y su calma inmovible” [stuffed ducks and colorful blankets / and shining necklaces and sharp spears, the fluorescent avenues and their immovable calm] (p. 173). From the point of view of trans-baroque aesthetics (Quiroz, 2012⁴ and 2017), the poetic subject is introduced in the poem which is presented as a text in construction: “an arrow in my tongue” reappears as a metaphor for the desire to write, but which is now trapped in “un cuadrito en un rincón del MoMA” [a little painting on a corner of the MoMA]. Aeneas, as an alter ego, appears next: “Pero las embajadas continúan / y así el Troyano es recibido entre cojines” [But the embassies continue / and so the Trojan is received between cushions] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 173).

Section IV also deserves attention, as it starts with some verses in inverted commas in which the poet provides a voice to the human being who expresses the anguish of imposed or self-imposed exile: “Yo no quise llegar hasta este extremo, yo

⁴ Rubén Quiroz has studied and defined the transbaroque style in the sense of a baroque aesthetic that runs through the history of Peruvian poetry, so in Peru such an aesthetic would not be so much “new” or neo-baroque but simply trans-baroque: “the Transbaroque is understood as a matrix and nuclear paradigm, which permanently uses a kaleidoscopic and dialogic language, with a non-linear argumentative logic and rhetoric that recreates itself and as a meta-referent construction that is threaded in a Moebius key, it runs through advanced Peruvian literature. European colonization, and reconfigures it to this day” (Quiroz, 2012, p. 432). Quiroz thus understands the transbaroque as an intermittent appearance of the baroque style and ethos from the 16th century to the present. And he adds, proposing a canon modern Peruvian transbaroque: “This leads us to present authors of the last century from the first two thirds such as Martín Adán, Joel Marroquín, Mirko Lauer, up to the present linked with the proposals of Vladimir Herrera, José Antonio Mazzotti, José Morales Saravia, Reynaldo Jiménez, Edgar Guzmán, Roger Santiviáñez, etc.” (Quiroz, 2012, p. 432).

no quise / sino sólo elevarme por el aire / [...] hacia el otro hemisferio / me empujaron, sin más chiste / que una pluma colgando entre las piernas” [I did not want to go to this extreme, I did not want / but only to rise through the air / [...] towards the other hemisphere / they pushed me, with no more joke / than a feather hanging between my legs] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 174). With baroque, gongorine, and sorjuanesque cues, such as the center and the sphere—a faithful reflection of the critic’s knowledge of the poetry of the Golden Age, Mazzotti brings out a “Viajero” [Traveler], with capital letters, turned into “centro de una esfera renovada” [the center of a renewed sphere] (p. 174), in the midst of “un soberano imperio” [a sovereign empire] which “engasta sus intersticios con diamantes congelados” [sets its interstices with frozen diamonds]; a new world which “lo viste de un círculo de fuego donde nada se parece / al Círculo de Fuego de la Infancia” [dresses it in a circle of fire where nothing resembles / the Circle of Fire of Childhood], a verse in which the poet establishes the contrast between the USA and childhood, which signifies authenticity. The contrast with the counterfeit gives way to the verse that marks the renewal, expressed through intertextuality with the Eclogue I of Garcilaso de la Vega: “Olvidar, olvidar, hundir el ceño / en las fuentes cristalinas” [Forget, forget, sink your brow / into the crystalline fountains] (p. 174). Nevertheless, the memory is constant and allows the writer to delve into the contrast, in section VI, through another intertextuality with the famous song by Chabuca Granda: “Y difícil encontrar entre estos almacenes / aromas de lisura y flores de canela” [And it is difficult to find among these warehouses / aromas of smoothness and cinnamon flowers] (p. 177); two verses from which the poet once again casts a critical eye on this world of warehouses that he portrays through the mythological reference to Scylla’s multiform mouths, that trap the consumer in their jaws and turn him into a slave to consumerism: “Sus esclavos se cuentan por millares [y entran en la] hora de hacer compras, lejos de las necesidades / inmediatas” [Their slaves number in the thousands [and enter at the] time of shopping, far from immediate needs] (p. 177). This superficiality is poetized in many different ways: “un grupo de señoras habla de las elecciones / como si se tratara del último perfume” [a group of ladies talk about

the elections / as if it were the latest perfume] (p. 177), to which Mazzotti, corrosive, uses the famous reference to the *Divine Comedy*: “dejad toda esperanza” [leave all hope], as well as the biblical reference: “mi reino... es de este mundo” [my kingdom... is of this world], through which, without naming her, the intellectual woman of the baroque par excellence, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, is introduced on her journey of ascent of the *Primero Sueño*: “por los astros subí atónita, / juntándome con ellos en la esfera” [I ascended through the stars in amazement, / joining them in the sphere] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 178). Facing Sor Juana, “las señoras pasean / sus castaños y teñidos soberanos / orificios / por los pasillos del supermercado” [The ladies walk / their brown and dyed sovereigns / holes / through the aisles of the supermarket] (p. 178).

The loneliness, the isolation, the feeling of being lost that appears in the first part of *Declinaciones latinas*—“Himnos nacionales”, was found in verses such as: “Hasta aquí pase. / El problema empieza cuando nos quedamos solos / mismos Robinson / perdidos en el espacio” [Up to here it is OK. / The problem begins when we are left alone / just like the Robinsons / lost in space] (p. 154), and returns in section VII in an identification of the poet with the world of the south: “Esas naves perdidas, esos aeropuertos / y esas calles pestilentes son mis venas” [Those lost ships, those airports / and those stinking streets are my veins]. Then, the awareness of the identity that has been torn apart: “su aire no se mezcla con el aire / atravesado de agujas de aluminio [...] y por eso envejezco / como la bestia del zoológico del Highland Park” [its air does not mix with the air / pierced by aluminum needles [...] and that’s why I age / like the beast at the Highland Park zoo] (p. 180). Faced with this impossibility of fusion, section VIII of the poem proposes the way out of the problem of identity in poetry: “Pero la única barca es el poema” [But the only vessel is the poem] (p. 181). However, which poem? The answer lies in the following lines, in which there is a shift with respect to the poeticization of the first part of *Declinaciones latinas*, those “himnos nacionales” [nationals anthems], in which the

polyhedral image of the homeland is the main objective. Now, the purpose will be different. By means of another intertextuality with Quevedo's well-known verse "miré los muros de la patria mía" [I looked at the walls of my homeland], Mazzotti points to the need for "un mapa secreto" [a secret map] which should not be directed "hacia los muros de la patria / en ruinas" [at the walls of my homeland / in ruins]. These, he claims, "requieren de un nuevo profeta" [require a new prophet] (p. 181), which could well be interpreted as a way out of the labyrinth identified with Peru, that "patria en ruinas" [homeland in ruins] which he had created in "Himnos nacionales" through the myth of Crete. At this stage the theme "no produce poesía" [does not produce poetry], the poem tells us, "sino la dispersión, y es ella / la que hace brotar entre los poros poesía" [but dispersion, and it is her / the one that makes poetry sprout between the pores]. Dispersion, that is to say, estrangement, the deterritorialization of Cornejo Polar's decentered subject, is what must now bring poetry to life. That is why the last two sections of the poem are devoted to a metaliterary reflection.

13

Thus, in sections IX and X one reads: "olerás Pocahontas como flores / de los campos de abril, y harás que te gocen / a cambio de dejar eliminados / tu saquito de huesos, tus pepitas de guano, que te quitan / espacio para carnes vivas" [You will smell Pocahontas like flowers / from the April fields, and you will make them enjoy you / in exchange for eliminating / your bag of bones, your guano nuggets, which take away / space for living flesh] (Mazzotti, 2018, pp. 181-182). These verses point to the acceptance and even enjoyment of the new North American environment ("Pocahontas as flowers"), assuming the sexuality of the new Aeneas who arrives to found a city and a new form of civilization, capable of leaving his native land behind (a Peruvian Troy destroyed by war) and at the same time creating new meanings through poetry. To achieve this purpose, the poetic self enters a nocturnal meditation in which he will meet again with the primordial image of the entire book, the Moon (announced from the very title of the compilation of the author's poetic work, *The Fox and the Moon*). To do so, he turns to a little-known text, but which once again

demonstrates the author’s unpredictable erudition. Mazzotti thus rescues a fragment of the epic poem *Vida de Santa Rosa de Santa María* (1711) [*Life of Saint Rose of Saint Mary*] by Luis Antonio de Oviedo y Herrera or Conde de la Granja: “Es de la noche el mediodía, cuando / en posesión tranquila de ambos mundos / los astros en sus globos, dominando / con celosos desvelos, / rondan las calles de los cielos / con ministros lucientes / prendiendo las estrellas delincuentes” [It is midday at night, when / in quiet possession of both worlds / the planets in their circles, dominating / with jealous care, / they prowl the streets of the heavens / with shining ministers / catching the delinquent stars] (p. 183, italics in the original, signaling a direct quote). This prepares us for the final solution, returning again and again to poetry as a constant exercise of identity, despite changes in national and linguistic contexts. For this reason, fragment or section X of the poem alludes to poetic work as a new “Ariadne’s thread” capable of finding a way out of the labyrinth that had arisen in “National Anthems.” Now the poem is also an “aeroplano / encima de las moscas, pero aún / debajo de la Luna” [airplane / above the flies, but still / below the Moon] (p. 184). That Moon that returns again and again as a spectrum and backdrop for the poet’s identity reconstruction throughout his migratory itinerary.

3. *Las flores del Mall*: The critical view on the American “Arcadia”

Ten years after the publication of *Declinaciones latinas*, *Las flores del Mall* appeared in 2009, and its initial section is dedicated to the USA as a worldwide political and imperial power. Mazzotti’s ‘cultural history’ in the USA takes on the character of a critique of its foreign policy. As Luis Fernando Chueca has explained, starting from the Baudelairean basis of the title, the book

is proposed—and this is the explicit axis of the first section—as a detailed and profound tour of the National Mall of Washington, DC. The place where, it could be said, the bases of the official American discourse are symbolically synthesized (through architecture, the conception of public space, the sculptural proposal and monumentality). (Chueca, 2009, n.p.)

As in the poems analyzed from *Declinaciones latinas*, the poetic subject expresses his relative otherness with respect to that community, emphasizing the well-known critique from the poem entitled “Jefferson Memorial”, in which the ironic tone returns in verses such as: “Redondo como un pastel de bodas, y con ese aire clásico / que no te corresponde, un aire / de Nueva Arcadia, / anuncio de la flamante libertad de los humanos”, “Conocen tu cara larga a través de un billete” [Round like a wedding cake, and with that classic air / that does not belong to you, an air / of New Arcadia, / announcement of the brand new freedom of humans, They know your long face through a bill] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 227); to the poem entitled in English “The White House”, which concludes with an explicit denunciation: “Con cuántos cautivos y con cuánto terreno extraño / se construyen / Las paredes / Del averno / Ajeno” [With how many captives and with how much strange terrain / The walls / Of and alien hell / Are built] (p. 229); or “Capitol Hill”, also ironised in verses that recall the well-known phrase of Inca Garcilaso to describe Cuzco, “otra Roma en su imperio” [another Rome in its empire]: “Un copo de azúcar, le decían [...] Otra Roma con su Capitolio, otra Esparta / Pero para la niña de Guanao no eres más / Que un copo de azúcar” [A flake of sugar, they called her [...] Another Rome with its Capitol, another Sparta / But to the girl from Guanao you are nothing more / Than a flake of sugar] (p. 230). The irony regarding the monument is developed throughout the whole poem through its identification with the Tower of Babel, but “de pastel neoclásico” [of a neoclassic cake], and again with the denunciation, in this case of war operations in the world: “En ese Laberinto vertical el Minotauro brama [...] Sus legiones se pasean por el mundo, cómo no temerle” [In that vertical Labyrinth the Minotaur roars [...] His legions walk around the world, how can we not fear him]. So, if in “Himnos nacionales” the labyrinth of Crete was Peru, which the poet constructs in the ten sections that make up the poem; now it is the country to the north, the one which exercises a brutal power symbolized by the Minotaur.

Another poem that speaks not only of the imperial excesses of the United States, but also of its internal deterioration, in which a shadow is noticeable that contradicts the supposed luminosity of the ‘American dream’ is “Lincoln Memorial”, dedicated to the great monument starring the legendary American president who is located at one end of the National Mall or National Walk, opposite to Congress. It says:

LINCOLN MEMORIAL

From afar and in the photos your features look like a marvel of Michelangelo.

Your stony look is not like that.

You are more like the almost stiff columns that rise
from the sprayed glow of the water.
You are the oracle of Delos above the stairs.
There they come to look at you from all corners of the planet.
They read your inscriptions on the marble tablets,
They talk about Union and Freedom,
They repeat the lesson of Gettysburg,
Let the woodcutter wake up, a child murmurs from the shadows,
Let him wake up dancing on the soldiers’ graves,
May he resurrect those who melted their shackles
On the spring suspension of a 1901 Ford.

Even so your stone look speaks with sadness
Of a lost world that will no longer
Devour.

A pale needle penetrates the aquatic mirror of the sky
And behind the palm trees the red eyes light up
From a dealer
Slashing the shadow.

(Mazzotti, 2018, p. 231)

The final allusion to the criminal world (embodied in the dealer or retail drug seller) refers to the type of society that has developed in the United States, as a reflection of corruption in the highest political spheres. The criticism of modern imperialism (“a pale needle” or the Obelisk to Washington that penetrates both the sky and—with its reflection—the rectangular pond of the National Mall) also involves

criticism of the problems generated by the internal inequality of North American society and its burden of crime, racism and discrimination, aided by the placebo of drugs.

Directly related to the myth, after “Lincoln Memorial”, which follows the same desecrating and critical direction, “Vietnam Memorial” introduces two verses that are an epigraph from the Latin poet Persius: “Cuántos jóvenes sacrificados / y aún no calma su hambre el Minotauro” [How many young people sacrificed / and the Minotaur still does not calm his hunger].⁵ Such an epigraph inserted in the poem dedicated to Vietnam establishes a common thread with “Himnos nacionales” (which begins with precisely this same epigraph), in order to establish from the beginning, the prominence of myth as a motif that articulates the poem. There Mazzotti referred to the young Peruvian victims of Peru’s internal war. And now, in “Vietnam Memorial” he links those deaths with those of the young Americans who died in Vietnam, mentioning a succession of names in the first four verses of his memorial to the Americans who died in the war, although the first citizens named are Latinos. As Chueca rightly points out,

17

[the] words of the Latin poet Persius that constituted the epigraph of “National Anthems”, now, having reached the end of “Vietnam Memorial”, double their meaning, because those who seemed to be the sacrificial victims of the beast state that led them to the labyrinthine slaughterhouse, are now portrayed as gears of that which is phagocytizing them. (Chueca, 2009, n.p.)

The poem’s strong sense of denunciation is intensified and rounded off in the final lines, in which the poem moves from Vietnam to India and Iraq: “Por la Cabeza Blanca [el águila americana] y sus monedas silenciosas / Cuando sus nuevas sombras se mezclan en la arena / de los túneles de Agra / y de Tikrit” [For the White Head [the American eagle] and its silent coins / When its new shadows mix in the sand / of the tunnels of Agra / and Tikrit] (Mazzotti, 2018, p. 233).

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Persio's epigraph is completely apocryphal, according to Mazzotti's own confession in a personal conversation. This reinforces once again the playful and ironic sense of much of the author's poetry.

This criticism, both external and internal, of the contemporary empire also involves an investigation into the historical ethnocides on which the pillars of Anglo-Saxon and North European rule in general have been built in a territory previously inhabited by dozens of native nations. The search for the poetic speaker of the book is based on the premise that in the new territories—as well as in his distant Peru—there are voices that were silenced and deserve at least not to be forgotten or erased from history, explicitly mentioning their names. The poem “American Indian Museum” refers to the multi-story repository that symbolically forms part of the National Mall, where vestiges and allusions to numerous groups that today we would call ethnic or—popularly—‘tribes’ are contained, but which in all rights constitute national collectivities in the original sense of the word. Thus, the symbolism of this “American Indian Museum” awakens in the poet the painful nostalgia of a past that time and again has been the object of constant forms of annihilation and subjection. Here is the poem:

18

AMERICAN INDIAN MUSEUM

It rises like smoke and suffocates the stars.
 They are the three floors of a hallucinated tornado.
 The fire dyes their charred flesh.
 Screams of horror and cries of exile,
 Stories that rise in a radiant spiral:

Mashpee of the Wampanoag
 Alabama
 Anishinaabe original village
 Apache the enemies
 Comanche fighters
 Dakota the allies
 Gayogohono swamp people
 Hopi peaceful people
 Hualapai Pine Tree People
 Kanza inhabitants of the wind
 Illiniwek the best people
 Kadohadacho the real chiefs
 Kiwigapawa the hustlers
 Iroquois of the King Serpent
 Mikasuki of the Boar Clan
 Mohawk the Maneaters
 Mohingan the Werewolves
 Mohican streaming waters

Nantego of the tide
Ottawa the Traders
Seneca Onandowaga of the Mountain
Shawanwa those of the South
Titska Watich civilized
Yavapai people of the Sun:

What happened to them?

What happened to them?

What happened to them?

(Mazzotti, 2018, p. 235)

The enumeration of these first nations with their respective names works as a tour of a pantheon that does not fail to have intertextual resonances (“corrientes aguas” [streaming waters] is a nod to Garcilaso of the “Third Eclogue” with his *locus amoenus* lost due to lack of love; “*Qué se fizieron*” [*What happened to them?*], appears in italics as a direct quote from the “Coplas a la muerte de su padre” by Jorge Manrique, in a reworking of the topic of *ubi sunt?*, through which the poetic voice inquires the whereabouts and fate of those who lived in the past). The poetic voice thus echoes the trauma of the historical massacres that every conquest implies. His place in the lands in which that the new Aeneas travels and begins to know never ceases to renew his memory of the Andean past, where similar anguish can be recorded, such as those expressed in some of the poems from the poet’s Peruvian period, specifically “Cuismancu” in *Fierro curvo (óbita poética)*, from 1985, and “Diuturnum Illud / Sueño profético de Wanka Willka”, from *Castillo de popa* in 1988. There is thus, then, a long line of appearances of the ‘other’ Amerindian that constitutes the side hidden from a historical consciousness that does not conform to the triumphalist discourse of a ‘civilizing’ West. In *The Flowers of the Mall* the theme appears again in the poem “Lake Chocorua”, which alludes to an indigenous chief who died resisting English colonization in the current state of New Hampshire, already in the second part of the book. The poet seems to intermittently evoke the presence of those native peoples that are an essential component of his own cultural

identity, thus constituting an expression of the anticolonial gesture—of resistance and re-creation—that characterizes his own self-construction as a Hispanic migrant and at the same time as a cultural mestizo in a country where white supremacy still has a dangerous presence.

The second part of *Las flores del Mall* is entitled “Nueva Albi6n”, the region of the Pacific coast of North America explored in 1579 by Sir Francis Drake, that could be taken as a metonym for the entire North American country. The poems that comprise this section maintain the contrastive line between the superficial and what remains behind the facades, but now the poet takes us to natural spaces (rivers, lakes, jungles, seas, forests). This is why, in “Háblame claro, r6o” [Speak clearly to me, river] the poetic voice, configured as that of a pilgrim from the very first poem (“Han de estar despertando”) that opens this part of the book, first questions the “r6o de las flores” [river of flowers] to refer immediately to “un mundo de cad6veres ocultos [que] se desnuda por la noche” [a world of hidden corpses [that] undresses at night] (p. 242). In “Pieces of Nail,” another poem from the same part, the pilgrim stops before a historic tree in Cambridge, Massachusetts, preserved for almost three hundred years because it witnessed George Washington’s oath to command revolutionary troops against the English. But that process of liberation from British colonialism in the 18th century turned into a decadence that now subjugates entire peoples who suffer the cruelty of imperial war with the same or worse methods of domination. The pilgrim speaks to Washington, calling him “Jorge,” familiarly, and asks him to let him exhume the bodies from a nearby cemetery to show the horrors of the new wars of the 21st century, specifically those that the United States led in the Middle East under the administration of George Bush Jr. (2009, the year of the publication of *Las Flores del Mall*, was the time of said political administration):

20

So let me dig in that cemetery
The mutilated arms of children, the horrible screams of old women
Running through the flames to search for their name, let me
Run like them collecting the pearls
From each of their children:
Hassan, the son of the raped woman;
Mohammed, the one from the severed mother;
the other one who cries every night
for his own dead children.

(Mazzotti, 2018, p. 243)

In this way, the idea behind the title of *Las flores del Mall* gradually acquires greater clarity as the allusion, on the one hand, to the “National Mall” or national promenade of the great North American monuments in the country’s capital becomes more transparent, such as we saw in the first part of the book, but on the other, by playfully paraphrasing the famous title of Charles Baudelaire’s classic book *The Flowers of Evil*, Mazzotti underlines the sordid and malign (and indirectly commercial) element of every imperial enterprise.

21

In a transbaroque key, the pilgrim traces strokes of his journey through New England in the poems “Mar o cielo” [Sea or Sky] and “Círculo Tercero” [Third Circle], in which he presents different moments of his experience in the new North American space. In “Sea or Sky”, like an impressionist painting, the arrival of autumn produces a certain uneasiness, which erases the colors of summer and becomes a correlate of a subjective change in the poet: “Pero vuelve el otoño, vuelve / Con su carga de hojas descompuestas / Y su cáscara / De pinzas que acarician los cristales” [But autumn returns, returns / With its load of decomposed leaves / And its shell / Of tweezers that caress the crystals] (p. 247). The “Cambridge towers” previously mentioned in the poem are those pincers that tear the reflection of the sky on the banks of the Charles River and the coast of Boston Bay, insinuating a burden of pain subtly expressed through the image of the sharp metal on glass or panes of buildings. We thus see that Mazzotti does not make concessions to the ease of direct or confessional expression, but instead elaborates semantic and landscape folds

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that complicate the direct expression of subjectivity. In the poem “Third Circle” there is an allusion to the *Divine Comedy* (a work that appears several times in Mazzotti’s corpus) and that section of the *Inferno* in which the lustful are supposedly condemned. That is to say, not everything is nostalgia and pain, because the pilgrim manages to distinguish, despite the gloomy and already wintry landscape, that “Francesca y Paolo están aquí. / Los misteriosos habitantes descubiertos / Debajo de la nieve en las solapas” [Francesca and Paolo are here. / The mysterious inhabitants discovered / Beneath the snow on the lapels] (p. 248). These are clearly Francesca of Rimini and her lover Paolo Malatesta, who were, according to Dante Alighieri, pierced by the sword of Gianciotto Malatesta, Francesca’s husband and Paolo’s older brother when he discovered them in the full exercise of sexual passion. These lovers were immortalized in Dante’s *Comedy* as a paradigm of illicit and unbridled love, and not without a certain dose of empathy, which Mazzotti seems to share.⁶ Curiously, Mazzotti places them in the “Third Circle”, which actually corresponds to those who sin by gluttony, while the lustful are found, according to Dante, in the Second Circle of hell. This apparent confusion finds its meaning when reviewing Mazzotti’s work as a whole, and especially his book *Sakra Boccata* (2006), in which eroticism and gluttony acquire the same trait of importance and are amalgamated, one serving as a metaphor for the other: Making love and eating is a common topic from Lucretius to the present day, as Raúl Zurita reminds us in the illuminating prologue he dedicates to *Sakra Boccata* (in Mazzotti, 2018, pp. 187-189).

⁶ In his third book, *Castillo de popa* (1988), Mazzotti had already presented Francesca of Rimini as the central character of a poem titled precisely “Francesca.” I have analyzed that text in Valero, 2022.

4. By way of conclusion

In short, in *Declinaciones latinas* and *Las flores del Mall* José Antonio Mazzotti constructs a new chapter in Latin American and Latinx literature from a present-day perspective, which, fundamentally since the *fin-de-siècle* period, has produced a discourse critical of the country to the north that crosses generations. However, in Mazzotti's case, such discourse is not enunciated from Latin America, but from the very heart of the USA. The place of enunciation and the experience of exile produce substantial changes in such discourse, insofar as it is tinged with a sense of fragmentation that densifies the mere critical vision of the USA and transforms it into a deeply personal vision. Thus, from the American island of the trans-Andean archipelago, these works are also the expression of the transliterary island that is Mazzotti, the poet whose intertextual vocation weaves literary references from the Hispanic and Andean traditions, from the pre-Hispanic, Western mythological or Anglo-Saxon ones... creating a profoundly cultural textual framework. Effectively nomadic, the poet travels through the world of his readings and his experiences and, from them, he never stops writing: "Del invierno, como un barco iluminado deslizándose bajo el puente, escribir / de ti, escribir de mí, escribir / de nada, pero / Escribir / Escribir / Escribir" [Of winter, like an illuminated ship sliding under the bridge, write / about you, write about me, write / about nothing, but / Write / Write / Write] (p. 264).⁷

23

⁷ These lines correspond to poem 10 of the third section of *Las flores del Mall* (p. 264), signed the heteronym "Ernesto E. López", an entirely Hispanicized form of the poet's new identity in his long journey and in resounding reaffirmation of the poetic word in Spanish within an English-speaking context.

5. Coda: Mazzotti in English

The poetry of José Antonio Mazzotti has had a discreet but growing presence in the English language and other languages⁸. In English, some poems appeared since 1991 in some prestigious specialized magazines. Here is a list of these translations:

- 1991: "Poems" (includes the poems "The Planks Creak", "Auristela's Tale", "Breathing Space", "Narihualac", and "Who Crushes the Night and Crushes"). John Oliver Simon, trans. *Review: Latin American Literature & Arts* 44 (New York City): 54-61.
- 1993: "Poems" (includes the poems "Pablo Guevara's Vision", "Dante and Virgil Descend into Hell", "The Anti-Ars-Poetica", "(.....?)", "I Love Your Freedom", "The Pond", "On the Late Massacre in Lima: June 19, 1986", and "Tullumayu"). G. J. Racz, trans. *Seneca Review* XXIII, 1-2 (Geneva, NY): 139-154.
- 1994: "Mare is the female of the horse" and "Nymph and Navigator". G. J. Racz, trans. *Poet Lore* 89, 1 (Bethesda, MD): 18-19.
- 1995: "Words". Gary Racz, trans. *Visions* 47 (Falls Church, VA): 20.
- 1995: "Francesca / Inferno, V" and "The fable of P. and G.". G. J. Racz, trans. *The Literary Review* 39, 1 (Madison, NJ): 81-82.
- 1996: "Valle del Santa. Invocación de Calíope y del olvido". G. J. Racz, trans. *Tamacqua* VI, 1 (Champaign, IL): 132-135.
- 1996: "Eclogue IV". G. J. Racz, trans. *Xavier Review* 16, 2 (New Orleans, LA): 24-25.

⁸ Recently, the prestigious Éditions de l'Harmattan has published in Paris the bilingual Spanish-French edition of *Nawa Isko Iki / Chants amazonienes*, translated by the poet and plastic artist Eliana Machado (2023-24). Translations of various poems by Mazzotti into Greek and Portuguese have also appeared in several electronic magazines.

- 1997: “Mare is the female of the horse”. In *Open Door. A Poet Lore Anthology 1980-1996*. G. J. Racz, trans. Bethesda, MD: The Writer’s Center. 160.
- 1997: “The Blue-Jeans Bunch”. G. J. Racz, trans. *Tampa Review* 15: 27.
- 1998: “Impossible loves, poems”. *Beacons. Journal of Literary Translation* 4 (Alexandria, VA): 152-153. G. J. Racz, trans.
- 1998: “Arabian mussings”, “Atoqsaykuchi”. G. J. Racz, trans. *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* 57 (New York City): 57-60.
- 2000: “Sunqururu”, “Saqsaywaman”, “Epitalamio del poeta y su dama”, “El zorro y la luna” and corresponding translations by G. J. Racz. *International Quarterly* 3, 4 (Miami, FL): 54-59. Winner of the Crossing Boundaries Award in Poetry and Translation.
- 2000: “Get together”. *Downtown Brooklyn: A Journal of Writing* 9, 33 (Brooklyn, NY). G. J. Racz, trans.
- 2001: “Al fondo del jardín” and corresponding translation by G. J. Racz. *International Poetry Review* 27, 1 (Greensboro, NC): 40-41.
- 2011: Poems 5, 6, and 7 of *Sakra Boccata*, translated by Clayton Eshleman, in [Nomadics](#). *Pierre Joris’ Meanderings & mawqifs of poetry, poetics, translations y mas. Travelogue too*, January 23, 2011:
<http://www.pierrejoris.com/blog/?p=5793#more-5793>
- 2012: Poems 21, 26 and 28 of *Sakra Boccata*, and Prologue by Raúl Zurita, translated by Clayton Eshleman, in *Cerisse Press, A Journal of Literatures, Arts & Culture*, Spring 2012, Vol. 3, Issue 9:
<http://www.cerisepress.com/03/09/sakra-boccata> and
<http://www.cerisepress.com/03/09/eros-and-the-sacred-the-sakra-boccata-of-jose-antonio-mazzotti>
- 2012: Poems 1, 2, 23, 24 and 25 of *Sakra Boccata*, trans. by Clayton Eshleman, in *Asymptote*:
<http://asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Poetry&id=21&currindex=81&curPage=Poetry>

- 2012: Poems 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 of *Sakra Boccata*, translated by Clayton Eshleman, in *Poems and Poetics*, Jan. 28, 2012:
<http://poemsandpoetics.blogspot.com/2012/01/jose-antonio-mazzotti-from-sakra.html>

In 2013, and now as a complete book, the renowned North American poet and translator Clayton Eshleman (the same one who translated the complete poetry of César Vallejo into English) published *Sakra Boccata* (a bilingual edition by Ugly Duckling Presse—New York, 2013—with a prologue by Raúl Zurita). The original version in Spanish is from Mexico, Ediciones Invisible, 2006. There is a second edition in Lima, Mundo Ajeno Editores, 2007. The bilingual edition of *Sakra Boccata* was presented at the Americas Society in New York in October 2013.

26



Image 1. Mazzotti (center) with U.S. poets Daniel Shapiro and Clayton Eshleman at the Americas Society of New York during the presentation of the bilingual edition of *Sakra Boccata*, October 2013. Photo by Elsa Ruiz.

Various reviews appeared on *Sakra Boccata* in English, among which are worth mentioning one written by José Luis Moctezuma in *Chicago Review* in 2015 (<http://chicagoreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/59-1-Sakra-Boccata.pdf>) and another one by Wyatt Sparks in *The Small Press Book Review* in 2013 (<http://thesmallpressbookreview.blogspot.com/2014/06/review-of-jose-antonio-mazzottis-sakra.html>).

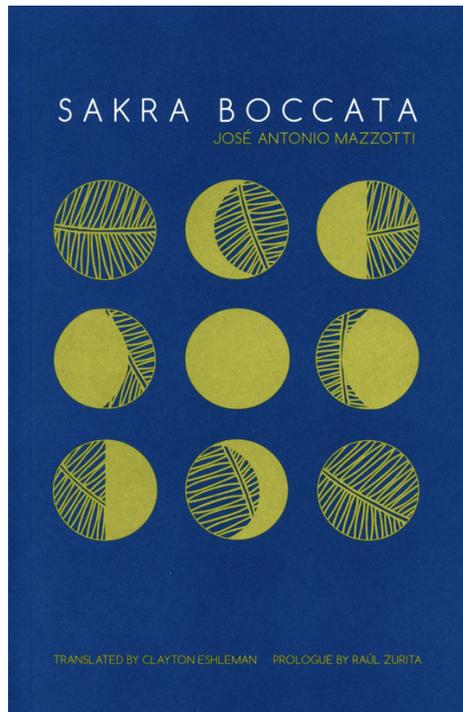


Image 2. *Sakra Boccata*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman. Prologue by Raúl Zurita. New York: The Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013.

In 2018, Axiara Editions and the North American Academy of the Spanish Language published *The Fox and the Moon. Selected Poems*, which collects a third part of *El Zorro y la Luna. Poems reunidos 1981-2016*, a book published in the United States in 2016 and which received in 2018 the José Lezama Lima Special Poetry Prize from Casa de las Américas, Cuba, awarded to a recent work by an author with a notable career in poetry in Spanish. *The Fox and the Moon* includes translations by John Oliver Simon, Gregory Racz, Yvette Neiser-Moreno, Clayton Eshleman, and Judith Filc.

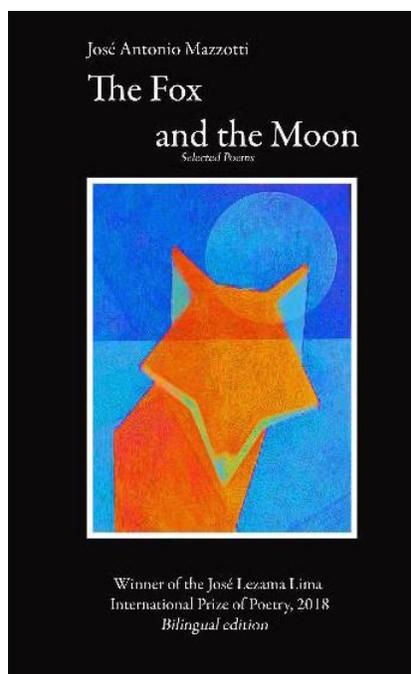


Image 3. *The Fox and the Moon. Selected Poems. Bilingual edition.*
Salem, Oregon: Axiara Editions and Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española, 2018.

In 2023, Pro Latina Press, a publishing house in New York City asked Mazzotti for a manuscript to include in its new Poetry Gala series. Mazzotti translated the poems of *Nawa Isko Iki / Cantos amazónicos* into English, a book published in Spanish by Hipocampo Editores (Lima) in 2020. He also translated the words of the renowned Cuban poet José Kozer on the back cover, which read:

I consider *NAWA ISKO IKI / Amazonian chants* by José Antonio Mazzotti a perfect example of that authentic modernity where the ancestral is combined with all the dense and arduous load of a long history that leads to the current modernity: it amalgamates where the dissimilar and complex of what apparently is not related, only a poet of the height of Mazzotti, oblivious to clothing and false paraments, is capable of harmonizing. Two languages that end up being one thanks to the grace of the poetic capacity that has no qualms about running the risk of trying to synthesize tradition and modernity: everything is double in the loving respect that unites a mystified Amazon that must be rescued and returned to the present as foundation of one of the true history of a country, every country. Two verses by Mazzotti serve as an example of this double conjunction of languages: “*They would have a party all together, but soft meat, pulpacona, was missing*”, or make us look like Boniniken for not understanding: “*He will live forever / Eating soil from the forest, ignorant of their language*”. This is evidence of that true double and multiple language that Mazzotti rescues poetically for us.

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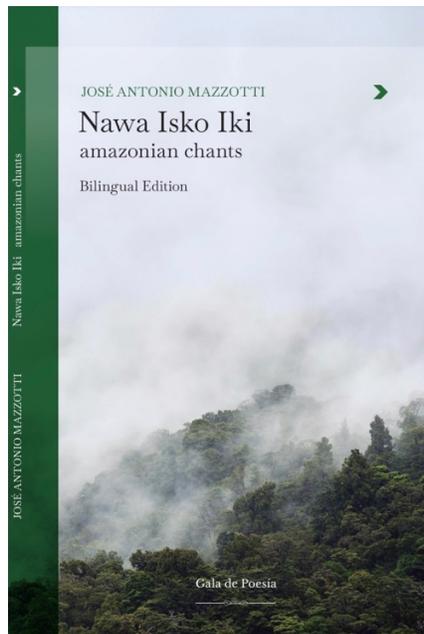
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Luis Benítez (2023), a renowned Argentine poet, has observed the following about this translation:

The distinguished Peruvian poet collects from his oral informants legends, traditions, and beliefs emblematic of a profoundly ancient cultural heritage. These narratives have undoubtedly been interpreted and enriched over countless generations by successive custodians. When presented by the author, they emerge as liberated renditions infused with the rhythmic and compositional finesse of his poetic mastery. Professor Mazzotti's illustrious career to date positions him at the forefront of this remarkable endeavor ("[Nawa Isko Iki / Amazonian Chants. de José Antonio Mazzotti: un Homero amazónico](#)").



29

Image 4. *Nawa Isko Iki / amazonian chants. Bilingual Edition*. Translated by the author. New York: Pro Latina Press, dirigida por María Amelia Martin. Colección Gala de Poesía.

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