



## Nature, Labour, and Infrastructure in the Amazon: Miguel Triana's *Por el sur de Colombia*

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# NATURE, LABOUR, AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE AMAZON: MIGUEL TRIANA'S *POR EL SUR DE COLOMBIA*

*Focusing on Colombian engineer Miguel Triana's 1907 travelogue *Por el sur de Colombia*, this article discusses the role that labour, broadly understood, plays in the projects of state transformation of the Putumayo region, in the Colombian Amazon. The text analyses the role that physical effort plays in making possible the construction of infrastructural works such as roads in the Amazon space, but also in the concrete forms of land cultivation he observes in Indigenous peoples and in his own process of writing his travelogue. Theories of environmental determinism turn out to be key in Triana's understanding of labour as a way of transforming nature and bringing progress to the Colombian frontiers. The article makes clear the rhetorical process through which different forms of materiality – roads, bridges, books, cultivation – are seen as parallel forms of embodiment in the discourse of engineering.*

**Keywords:** infrastructure; engineering; labour; Colombia; Amazon; materiality; climate; environmental determinism; Putumayo; Indigenous peoples

## Introduction

Miguel Triana (1859-1931), a Colombian writer, civil engineer, and politician known for his anthropological and archaeological works, especially for his study of prehistoric rock art, was sent in 1906 by then President Rafael Reyes (1904-1909) to survey the Colombian territory from the port city of Tumaco in the Pacific coast to the Amazonian region. More specifically, Triana's destination was a town named La Sofía (which Reyes himself had founded in the 1870s) in the Putumayo region, close to the border with Peru, and his mission was to find the best route to build a road that would connect the Andean region – traditionally associated in Colombia with “civilisation” – with the Amazon – usually described as an abandoned, barbarous, and unexploited region – which was exceedingly difficult to reach due to a steep and precipitous geography. While a road in the region was eventually built and inaugurated in 1912,<sup>1</sup> Triana's specific recommendations after his trip were quickly discarded and never followed. The most visible, material result of his trip was actually a book, Triana's *Por el sur de Colombia: excursión pintoresca y científica al Putumayo* (1907) [Through Southern Colombia: Picturesque and Scientific Excursion to the Putumayo], which will be the focus of this article.

*Por el sur de Colombia* is a complex, sui generis, and rather under-studied text. In this article I will discuss Triana's perspective on nature by exploring the environmental connotations of the discourse of engineering and its projections into space. I am interested in the ways of conceiving of transits and displacement in the frontier not just regarding the road Triana is projecting to build, but also with respect to other material elements that are built to modify the environment, such as bridges. My discussion of the poetics of engineering dialogues with the field of infrastructure studies, an emergent perspective within environmental studies. As Brian Larkin has affirmed, "infrastructure has its conceptual roots in the Enlightenment idea of a world in movement and open to change where the free circulation of goods, ideas, and people created the possibility of progress. This mode of thought is why the provision of infrastructures is so intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future" (2013, 332). We should keep this in mind when we seek to understand Triana's conceptualisation of nature. Triana was a liberal who cherished the notions of progress and modernisation and for whom the free circulation of people and goods was a key component of a modern nation. For him, building roads and transforming the modes of circulation in the frontiers were instrumental for achieving those ideals. In their book-length study of Triana's life and works, Carl Langeback and Natalia Robledo point out that his preoccupation with communications was central to his evolutionist understanding of indigenism and that, in his view, the liberal philosophy of perfectionism was akin to the construction of roads and railroads (2014, 193). In other words, building communication infrastructure meant for him civilising the nation. So, going back to Larkin's mention of temporality in relation to infrastructure, I am interested in exploring how in *Por el sur de Colombia* the fact that a road – or sometimes in the text a bridge – is projected into space implies a powerful symbolic operation of futurity. The traveller imagines different concrete bodily and environmental dynamics that involve desired forms of labour, circulation, and transformation of nature. I should mention an important caveat here, however: there is almost no concrete material infrastructure in *Por el sur de Colombia* to describe or to relate to, as the text does *not* narrate the construction of a road (or its aftermath) but presents a survey of the best route where it *could* be built. As Larkin has pointed out, "roads and railways (...) also operate at the level of fantasy and desire" (2013, 333), and so this article will focus largely on desire and projection, but also on concrete forms of alteration of the landscape that, while not being the road itself, help the traveller anticipate the possible material transformations it would bring.

This article will focus on two main aspects in *Por el sur de Colombia*: first, on the importance of labour; and, second, on the parallels between physical work and writing. Regarding the first aspect, I am referring to labour in two main ways: on the one hand, understood as physical effort, as a bodily exercise; on the other hand, understood as work, as a productive activity that modifies the environment and generates capital. These two connotations are at some points in the book closely related, but in general terms, in my reading, the first one has to do with the very narration of the trip, with the difficulties involved in merely trying to move forward amid various natural and logistical obstacles, with traversing rivers,

with the immobility to which travellers are at some points forced, but also with the intellectual work conceived of as labour and as generator of a concrete product. The final part of the article will deal with this aspect. The second way of understanding labour – which in this article will be addressed first – is centred on the observation of the work of others, of how they transform space following logics of production and also on a narrative of futurity – typical of this type of discourse – according to which the engineer imagines forms of generating capital that would have consequences on the landscape described: here there is not so much a description of the land but a projection of what that land can be transformed into through labour.

The role of labour in the debates regarding the nature-culture divide cannot be overstated. As is well known, this divide is constitutive of Western thought, and implies that humans are something essentially different and separated from nature. Philippe Descola has showed that this opposition has not existed everywhere, nor in all epochs. On the contrary, “it possesses a history of its own, conditioned by a particular system of organizing space and a particular style of alimentary regime that can in no sense be applied generally to other continents” (Descola (2005) 2013, 54). Somewhat simplifying these ideas, it could be said that labour is the key factor that makes nature become culture. It is important, in this sense, to remember that, for Marx, labour was a fundamental element in the distinction between culture and nature. Through work, humans can add value to nature, crafting it into something worth exchanging. But this needs to be historically situated. Working with Alfred Schmidt’s approach to Marx’s understanding of nature, Neil Smith explains that “with the emergence of bourgeois conditions of production” the original identity between man and nature “changes into its equally abstract opposite: the radical divorce of labor from its objective natural conditions” (2008, 35). At the same time, technology was understood by Marx as an emancipatory force (Smith (1984) 2008, 37). In *Grundrisse*, Marx explains how, under capitalism, nature becomes an object to be dominated: “For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself, and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse, so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production” (quoted in Worster 1985, 26).<sup>2</sup> In the context of the discourses of modernisation in the Americas, labour was also essential as the unknown portions of the national space were conceived of as a vast land, barbarous or uncultured, as wilderness, that needed to be transformed into merchandise and incorporated into the agroexport economy. These could be considered examples of what Marx called a “second” nature of artifice, the result of the effects of human energy and technique on nature (Worster 1985, 26).

Although I will explore moments when Triana imagines forms of environmental transformation through labour, as mentioned above there is nonetheless one material outcome of this trip: the book itself, which in interesting ways turns out to be a quite powerful substitute for (or equivalent to) the road. While being the result of a government-sponsored mission, Triana’s book is nothing like a dry official report; on the contrary, it is a highly personal and original text. Precisely, the

role that writing and literature play in it is notable: as we shall see, metaliterary scenes are abundant throughout its pages. In these scenes, the traveller represents himself during the act of writing, and sometimes writing itself appears as one of the main objectives of the trip, being even likened to forms of labour and physical work. In *Por el sur de Colombia*, the effort involved in moving forward accompanies the task of composing the book: in a way, these two parallel operations of construction are results of the environment and the challenging geography across which these bodies move. At the same time, it is worth noting the use of humour in the book, particularly of a self-deprecating sort: the narrator demonstrates that he is able to criticise his own project, pointing to its shortcomings, as when he fails miserably to communicate with Indigenous people he encounters (an episode I shall discuss in detail) or when he is abandoned by almost all members of the group that travels with him. This performative element evidences a clear consciousness of his own construction as a character who is aware of being read. In other words, *Por el sur de Colombia* isn't really – or solely – written for the president but for a reader who is also looking for entertainment: the narrator seeks to sustain the reader's attention, to whom he directs his words explicitly on several occasions. And this, again, has to do with the relevance of literature in Triana's book, as it can be read as part of a certain tradition of travelogues in which the supposedly official objectives merge with – and ultimately are subsumed by – the specific interests, whims or obsessions of the narrator, who ends up becoming the centre of the narrative. This intersection between the discourse of engineering, that of environmental planning, and that of a travel narrative focused on an omnipresent "I" produces a novel type of writing which, while convinced of the urgent necessity of colonising the frontier, shows a critique of that same logic or, at least, makes visible its shortcomings and contradictions.

## The place of the frontier in modern Colombia

The role that frontiers, or regions where the state does not have the monopoly of legitimate violence, play in the history of Colombia, and particularly in the country's territorial imagination, has been enormous. These "no man's lands" or places defined sometimes as *terra incognita* occupy an important part of the total territory of the country, and they have been time and again characterised as unknown, dangerous, and lawless but, at the same time, as potentially full of riches and natural resources ripe for possible exploitation. Even at the beginning of this century, in 2002, then Vice President Gustavo Bell affirmed that "Colombia has more geography than state" (quoted in Serje 2005, 27). But, as Margarita Serje has shown, the existence of this immense wilderness is also a rhetorical operation, because the modern nation-state needs its underside in order to better define itself: "the margins of civilisation can be described, rather than as realities that are external to it, as its condition of possibility" (2005, 10).<sup>3</sup> What interests me here regarding this representation deals with the place of labour as a force that can transform the frontier, as one of the key elements that, according to the *criollo* point of view of the Amazon, is fundamentally lacking there. The radical difference between nature

and culture – whose centrality is limited to the so-called Western world, as seen above – is pivotal in the definition of the nation-state and ideas of civilisation, and, related to this, the way that human bodies interact with the non-human world – labour being one form of this interaction – is central. This conceptualisation of nature is a form of what Neil Smith called an external nature “waiting to be internalized in the process of social production” (2008, 11). This internalisation is a form of domestication, in the literal sense of the word, making the savage and incomprehensible become one’s own and “legible”.

The Putumayo region, Triana’s destination in his trip, is one of these frontier territories, a “Colombian border zone *par excellence*” (Wylie 2013, 2). In those years, the region – Triana’s destination – was an important centre of rubber production. The most infamous case is that of the Peruvian Amazon Company, whose owner, Julio César Arana, controlled a rubber empire that depended on the forced labour of thousands of Indigenous peoples from the Putumayo region (the Huitoto and Bora communities were among the ones who suffered most). These groups endured physical punishment, torture, and murder by the thousands, of which Triana seems to be at least in part aware.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Arana’s company, with the tacit support of the Peruvian government, exploited lands that Colombia claimed as its own, which would lead to a war between the two countries between 1932 and 1933.<sup>5</sup> But, in more general terms, since the 1890s the more frequent problems were “the regular incursions into national territory by Peruvian and Brazilian *caucheros* (rubber tappers)” (Uribe 2017, 33). While in Triana’s text the references to the rubber boom are generally not detailed or abundant, there are clear mentions of this international tension near the border with Peru, as when the author includes a story told to him about how a post marking the border between Peru and Colombia in contested lands within the Putumayo region was removed by a Colombian, a kind of man who “through slaps in the face makes other people respect the national soil” (Triana [1907] 1950, 319).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, in this 1906 trip the anxiety of intellectuals and politicians (and of the Colombian nationalist discourse) regarding the trauma caused by the 1903 loss of Panama becomes tangible, as the narrator repeatedly reminds his reader about this episode, urging those in power to prevent something similar from happening in the Amazon region.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that Colombia needs to strengthen its control and colonisation of regions that on paper would belong to it but whose lack of population or of state presence would put them at risk of being seized by other countries. As we have seen, frontiers have historically constituted an obsession for the Colombian intelligentsia. As Serje has pointed out, “the inability of the Colombian state to consolidate, control and maintain the national territory has been one of the main – or perhaps *the* single main – obstacle for the achievement of its great ideals: to build a nation capable of guaranteeing development and democracy” (2005, 105–6). This rhetoric of vulnerability has triggered the state’s intervention at different points in history.

Miguel Triana was a staunch liberal and a strong supporter of the positivist and evolutionist ideas of Spencer and Darwin. Langebaek and Robledo (2014) describe him as an indigenist who believed that the route to civilisation included indigenising Colombia’s history, rather than whitening it. For him, Indigenous peoples

needed to play a part in *civilising the country*, that is, they were not merely passive subjects that needed to be civilised themselves. As mentioned above, Triana was one of the first in the country to study rock paintings, as shown by his texts *La civilización chibcha* (1922) [The Chibcha Civilisation] and *El jeroglífico chibcha* (1924) [The Chibcha Hieroglyph], where he shows admiration and praise for these ancient Andean civilisations (known also as Muiscas), although in reality he had been writing about Indigenous peoples at least since 1898 (Martínez-Pinzón 2019, 36). In regard to these studies, Langebaek and Robledo explain that, according to Triana, *La civilización chibcha* “had been the result of his idea of vindicating a race that had been despised by its contemporaries but which, while dejected and degenerated, formed nonetheless the sociological basis of our people” (2014, 46-7). While Triana had been a critic and a political adversary of Reyes during the last decade of the nineteenth century (Reyes was a conservative), the first years of the twentieth century brought a relative easing of political tensions. Reyes, an admirer of Porfirio Díaz’s positivism (his presidential motto was “less politics and more administration”) and of Theodore Roosevelt’s conquering logic, adopted an apparent pragmatism in his government, a decision that goes a long way toward explaining the inclusion of men of action (such as Triana himself) in it;<sup>8</sup> that is, of people who shared Reyes’s commitment to progress, combining the love for literature with military experience in the frontier.<sup>9</sup>

## Climate, labour, and migration

The edition I have consulted, published in 1950 by Colombia’s Ministry of Education, contains at the end of the book, as an appendix, the 15-page-long “Official Report about the Nariño Road to the La Sofia Port, on the Putumayo River” – this makes clear the different nature of each of the texts – and a map of southern Colombia. The narrative begins on the Pacific coast, then the travellers ascend the Andes mountains, passing through the town of Barbacoas, all the way to the city of Pasto, and finally they descend into the Amazon region – this being the hardest portion of the route – all the way to the village of Mocoa. The route followed is relevant because it shows the centrality of climate and heights in the ways culture and the economy – as well as their interactions with respect to labour – are understood. This idea of environmental determinism of course pre-dates Triana.<sup>10</sup> David Arnold, in his introduction to environmental history, traces these notions mainly to Montesquieu, who “repeated the Hippocratic formula that fertile soils produced weak, cowardly men, while barren soils bred brave sons. Warm climates relaxed the body; cold ones were bracing. It followed that ‘people are, therefore, more vigorous in cold climates’” (Arnold 1996, 21). Given the characteristics of its geography, Colombia has likely been the clearest case in Latin America where these distinctions were used insistently and with concrete results by the white civilising elites. The traveller and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was enormously influential in this regard. In his *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (1816) he proposes that there is not merely a “natural” difference between the high lands (known in Colombia as

*tierras altas*), characterised by their mild climate, and the low lands (*tierras bajas* or, more frequently, *tierra caliente*), where temperatures are significantly higher but, most important, a cultural one. According to Serje, for Humboldt “only in the cold climates of the high mountains are there possibilities for civilisation, since the wild and overwhelming nature of the burning plains and of the oppressive forests determines a sort of incapacity of low lands societies for ‘ascending’ to civilisation” (2005, 75). The capacity for work is in this view intrinsically linked to climate: high temperatures are believed to be a disincentive for the active transformation of the landscape, making bodies prone to immobility, unproductivity, and “degeneration”.<sup>11</sup> In his book *Una cultura de invernadero: Trópico y civilización en Colombia*, Felipe Martínez-Pinzón studies how several writers of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth formulated civilising projects taking into consideration the climate, particularly this precise opposition between the *tierras frías* and the *tierras calientes*. It could be said that in Colombia the notion of frontier is close to that of *tierra caliente*. The white *criollos* needed to expand the agricultural frontiers due to the demands of global capital (with its high demand for products that could only be cultivated in hotter lands), and so these frontiers began to be represented through a powerful racialising machine that had labour as one of its centres. The racialised bodies that lived in the lowlands would be disciplined – or face extermination – so that they could become a cheap workforce as part of this expansion of the frontier (Martínez-Pinzón 2016, 16).<sup>12</sup>

As his trip progresses, Triana notes with precision the changes in height and – correspondingly – in temperature; in turn, these changes determine for him the different forms of labour and environmental transformation he finds. Triana incorporates a key new element in his consideration of the national space, as he pays special attention to the migration and circulation of peoples. That is, for him there is not an exact correspondence between certain races and geographical regions – as was the norm in Colombian civilising discourse – but different populations circulate and find the more appropriate climates in order to work: “Those men who, like whites and Indians, seek to live in the high lands ( ...) are abler for work and civilisation than those who look for an easy life as they lack adaptation to an industrial regime. It is consoling for the future of these lands to know that the Indigenous race from the high plateaus is perfectly apt for civilisation” (Triana [1907] 1950, 81; emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> While the central notions – described above – about the relations between temperature and capacity for work are upheld here – and Black people, who mostly lived on the Pacific coast, are conspicuously not mentioned – the idea that Indigenous peoples are likened to whites in their work ethics and civilisation level is nonetheless striking. Indigenous populations can also migrate within the national space: rather than being intrinsically prone to idleness, they have sought the Andean region *so that they could work*. One of the ideas that Triana floats in the book is that Andean Indians can help “civilise” those who live in the lowlands: “this road would open the field for a voluntary migration of businesses toward the rich Caquetá, and the gradual and moderate exodus of the race from the cordillera, bearer of a stable civilisation, toward the wild plain, would be established” ([1907] 1950, 150).<sup>14</sup>



The way in which labour is conceived of turns out to be, then, of great interest. Mostly in the Andean regions, the subjects that appear more closely linked to the productive transformation of the environment are Indigenous people: they are portrayed as excellent *workers*. This amounts to a stark contrast not only to the rhetoric of conquest, used throughout colonial times to construe these groups as characterised by indolence, stupidity, and unproductivity, but also to the Colombian civilising discourse, which largely maintained those racist tropes. The colonising gaze has typically made use of a rhetoric of substitution, according to which the Indigenous person must be replaced by some kind of settler: sometimes Europeans, Africans, or Asians, depending on the place and time of the specific civilising discourse. There is no question that in *Por el sur de Colombia* one can find highly problematic moments involving Indigenous peoples, and not all the aboriginals the traveller encounters are described in this same way (these positive views are clearer in the Andes), but in general terms his perspective on the Indigenous cultures he finds is positive and includes a vindication of – and genuine interest in – their modes of life and their capacity for work. While the text presents an evident anxiety regarding the *tierras de nadie* or no-man’s lands the traveller visits, the opinions regarding the present times are largely positive: there is no explicit condemnation of the populations encountered, although this might contradict the notion that there is a “desert” – a word that Triana repeatedly uses to refer to the rainforest – that needs to be populated.<sup>15</sup> An example of this optimistic perspective on the other appears in Barbacoas, a small city Triana visits at the beginning of his trip, whose harmony – an important word in this book – is highlighted as follows: “Here there is no poverty; but there are no rich people either” (Triana [1907] 1950, 54).

There is no question that the emphasis is on the aboriginal’s physical force rather than on his education or intelligence. The admired and detailed descriptions of the beautiful and robust Indigenous bodies that appear at different points are telling in this respect. When the expedition is ready to initiate the descent into the Amazon, we read:

These men are marvellous for loading in these infernal paths: they are of athletic proportions; their legs have under the epidermis a muscular tissue which looks like steel serpents had wound themselves around the calves of a Laocoön (...) The imprints of these men’s feet look like those of elephants, and the tracks left on mud like those of an ox. When one sees them climb the mountain in a patient line, under their enormous packages, one can’t help but think of the figure represented by the god Atlas with the world on his shoulders. (Triana [1907] 1950, 140)

The description is ambivalent: while Triana looks at these bodies in awe, comparing them to mythical or godlike figures, they are also compared to animals as they are actually being treated as beasts of burden. And, at the same time, there is no trace here of the supposed biological degeneration or physical weakness that colonising and civilising discourses had attributed to the Indigenous peoples of the Americas for centuries.<sup>16</sup> There is no question: the text praises a certain

indigenous work ethics which, from Triana's perspective, "saves" the aboriginal and puts him squarely within the symbolic borders of the nation.

Indigenous people are, at the same time, objects of study. They generate curiosity in the narrator and remain for him at times inscrutable, although for that same reason there is also a profound awareness of the complexity of their cultures: the narrator makes a point of differentiating between the different groups that he successively encounters, tries to find out about their languages, or offers a possible explanation of their origins. A good example of this appears when the traveller approaches Pasto, in the cordillera, the highest point of the trip. The positive impressions regarding the spaces traversed are encapsulated in the description of indigenous work. Referring to the "Indian of the southern high plateau", Triana says, "This Indian discovered, projected, built, and keeps today, through the tolls he pays, the Barbacoas trail. This Indian was, is, and will be the matter, the vehicle and the object of the Equatorial nations' civilisation" ([1907] 1950, 89). As is the case with the description analysed above, there is here a remarkable insistence on matter and the circulation of bodies. Indigenous peoples are also those who do the engineers' work, as the trails that make travel and movement possible depend on them. This becomes outright problematic, however, when the bodies described or the physical strength praised are those of the Indigenous bodies *on which* the narrator travels. In addition, the previous quotation needs some contextualisation, since it is actually a likening of the Indigenous worker to a donkey. Immediately before the quotation, Triana states, 'We remember having once seen in an illustrated magazine (...) the photoengraving of a sad brooding donkey, carrying pickaxes, shovels, and drills, with this inscription at its base: 'This was the only worker that did not abandon, even for a single day, the interoceanic railway's works, from the beginning up to the end'" (88). This is followed by the praise of indigenous work as part of the state's civilising mission reproduced above. The vindication of indigenous work refers then to a material contribution; it is seen as a tool that progress uses but that is not clearly identified with it. Indigenous workers are seemingly a part of the civilisational process, but not so much of its results.

The cultural transformations that take place as the traveller ascends become clear for him:

as one ascends, the poles or stilts of houses become smaller, we hear fewer marimbas and the colours of the population become clearer, dirtiness becomes noticeable, the guinea pigs (small rabbits) begin to appear and become more numerous inside of them and, with the cold, the hospitality is less honest. Through the Barbacoas trail one could link the barometer to the different types, characters and customs of humans, from the sea to the high plateau. (Triana [1907] 1950, 71)<sup>17</sup>

The last sentence is of course a synthesis of the theories associating climate – and particularly heights – with sociological elements. Some characteristics identified with Black populations – such as music and hospitality – become rare as one ascends. And soon afterwards, land cultivation becomes apparent: "At Altaquer, 1,000 meters above sea level, one finds the first manifestations of agriculture" (75). The one responsible for these crops is largely the aboriginal who, a few lines after the narrator announces that

“we say goodbye to the hot land” (80), is characterised by his work ethics and identified with the white man, as we have seen.

Of course, Indigenous people are considered as valuable workers mostly when they live in the *tierras altas*. However, while Amazonians are not characterised in the same way as those living in the mountains, there is no reference to vagrancy, idleness or weakness on their part. Their “freedom” is instead highlighted. When the narrator arrives in the Putumayo region, he encounters Basilio, an Indigenous man whose specific group is never mentioned. Triana then states the purpose of his trip: “we told him that we had been commissioned by the President from Bogotá in order to see rivers and build a road to Pasto” (Triana [1907] 1950, 242). The description is eloquent, as it situates the state’s sponsorship of this trip alongside its infrastructural focus on different forms of circulation: rivers and roads appear as central to the project Triana represents. But Basilio’s answer, “¡Umjú!”, is arguably more eloquent. Triana goes on to offer a free – and perhaps ironic – interpretation of this sound as suggesting a vague awareness in Basilio “that our science constituted a threat to his life, his house and his happiness, concepts that were encapsulated in the forest’s holy freedom” (242). Triana reads this silence as resistant, or at least as suspicious or distrustful. This is important because this “answer” appears precisely when the trip is described as part of the state’s infrastructural project. The forms of circulation referred to in the minimal characterisation of Triana’s trip are central to the logics of the world that – according to Triana – is being perceived as endangered by his presence. This critical view of so-called civilisation appears numerous times in *Por el sur de Colombia*. The author denounces, among other things, the “trickeries, swindles and the thousand spoliations perpetrated by the white men against the Indians, with the excuse of their superiority in the human hierarchy. To introduce white people within the Indigenous communities is to impose on them servitude and to determine their extinction or social dispersal” (356). Coherent with his evolutionist and Spencerian credo, Triana assumes the superiority of whites, while at the same time denouncing their violent excesses and forms of exploitation.<sup>18</sup>

This is one of the revealing moments when “other” voices are given space in the text, thus complicating an official perspective that could be otherwise understood as monolithic. After having received on several occasions these interjections as responses by Basilio, Triana ends up repeating and incorporating the very same “Umjú!” as part of his own discourse. This operation, for Martínez-Pinzón, suggests the scepticism with which Triana himself (as well as Basilio, naturally) approaches the idea of the nation as civilising discourse “and the happy acquiescence of the indigenous people in allowing themselves to be incorporated, as hispanized mestizo laborers, into the project of nationhood” (Martínez-Pinzón 2019, 42).

## Engineering, infrastructure, writing

It is worth reflecting on the role of the engineer in *Por el sur de Colombia*, particularly if we put it in the context of several narratives of these years linked to the state’s gaze toward the Amazon. As in Triana’s book, the engineer appears in

many of these texts as a traveller and a writer but also, as in the short story “Inferno verde” (Green Hell), published in 1908 by the Brazilian writer and engineer Alberto Rangel, as the protagonist – in the case of Rangel, a tragic one – of some key stories. In this context we can also consider the Amazon writings of the Brazilian engineer Euclides da Cunha, whose essays included in the posthumous book *À margem da história* (At the Margins of History), published in 1909, discuss the importance of understanding and controlling the rivers, which appear as nomadic and barbaric to him (Uriarte 2019; Kozikoski Valereto 2018). The engineer is, in a certain sense, the emblematic figure of the conquering logic that extends over the Amazon in this period. In fact, from the nineteenth century to the present, when the construction of gigantic dams on the Amazonian rivers – such as the Belo Monte, on the Xingu River – is having profound environmental and social consequences, the modern state has thought of transforming Amazonia from the perspective of what we could call infrastructural utopia, or infrastructural imagination (this discourse is a modern version of the centuries-old idea that Amazonia is a land waiting to be exploited, as the colonial legend of El Dorado, for example, implies).<sup>19</sup> I am interested in these expressions because they juxtapose the strong materiality of infrastructure with the aesthetic connotations linked to desire and beauty, and also to delirious ambitions of grandeur, where the notion of the sublime, so often used to refer to natural landscapes, can be helpful to describe immense works of infrastructure (Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal 2015, 576). My claim here is that the tensions between desiring projection and material-extractive depredation that have characterised the modern ways of representing – and relating to – the Amazonian space can be better understood through the lens of infrastructure.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout *Por el sur de Colombia*, Triana repeatedly mentions his profession. This might be due to the prestige that it had acquired toward the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, where it had been key to the transformation of urban and rural landscapes. As architect Marta Macedo affirms, engineers became to a large extent the eyes and the hands of the state on the territory since their work was seen as essential to the material construction of the state (2012, 27). In this respect, my analysis highlights the relationship between bureaucracy and public works as fundamental to state-building. As suggested above, roads, bridges, and railroads are materialisations of the state, concrete ways in which the state “speaks” while imagining and narrating space. This prestige, which stems from the role of the engineer in the construction of “technological landscapes” (Macedo 2012, 28), could explain this insistence on pointing out the narrator’s profession (a profession which is the explanation for the trip, of course). This becomes explicit many times in the book. When he visits Pasto, the point from where the expedition begins its descent toward the Putumayo, and after discussing the projected construction of a road, Triana concludes: “We, the engineers, were fashionable in Pasto, and a dream of progress enlivened the people from the South” ([1907] 1950, 104).

The engineer had a crucial role in enhancing the capitalist state’s ability to “dominate” nature. From the perspective of instrumental reason, the idea is to project an order onto nature, thus making landscape legible (and exploitable). Expert knowledge, together with the figure of the technocrat, becomes an essential

instrument in order for this project to come to fruition. Donald Worster proposes that “[t]he contemporary engineer (...) reinforces directly and indirectly the rule of instrumentalism and unending economic growth” (1985, 57), and ends up delineating a decisively bleak outlook on the role of this type of knowledge: “Democracy cannot survive where technical expertise, accumulated capital, or their combination is allowed to take command” (57). It can be said that Triana wrote at a moment when Colombia was beginning to move in this direction (in his 1985 book, Worster studies projects of water management between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the deserted west of the USA). Nevertheless, it should be said that the importance of the engineer is sometimes questioned by the narrator himself, an operation that turns the rhetoric of engineering (as well as the idea of the state as a homogeneous entity with precise objectives) into something barely monolithic and rather unstable.

In fact, at times the text belittles – and even ridicules – the work done by the engineer; in these moments, the narrator’s characterisation as a traveller and adventurer overshadows his profession and the authority that comes with it. First, because Triana’s mission *does not involve any type of construction whatsoever*. His task is pure potentiality, it is entirely a matter of projecting and imagining. He must, as we know, find a route by which a road could – perhaps – be built (something that does not happen in the way proposed by the author). Going back to Macedo’s idea, we could say that Triana is more clearly the eyes of the state, but *not its hands*. He is a subtle observer, who expresses opinions that are original at times, while not modifying the landscape in material ways: he projects onto the space the effects brought about by the construction of roads, bridges, or ports. As a matter of fact, the constructions he realises (or that, to be precise, his assistants realise) are limited to the erection of precarious structures that work as bridges, and for whose construction the traveller needs to forget about the methods and theories learnt as part of his training as an engineer (I shall come back to this below).

As he travels through the Colombian territory, the narrator mentions on many occasions the work that other engineers have done, which points to the existence of a collective identity, of the consciousness of a group that holds power and prestige. For instance, he praises a hanging bridge that according to him should be named “Triana’s bridge” (this Triana, another engineer, is not his relative, he clarifies). This bridge made of wire is a “kind of ironic miniature, thanks to which science overcame an abyss” (Triana [1907] 1950, 90). In her beautiful study of the artistic representations of the bridge in nineteenth-century Colombia, Verónica Uribe Hanabergh explains how, toward the end of the century, these precarious bridges began to be replaced with modern ones, iron-made, which rendered mobility more efficient, as the necessity of making crossings controlled and safer, reducing the risks of falling into the waters or making horses cross them, became imperative: “control over routes, control over commerce, control over money, control over power” (Uribe Hanabergh 2016, 108). The task of the engineer – like the travellers’ difficult movement forward through a hostile terrain – is seen as a struggle against space, as a way of overcoming the obstacles found along the way. This task should be considered, from the perspective of the capitalist state, as one of struggle and domination: “Science and technology are given a place of

honor in the capitalist state. (...) Where nature seemingly puts on human wealth, engineering presumes to bring unlimited plenty” (Worster 1985, 52).

As pointed out earlier in this article, I am interested in exploring the intersection between the rhetoric of engineering and that of literature, that is, to consider the writing of engineers as one that can have an important aesthetic component, including figurative or symbolic elements. There are moments like these in *Por el sur de Colombia*. The road, which, as we know, won’t be built following Triana’s suggestions, is nonetheless present in the narrator’s imagination: in a chapter eloquently titled “El sueño del camino” (The dreamed-of trail) he proceeds to imagine how travelling through the region would feel once the road was built. We know that infrastructures “encode the dreams of individuals and societies” (Larkin 2013, 333), an element intimately linked to the idea of progress. In this chapter, nothing actually happens: Triana limits all activity to daydreaming. As a result of the projected route, he “sees” in the region crops, colonies, and houses. The fantasised travel becomes then uneventful, comfortable (the experience is described with adjectives such as “ameno” [pleasant] and “útil” [useful]). This almost delirious and certainly carnivalesque expression of desire – Hannah Appel shows that infrastructural discourse about the future can be “at once utopic and surreal” (2018, 50) – ends with a vindication of work as a form of appropriation of the land, as Triana refers to “a virile people, who knew how to make their own, through labour, that which the motherland had bequeathed them through an abstract law” ([1907] 1950, 161). One becomes part of the nation through labour: land cultivation is understood as a way to materialise nationhood, to make the nation’s existence in the Amazon a practical and concrete experience. In other words, the nation is seen as bodies at work, and work appears as the vehicle to gain full citizenship. The following chapter, when the traveller mentally returns to the actual lack of roads, will quickly destroy this fantasy of a forest across which one can easily glide by revealing its exact opposite: immobility, obstacles, and constant physical effort required to move forward.

The book does not only emphasise the narrator’s profession, though. His writing activity is also highlighted. We should then analyse this figure of the writer-engineer considering the perspective on geography and the environment put forward in the book. When the expedition is already in the Putumayo, Triana and his closest assistant are abandoned by all their men. They must then decide what to leave behind if they want to move forward at all. The narrator cannot bring himself to leave his instruments for measuring (compass, sextant, thermometer, hypsometer, instruments for determining the slope of the terrain), but, significantly, he also decides that two books must be “saved” along with his own writing materials. The books are “el *Diario de la expedición* and my *Viaje al Caquetá*” ([1907] 1950, 193), regarding similar voyages of exploration to the nation’s frontiers. He will now carry with himself – the physical intimacy and the effort involved in this movement forward are both symbolically relevant – two kinds of instruments of description and measurement of the Amazon: those of the engineer and those of the writer.

As pointed out above, the region near Pasto is the highest of the entire trip, from where the travellers descend into the Amazon. Although the reader has left behind more than 100 very interesting pages – about one quarter of the entire

book – the text rhetorically proposes that the trip starts here, not only because this is the beginning of its most arduous part, but also because this is the point when *writing* begins: “A series of adventures worthy of a book awaited us, and for this reason we came up with the idea of writing the one the kind reader now has in his hands: if you find this to be absurd, you should thank the contract person in charge of the organisation” (Triana [1907] 1950, 106). The frequent moments when the narrator speaks directly to the reader, related generally to the ways in which the book betrays the latter’s expectations or demands an extraordinary patience from them, are largely humorous. At the same time, the themes of lack and abandonment, which appear repeatedly, tend to constitute absurd explanations for the writing. The previous quotation is misleading, since of course both travel and writing have already begun. But it is a good example of one of the preferred fictions of travel narratives: that of representing writing as if it happened contemporaneously to the trip itself, generating therefore an impression of spontaneity which these texts mostly lack. However, the idea is that it is only at this point in the trip that the traveller will begin to find new spaces and when the trip becomes difficult, characterised by precariousness, weakness, and suffering: that is, travel becomes an exceptional experience, an adventure worth writing. Travel is not precisely what begins now, but exploration. Writing becomes one of the components of the trip and what is more, one of its objectives. The book – just like the road – becomes one of the expected results of the exploration:

when the passable road ended, we smugly took out the bag, we sat down at a cliff and we wrote the following: “We are at the height that separates the Pacific and the Atlantic; we left behind the land cultivated in squares by the Indigenous inhabitants of the Atrís valley, as well as the mean interests of civilised men; before us an amphitheatre of rough and lugubrious hills develops which hide from our sight the panorama of the immensity of the Amazonian plain, where the Indians, sons of freedom, live”. (Triana [1907] 1950, 106–7)

Where the road ends (but the new road would begin), writing begins. The difficult, slow or painful movement forward through new lands becomes the nucleus of the writing. Travel stops, and this makes the task of writing – which in turn becomes the centre of all action – possible. When there is no movement forward, the attention shifts to time rather than to spaces and concentration on the exercise of writing is possible. Travel is the opposite of writing; it has to become difficult in order for the latter to exist.

Right before entering the forest, the quite rudimentary construction of a bridge is narrated, and here again narrative and infrastructure go hand in hand. While the construction is entirely precarious, this is a moment when the river – in this case the Guamués, a tributary of the Putumayo, described as “a river almost unknown by geographers at the entrance to the Amazon jungle” (Triana [1907] 1950, 167) – has a strong presence in the story. With his typical irony, the narrator refers to the bridge – which is no more than a few tree trunks – as “the magnus work of this trip” (169). Once the “bridge” is finished and the group traverses it, this is celebrated as a victory of man’s inventiveness over nature. But, tellingly, the



successful construction of this “bridge” was possible thanks to an utter disregard for all the principles of the “art of construction”, that is, for the scientific knowledge that explains the very presence of Triana in those territories. This is a recurrent theme: the narrator increasingly embraces bodily force as he discards scientific or “complicated” ways of problem-solving. The physical work that others perform under the engineer’s instructions does not prevent him from claiming responsibility for this supposed milestone in the trip: “We have won the definitive battle; there will be only skirmishes now. The problem of the road has been resolved. I thank my workmen for the passage over the river, and the country will thank me, you will see” (Triana [1907] 1950, 171). The ironic answer of his assistant presents several levels of complexity: “‘Dream on, my heart, dream on: this is how the thistles in the path of life become less sharp’, my assistant hummed, making a refrain from the opening words of this chapter, which he had observed me write over the shoulder” (171). First, this answer undercuts the apparent assertiveness of the statement, in an operation akin to the one involving Basilio, analysed above. Second, and perhaps more important, the assistant quotes from the same book we are reading (in fact, “Sueña corazón, sueña” are the words with which this very chapter opens), of whose writing he is a witness; the process of writing is parallel to that of travelling, as the assistant accompanies both. In this chapter, imagination plays a pivotal role: as indicated, the road begins as a “dream” and then it metamorphoses into the construction of the bridge, and thus the real and “dreamed” trip oppose each other or, better, alternate throughout the narrative. Dreaming, as we saw above, is a way of escaping the obstacles that complicate and slow down movement. In these chapters, which come immediately after the travellers leave Pasto, there is an abundance of descriptions as well as of narrations of imaginary stories and contemplation, precisely because *there is nothing to tell*. In a metaliterary operation, the book and its writing become one of the events of the trip that the travellers witness, accompany, and quote. The diary is read practically at the same moment when it is written: the impression of immediacy is strong, as is the attention to the writing process. The book becomes something that is built while the group moves forward, perhaps as the road itself should have been. The writing of the book and the construction of the road are thus parallel: they are two works in construction and in a close relationship with the environment, which they seek to transform. Furthermore, when Triana narrates the tasks to which his aide and himself dedicate their free time, material construction and writing are likened. While Triana writes, his aide works on repairing a camp bed: “Writing for the sake of writing and carpentering for the sake of carpentering are two vices of entertainment, as any other. But we had closed a deal: ‘You arrive in Pasto with a travelling camp bed, of your exclusive invention, and I bring an adventures book’” ([1907] 1950, 204). These are two concrete outcomes of the trip that the travellers will be able to show once they return to Pasto, in the Andes. The parallel construction of the book and the camp bed are mentioned repeatedly throughout the book. While relaxing, writing is seen as a manual labour, involving technique and inventiveness.

Near San José, in the Putumayo region, Triana encounters an Indigenous community, which he describes as having welcomed the expedition better than people from the high



class of Pasto. He is then asked about his job, which he describes in this way: “Building roads, travelling (...) writing adventures for now” ([1907] 1950, 310). His answer fittingly juxtaposes three elements that imply the centrality of circulation and displacement in his Amazon trip. Telling stories and building roads are forms of *moving things forward*, of connecting peoples and places. If we consider Larkin’s definition of infrastructure as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (2013, 328) we could think that the book, particularly the way its *manufacturing* is narrated in *Por el sur de Colombia*, could very well be read as a concrete, material product of human technique and technology that ends up working as a connector and facilitator of circulation, just as a piece of infrastructure; or perhaps more precisely, a substrate of visible infrastructure, “required for its construction and maintenance” (Appel 2018, 52). We can conclude, then, by returning to the theory of environmental determinism as an explanation for the very writing of the book, *Por el sur de Colombia* is a narrative of precariousness and abandonment, but the very roughness of the terrain, the many obstacles it opposes to the explorer’s movement forward, are what makes it worth telling. As Deneb Kozikoski Valereto has pointed out with reference to the writings of the German explorer Franz Keller, “the longing for an encounter with natural obstacles” is what excites “the explorer and require[s] physical action” (2018, 51). And, we should add, this need for natural obstacles also triggers *writing*, understood as work and technology.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. This route was built mostly by the Capuchin missionaries in the region with the support of the state (Uribe 2017, 73-80).
2. Sociologist John Bellamy Foster (2000) has argued that Marx should be read beyond the idea that labour contributes to internalising nature, and seeks to show how he did not just offer scattered environmental insights, but that a consistent ecological thinking can be found in his work.
3. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of texts written in languages other than English are mine.
4. In his official report, which is included in the same edition of *Por el sur de Colombia* cited in this article, Triana denounces the almost complete annihilation of Indigenous inhabitants in the Putumayo region: “The Indian trafficking still subsists, being the main cause of depopulation: we can mention to support this seemingly daring assertion, the sale, made recently by a Mr Larrañaga to the Peruvian Casa Arana y Ca, of a numerous tribe that the latter enslaved at the La Chorrera site” (1950, 392-93). While the scale of the systematic “culture of terror” (Taussig 1991, 121) under Arana remained most likely unknown to Triana, this constitutes a rather early accusation if we consider that the first public impactful denunciations of the system were the reports of Peruvian journalist Benjamín Saldaña Rocca, which appeared in Iquitos in 1907–1908. According to Roberto

- Pineda Camacho (2000), “it is estimated that between 1900 and 1910, more than 40,000 natives may have been killed” (100).
5. Regarding the political tensions, discursive formations, and spatial imagination at the origin of this war, see Zárate Botía (2019).
  6. To be clear, while the region of Mocoa, in the Putumayo, is quite close to the Ecuadorian border, Triana himself does not get close to the Peruvian border, where these episodes take place. By telling these stories to the reader, Triana wants to “draw a picture of the distant low Putumayo region, where we cannot take the reader, nor are we able to go there ourselves due to the urgency to return” (Triana [1907] 1950, 319).
  7. For example, as he sees the laborious Indigenous population near the city of Pasto, close to the border with Ecuador, Triana grows anxious about what might happen in the near future, as the positive signs he describes in the landscape could easily disappear: “we feel forced to raise the alarm, as we did before the President of the Republic, with respect to Panama, in the inaugural discourse of the Bogotá Geographic Society, sometime before the separatist movement which so caught our wretched then-president by surprise” ([1907] 1950, 85). The president in 1903 was José Manuel Marroquín (1900-1904).
  8. On Reyes’s relationship with Roosevelt, see the account of their encounter as reproduced and discussed by Uribe (2017, 21-22).
  9. At the same time, the liberals bore no particular animosity toward Reyes, who did not participate in the Thousand-Day War (a civil war between 1899 and 1902) – he was ambassador in France during those days – and boasted about being an impresario and a loyal adversary in the 1895 civil war (Martínez-Pinzón 2019, 37).
  10. He refers to this as “geographic psychology”, defining it as “the correlation between the characteristics of the landscape and the ideas of the men who observe them” (Triana [1907] 1950, 238).
  11. These ideas were also prominent in the writings of the Colombian geographer Francisco José de Caldas (1768-1816), who likened the inhabitants of the Colombian Andes to Europeans and established a categorisation of regions and their populations: “the wilderness inhabited by ‘savage hordes’, the hot lands inhabited by Blacks and miscegenated peoples marked by the nefarious influence of the torrid climate and the ‘elevated’ groups of the Andean lands” (Serje 2005, 92).
  12. The idea that the tropics would correspond to a *previous* moment in history with respect to the temperate zones is one additional element of what Martínez-Pinzón calls “anti-tropical thought” in Colombian lettered and political elites (2016, 18).
  13. Later on, during its description of Pasto, the text identifies Indigenous people with production at various points. See, for example: “The Indian woman weaves on a loom, the Indian man cultivates the land, the Indian children herd the sheep” (Triana [1907] 1950, 95); “As tributaries of the city, these indigenous villages surround, serve and embellish it” (96).
  14. In addition, Triana calls for Asian immigration, particularly from China and Japan, a stance that was not shared by the majority of Colombian elites by then. Chapter VIII in the first part of the book, titled “Los chinos” (The Chinese), is entirely devoted to this issue.
  15. My interpretation here somewhat differs from Lesley Wylie’s assertion that this text is one of the first examples of a certain “infernal” tone that would characterise a great part of the writing about Amazonia since the beginning of the twentieth century (2013, 68). While the Amazon is unquestionably for Triana a mysterious and threatening region, the “infernal” or tragic tone does not really predominate in *Por el sur de Colombia*, where

- adventure and humour characterise the urge for progress and productivity in these “new” lands.
16. Additional examples abound. In his visit to Pasto, the narrator stops to look at the Indigenous bodies: “Good height, muscular, of an almost white colour and a sweet and snide physiognomy, the Indians in the proximity of Pasto suggest, as much as the agricultural products, the fertility of and love for the land” (Triana [1907] 1950, 96). It is worth noticing that the Indigenous men that are praised for their physical strength and their capacity for work are also described as almost white.
  17. Here, I translate the Spanish “páramo” as high plateau. Simón Uribe explains that “the term *páramo* refers to a grassland ecosystem located mainly in the upper parts of the northern Andes, in altitudes generally ranging from 3,000 to 4,500 metres above sea level” (2017, 16).
  18. Also in his 1913 book *Al Meta*, Triana acknowledges the destructive impulses of civilisation – which he nonetheless never disavows – and how it implies that the Indigenous people’s usage and control of the river ends as the state now possesses it: “The Guahibos are right when they shout in broken Spanish to the passengers of the steamboat that makes trips through the Orinoco River: ‘White man, thief! Boat mine, river mine!’” (Triana 1913, 135).
  19. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s way of describing the Amazon constitutes substantial evidence that this classical discourse is very much alive.
  20. One example – among many – might prove sufficient here: the railroad between the Madeira and Mamoré rivers, whose construction between 1907 and 1912 caused the death of thousands of migrant workers and was almost contemporary with the trip studied in this article (the railroad was subsequently abandoned). On the construction of this railroad, among others, see Francisco Foot Hardman’s *Trem fantasma*, as well as the article by Carolina Sá Carvalho in this special issue.

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