

# THE RETURN TO THE ANCESTORS IN VITO APÜSHANA'S POETRY\*

## EL RETORNO A LOS ANCESTROS EN LA PALABRA DE VITO APÜSHANA

Mildred del Carmen Nájera Nájera<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This article is a result of the research project "Representaciones simbólicas de la abundancia y la escasez alimentaria en la obra de Ramón Paz Ipuana" [Symbolic representation of abundance and scarcity in Ramon Paz Ipuana's work] to opt for a Master's degree.

**How to cite this article:** Nájera Nájera, M. (2021). El retorno a los ancestros en la palabra de Vito Apüshana. *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana* (49), pp. 121-136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.elc.n49a07>



[mildrednajera@gmail.com](mailto:mildrednajera@gmail.com)

Universidad de las Américas, Ecuador

**Abstract:** Vito Apüshana's poetry recreates and celebrates the Indigenous world from which he comes. In his poetry, life intertwines with death, and the connection with the ancestors maintains the order of a universe composed of manifold simultaneous and fluctuating dimensions. Based on the principles of the Wayuu worldview, this article analyzes how the author, through poetic language, presents life as a path towards death, a stage where existence is prolonged and you return to your ancestors.

**Keywords:** poetry; Wayuu people; ancestors; return; worldview.

**Resumen:** Vito La poesía de Vito Apüshana recrea y celebra el mundo indígena del cual proviene. Allí la vida se enlaza con la muerte, y la conexión con los ancestros mantiene el orden de un universo compuesto de varias dimensiones simultáneas y fluctuantes. Partiendo de los principios de la cosmovisión wayuu, en el presente artículo se analiza cómo el autor, mediante el lenguaje poético, representa la vida como senda hacia la muerte, instancia donde se prolonga la existencia y se retorna a los ancestros.

**Palabras claves:** poesía; wayuu; ancestros; retorno; cosmovisión.

**Editors:** Andrés Vergara Aguirre,  
Christian Benavides Martínez

**Recibido:** 15.02.2021

**Aprobado:** 21.05.2021

**Publicado:** 30.06.2021

**Copyright:** ©2021 *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana*.

Este es un artículo de acceso abierto distribuido bajo los términos de la [Licencia Creative Commons Atribución - No comercial - Compartir igual 4.0 Internacional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)



Check for  
updates

Vito Apüşhana is one of the heteronyms used by the Wayuu poet Miguel Ángel López, who began an intercultural poetic journey in 1992 with the publication of the poetry collection *Contrabando sueños con alijunas cercanos* [I smuggle dreams with nearby *Alijunas*<sup>1</sup>]. In that initial work, he declared his intention to write “our voices / for those who do not know us, / for visitors seeking our respect... / I smuggle dreams with nearby outsiders” (Apüşhana, 1992, p. 7).

Juan Duchesne (2015) referred to this condition, when he noted that Apüşhana’s poetry is halfway two enunciation loci:

firstly, that of the rhapsodist speaking to his inner self and to his people, not as a modern author entertained by an individual expression of incidental experiences, but rather as the updater of the traditional space of participation formed by the multiple voices of his people; secondly, that of someone writing for the outsiders by “assuming the role of spokesperson of the community for a new type of contact, different to the one which has historically marked the loss of identity of his people” (Ferrer and Rodríguez, 1998, p. 120, cited by Duchesne). (Duchesne, 2015, p. 25)

To achieve that, Duchesne goes on, the author should adopt a bi-vocal enunciation through the combination of his mother tongue, Wayuunaiki, with the Spanish of the *Alijuna*, thus reaffirming “a reality that is doubly named, that is, it has a double existence in the Wayuu and alijuna universe (Ferrer & Rodríguez 1998, p. 116)” (Duchesne, 2015, p. 26).

Vito Apüşhana’s poetry offers the opportunity to explore a poetic creation based on Wayuu Orality, which consists of “the recreation of their myths, fables, and legends [...] multiple of a collective past” (Paz Ipuana, 1987, p. 71), sung by various voices that have been transmitted from one generation to the next. The author gathers these voices through poetry, “a genre capable of informing about life in all its dimensions” (p. 73), tracing the flow of language back to its original source (Paz, 1993, p. 41). For the Wayuu, this source lies in the origins, in the spheres inhabited by the ancestors that sustain the everyday world. A cyclical conception of flux traces the *continuum* between life and death, the constant interaction between worlds connected by thresholds, shores, and borders where the living communicate with the dead, and the primeval ancestors intervene to maintain the order of the universe. According to this, in the Wayuu worldview, life extends into death, where one returns to their ancestors to

---

<sup>1</sup> Alijuna is a term in the Wayuunaiki language to describe an outsider to the ethnic group.

ensure the physical and ideological survival of the group. Due to this entire symbolic background that nourishes Apüshana's poetry, this article analyzes the representation of the return to the ancestors in four of his poems.

The purpose of this return is expressed in different dimensions of Wayuu culture, and in the maternal circle, Wayuus become aware of the direction this gives to their existence. It is not by chance that the poetry collection from which the poems were selected is titled *En las hondonadas maternas de la piel* [In the maternal hollows of the skin] (2010). There, Miguel Ángel López is Vito, who "devotes daily to the tasks of herding, searching for water... and what distinguishes him from his kin: writing legends, stories, poems" (Bravo, 2010, p. 151). From these poems, "Pastores" [Shepherds], "Mar" [Sea] "De un alaüla de Alemasahua" [From an alaüla of Alemasahua] and "Vivir-morir" [Living-dying] were chosen to demonstrate that Vito Apüshana represents life as a path towards death, a stage where existence is prolonged, and one returns to their ancestors, as explained by the Wayuu cosmovision.

To attempt an approach to this return through the words of Vito Apüshana, it is first necessary to recognize the poet's locus of enunciation; then, to present some features of the Wayuu symbolic universe from which the poetic word is nourished, and finally, in light of the above, to identify the rhetorical figures that construct the images of life as a path towards death and the discovery of the transcendent, to reflect on the images that establish the link between life and death, and finally, to interpret the images that refer to the return to their ancestors.

### **Collective Voices in Vito Apüshana**

Vito Apüshana is an heir to a tradition whose literary status has not always been valued as such. The works of various authors (Niño, 2008; Rocha, 2012) have documented the different attitudes towards indigenous literatures over time, ranging from exclusion and subordination (Niño, 2008, p. 46) to attempts to listen to "the voice of the other," first through mediators (chroniclers, translators, researchers), and later in the voices of the Indigenous people themselves, whose texts and stories are beginning to be recognized "as literature in terms of equality and correspondence" (p. 33). This is amidst the various conceptualizations used so far to name indigenous literary traditions: ethnopoetry, ethno-literature, ethnofiction, ethnotext, and oraliture.

For Hugo Niño (2008), an ethnotext is a text with heritage references (p. 30) linked to processes of cultural knowledge and retrieval (pp. 36–37), which can express both Indigenous and intercultural views combining the perspective of outside observers (p. 38). Yoro Fall introduced the notion of *oraliture*, in opposition to literate history and literature (Niño, 2008, pp. 27, 36). Miguel Rocha (2010) embraces this notion and puts it forward to name the period of Indigenous literature in Colombia where Indigenous authors become visible. Thus, according to him, oraliture would be the true Indigenous literature with intercultural literary purposes (p. 34).

Following Niño and Rocha's path to understand the varied attitudes towards Indigenous literature, Wayuu literature has a vast ancestral legacy prior to the Spanish Conquest, which was tossed aside during times of exclusion and subordination. Chronicles and various written documents from the Conquest up to the 20th century persistently portray Indigenous peoples as barbarians. Later on, that image would be nuanced by other voices, including those of Wayuu authors that pioneered the “transition [...] between the informant and the Indigenous writer” (Rocha, 2012, p. 65), as demonstrated by Wayuu Antonio Joaquín López, the first Indigenous Colombian author of a novel: *Los dolores de una raza* [The pains of a race] (1957). While features of the ethnoliterary period can be recognized within the corpus of Wayuu literature, in the case of López and other Wayuu authors, their closeness to ethnotext and oraliture can also be affirmed, as they have built a narrative tradition based on the compilation of their oral tradition and original creation.

Amid this critical and academic discussion, the legacy of Wayuu literature emerges from its own voices and enters the literate arena with Antonio Joaquín López and his aforementioned novel, which depicts scenes of slavery, hunger, and wars in the Guajira desert. Although today's Wayuu writers prefer to use the term Indigenous literature (Rocha, 2010, p. 38) to refer to their works, Ramón Paz Ipuana (1987) had defined it as “Indigenous Wayuu oral literature” (p. 71), since, as he notes, “the literary goes beyond writing itself” (p. 71). For the author, his people's “autochthonous genre” must use the written medium to preserve and recreate their tradition (p. 79). This Wayuu author's aim to include orality within the realm of literature has a correspondence with Western literary studies. In his pragmatic study of oral literary narrative, Ulpiano del Pino (2003) recounts the various views towards oral tradition and supports the use of “oral literature” (p. 115). Del Pino argues that oral literature

retains its literary specificity by combining elements of narrative with those of drama to be represented by a narrator (p. 115).

Indeed, Wayuu literature has not disappeared. It lives through orality and is deployed in written creations by authors who are nurtured by their clan's tales; they recreate their ancestors' voices, and decipher dreams through poetic images. Paz Ipuana's (1987) call on future writers to "recreate forgotten themes," "rescue cultural heritage," and uncover Wayuu people's "hidden stories" (p. 80) has reverberated in different generations of Wayuu authors. Those writers, starting with Joaquín López, have built a written corpus within the singular panorama of Latin American literature that paradoxically was born from a denial of its Indigenous sources but at the same time sought to break with colonial past. However, the decisive features of this Latin American literature would emerge from such a paradox: the search for independence based on originality and representativeness (Rama, 1982, p. 15).

To expand this horizon, Latin American literature scholar Ángel Rama (1982) points out that in the formation of American societies within the framework of political and ideological independence projects, literature was required to represent both social classes and the expression of regional cultural originality (p. 15). By restoring the place of "literary works within the cultural operations carried out by American societies" (p. 19), Rama reveals the "cultural plasticity" visible in the struggle between the *avant-garde* and regionalism, two extremes in the continuous pendulum movement of Latin American literature, between keeping up with external input and recognizing itself in the ancestral. Beyond considering this plasticity as a response to some modernizing acculturation, Rama sees regionalism as a fully transculturating movement when it takes elements from modernity, when it reviews regional cultural contents in light of them, and when it makes up a hybrid out of both sources, a hybrid able to continue to transmit the inherited legacy (p. 29), that is, a new cultural product or situation rather than simply some legacy from the foreign.

This emphasis on a living and transformative American culture is taken up by Rama from Fernando Ortiz's transcultural category. The latter problematizes the supposed unidirectional Anglo-Saxon transformations of culture. Rama (1982) rethinks transculturation in the realm of Latin American literary criticism, and, "adapting" Ortiz's previous idea, he includes the criteria of selection and invention in the transcultural process (p. 38) —the starting point of which would be some loss or

partial deculturation. However, before getting to create new cultural phenomena, two types of choices should be made —one at the level of external elements and the other by an internal cultural rediscovery, whereby the choice would be for the elements capable to enter into a dialogue with the external and to embrace changes without giving up on their own heritage. Finally, a recomposition would occur, by incorporating the previously chosen elements through a creative or inventive operation resulting in an “encompassing restructuring of the cultural system” or neoculturation. Helping the analysis, Rama (1982) traces back this restructuring breaking it down into three literary categories: language, literary structure, and worldview (pp. 40–56).

Despite how widely welcome Rama’s ideas were, they have been targets of criticism for fetishizing the subaltern as a sign of authenticity (Sobrevilla, 2001, p. 23), and for homogenizing Latin American culture, as it was reduced to a single literary system (p. 24). This was disputed by Cornejo Polar (1989), since “in Latin America there is not one literature but genuine literary systems with different subjects, times, and spaces, which therefore pose contradictory relationships among them” (pp. 19–20).

However, the most notable criticism of transculturation, pointed out by Cornejo Polar himself (2002), is that it continues to aim for a harmonious synthesis close to the notion of *mestizaje* (pp. 867–868). Furthermore, such a synthesis would be shown as happening in a space of hegemonic culture, thereby excluding discourses incompatible with the new system, something that Rama (1982) accurately reflected in his discussion about reviewing local traditions: “They cannot give up on them, instead they can review them in light of modernist changes, choosing those components that can adapt to the new system in progress” (p. 29). This is why Cornejo Polar would reaffirm his option for the concept of heterogeneity in his search for a specific system to think about Latin American issues.

Heir to a literary tradition shaken by convulsive historical events, failed nationalist enterprises, ambitious continental projects, excessive copying and imitation of external models, renewing experiments from denied roots, emergence of new voices reluctant to be defined on one side or the other of tradition, and a studious follower of the attempts of Latin American thought to account for all of this, Cornejo Polar leaves aside comfortable conclusions and finished notions to settle into tearing, contradiction, dualism, and subterranean voices. His endeavor is difficult, complex, and sometimes even contrary to positivist reason, which seeks regularities, conclusions, closed ends.

Cornejo Polar's view is unsettling, inconclusive. He suggests the existence of some historical rejection of our foundational diversity by the tradition of Latin American thought. Why not to accept conflict as a starting point for understanding our particularity? Why to define ourselves in only one way? Why would not all the homelands live happily? Is this possible?

Cornejo's thoughts on diversity would take shape in the postulate about heterogeneous literatures, characterized by the "duplicity or plurality of the sociocultural traits of its productive process: Such a process has at least one element that does not coincide with the affiliation of the others opening an ambiguous conflicting zone" (Cornejo Polar, 1997, p. 456). Based on that, he proposes a literary analysis considering sender/discourse-text/referent/receiver (pp. 451–456). This approach was shown by Cornejo Polar himself in his analyses of New World chronicles and indigenist literature, with references encountered in those texts coming from universes alien to their production and consumption. In his latest book, *Escribir en el aire* [Writing in the air], Cornejo Polar (2003) expanded the spectrum of heterogeneity, arguing that it infiltrated each stage of the productive process "making them dispersed, fragile, unstable, contradictory, and heteroclitic" (p. 10), rather focusing his analysis on discourse, subject, and representation.

According to Sobrevilla (2001), Cornejo Polar's proposal of cultural and literary heterogeneity has been almost unanimously embraced due to its potential application to various types of literature and cultural fields (pp. 27–29), and its descriptive suitability for the American context, where varied dynamics would arise from the contact between cultures. Given that both transculturation and heterogeneity refer to discursive and cultural interweaving, both proposals complement each other and could be jointly applied to enrich the analysis of Latin American literature and culture, because there is an underlying aim in both to "adapt the methods and principles of critical practice to the peculiarities of Latin American literature" (Cornejo Polar, 1997, p. 451). Ángel Rama delves into local proposals applying Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation to literature, highlighting the close relationships between literary production and cultural transformations. Furthermore, by situating himself within the processes of cultural exchange, Rama provides a methodological framework to explain the transfers of content and elements from one culture to another. In turn, Cornejo Polar warns that such transfers do not necessarily have to result in a synthe-



sis, offering a broader conceptual framework to consider the Latin American cultural space, recognizing heterogeneity as its fundamental trait. However, as Cornejo Polar himself (2002) states, “no critical category reveals the entirety of the subject matter studied [...]. None of the mentioned categories resolves the problem in its entirety” (p. 868), and he does not explain the mechanisms of cultural exchanges.

Thus, the path of analyses and studies on American literature opens up to recognize the diverse historical, social, and cultural phenomena that constitute not one, but several literatures in the continent, the voices of which dialogue, intertwine, and transform through various dynamics of exchanges and influences. Approaches to Wayuu literature have ventured down this path, following the writings of the ethnic group’s authors, who have left written records that highlight elements of Orality and bilingualism, exemplifying the previously mentioned phenomena. In this line of thought, Ramón Paz Ipuana, as previously mentioned, but also Miguel Ángel Jusayú and Glicerio Tomás Pana are examples of this. According to Miguel Rocha (2012), the work of these authors inaugurates contemporary Indigenous literature in Colombia and Venezuela, and specifically in the Wayuu case, their work is bridge between ethno-literature produced by Westerners and Indigenous literature written by Indigenous people (p. 241). In Colombia, their work has been labeled as “oraliterary, that is, the result of an immersion in oral verbal arts and their subsequent transcription and reworking through phonetic literary writing” (Rocha, 2016, p. 37).

One of those contemporary Wayuu authors within the field of *Piitchikalü Anachonwaa*, the “poetic variation of spoken word” (Paz Ipuana, 1987, p. 71), is Vito Apüshana, his voice traversing the collective, fluctuating between various dimensions, and actualizing the world through an encompassing circular advance towards the origin.

Miguel Ángel López uses his community’s language in his heteronym Vito Apüshana —one shepherd among Wayuu shepherds who speak their clan’s “us”, their community, their profession, their ethnicity. Throughout his life, he has had the opportunity to listen advices, stories, tales, myths, and the songs called *jayeechis* that narrate the earliest times and the vicissitudes of human beings’ daily lives. While, for Wayuu people, the art of storytelling is not exclusive to specialists, there are privileged individuals, among them the elders, for their wisdom and skills. Similarly, while wisdom transmission occurs spontaneously in daily life, there are special moments when the atmosphere is conducive for those with the gift of oral expression to freely



share their stories and for those who can sharpen their ears to memorize them. Those moments mostly occur during collective celebrations such as rituals and social events, or on events related to changes in life cycles; for example, when pubescent girls receive teachings from their elders.

Vito Apüşhana, the poet, recreates the world told through Orality with his Wayuunaiki and Spanish writing. In doing so, he combines elements of different affiliations in a heterogeneous space (Cornejo Polar, 1997, p. 456), where he aims to “smuggle dreams with nearby *alijunas*” (Apüşhana, 1992, p. 7). Just as oral narrators display innovations, gestures, and verbal twists that give a unique touch to their art, Apüşhana does so with writing, recreating in poetry the knowledge inherited from his ethnicity. Thus, “the work returns to its sources and becomes an object of communion” (Paz, 1993, p. 41) not only with Wayuu people themselves, but also with those outsiders with whom a symbolic universe and a unique worldview are shared through poetry. But what are the keys to understanding that world?

### The Wayuu World and Ancestors

The Wayuu world consists of simultaneous and complementary dimensions: “the Remote-origin, the Hidden-invisible, and the Natural-visible” (Campos, 2010, p. 14). In the “Remote-origin”, deities live representing the forces of nature and accounting for the origin. The “Hidden-invisible” refers to “the dimension of the intangible, the invisible, what is on the other side of daily life, sustaining it, nurturing it, regulating it. There, Pulowi and her emissaries reside” (p. 14). Finally, the “Natural-visible” refers to the world of the living. According to the Wayuu worldview, these dimensions are not separate, as they sustain multiple relationships, and some beings or elements can inhabit them simultaneously, as expressed in the poetic lines of Apüşhana (2010) in “Pastores” [Shepherds]:

We dream there, between Kashi and Ka’i, the Moon and the Sun,  
in the realms of the spirits.

We die as if we were still alive (p. 68).

After death, the Wayuu believe they transform into *yolujas* (shadows of the dead), and, by taking the path of the deceased Indigenous people, they begin their journey towards *Jepira*,

[...] allí donde residen las sombras de los muertos [...]. Según las descripciones de los guajiros se encuentra en Jepira una sociedad que desde el punto de vista de la economía, de la política y de la organización social, reproduce la sociedad de los vivos (Perrin, 1993, pp. 183, 186).

//[...] there where the shadows of the dead reside [...]. According to the descriptions of the Guajiros, in Jepira there is a society that reproduces the society of the living in its economy, politics, and social organization (Perrin, 1993, pp. 183, 186).

In *Jepira*, “each individual meets again with their deceased ones and retrieves the cattle slaughtered for their funerals” (Perrin, 1995, p. 37). But the Wayuu journey does not end there, as the *yolujas* also die to go to some “afterlife,” the residence of supernatural beings like the mythical couple *Juya-Pulowi*. In this “afterlife,” the *yolujas* integrate with one of these mythical beings and can return to the world of the living, either in the form of rain (manifestation of *Juya*) or *Wanulü* (one of *Pulowt*’s emissaries) *Pulowt*) (Perrin, 1993, pp. 198–199).

While living in *Jepira*, the *yolujas* approach the living as specters and communicate messages to them through *Lapü*, The Dream. Regarding this character, Guerra (2019) explains that *Lapü* is an immaterial being who acts as a ‘messenger between humans and a wide plurality of non-human beings’ (p. 54). For the Wayuu people, experiences in dreams are considered real; warnings about dangers, commands, and requests from the dead are taken literally, as dreams have a prescriptive nature about the future. The relationship with *Lapü* and the communication bridge he extends towards the dead attests to the continuity between life and death (Perrin, 1995, p. 67). That is why in the poem “Sea,” the mourner bids farewell to his deceased grandmother saying, “Now I prepare myself to receive her in my dreams” (Apüshana, 2010, p. 56). In fact, the Wayuu say that “Dreams and Death are siblings. Sleeping and dreaming are linked to death. *Kata’owwaa*, being awake, also means being alive” (Perrin, 1995, p. 36). Therefore, when dreaming, the soul of the living wanders through the domain of spirits and the various instances of the “Hidden-invisible.”

“All of the abovementioned shows that life and death are intertwined for Wayuu people. Life extends into death, and this is necessary to renew the life cycle. Throughout their lives, Wayuu people catch glimpses of the ‘Hidden-invisible’ and the transcendental flux through their connections with their ancestors inhabiting that sphere. These ancestors —whether embodying natural phenomena, astonishing beings, or deceased Wayuu individuals—possess extraordinary abilities and share a past

that offers a path of return to the living, who navigate life following their steps and signs. For Wayuu people, 'life extends into day, into night, and beyond time. Life is an ascent through death' (Paz Ipuana, 1972, p. 72). You might consider the proximity of this conception to Eastern doctrines of interdependence, where 'life is life in the face of death. And vice versa. Affirmation is so in the face of negation. And vice versa' (Paz, 1993, p. 102). From this fundamental interdependence, images of that plural, fluctuating, superimposed world arise in oral tradition and poetry, because 'language and myth are vast metaphors of reality.'" (p. 34).

Next, we will see how Vito Apüshana manages to represent this interdependence of life and death, linking through poetic imagery what is already united and similar in the Wayuu world, where his words come from.

### **Life as a Path to Death and the Discovery of the Transcendent**

If we understand metaphor as something that brings together disparate things to create a new meaning not only between words in tension but also among multiple interpretations, we find that the first poetic line of the poem "Shepherds" (Pastores), "Somos pastores. / Somos los hombres que vivimos en el mundo de las sendas"// *We are shepherds / We are the men living in the trail world* (Apüshana, 2010, p. 26), unfolds its significance by referring both to the wandering shepherds who seek water and pastures for their animals and to that network of trails offered by the "world other," where the encounter with the transcendent and the return to the ancestors occur. These paths intersect the path of life, which is personified as a shepherdess leading people back to the original fold of the ancestors, following the destiny marked by their life cycle. But if life is a shepherdess on its trail, humans, conversely, must return to the animal world, to the natural, and let themselves be guided and tended. This inversion is not gratuitous in the poetic play, as in the Wayuu dream codes, there are homologous relationships between humans and their flocks; thus, many times, when the Wayuu dream that a deceased person wants to take a loved one, they often appease them by sacrificing an animal corresponding to the sex and age of the person being called.

Similarly, the spirits or *wanulüs*, who are assistants to the *outsbi*, demand an animal as payment for their healing work to replace the sick human in the "other world." The animal will take their place and be devoured by the illness or spirit that tormented them. A particular replacement of animals for people occurs in funerary

rituals, where the family of the deceased must sacrifice the largest number of livestock and distribute it among the guests for consumption. Through this distribution and ritual consumption, not only is the livestock of the deceased transferred to *Jepira*, where it will constitute their sustenance, but all the *yolujas* attracted by the ritual are also fed. If they fail to serve sufficient meat, the deceased and the *yolujas* will cause misfortunes, by taking the lives of relatives and attendees to the wake as payment. In this light, the metaphorical expression “we are milk of the dream, meat of the feast... blood of the farewell” (Apüşhana, 2010, p. 26) makes sense. Here, metonymically, human-animals are represented in the offerings made in the ritual ceremonies: the milk to prepare drinks, the meat distributed among the guests, and the sacrificial blood spilled on the ground during the slaughter of animals as offerings to the spirits or *yolujas*.

In the poems “De un alaüla de Alemasahua [From an Alaüla coming from Alemasahua]” and “Vivir-morir [Living-dying],” the metaphor of life as a path is constructed as a metonymy of the ancestor trace already left on the road. The *alaüla* (elder) advises the newborn not to despair in leaving their footprint, because

we will find ourselves looking towards Jepira,  
where the spirits will become one,  
for the final journey  
[...]  
for the old steps of the ancestors are already in your new ones (Apüşhana, 2010, p. 74).

In “Vivir-morir” [Living-Dying] growth is represented through the metaphor of a man-tree extending its branches within the footprint of its ancestors: “We grow, like trees, within / the footprint of our ancestors” (p. 68). Growing, walking through life, departing, and arriving are already marked on the path of life by our ancestors’ footprint; our destiny will always be to remain in that footprint, to walk in it, to return to it. To return to it, we will need to live, die, and then return to the earth transformed, always following the cycle traced by our ancestors. In this poem, a more specific path of life is marked by the metaphor of maternal weaving: “We live, like spiders, in the weaving of the maternal nest” (p. 68); there, spider-men are inserted into the life-weaving created in the maternal corner by the clan’s ancestors. Upon birth, one must continue growing that weaving, that trail, in a web that pushes both outward, extending the family group, and inward, retracing the primary threads and the ancestors’ design to stay connected to the group and keeping the memory of their

origins alive. Therefore, life always offers an image of a two-way path, one moving forward, growing, and another weaving to return to the origin and start again.

So far, it has been evident that the poet turns to metaphor, metonymy, prosopopoeia, and even puns to evoke and recreate the image of life as a path toward death and the discovery of the transcendent. This image ties life and death together, linking the departure and the return, expressing the unspeakable and reflecting the sense of interdependence in the Wayuu world (Paz, 1993, pp. 106, 111–112). Now, we will need to reflect a bit on the images that demonstrate this interdependence in the poems.

### **The Connection Between Life and Death**

At this point, it should be evident that, as in the poem “Shepherds,” living “in the world of the paths” and embodying “the milk of dream” (Apüshana, 2010, p. 26) involves building bridges between life and death. In the poem “Sea,” we see the role of the metaphor in bringing together things that do not typically go together impose itself once again. The metaphor of “the shore of the living” (p. 56) as a threshold complements the image of the connection between life and death constructed by the synecdoche of an ancestral Sea that reaches this border to spill into weeping. Here, the sea is not only a natural element but also *Palaa*, the ancestor, the origin that offers its waves as a path to collect the second death, represented in the metaphor of bones. Whoever leaves their bones has already begun the journey of death a long time ago, since several years after the passing, the Wayuu celebrate an exhumation, a second wake, and the burial of the deceased. The second burial, of fleshless bones, is held at the oldest clan cemetery, where the remains join the group of ancient ancestors’ bones, without an individual identity. In that poem, the accompanying grandmother leaves her bones in the Sea, a metaphor for the dissolution and transformation of the *yolujas* in a “beyond death” inhabited by primeval ancestors. Despite this dissolution, the shore of the living is not separated from these realms, for in dreams, the leaving can continue communicating with the grandmother, who ceases to be a companion to become an ancestor.

In this way, in both deaths, dreams serve as a connection to life. But in the second death, the ancestral Sea appears to demarcate the shore of the living, to link dimensions, and to offer a geographical and symbolic horizon of the “afterlife.” In “The Alaüla from Alemasahua,” this horizon is precisely what allows the living to ga-

ther and look toward *Jepira*, toward death. Its demarcation in the mythical geography of the “Natural-visible” world not only connects life with death but also constitutes a meeting and gathering point for the living, as at some point everyone must look toward “where the spirits will become one, / for the final journey” (p. 74) which everyone will eventually embark on. In this way, a mythical geography is set up that transcends the thresholds of the worlds and connects them—a geography that is established in the Earth, in *Jepira*, and in the afterlife. “Living-Dying” proposes how from the shore of the living one can access these various places and dream “there, between Kashi and Ka’i, the Moon and the Sun, / in the realms of the spirits” (p. 68). Existence is not nullified once we stop being awake forever, as death is akin to life and “We die as if we were still alive” (p. 68). Here, death is a transformation that allows the return to the ancestors and the perpetuation of the vital cycle.

### **The Return to the Ancestors**

After having presented all of the above, we can conclude that the central image, or the one that encapsulates the meaning of the poems under analysis, is that of returning to the ancestors. Life is lived by traversing a path that leads to death; while on this path, there are numerous experiences of encountering the transcendent, thanks to the multidimensionality of the Wayuu world. Each of these experiences evokes, refers to, and leads towards the voices and spaces of the ancestors, who require the return of the living for their symbolic reproduction. In turn, the living have their earthly world sustained by the return of the ancestors in the form of rain, food, and health. They also give meaning to their journey on Earth and to the occurrence of natural phenomena. They also establish models of society based on the order of the supernatural. Death is not the end of existence here. Death and life ultimately complement each other and unite with the opposing principles that sustain the world in balance.

The selected poems provide evidence of this conception and abound in images of a return to the primordial. In “Shepherds,” the metaphorical expression returns men-herd to Nature to be nurtured in the primeval fold. In “Mar” [Sea], the bones of the dead are entrusted to the waves, while the soul already walks in the domains of the geniuses “beyond death” and prepares for its encounter with the living in dreams. In dreams, the living temporarily return to the ancestors, who point out the path they must follow not to lose their way towards them. “The Alaüla from Alemasahua”

reminds the newcomer to life that their duty is to make the path in the footsteps of their ancestors, without despair, as they will always return to them. They are born children of people who have cleared trails and are also born children of the “sweat of rain” (Apüshana, 2010, p. 74), a metaphor for the union between *Juya*, Rain, and *Mma*, the Earth, from which the first individuals were born. And although they may travel different paths, the path of life will return them through death to the cemetery of their ancestors. Through music, they will become legend, and after their ultimate journey, they may return, perhaps transformed into “sweat of rain.” Though they depart, they will always return.

Vito Apüshana's own poetic exercise proposes a return. He speaks in Spanish and Wayuunaiki, as he is aware of the intercultural dialogues established over centuries, which have crossed the symbolic and material boundaries of his culture. From this crossroads, Apüshana metaphorizes his poetry based on primordial images and suggests a return home from the path of life, which, connected with death, allows for encounters with ancestors. In Apüshana's words, these encounters are manifold; the dimensions of worlds reconnect and create new meanings, which will strengthen an identity in dialogue that must not forget where it comes from and where it is going.

### Bibliographic References

- Apüshana, V. (1992). *Contrabando sueños con alijunas cercanos*. Riohacha: Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas Departamental and Universidad de La Guajira.
- Apüshana, V. (2010). *En las bondonadas maternas de la piel (Shinalu'uirua shiirua awulii)*. Bogotá: Department of Culture.
- Bravo, V. (2010). Literatura guajira. *Lingüística y literatura*, (57), 146–59.
- Campos, A. (2010). Prologue. In V. Apüshana, *En las bondonadas maternas de la piel (Shinalu'uirua shiirua awulii)* (pp. 13–20). Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura.
- Cornejo Polar, A. (1989). Los sistemas literarios como categorías históricas. Elementos para una discusión latinoamericana. *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, 47, pp. 7–12.
- Cornejo Polar, A. (1997). El indigenismo y las literaturas heterogéneas: Su doble estatuto sociocultural. In S. Sosnowski (Comp.). *Lectura de la crítica de la literatura americana. Actualidades fundacionales* (pp. 451–456). Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho.
- Cornejo Polar, A. (2002). Mestizaje e hibridez: Los riesgos de las metáforas. Apuntes. *Revista Iberoamericana LXVIII* (200), pp. 867–870.



- Cornejo Polar, A. (2003). *Escribir en el aire. Ensayo sobre la heterogeneidad cultural en las literaturas andinas*. Lima Berkeley: CELACP-Latinoamericana.
- Del Pino, U. (2003). *Narrativa oral literaria. Estudio pragmático*. Sant Joan Despí, Barcelona: Universidad de Oviedo. Kassel. Edition Reichenberger.
- Ferrer, G. y Rodríguez, Y. (1998). *Etnoliteratura Wayuu: Estudios críticos y selección de textos*. Barranquilla: Universidad del Atlántico.
- Duchesne, J. (2015). *Caribe, Caribana: Cosmografías literarias*. San Juan: Ediciones Callejón.
- Guerra, W. (2019). (*Antología wayuu: categorización, identificación y relaciones de los seres en la sociedad indígena de la península de La Guajira, Colombia* [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. Universidad de los Andes, Colombia.
- Niño, H. (2008). *El etnotexto: las voces del asombro*. Havanna: Fondo editorial Casa de las Américas.
- Paz, O. (1993). *El arco y la lira. El poema. La revelación poética. Poesía e historia*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Paz Ipuana, R. (1972). *Mitos, cuentos y leyendas guajiros*. Caracas: Instituto Agrario Nacional.
- Paz Ipuana, R. (1987). *Literatura oral wayuu*. Venezuela: Universidad del Zulia.
- Perrin, M. (1993). *El camino de los indios muertos*. Venezuela: Monte Avila Editores-Latinoamericana.
- Perrin, M. (1995). *Los practicantes del sueño. El chamanismo wayuu*. Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores Latinoamericana.
- Rama, A. (1982). *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno editores.
- Rocha, M. (2010). *El Sol babea jugo de pina. Antología de las literaturas indígenas del Atlántico, el Pacífico y la Serranía del Perijá*. Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura.
- Rocha, M. (2012). *Palabras mayores, palabras vivas*. Bogotá: Taurus.
- Rocha, M. (2016). *Piitchi Biyá Uai. Precursores. Antología Multilingüe de la literatura indígena contemporánea en Colombia vol. I*. Bogotá: Instituto Distrital de las artes-iDARTES.
- Sobrevilla, D. (2001). Transculturación y heterogeneidad: avatares de dos categorías literarias en América Latina. *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana XXVII*(54), pp. 21–37.