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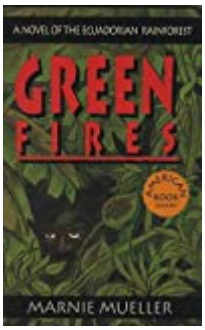

Marnie MÖ¼ller. *Green Fires, Assault on Eden: A Novel of the Ecuadorian Rainforest.* Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1999. 318 pp. $13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880684-16-0.

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GREEN FIRES: A NOVEL OF DENUNCIATION

"There would never be a compromise toward preservation, toward honoring what was, toward taking what knowledge the Indians had garnered over the centuries and learning from it. No, the only plan was to impose an outside notion of progress, a concept of incremental eradication" (p. 260).

In 1940, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz proposed the term transculturation as a more accurate one to explain the different phases of the transitive process from one culture to another. This process does not simply refer to the full acquisition of another culture (acculturation), but it necessarily implies the loss or uprooting of a foregoing culture (a partial deculturation) and the resulting creation of new cultural phenomena that he calls neoculturation. *Green Fires: Assault on Eden: a Novel of the Ecuadorian Rainforest* is a book that explores the processes of acculturation forced upon the indigenous groups of the Ecuadorian rainforest – Shuar or Ji'varo, Cofa'n, Quijos Quichua, Canelos Quichua or Roani – as well as the processes of transculturation that have taken place among the people who came in contact with the plight of the Indians in the rainforest. Mingo Mincha, a transculturated Ji'varo Indian, explains what acculturation is about: "they [whites, latinos and mestizos] want us to live by their rules, and when we resist, when we live by our own rules, we are punished by theirs. But they never live by *our* rules when they come to our land" (p. 257).

The story is set in 1969 in the Ecuadorian rainforest. Ann Saunders Schmidt is a former Peace Corps volunteer who goes back to Ecuador on her honeymoon, six years after her first stay as a community organizer in Guayaquil. Her husband, Kai, is a German who lived as a child through the horrors of World War Two. He is a birdwatcher and naturalist, and these interests are what initially bring them to Ecuador. However, as the story evolves, they become more interested and involved in the conflict, and take part in curing the maimed and injured Indians. Throughout the narration, Ann remembers parts of her life both as a child and in her community work in the Peace Corps. She describes her conflicted existence as a half Jewish person and as an inexperienced volunteer seeking to solve problems that even experienced leaders fail to unravel. As a child, she and her family had

to move from town to town, in part because her mother was Jewish and frequently taunted, and also because her father was an outspoken conscientious objector during World War Two. His opposition to the war landed him in prison for three years, beginning when Ann was a year old. When she turned seven, her mother committed suicide while her father "was traveling through the state organizing farmers into fuel cooperatives" (p. 16). She felt the need to hide her Jewishness, and as she puts it, "[A]ll through high school, college, and the Peace Corps, I concealed my background by saying my mother had died of pneumonia, by passing as a gentile under the cover of my father's last name of Saunders and my own bleached blond hair, and by never revealing that my father had been imprisoned" (p. 17). She learns from him to stand for herself, to be aware that one individual can help a community by empowering its members in the decision making process. Her leadership skills secure her the job as a Peace Corps volunteer. After finishing her assignment, she returns to the United States feeling she failed the community. Not only was she unable to prevent the death of an infant boy, but was unsuccessful in finding Angel, a community organizer suspected of leftist activities. He had disappeared on the day the army took him for helping organize a rally to demand immediate attention to a problem with the neighborhood sewage system. She felt she did not do enough to find and save him, neither then nor after she left for the United States.

The three stories interweave, her childhood, her memories as a community organizer, and the events in the present, marked by danger, and the discovery of her accumulated guilt. By now, she has accepted her past, but still has not come to terms with it and has not found a way to resolve her feelings of culpability. In the trip to the remotest areas of the rainforest, she also confronts the painful past of her husband: the Nazis protected his father during wartime and the Allies denazified him. This is part of the internal conflict between them which constantly threatens their relationship.

Upon their arrival in Puerto Napo, they meet a Shuar Indian who goes by the name Mingo Mincha, a transculturated man who apparently makes a living by bringing 'civilization' to the natives of the forest. He was one of the many individuals that were, as he sarcastically states, "fortunate to be rescued by the Salesian priests. And educated so that we could carry on business with the outside world" (p. 22). As the events unfold, we learn that Mingo's interest in his people becoming civilized is a way to empower them and teach them to fight the way Westerners do, if they are to keep their land and their traditions untouched. He brings weapons to their settlements and teaches them to counterattack the invaders.

Another person they meet early on is one of the missionaries, Father Roberto Baʻez Chamino, whose religious affiliation is never clarified. Behind his guise as a man of God only interested in the well-being of the natives, he hides his support of the government's efforts to allow a North American company, the Somaxo, to settle in the area and begin the exploration and exploitation of oil fields, even if the natives have to be forced out of their land by disadvantageous treaties or by violent acts. He is a highly educated bilingual man who strongly influences the conflicts that ensue. Also, he appears to work as an informant for the military government, trying to eradicate any community settlements in the rainforest that the government sees as communist, and, therefore, must be eliminated.

As Ann and Kai talk to Mingo and the Father, they learn of the existence of a German, Georg Haberle, who has lived in the jungle for more than twenty years and has taken an Ecuadorian black woman as his wife. At first, the news of him is unsettling and contradictory, with Mingo defending him as a good man, though idealistic, and the priest attacking him as a contributor to the subversion in the indigenous communities. Later we learn that indeed he had been a member of the Nazi troops, thus making him highly suspicious. During World War Two, the German representatives in Ecuador had drafted him when he was in his twenties, forcing him to fight in a war in which he did not believe, forever changing his perspective on life. Upon returning to Ecuador, he retreated into the jungle and learned the ways of the Shuar and other tribes, their love for the land, and their ways to survive without damaging the ecosystem. He has become a pacifist who is against any armed confrontations and he vows for passive resistance. He is also against the efforts of the missionaries to convert and acculturate the population. The government and its representatives in the region see him as an enemy.

Ann and Kai end up going down the Napo River with Mingo and the priest to some of the settlements in the jungle where they learn what is really happening. Father Baʻez asks them to stay at his mission where they meet a young Peace Corps engineer who is tracing plans for land subdivisions for the Indians. They also find out that the priest wants to prevent them from going farther into the jungle and meeting Haberle because he fears that they will come out of the forest "with all sorts of tales" as he had complained before (p. 31). Mingo leaves the area in

disgust, only to return later and convince Kai and Ann to accompany him to meet Georg Haberle. Mingo's interest is to have witnesses who will denounce the horrors that are taking place in the jungle and who will perhaps raise their voices in international circles and demand the protection of the Indians and their land. That is also Haberle's interest: "[W]e must get these *gringos* out of here. They must get back home and tell this story." (p. 309)

As Mingo, Kai and Ann approach the Roani settlement where the German lives, they hear the sound of an engine coming toward them. It is a small plane, "a crop duster" (p. 157) that, after circling the area, in just a few seconds, bombs the clearing where Haberle, the black woman, and a few of the Indians live. When Kai and Ann finally arrive, they witness the destruction caused by the fire. Ann describes how "[I]t burned into my nostrils, down my dried-out throat, into my chest, as though the flames had entered my body." (p. 161) This is the first attack they experience and, in spite of the great damage, there are no human losses. A couple of days later, as they are helping in the community, they meet with another attack, only this time the damage is far more extensive.

Ann describes the degree of the destruction: the burning of the people, "their skin peeling like cellophane off a pack of cigarettes. Like the bark of a birch tree in spring. Like dying leaves." (p. 224), and the forest, the smell and defoliation that take place, the "slick coating of black oil" that spreads and kills. (p. 223). The bombers have used white phosphorus and, as Mingo explains,"[W]hen it explodes, the shrapnel goes deep inside the skin. It makes a flame that can't be put off. It burns and burns . . . I've seen it burn for days in a person's body." (p. 225) Haberle then explains that they have been consistently using napalm and describes how "[T]he gasoline jelly splatters when the bomb explodes and attaches to the flesh." (p. 226) This reminds Ann of the information she has heard from the Vietnam war soldiers she has interviewed for her radio station, only this time she witnesses, first hand, the effects on both the land and the people.

Since their medical supplies are scarce and the people are severely injured, they agree to send Mingo and Ann to the Christian missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ to get antibiotics and medications essential in keeping infections at bay. Mingo knows they will have trouble convincing the missionary, Ted Albertson, to help them. They eventually succeed mostly because of his daughter, Alice, who warns Ann of the presence of priest Baʻez in their mission. She explains that he arrived piloting his own helicopter, and makes Ann aware of his activities in Peru and Bolivia by adding: "[T]hey say he's dangerous, that Roberto Baʻez stops at nothing. Nor does this government." (p. 250) Alice's father, on the other hand, needs the support of the government to keep his mission going: "we are only here bringing light to these people because of the willingness of the folks in charge to let us be here." (p. 241) He argues that the country "desperately needs the revenues from oil production for education, health care, everything" and accuses Haberle of coming to the area and making "a ruinous mess, another holocaust." (p. 240) He is convinced that Haberle "is making it increasingly difficult" for them to do their work. (p. 241)

When Ann and Mingo return with the medications, they find more bad news. Another attack was launched by apparent paramilitary forces, and these ended up killing many of the injured people. Also, three Latinos have come to Haberle's settlement and terrified Maria, his wife, warning her of their future actions if they do not abandon the region. Mingo becomes upset; then decides to take Kai, Haberle, and some of the Roani men on a search mission, and without telling anyone, plans and carries out an attack on the people piloting the plane in retaliation for the attacks on the settlements. Haberle and Kai are taken by surprise and they decide that Ann and Kai must leave the area immediately and return to the United States without delay for the violence has escalated. They leave the area soon and find themselves on the road to the United States. The book ends with Ann sitting on an Andean hill, observing the people, all Indians of the highlands, totally assimilated, going about their lives. It is then that she promises to go back and speak of what she saw, even if it is only on the air of her own radio station, reporting on the tragedies inflicting the peoples of the Ecuadorian forest.

The focal point of the story is the process of acculturation and transculturation and how the protagonists see it. For the friar, it is essential they bring the indigenous communities into modernity. This is also what the Andersons and the Salesians think, getting the communities to learn the word of God through the Bible and becoming Christian. Knowingly or not, this prepares the Indians for invasions on their land, capitulation of their ways of living, and abandonment of their history as a community. For purists like Haberle, passive resistance is at the core of the struggle and he vows for affirmation of their land and their centenary practices, respect for their ways of living, and assuring the land remains unchanged for

them. In order to achieve these goals, he helps them organize self-sufficient communities, thus insuring the refusal to trade with Westerners and any contact with the missionaries, the Latinos, or the mestizos. For the oppressed, people like Mingo, Awae and Maria, violence and retaliation are the only ways of keeping the Western civilization at bay, although they know that many lives will be lost in the process. There is a fatalistic view that no matter what they do, they will lose, so putting up a fight is better than to wait passively to witness their own demise. Mingo knows from experience that even if acculturation were to be reached, the sheer fact of being Indians will make others look at them as inferiors. That is how he feels toward the Church of Jesus Christ and it is the reason for his bitter reaction against Ann when she refuses his sexual advances. For Kai and Ann, the problem is not so much if the communities are to be civilized – they know it is inevitable – but by whom and to what end. In the end, they are the voices that denounce the atrocities they witnessed.

The journey into the jungle is a way for Ann and Kai to come to terms with their past. Ann finally understands why it is so difficult for Kai to talk about his experiences during the Nazi Germany when she looks at his vulnerability and fear during the bombings: they revive in him his childhood memories of bomb attacks and how everything shook and felt in the bunkers. He is a genuine man, but, like many other Germans, he has chosen to move forward and not to talk about the atrocities against the Jews during the war. Ann, for her part, comes to terms with her life by finally accepting that being a Jew does not hinder her ability to love and trust someone, even the son of a Nazi. S he finally understands where Kai comes from and what sort of a life he hopes to achieve.

In a way, Ann and Kai's relationship, as well as Haberle and Maria's, are examples of transculturation. Linguistic concerns are not as obvious in Maria and Haberle's relationship as they are in Ann and Kai's, but the cultural exchange is equally intense. All of them have experienced the necessary cultural and emotional interchanges that make them strong as a couple. Maria, for instance, concedes that she is happy with the German because he took her as she was, barren, black, and as an equal, and it has worked out well for the two of them. Kai has chosen a Jewish woman as his wife because he recognizes her value as a woman, not as a member of a race. Haberle has lived both cultures and prefers to live in a society of indigenous peoples with values very different from the ones in the Western world, values that in the end make them vulnerable. Ann has just discovered that she loves Kai because he understands her disillusionment, having himself experienced it earlier and more profoundly. (p. 318)

Green Fires is a novel that denounces the atrocities that took place in many of the Indian communities of the Andes mountains through the sixties and seventies. It also shows how the process of their extinction as a culture and as a social group has been carried out through missionaries and armed confrontations. The historical facts are true: there is evidence of the profound transculturations already in place through the Salesian Mission set up in the Amazon region (the Tukano area) since 1926. In spite of its denouncements, it is a novel that does not offer any solutions because the process of acculturation is unavoidable, and as Mingo himself puts it, "[T]here isn't a choice . . . It isn't a choice between danger and safety for our people. It is doing what must be done and going on from there." (p. 256) We could argue that, ultimately, the process of acculturation is like the white phosphorous that sticks to the flesh and consumes, despite all efforts to remove it, until all vestiges of life are devoured, leaving an unrecognizable shell of the former life.

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