

**APARECIDA VILAÇA. PALETÓ AND ME: MEMORIES OF MY INDIGENOUS FATHER, TRANS. DAVID RODGERS. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022, 232 P. ISBN: 9781503629332**

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'The Indians cease to be symbols in kinship diagrams, and become human beings', Emilio Willems wrote in his review of Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques* for *American Anthropologist* in 1956. Since then, and, partially as a result of Aparecida Vilaça's work on the Wari' of the Brazilian Rio Negro, kinship diagrams have become unfashionable. It has long been established that, as she wrote in 2002, 'a true process of consubstantialization, generated by proximity, intimate living, commensality, mutual care, and the desire to become kin.' ('Making kin out of others in Amazonia', 352) The *Memories of my indigenous father* that the subtitle of *Paletó and me* refers to, are the memories of such a process and desire to become father and daughter. If *Tristes tropiques* made humans out of symbols in kinship diagrams, then *Paletó and me* makes the process of becoming kin a personal one. Much like with *Tristes tropiques*, consequently, the reader in search of purely scientific insights will be left disappointed. The general themes the book touches on, from the first encounters the Wari' had with white people, to their concept of kinship, funerary cannibalism and Christianization, were already the subject of the author's scientific work. Equally disappointed will be those who are hoping for a book more self-aware of the power relations between anthropologist and informant than Lévi-Strauss' was. In one episode, for example, Vilaça remembers how, 'with the help of a lawyer friend from the Public Prosecutor's Office', she helped the brother of one of her Wari' friends to be released from prison after he had been wrongly accused of rape (162). Not a word is spent contemplating the social structure that grants access to justice, or, in a similar situation, to medicine (177), to Vilaça, and denies it to her Wari' friends.

The strength of the book, rather, lies in the way it arouses emotions in the reader. Written in simple prose that never distracts from the book's content and with a sober style, one wonders why one feels anything at all. Many of the memories the book recounts have nothing particularly extraordinary about them. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, trekking through the jungle and living with those who inhabit it does not anymore have the same air of excitement and mystery around it that it once did; and Vilaça never presents it as if it should. But neither is it the sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar – seeing oneself in the other –, which once accompanied the mysterious, that the book evokes: Vilaça does not need to 'humanize' the Amerindians, as Lévi-Strauss had to in 1955 – this, she takes for granted. Rather, by recounting the story of how two people from different 'worlds' became kin, *Paletó and me* overcomes both these forms of narcissism that maintain the self either by denying all similarity with the other, who is regarded as nothing but a 'savage', or by seeing in him only a

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mirror of the self. Vilaça achieves this by writing a book not only from *her* ‘memories of [her] indigenous father’, but also from *the* ‘memories of [her] indigenous father’, letting them speak directly from transcripts of voice recordings she made of Paletó.

The book is certainly more about Paletó than about Vilaça herself. While never feeling like a biography, it narrates his life from growing up in a time before the Wari’ encountered white people, through massacres and epidemics that followed the first violent encounters, all the way to visiting Rio de Janeiro. But despite this, it is the process of becoming kin that the book captures so intimately and of which it is itself an expression, that most arouses the reader’s emotions, almost as if he became part of the same kin group. But in remembering, Vilaça also offers the reader insights into Wari’ social life and how it changed since contact with white people that make up for what they lack in scientific rigour by the liveliness with which they are presented. Indeed, I think that *Paletó and me* is best understood in the company of *Tristes tropiques* and Philippe Descola’s *Les lances du crépuscule*. What it adds to this small genre of literature that Amazonian anthropology seems to produce periodically, however, is a second perspective: among the most fascinating passages of the book are those in which Vilaça presents us Paletó’s impressions and analyses of Rio de Janeiro during his visits there. While, like its predecessors, the book is unapologetically written for the ‘interested public’, it is these passages that might also be of interest to the specialist as specialist, particularly because Vilaça often gives the transcription of the original recording directly.

With *Paletó and me*, Aparecida Vilaça has written a book of a sort that we can only hope is more frequent, bringing anthropology to a wider audience without the pseudo-philosophical megalomania so many ‘anthropological’ best-sellers exhibit today. Relying neither on pretentious prose nor speculations so fantastic they rival the worst of late 19<sup>th</sup> century diffusionism to entice the reader, Vilaça manages to captivate us by letting her and Paletó’s memories speak for themselves. Beautifully written, *Paletó and me* is not only a joy to read, but should become the model for anthropologists wishing to express the personal aspects of their fieldwork.

## Bibliography

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