

# *Between Science Fiction and a Travelogue: Albalucía Angel's Tierra de nadie*

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Entre la ciencia ficción y la bitácora de viaje: *Tierra de nadie* de Albalucía Ángel

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora la estructura dual de *Tierra de nadie*, última novela de Albalucía Angel, como tanto una bitácora de viaje como una obra de ciencia ficción. El primer hilo tiene que ver con lo que la autora ha llamado **mujeres galácticas**, un grupo de mujeres extraterrestres que descienden a la Tierra y viajan por diversas regiones y circunstancias en busca de desatar la 'bondad', y que corresponde a las características de una narrativa de ciencia ficción. El segundo de estos hilos narra las experiencias de una mujer protagonista, claramente colombiana de origen, y narra sus viajes alrededor del globo, experimentando diferentes culturas, desde la europea a la australiana y la india. Estas experiencias reflejan de modo libre las de la autora en sus viajes en estos países, y por lo tanto podría clasificarse como escritura de viajes. De este modo el texto combina y entrelaza las localidades geográficas con la narrativa, cambiando de viajes galácticos a relatos de viajes cotidianos. La conclusión, donde se unen los dos hilos, se interpreta en términos de la posición teórica de Luce Irigaray sobre el proceso de «convertirse en divinidades mujeres».

**Palabras clave:** Novela, mujeres escritoras, género, ciencia ficción, bitácora de viaje.

**Abstract:** This article explores the dual structure of *Tierra de nadie*, Albalucía Angel's latest novel, as both a travelogue and a work of science fiction. The first strand deals with what the author has termed **mujeres galácticas**, a group of extraterrestrial women who descend to Earth and travel through various regions and circumstances in their quest to unleash 'bondad', and it corresponds to the characteristics of a science fiction (SF) narrative. The second of these strands narrates the experiences of a female protagonist, clearly Colombian in origin, and narrates her travels around the globe, experiencing different cultures, from European to Australian and Indian cultures. These experiences loosely mirror the author's own in her travels around these countries, and could therefore be classified as travel writing. Thus the text combines and intertwines geographical locations, with the narrative, switching from galactic journeys to everyday travel accounts. The conclusion, where the two strands are united, is interpreted in terms of Luce Irigaray's theoretical position regarding the process of 'becoming divine women'.

**Key words:** Novel, women writers, gender, science fiction, travelogue.

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In this text I will explore approaches to the latest novel by the Colombian novelist, Albalucía Ángel. Born in Pereira, Risaralda in 1939, since 1964 Ángel has mostly resided outside Colombia, spending time firstly in various European countries including Italy, France and England, and then moving to India, the USA, and Australia, although she has recently returned to her home country. She published her first novel, *Los girasoles en invierno* in 1970, and since then has produced four other novels: *Dos veces Alicia* (1972), *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón* (1975), *Misiá Señora* (1982), and *Las andariegas* (1984), and also short stories, plays, and unpublished poetry. Her most successful novel to date is *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón* in 1975, which won her the *Vivencias* magazine prize for best Colombian novel, the first time the prize was awarded to a woman. Since *Las andariegas* Ángel took a long break from literary publication, returning only in 2002, with the publication of *Tierra de nadie*, the work with which this article deals.

*Tierra de nadie* follows a dual structure, with two alternating narrative voices, geographical locations, temporal settings, and type faces. The first of these deals with what the author has termed *mujeres galácticas*<sup>3</sup>, a group of extraterrestrial women who descend to Earth and travel through various regions and circumstances in their quest to unleash ‘bondad’ (Ángel, 2002, pág. 159), and to bring about the ‘Aurora de los tiempos del Amor’ (Ángel, 2002, pág. 162), which will redeem the Earth and its inhabitants. These galactic women are equipped with holograms that have pre-programmed their memories to recognise aspects of life on Earth that they will encounter, and maintain contact with other-worldly voices and sources of wisdom. This narrative strand therefore equates loosely to a science-fiction (SF) narrative, although I will be indicating later how some of the common thrusts of SF are deliberately thwarted by Ángel’s playing with the typical codes of this genre.

The second of these strands narrates the experiences of a female protagonist, clearly Colombian in origin due to her speech patterns and cultural references, and narrates her travels around the globe,

experiencing different cultures, from European to Australian and Indian cultures. These experiences loosely mirror the author’s own in her travels around these countries, and could therefore be classified as travel writing. However, as I will be arguing in the course of this article, just as the futuristic thrust of SF is thwarted in this novel, so too the geographical accuracy and truth claims common to travel writing will also be thwarted.

In terms of its structure, the novel is formed of 8 unnumbered chapters, and within each chapter, the narrative oscillates between the two parallel stories. However, despite the constant jumping between the two parallel stories, there is a unity in each chapter, provided by the location of the episodes narrated. The location of the galactic episodes is overtly named in the chapter titles, yet these locations are in fact amalgams, rather than actually existing locations. As the author herself has corroborated, these names are drawn from Inca cosmology, with the Inca term ‘suyu’ meaning land forming the basis for these neologisms. However, instead of the four Inca regions of Antisuyu, Kollasuyu, Chinchasuyu, and Kontisuyu (Kontisuyu from South-east Cuzco to Pacific; Kollasuyu towards Lake Titicaca, parts of Chile, Arg and all Bolivia; Chinchasuyu: Ecuador; Antisuyu: Amazonia Basin), Ángel modifies the original Inca terms to create 8 zones from the Inca’s original four. Thus the titles to each chapter, whilst purporting to convey a geographical location for the events narrated, in fact provide only an oblique reference to locatedness. Parallel to this, the ‘historia cotidiana’, the tale of the travel narrative, remains in one particular location in each chapter, and these are real locations, but never overtly named. So we have a paradox: seemingly fixed geographical terms which are in fact neologisms; and seemingly fixed geographical narrative (ie, the travel narrative), which in fact refuses to name its location. Indications of the real geographical setting of these travel narratives are given only in often indirect references to national landmarks. For instance, in chapter 3, the setting of Paris is indicated by remarks made about ‘esos tubos de colores que es la armazón «del monumento a la vangloria de los alucinados»’ (Ángel, 2002, pág. 121),

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the author, 20 January 2005.

which can be seen to refer to the Pompidou Centre.

We can represent the structure of this novel in the following way:

<b>Ch.</b>	<b>SF Location</b>	<b>Travel narrative location</b>
1)	Rami-Tuyu	Barrio Latino of New York
2)	Kara-Muyu	Brazil
3)	Marita-Muyu	Paris
4)	Mukti-Suyu	Scotland
5)	Marthi-Cuyu	Italy
6)	Kartha-Muyu	India
7)	Murtha-Puyo	Crete and mainland Greece
8)	Masta-Ruyu	Australia

Thus this text combines and intertwines geographical locations, with the narrative switching from galactic journeys to everyday travel accounts.

Parallel to this switching from one location to another, and the deliberate attempt to thwart the easy interpretation of where the story is taking place, the narrative also switches from genres, moving from SF, through what may be termed a New Age narrative, to travel narrative. However, as I indicated briefly in my introduction, in the same way that attempts to provide a clear geographical location for the setting of the parallel stories, so too, clear attempts to maintain a distinction between the genres are hindered in this text.

### **Generic Confusion**

The novel makes use of different genres, each with their own characteristics, but then goes onto deliberately thwart neat distinctions between the through Angel's playing with generic conventions.

The first of these genres as raised by the title of this article is the travelogue. One immediately obvious challenge to the conventions of the travelogue in Ángel's version is the reversal of what Pratt has termed the imperial eye of travel writing (Pratt, 1992); from Columbus's first journal, through von Humboldt and beyond, the Americas have been the privileged site of European colonial and neo-colonial travel narratives. Angel's narrative clearly reverses this imperial gaze, presenting the quirks of European culture from the point of view of the third world

traveller. Her narrative could thus be seen to engage with a phenomenon noted by Hunter in which 'Great Britain, or Europe – the «West,» in a broader sense – formerly seen as the imperial center, as the intellectual and literal point of origin, becomes «marginalized» by the encroaching Other, as it becomes destination and thus the object of the travel writing eye/I' (Hunter, 2002, pág. 30). Whilst Hunter's analysis focused on writers in English who were refiguring a sense of Englishness, I would argue that Ángel's narrative can be seen as part of this reversal tactic, from the point of view of Latin America turning its eye onto Europe. With the growing affluence of former Iberian colonies – or, at least, of the upper and middle classes of these former colonies - and with travel becoming ever more affordable, it is now open to the Latin American middle classes, of which Angel forms a part, to engage in travel to the former metropolitan centres.

Moreover, the travel narrative is one which conventionally relies on veracity, notwithstanding copious studies by a variety of academics revealing how travel narratives inevitably fictionalise their subject. In the Hispanic context, historians as early as Edmundo O'Gorman have illustrated how the early instances of travel writing in the Americas, in the form of literature of the conquest, was engaged in the 'invention of America' in which the writer, rather than objectively describing an already existing America they encountered, in fact actively created America, as they fashioned it according to their own European preconceptions (O'Gorman, 1961). Likewise, Palencia-Roth has shown that Columbus's references to the existence of man-eaters in his journal were less the result of real cannibalism encountered than the transference of preconceived ideas from Columbus's European mindset to the new world (Palencia-Roth, 1993, pág. 30). Similarly, Pratt has indicated how 'travel and exploration writing produced «the rest of the world» for European readerships' (Pratt, 1992, pág. 5).

These observations notwithstanding, what the conventional travel narrative attempts to do, despite its fictionalising, is to present its narrative as truth. That is, whilst, as has been frequently noted, conventional travel narratives frequently reveal more

about the traveller than the country visited, it is the standard within such texts to disavow such fictionalising. However, in Ángel's version, the truth claims of the conventional travel narrative are constantly eroded by the self-consciousness of the travel writing sections. There are a variety of deliberately self-conscious references to the act of writing, and to the lack of credibility of this travel account. For instance, we read the female narrator of this travel narrative informing us:

‘Porque lo que yo ví y oí en aquel día sin sol, se pasa de la raya. Y a lo mayor van a creer que sólo es artificio de escribana’ (Ángel, *Tierra de nadie*, 2002, pág. 185).

This is just one example of the increasingly self-conscious narration of the travelogue, whereby the narrator continually highlights the lack of verisimilitude of her account. Ángel's account could therefore be allied with recent developments in travel narrative as identified by Pitman, in which modernist innovation in narrative, with its epistemological self-consciousness, fragmented temporal and spatial schemata, limited characterisation of protagonists, and so on, has threatened the basic premises of the genre in both form and content. (Pitman, 2003, pág. 49)

In addition to this, we constantly witness the protagonist in the process of writing a work of fiction, which, as the text progresses, we gather must be the galactic narrative of the parallel sections. Ángel's take on the travel writing genre could therefore be an attempt to lay bare the fictionalising at the heart of such purportedly objective accounts. Ángel's travel narrative is never innocent, and never declares itself to represent truth.

The second of these genres that I have indicated, the SF narrative, can be identified both in the plot of these sections – that is, galactic women who descend to earth to discover human nature and change the ways of the world – and also in the use of certain motifs common to SF, such as alien beings, and unusual technologies which are unable to be explained by contemporary scientific knowledge. *Tierra de nadie* also, however, thwarts certain of the thrusts of SF. Science fiction is conventionally seen as a genre with a forward-looking gaze, providing visions

of a world future to our own. However, as critics have noted, the purportedly forward-looking drive of science fiction is often offset by a recursive impulse. As Nigel Clark has argued, ‘we tend to begin each of our «advances» into the cybernetic realm with a rear-vision mirror firmly affixed to the console screen, moving into an indeterminate future with a sort of ongoing recursive gaze’ (Clark, 1995, pág. 115). Clark suggests that science fiction projections of the future are frequently based on a reworking of the present and of the past, and indeed it has often been noted that science fiction is as much about contemporary and past concerns as about the future.

But, if SF's futuristic gaze is predicated on a disavowed recursive gaze, Ángel's version of SF negates both of these movements. Ángel's SF narrative is neither forward-moving nor rear-gazing, but instead refuses both progression *and* regression. For the galactic sections of this text are repetitive ones: in each of the distinct chapters, a different galactic woman journeys to a region of the earth, but her experiences, far from adding to a rich tapestry, end up repeating those of the galactic sisters before her. Thus, in *Tierra de nadie*, movement is neither forwards nor backwards in the SF narrative of this novel, but spirals in upon itself.

The other genre – or perhaps more properly, influence – which is interwoven within the SF sections, is one that I am broadly terming ‘New Age’. Within the galactic women's quest to change the world, there are repeated references to chakras, and the search for inner harmony which would fit in with a New Age mentality. Whilst New Age theories may at first sight be seen as incompatible with SF, as I have shown elsewhere, the two systems do share some common features – not least in their respective progressive-recursive gazes. (Taylor, 2002) However, whilst the New Age elements in Laura Esquivel's *La ley del amor*, for instance, tended to function in a parodic fashion, Ángel's take on New Age philosophy reads as a straight acceptance of these values. The references to chakras; to Gaia, the goddess of the earth and feminine spirit who has been taken up by a myriad of New Age practices, ranging from self-healing to eco-feminism; the search for divine love (el Amor Omnisciente. O sea, el Amor Divino) (Ángel,

2002, pág. 335), and other such repeated elements in Ángel's novel, all appear to function in a non-parodic way. Yet, the question must be addressed of how, in a work by a novelist whose writings have always challenged essentialism, and frequently presented a feminist reworking of events (Angel, 1894), feminist impulses can be reconciled with the essentialist and ultimately deterministic discourses of New Age: discourses which, ultimately, provide for no individual human agency. The experiences of the galactic women, each of whom undertakes a journey to a particular part of the Earth in each chapter, are essentially the same: each undergoes a harsh process of adjustment to the realities of life of earth; each, in their attempt to introduce love to the world ends up suffering at the hands of men.

One potential way of reconciling these two seeming opposing poles - that is, feminist emancipation, and spiritual pre-determination - could be through a reading of Luce Irigaray's arguments about the importance of the divine in a feminist praxis. Irigaray argues that:

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine (Irigaray, 1993).

Irigaray's assertion may at first strike us as paradoxical - and particularly with relation to feminism's aims, which have often been predicated on the dismantling of religion as a patriarchal institution. Yet Irigaray's provocative statement claims that it is precisely through the reinterpretation of notions of the divine that an emancipatory feminism is possible. To see what Irigaray could mean by this, I shall take a further quotation from her, and then expand on how this could illuminate a reading of Angel. Irigaray states that:

I am far from suggesting that today we must once again deify ourselves as did our ancestors with their animal totems, that we have to regress to siren goddesses, who fight against men gods. Rather I think we must not merely instigate a return to the cosmic, but also ask ourselves why we have been held back from becoming divine women. (Irigaray, 1993, pág. 60)

What particularly interests me in Irigaray's assertion is the notion of 'becoming divine women', a notion which perhaps encapsulates what Irigaray later describes as 'the perfection of our subjectivity' (Irigaray, 1993, pág. 63). I would argue that any useful meaning to be garnered from Angel's galactic women's quest for spiritual harmony must be formulated in the light of Irigaray's claims. It is in this light that, I argue, we must examine the conclusion to the novel, which, in this reading, embodies this 'becoming divine women'.

### Meeting of the Two Strands

The second narrative strands of this novel, whilst clearly demarcated at the outset, become progressively closer throughout the last half of the book. The first indications of the cross-overs between the two narratives comes in the instances of parallel episodes in each sections. For instance, an early indication comes in the chapter Mukti-Suyu, where the experiences of the galactic woman is narrated, as she witnesses a community in which 'Las mujeres ocupaban espacios de mujeres. Los hombres terrenos de los hombres' (Angel, 2002, pág. 198). This experience is mirrored by the narrative of the everyday sections, in which 'las mujeres andaban mancornadas y los hombres aparte' (Angel, 2002). Thus even at this relatively early stage in the narrative, indications of the cross-overs between the 2 sections begin to arise, in that situations within one narrative are paralleled in another.

Stylistically too, the distinct tone of the two sections are eroded, as the tale of the galactic women becomes ever more mundane: animals that speak, bears which supposedly represent gods, elements of nature which commune with these celestial beings, start to talk in chatty Colombianisms: '¡Estás loquita de remate...! ¡Misiá desvirolada!, gritaban las rocas'. Indeed, even the galactic woman herself takes on these forms of speech:

'Yo me cansé de tanta brega. Ya le dije al Consejo de la Galaxia Venusina, que si tanta tramoya [...], yo mejor me dedico a hacer muñecos de cristal. Esos responden mucho más que tanto mequetrefe creyéndose mi Dios...' (Angel, 1982, pág. 366)

At the same time, the experiences of the everyday narrator become ever more esoteric, moving from, in the earlier sections, the murders of street children in Brazil, through walking through fire in Scotland, to jumping to another dimension in Australia. What interests me here is the notion of contamination, or perhaps of cross-fertilization, of the narrative voices. The respective codes of the two distinct genres are progressively eroded by Angel in the course of the novel

Moreover, I would argue here that Ángel's use of overt (and, to a certain extent, quite folkloric) Colombianisms for the speech of purportedly celestial beings, functions to undermine the otherworldly, galactic quality of the *mujeres galácticas*, and of the SF quest as a whole. This is a feature quite common to the writing of other Latin American women who turn their hand to SF narratives – we might think here of Laura Esquivel's *La ley del amor*, where the Guardian Angels swear in colourful Mexican expletives. For me, this functions to undo the often clinical, neutral, and often overtly 'Americanised' (I use this in the sense of the USA) discourse of SF.

### Becoming Divine Women

Moreover, as I will mentioned earlier, the novel's conclusion, in which the two strands of SF and travel narrative are united, for me gives a specific image of 'becoming divine women'. I would argue that we can interpret the metamorphosis of the everyday protagonist (alternatively narrator and subject of the *historia cotidiana*) into the galactic woman Arathía as precisely this becoming divine woman that Irigaray urges.

This, for me, is a possible way of answering the problematic presence of determinism in this text. Crucially, I think the question must be raised as to whether there can be a space for the recuperation without irony of notions of 'amor divino' and 'amor onmisciente'. It would appear that Angel's text, for the most part, does indeed engage with these terms without irony, and indeed, portrays the galactic women's quest in all its anguish. Angel, I would argue, performs in the galactic sections of her novel what

Spivak in another context has termed 'strategic essentialism'. Spivak, in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, argued that

we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse [...] it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism [...] But strategically we cannot. [...] You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side' (Spivak Gayatri, 1990, págs. 11-12).

Spivak's argument seems to run here that, yes, we know that essentialisms are false, but strategically, politically, they are necessary. Perhaps here in Ángel's case we might call it 'strategic becoming divine women'; a kind of knowing essentialism. Whether this strategic essentialism is ever enough, however, is called into question by the close of the novel, as will be examined below. Indeed, as Spivak's argument implies, for essentialism and/or spiritualism to be 'strategic' implies a lack at the heart of such essentialism.

The ending of the novel, then, brings about the union of the two narrative stands, and enacts this strategic becoming divine women. In an ending which, according to the writer, was a surprise to herself as she wrote it (a statement which in itself suggests a take-over of subjectivity by an alien force)<sup>4</sup>, the narrator of the supposedly everyday story is transformed into the galactic woman of the SF narrative. In the last section of the travel narrative, the protagonist is encouraged to make a leap to another dimension, with the result being the following:

¡Bienvenida, Arathía...! ¡Te estamos esperando, hace más de dos siglos...! Ya las risas de aquellas navegantes, así le parecieron... la sacudieron de emoción y comenzó a llorar y más llorar, mientras reconocía a cada una (Angel, 2002, Pág. 48).

The everyday protagonist has now crossed over to the side of the galactic women, and has come to form part of the SF narrative. Yet, much more than this, she has also become – or perhaps, has always already been – Arathía, the galactic heroine of the final section of the novel. This, for me, is where the

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with the writer.

enactment of Irigaray's exhortation takes place: the everyday narrator in this scene, quite literally becomes divine woman. The *protagonista cotidiana* has now shed her everyday status, and become divine, become one of these other-worldly creatures on a mission to provide spiritual enlightenment for the world.

But, what is even more telling and potentially disturbing in this episode, is not just that the travel narrative protagonist has become the galactic woman, but that the whole binary of fiction/reality has been turned on its head. The following quotation shows how:

Y cantó y cantó canciones en su lengua nativa y recibió su bastoncito de abedul y se acomodó la piedra de esmeralda al lado del corazón. Así fue aquella historia, que ella creía una invención y resultó ser lo que es... (Ángel, 2002, pág. 410).

This is the final twist in the tale, and takes the by now Angelian tactic of interweaving layers of fiction one step further. Now, the narrator who had revealed herself to be the writer of the SF extracts, finds herself being written by her fiction; or, even more disturbingly, that what she had assumed to be fiction was all along reality. The writer is no longer in charge of her creation; it is now in charge of her, and she is written by it.

Thus Ángel's novel, and in particular, the closing section to her novel, enact for us a 'becoming divine woman'. Yet I would argue that the text bears clear traces which indicate for us that this becoming divine woman is only ever a *strategic* one; only ever a *strategic* becoming divine woman. That is, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the recuperation of notions of the divine can never be an innocent one, it can only ever be a knowing one.

This, I would argue, is revealed by the self-conscious framing of what should be purportedly the most solemn, most transcendental moment of

becoming divine, in the passage over to 'the other side'. Just a few lines before the exalted transformation of the protagonist into the divine woman Arathía, we have a self-conscious discourse of fictionalising:

[Ianuth] saltó al vacío y en menos de un Segundo su cuerpo refulgió como una chispa de candela y desapareció. Así no más. [...] Como cuando la gente se desintegra, en los episodios de «Star Treck [sic]» (Ángel, 2002, pág. 409)

As this quotation reveals, this purportedly transcendental moment is in fact formed within the discourse of popular culture, with the reference to *Star Trek*. A feature common to other of Ángel's writings (see *Dos veces Alicia*, for instance), the reference to already-existing texts in the broadest sense of the term, has peppered this novel (other examples include the Pied Piper of Hamilyn, and the ubiquitous *Alice in Wonderland*). As is the case with the other instances of the mention of previously-existing texts in this novel, they are used to question the veracity of the narration, and to undermine the notion of essence. It is this key moment which for me, lays bare the 'strategic' in the strategic essentialism/spiritualism; always a knowing essentialism. The moment of becoming divine is clearly framed within discourses of fiction, and is thus clearly not an innocent one. Nonetheless, that is not to say that this means a parody of becoming divine: rather that becoming divine is used knowingly, strategically, to provide for a leading role for women as spiritual saviours. That is, Ángel's text, through its knowing, self-conscious references, makes clear its awareness of the pitfalls of religious discourse – discourse which has been largely discredited by certain brands of feminism. Yet it nevertheless argues for a strategic appropriation of the terms of the divine as an emancipatory goal.

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