



Elite Indigeneity from *Cumandá* to Instagram: Femininity, Visualism and Aesthetics in Elite-Friendly Representations of Indigenous Amazonia

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Amazonian indigeneity is represented in elite-controlled cultural spaces – what I call “elite indigeneity” – through a comparison of Juan León Mera’s 1879 novel *Cumandá* with contemporary indigenous influencers on Instagram. Through analysis of visualism, gender and ethnicity, it suggests some of the ways through which certain forms of indigenous (self-)representation can be made palatable to elite interests despite broader conflicts between indigenous and elite agendas. The study compares Juan León Mera’s representation of the fictional *Cumandá* with the social media presence of the Gualinga sisters, indigenous influencers from Ecuador’s Sarayaku territory. In spite of their historical distance, the cases share striking parallels: their protagonists occupy ambiguous positions between indigenous and white identity, their representation relies heavily on visual aesthetics that maintain a balance between intimacy and exoticization, and they present feminine-coded forms of political expression that contrast with masculine-coded forms of indigenous resistance that have dominated outsider perceptions of Amazonia. The analysis suggests that while digital media appears to democratize indigenous self-representation, it may reproduce long-standing patterns of elite indigeneity by privileging particular aesthetic and political forms.

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“Amazonia has the voice of a woman,” read the magazine cover. It was an April 2022 edition of *Hogar* (“Home”) and the cover photo was a shot of Helena and Nina Gualinga, sisters from the Ecuadorian Amazonian territory of Sarayaku. The sisters were looking elegant, wearing crocheted, cropped tops, shoulder-length earrings and loose linen pants while striking a stylized pose by a riverbank. Other headlines on the cover: “Fashion: Trends 2023” and “Special: Entrepreneurial Women.” The cover stood on a shelf in Quito (the Ecuadorian capital) by the checkout at Supermaxi, a Western-style supermarket frequented by the capital’s upper crust and invariably found in securitized mall complexes.

In the capital for visa paperwork at the time, the plastic-packaged image of Amazonia crossed my mind a few months later. In June, thousands of Amazonian indigenous people, mostly men, took their spears to the region’s main roads to block all traffic and stare down police and soldiers. The campaign had many goals, but the pre-eminent one was to maintain the fuel subsidies that make life more bearable for Ecuadorians at the bottom of the economic ladder. Its target was the neoliberal presidency of Guillermo Lasso, the candidate backed by the Quito elite. The men spent over a week at the blockade, catching at most a few hours of sleep each night laid out on the bitumen amid the adrenaline and unease over the ever-present possibility of violent government escalation of the conflict (see [Vangsnæs 2024](#)). The campaign leader, Leonidas Iza, had narrowly escaped assassination after a bullet tore through the window of the vehicle in which he was travelling.

Standard accounts of the relationship between race, ethnicity and power in the Americas – particularly those heavily influenced by US cultural politics – frequently envision whiteness at the top of the hierarchy and indigeneity at the bottom. While this is especially apt in Latin America given its highly racialized socio-economic hierarchy, a too rigid application of such a schema risks overlooking the role, style and scope of indigeneity within elite-controlled culture, what I call “elite indigeneity”. Fitting identity into a rigid schema of political and economic inequalities overshadows the way in which identity positions such as those of indigenous peoples can be amplified when they are expressed in a manner that complements pre-existing desires and agendas.

In this article, I would like to contemplate some examples of indigeneity palatable to elite interests, and their implications. How is it that indigeneity becomes an object for elite affinities when the interests of the vast majority of indigenous peoples run counter to the elites? What are the principal characteristics of this “elite indigeneity” and how can it be recognized?

Drawing on Ben Highmore’s (2017) approach to the interplay between class and cultural reproduction that builds from Raymond Williams’ (1958) “structures of feeling”, as well as multi-modal discourse analysis ([Pauwels 2012](#)) and visual anthropology ([Nugent 2007](#)),

this article traces the continuities in elite indigeneity in and from Ecuadorian Amazonia, starting with the 1879 novel by Juan León Mera, *Cumandá*, and proceeding to the Instagram pages of Ecuador’s pre-eminent indigenous influencers, the Gualinga sisters. Though some 150 years distant from one another, the two cases share the curious parallel that their protagonists are, in different senses, both white and indigenous. In Mera’s novel, *Cumandá* is revealed to be the daughter of a white family, but who was raised and lived as an indigenous Amazonian in the wake of an uprising against her landowning family. The Gualinga sisters, for their part, are the daughters of a Kichwa mother and a Swedish father. This transnational access is undoubtedly a factor in the dramatic scope of their influence, not just materially but also, as I will argue, in the capacity it affords them to bridge the aesthetic gap between Amazonia and an “elite” online audience. In both cases, as we will see, the consumer is invited to aestheticize the women through the prevalence of visualism in their (self-)representation, which produces an ambiguous blend of intimacy and distance that matches their ambiguous identities.

These cases are small windows into the current state of interethnic relations in Latin America and the way in which elite interests not only disempowers the great majority of indigenous people but also shapes which indigenous people are empowered and the imagery of their indigeneity. This influence over the imagery of indigeneity and indigenous identity in turn strongly influences the kind of stories and politics that are held to represent indigenous people, making the story of *Cumandá* and the Gualingas far more politically significant than the cases themselves might suggest.

INTERSECTIONALITY, GENDER AND ELITE INDIGENEITY

Both popular and academic analyses frequently understand intersectionality as a cumulative index of oppression. This analytical framework assumes that if people of color experience oppression and women experience oppression, then women of color are doubly oppressed. Certain such analyses reduce the entire arc of history to a racially and gender charged play of identities and power ([Quijano 2000](#); [Yusoff 2018](#)). Aside from producing overly theory-led narratives, such analyses also lack the nuance to generate insights into the micro-politics of race, gender and power as they are lived out by people within these very systems.

Elite cultural institutions and gatekeepers favor non-dominant identity positions in certain manners and contexts. As bell hooks already put it several decades ago:

“Mass culture ... perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure and enjoyment to be found in racial difference. ... [I]t is offered as a new delight,

more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” (hooks 1992: 21)

Secondly, in addition to this pleasure attendant on consuming representations of ethnicity, there is also the contemporary satisfaction that comes with the mere fact of openness to expressions of non-dominant culture or identity positions. This is a point of special importance for members of the professional-managerial class whose perspective dominates the culture industries (see Liu 2021). As a result, there is a social capital available for those who produce a difference that is clearly *different* and yet also aesthetically appealing and non-threatening.

This dual conjuncture – the positive value attached to ethnocultural difference and to openness to difference itself – means that amidst an overall situation of inequality, opportunity and obstacles are disbursed in differential fashion. There remains an inherent threat to power in giving voice to the voiceless, but that threat is attenuated via the control of cultural production. In the case of indigenous Amazonia, I suggest that such attenuation is now being achieved by privileging female or female-coded cultural expressions over more confrontational and aggressive masculine-coded forms of politics that formerly dominated Western imaginaries of Amazonian indigeneity. While there is nothing inherently non-threatening about femininity and female-led politics, visualist representational techniques – i.e., those that privilege vision as the primary mode of sensory engagement – thereby establish a balance between aestheticisation and distance that enables femininity to be appreciated as a non-threatening political stance. Visualism and the colonial “gaze” has previously been linked with objectifying modes of Western knowledge formation relying on spatial order and purportedly neutral subject positions that enabled the translation of knowledge across transnational context (Espinosa Miñoso 2009; Fabian 1983; Lydon 2005; Pratt 1992). Yet through the following analyses of *Cumandá* and Instagram publications, I suggest that visualism also has the capacity to facilitate a balance between intimacy and exoticization that complements the role of feminine imagery in the construction of elite indigeneity.

The new pre-eminence of this style and aesthetics of political indigeneity implies, as a corollary, the minimization of masculine-coded politics. Amazonia has long been associated with the imagery of masculinity in Western accounts. Shamanism, warfare and war-like artefacts such as blowguns, poisons and severed heads have been its longest-standing symbols (Nugent 2007; Rubenstein 2006; Whitehead 2006). Such imagery has also flowed through global information circuits to influence Amazonians own self-perception and thereby also the nature of their self-representation in identity-

driven public political fora (High 2010). Yet contemporary representations of Amazonia have advanced at the pace that they have become more feminine. Conservationist NGOs nowadays promote female leaders like Josefina Tunki, Nemonte Nenquimo and, as we will see, the Gualinga sisters. This is not just a matter of recognizing female leadership, but also the prominence of female-coded modes of politics: cosmological poetics, ecology and a politics of care, as we see for instance in the international success of Davi Kopenawa (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). In this way, the masculine-coded staunch resistance of Amazonian warriors – as we remember, for example, from the “hypermasculine” Gê warriors’ campaign against the Belo Monte dam (Graham 2014) – has been replaced by a more poetic and aesthetic mode of engaging political interests and ideals. This aestheticization of indigenous politics is central to the contemporary construction of elite indigeneity.

To trace the historical roots of elite indigeneity, the article’s first substantive section describes the narrative framing and representational techniques applied by Juan León Mera to Amazonian indigeneity and indigenous people in the 1879 novel *Cumandá*, a novel considered foundational in the construction of Ecuadorian nationhood. The focus on the analysis is on the representation of its female protagonist, *Cumandá*, as well as her connection with the Amazonian landscape and the other indigenous Amazonian characters. Here, I take for granted the fundamental observations of Raymond Williams (1958) in regard to the tense interplay between elite control over cultural production, on one hand, and on the other hand, the everyday nature of the culture that is reflected in the perspectives of cultural producers. In particular, I take inspiration from Ben Highmore’s (2017) operationalization of Williams’ notion of “structures of feelings” as the public manifestations of affect that have typically been interpreted as responses that belong to the private and individual domain. Through prioritizing the sense of vision, I argue that *Cumandá* provokes an aestheticisation of its female protagonist and the Amazonian landscape. This, I go on to argue in the following section, has striking parallels with the self-representation of the Gualinga sisters via Instagram, suggesting the common characteristics at play in elite indigeneity. First, however, some words are warranted on the methodology and theoretical framework being implemented.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Politically and theoretically, the argument in this article extends upon a prominent strand of thought in decolonial theory, that is, the suspicion of the capacity of politics of cultural recognition to reinstate hegemonic forms of power. Elizabeth Povinelli calls this “the cunning of recognition” (2002; see also Coulthard 2014). Important

here is Charles Hale's (2002) foundational analysis of neoliberal multiculturalism as a technique of interethnic governance, whereby certain minimal forms of difference are recognized so as to more effectively sideline more radical claims. Similarly though with a more cultural and ontological focus, Povinelli (2002) demonstrates how the process by which indigenous peoples' land rights are recognized in Australia works to constrain the kinds of difference that can be articulated. This article grounds these global dynamics in Amazonian realities, most especially the romanticization of the imagery of Amazonian and its people. In this it follows Stephen Nugent (2007) and, especially, Alcida Ramos (1994). The latter showed an ethnographic case in which a group of Amazonians compromised to improve their economic conditions at the cost of exploiting local forest resources, leading to their subsequent rejection by their NGO allies. As Sarah Sarzynski argued, "While indigenous peoples can gain power by wearing feathers and face paint, their power does not transcend the confines of the stereotype" (2021: 49). The concept of "elite indigeneity" is thereby proposed to capture the way in which a particular imagery of indigeneity (and its associated politics) can be not only recognized, but even celebrated and actively promoted by elites, precisely because it places constraints on indigenous people's political protagonism.

Although the article brings together a novel combination of materials in terms of both format and historical context, it is conventional in terms of method. The reading of *Cumandá* is character-centered, focusing on Cumandá herself and her relationship to the other characters, with attention to gender as well as their situation by the author on a spectrum between whiteness and indigeneity. In the course of this reading, it became clear that the text predominantly invokes the visual sense, especially in its treatment of Cumandá. The discussion of "visualism" then – by which I mean simply the prevalence of the visual sense among the senses invoked by the text – should be understood as finding rather than method.

Likewise, my analysis of the Instagram accounts of the Gualinga sisters is relatively conventional. Their content is not approached via a "digital ethnography", which in my reading is more appropriate in contexts of digital immersion in virtual worlds that can stand in for an ethnographic field (see e.g. Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2024). Rather, their Instagram accounts are approached much as in visual anthropology or the "visual studies" sub-field of cultural studies. The analysis does not rely on the arguably tendentious claims of "visual grammar" (see Kress and Leeuwen 2021), but rather the more approachable issue of curatorial decisions, or, as Nugent puts it, the fact that "what qualifies as an informative image...reflects non-trivial editorial decisions" (2007: 20). Implicit also is the notion, most famously from Susan Sontag (1977), that photography at once claims the present but inherently produces images

of the past, and thus inevitably brings with it a certain nostalgia; in the context of Amazonia, this tendency plays into established tropes about the region as a supposed surviving relic of the deep past within the present day. I also give attention to the composition of images and video; the language used (for instance, the text captions that conventionally follow Instagram posts); the language itself that is being spoken (English, Spanish or Kichwa); and the switching of pronouns, seen as reflections of a fluid or unstable identity positioning between whiteness and indigeneity. Together, the approach can be best glossed as "multimodal discourse analysis" (Pauwels 2012: 253–9), following a framework for analyzing websites that focuses on the interplay of distinct visual, textual and auditory elements as well as the play of impressions and thoughts that the simultaneous media produce in the consumer of the content.

It cannot be forgotten, nonetheless, that Instagram is not exactly a website; it is still a relatively novel medium for cultural analysis. Most significant about this scenario, in my view, is the breakdown of the former relationship between the content and the consumer: the content being consumed is often not explicitly sought out but is served to the consumer based on prior expressed preferences. While consumers experience the content stream as fluid, creators experience the audience as fluid, in the form of a shifting quantity of attention, revenue and prestige. Relative to prior to the era of digital platforms, then, power remains unequally distributed among content producers, but it is more rapidly and fluidly shifted and distributed. This scenario enables the methodologically creative step of this article, which is its connection of established cultural analyses of the "colonial gaze" to political theories of "the cunning of recognition". I suggest that digital platforms are able to execute a fluid form of recognition by facilitating a certain kind of "gaze" and simultaneously encouraging the production of content to satisfy it. An aestheticized, elite-friendly version of indigeneity can thereby emerge, as if on its own, based on long-standing structures of feeling with their roots in the imagery of gender, ethnicity, wildness and nature.

CUMANDÁ AND THE AMAZONIAN LANDSCAPE

Juan León Mera's *Cumandá* has been described as the first Ecuadorian novel. It is typically read as an example of the nineteenth century "national novels" in the Romanticist traditions, in which authors sought to invent the tradition of their new republics by identifying the spirit of their people (see Sommer 1991). It has also been read as an *indigenista* narrative (Corrales 1978) and an "apologia" for Church-state governance under the García Moreno presidencies.

These analyses center on the redemption arc of a central character, Don José Domingo de Orozco, an *hacendado* from the highlands whose son Carlos is the young sweetheart of the beautiful Cumandá. Don José, we learn near the novel's opening, lost half his family in an "Indian" peasant uprising in the highlands and is haunted by it, telling himself that "in some way you yourself were the cause of the extermination of your family" (Mera 2003[1879]: 28). Mera does not equivocate in presenting the highland peasant rebellion as a series of "bloody atrocities" of genocidal anti-white intent (27), but in Mera's account this does not mean that Don José is without blame. On one hand, Mera says, José was "an excellent husband, tender father, honorable citizen...and on the other the inhuman and almost ferocious heir to the instincts of [conquistadors] Carvajal and Ampudia" (28–29).

Don José responds to the tragedy of the rebellion by abandoning his worldly possessions and entering the Church. We meet him as Padre Domingo, in charge of the Upper Amazonian mission of Andoas. A sequence of events then unfolds around Carlos and Cumandá, set in train when an indigenous Amazonian named Tongana, ostensibly Cumandá's father, seeks to have them killed. The narrative climax is reached when Padre Domingo converts Tongana, formerly "distinguished for his implacable hatred for the European race" (10), to Christianity. Clearly then, in this Andean-Amazonian national myth, the restoration of the conservative ideal of benevolent hierarchy, which Mera positions as the ideal state of affairs for the Ecuadorian nation, comes about through the encounter or confrontation with the "savage" Amazonian and his conversion and peaceable assimilation. The narrative sits within the broader elite western South American notion that both Amazonia and its indigenous people had to be "tamed" in the interests of national development (see Santos-Granero and Barclay 2000).

I say "his" conversion because the challenge posed by the indigenous Amazonian has undoubtedly been gendered. For Mera in *Cumandá*, the threat of indigenous people is posed entirely through male characters. Their most "barbaric" customs represented in the novel – warfare, head-hunting, kidnapping of women, as well as a historically very early reference to ayahuasca consumption (9) – are carried out by men. The obstinate Tongana, for instance, is an implacable opponent of the whites who are Mera's protagonists, but Tongana's wife is a mysterious, benevolent character who assists Carlos and Cumandá behind the scenes with herbs and spells. Or, when it appears that the young lovers might be killed for violating taboos at the Fiesta de la Virgen de las Flores, Mera writes, "The women [in the crowd], who not even savagery had made insensitive, trembled at the punishment that awaited the virgin and the beautiful white [man] and wept silent tears" (50). This gendered imagery parallels the anthropologist

Laura Graham's observation from Brazil that Kayapó and Xavante performances of indigeneity – in this instance, in opposition to hydroelectric dam construction on their territory and, in a more general sense, in opposition to the colonization of their territory – are "hypermasculine" (2014: 306).

This raises intriguing points of contrast with earlier analyses of gender in Western representation of indigeneity. These associations of gender with political styles and attitudes toward interethnic relations, I suggest, can be understood as "structures of feeling" in Ben Highmore's (2017) sense. They reflect elite preferences and are widely recognizable across society as a whole, despite their arbitrary character. Yet it is also clear that the structures of feeling around gender and indigeneity are locally variable. Pamela Scully, for example, argues that the "trope" of the young indigenous woman aiding the European explorer or conqueror, "yielding to the European man", is an aspect of a wider "feminization of indigenous societies in general" (Scully 2005: n.p.). Scully's argument, based in particular on the figures of Malintzin (La Malinche), Pocahontas and Krotoa, parallels the well-known observation about structures of feeling surrounding gender in the Andean highlands that "the women are more indigenous [than the men]" (de la Cadena 1996). The feminization of indigenous culture in the Western imagination has also been observed in the south of Chile (Bacigalupo 2002) and in mainstream Brazilian representations of Amazonia in the 1970s, when both the people and the forest-territory were framed as feminine and "conquerable" (Sarzynski 2021: 56). This is clearly not the case in Western representations and imaginaries around indigenous Amazonian societies, as we can see in *Cumandá* and also in the leverage gained by masculine-coded forms of public performances of Amazonian indigeneity, as noted by Laura Graham (2014) and others (Benítez 2024; High 2010). What we might say, however, based on the imagery in Juan León Mera's novel, is that women came to represent the non-threatening and redeemable component of Amazonian indigeneity in the Western imaginary. This, in turn, as we shall see, has implications for the possibilities of elite indigeneity in the digital era.

Of course, standing in contrast to the overall masculinized representation of indigenous Amazonian culture and society, Cumandá herself is the clearest example of femininity as the key to a redeemable indigeneity. An oft-noted feature of *Cumandá* is the almost excessive naturalistic detail through which the Andean-Amazonian piedmont and the rainforest itself is depicted (Goldberg 2000). I suggest that this representational technique is not just intended as a mode of nascent Ecuadorian self-presentation for a work explicitly written for the Real Academia Española, as some have observed (Corrales 1978; Vidal 1980). More importantly for our purposes, the mode of representation

– the precipices, roaring rivers, vines and overhanging trees, the mountain-tops standing like altars (5–6) – activates the visual senses of the reader.

The same then occurs in the introduction of Cumandá herself. The heroine’s “graceful body” is described as like “the palm trees of her homeland” in the midst of a single-sentence physical description of her of more than twenty clauses (12), which is very much an atypical syntax compared to when the events of the novel have begun in earnest. In Mera’s account her voice is “sweet and harmonious like that of a bird in love” and her words bubble like the rolling waters of a stream (13). Laura Hunt (2013: 75) observed, similarly, that Cumandá is distinguished by her closeness to nature, talking to plants and manipulating the rivers and streams with her emotions, and it is through this association with Amazonia that she is able to bypass nineteenth century ideals of female virtue (see Mataix 2006). At the same time, this is not simple physical beauty; like the sublime peaks of the piedmont, Cumandá’s expression combines “sweetness and arrogance, timidity and fire, love and disdain” (12).

We are invited to admire Cumandá, in other words, as the visual centerpiece of an awe-inspiring topographic scenario, a representational technique in accounts of women and “New World” nature that features in similar accounts from elsewhere in the Americas (Linton 1998). Through the activation of visual senses, we are invited to appreciate Cumandá in the same manner as the awesome Upper Amazonian landscape. The political effect of visualism is summarized by Monika Siebert, when she argues that it “endows the viewer with mastery while it reduces the Indigenous subject to the object of this masterful gaze” (2018: 207). This mode of representation stimulates both intimacy and distance; we as readers can imagine that we are seeing Cumandá exactly as she is, even as we are most certainly watching events unfold rather than standing in the shoes of one of the characters. Despite the novel’s nineteenth century provenance, the effect is much like that of a film, and indeed *Cumandá* has been adapted for Ecuadorian television (Dillon 2016). The effect is enhanced by the regular irruptions of narrative commentary, as Mera was still recounting the exotic events in the same voice as his letter to the Real Academia that introduces the novel.

As events unfold, of course, it becomes clear that Cumandá is not just an indigenous Amazonian woman, however beautiful. Her countenance is described as the color of marble (12) and “white as coconut pulp” (34); her descent from Padre Domingo is hinted at early when it is written that she has “a noble soul” and “a Christian heart inside a savage breast” (12). Indeed, her growing closeness to Carlos is indexed by his entreaties to her to no longer fear the spirits of the river and forest, as a Christian should not. We should recall here, as Agustín Cueva described of the Andean-Amazonian countries, that “until today

‘Christian’ is a synonym of ‘human’ in everyday language... given that the first term was confused with ‘European’ in colonial times, those who were not automatically fell into the domain of zoology” (Cueva 2008[1967]: 31). Her whiteness, in other words, made her redeemable within the moral narrative constructed by Juan León Mera, even as the visualism activated in the mode of representation applied to her encouraged readers to hold their distance – view her rather than identify with her – and appreciate her wild physical existence. As previously noted, the conversion of Tongana has been interpreted as the climax of Mera’s moral narrative in *Cumandá*. Yet it is the support of the mysterious but sympathetic indigenous female characters that sustains the narrative arc of the Orozco men long enough to reach the conversion of the implacable Tongana.

CONTEMPORARY CUMANDÁS? ELITE INDIGENEITY ON INSTAGRAM

In sum, the image of elite indigeneity in Juan León Mera’s *Cumandá* combines three characteristics – visualism, whiteness and femininity – in order to construct a still-different but nonetheless non-threatening and redeemable image of Amazonia that strands in contrast to the fear-inducing masculine figures – as we know them through both *Cumandá* and more broadly prevalent Western imaginaries – whose representation centers on weapons, drugs and trophies of war (e.g. Whitehead 2006). I suggest in this section that this construction of elite indigeneity is becoming the more prevalent representation of Amazonia for Western audiences – supplanting the masculine imagery through which the region has historically been presented – and that it has a special affinity for social media in its current state. This is significant not just as an interpretation of trends in cultural production and representation, but also for the kinds of indigenous stories and politics that are heard in an increasingly fragmented cultural and media system.

The success of Nina and Helena Gualinga is an instance of this development. The Gualinga sisters have easily the most significant digital presences amongst indigenous figures in Ecuador. With around 115,000 followers each, they individually double the number of Instagram account followers of the national-level indigenous confederation, CONAIE. The audience for their photos and videos fluctuates between 100,000 and 900,000 views. The sisters have 25 times more followers than the current president of CONAIE (at the time of writing), Leonidas Iza, who has been spoken of as a potential candidate for president of the country. Admittedly, Iza is a national political figure whose public statements are mandatory broadcasting on traditional media of television and radio news. But in terms of visual representations of indigeneity and cultural reproduction of indigenous narratives, the

Gualinga sisters shape perceptions of the lived experience and aesthetics of indigenous people and spaces far more than such formally more significant figures as Iza. Their international reach, moreover, is incomparable among Ecuadorian indigenous leaders.

To be abundantly clear, to interpret their online presence as an instance of elite indigeneity is by no means intended as a criticism of Nina and Helena's authenticity or organic intentions. The truism that novels take on a life of their own that transcends the original intentions of their creators is arguably even more true in the case of digital media profiles. There are perhaps hundreds of thousands of indigenous social media accounts in the Andean-Amazonian region, and the profile that the Gualingas have attained is not something they could ever have anticipated. The fact that they are the ones in a position to have a combined 230,000 followers so far and millions of impressions on their photos and videos should be understood as an artefact of a Western demand for a certain imaginary around indigeneity.

I suggest that their success has not accidental commonalities with the representation of Cumandá constructed by Juan León Mera in the nineteenth century. The first point – and the most essential in terms of the significance of this interpretation beyond these case studies – is the nature of the medium itself. Instagram is of course a primarily visual medium. Yet more so than other visual digital niches like Pinterest and arguably Twitter/X, Instagram strongly privileges the tie with the content-producer's identity. Users can use the platform to share photography and video or a short burst of text to convey a message, but they predominantly share content centered on themselves. A user's profile is closely linked to their real identity, such that "stalking" an individual's profile has become common practice in Gen Y and Gen Z relationship building. The follow of a person's profile creates a friendship or, in the case of high follower-count influencers, a para-social relationship, and generally signals approval of the person being followed. These elements combine to create a formerly unusual combination of distance and intimacy. Influencers produce public images of themselves, producing themselves as visual objects, at the same time as the act of doing so becomes a means of creating connection and intimacy. This blend of intimate authenticity, on the one hand, and objectivization and publicity, on the other hand, has led to Instagram being dubbed a medium of "self-performance" (Vainikka, Noppari and Seppänen 2017). The user self-performs as an object for the visual gaze – creating oneself as the object the audience requires and typically also doing the photographing of oneself – an act formerly understood as inherent to colonial knowledge-making (Espinosa Miñoso 2009; Fabian 1983; Lydon 2005), yet this particular style of sensory interaction has become naturalized as simply what constitutes twenty-first century relationships.

In the specific case of the Gualinga sisters, this produces a striking parallel with the figure of Cumandá, despite their being some 150 years distant in history. These figures become known through their physicality: their bodies, yes, but also the close-up, intimate details of eyes and facial expressions that allow the audience to imagine they can discern the person's character. Juan León Mera focused on these very same details. Indeed, one could anachronistically imagine that Mera would have made an excellent Instagram-focused publicist, given, in his introduction of Cumandá, his intense attention to the qualities of hair, cheeks, skin tone and physical beauty generally. His description even includes the "indecipherable expression" of Cumandá, capturing the paradox of Instagram and para-social relationships that no matter the extent of intimacy that is fostered, one never actually knows the figure on the other side. In this way the exoticism and mystery are maintained even alongside the vivid visual detail offered by Mera and the Gualingas.

Unsurprisingly, just as in *Cumandá*, this visual style of representation carries over into the representation of Amazonia in the Gualingas' social media profiles. Their photos and reels are almost all taken in Amazonia (presumably their home community of Sarayaku, Ecuador). In several items of Helena's content, the camera shot is literally interrupted by a palm frond or other item of greenery, with Helena herself situated behind. Despite their evidently very mobile and cosmopolitan lives, the majority of their content is shot in Amazonia. The content recorded outside of Ecuador – commonly a red carpet, interview, or public speech – almost invariably contains Amazonian symbolism: beads, feathers, face paint and the like. Like Cumandá, the implication again is that their identity cannot be understood absent their natural environment as their point of origin.

Alongside this visualism that maintains the balance between intimacy, knowledge and exoticism, there is the curious parallel that both Cumandá and the Gualingas are ambiguously both white and indigenous. In both cases, I suggest this partial whiteness generates a relatability for the white gaze of the Northern audience. For Cumandá, this centered on her supposedly "Christian heart" and her gradual conversion, which showed her to be redeemable within the conservative Catholic worldview Mera espoused. For the Gualingas, this whiteness is, for one thing, literal. Their father was a Swedish biologist and Helena, for one, has posted about attending high school in Finland. They also regularly post reels speaking in English, which is of course means access to the main language of political and cultural influence in Europe and the Western hemisphere, while also allowing them to cultivate an audience that is a more lucrative target for advertisers. These points contextualize the more significant ambiguity that one can note in their voice around indigeneity. In their interviews, the sisters frequently use the third-person pronoun when speaking about indigenous peoples. "We all need to take a seat and listen to indigenous people,"

said Helena in December 2023. “Wherever they’ve lived, they’ve lived there for thousands of years. So they’ve been able to develop expertise that is very relevant to those places.” The audience is thereby able to hear directly from an indigenous person – a crucial point in a contemporary political scenario where knowledge and the legitimacy of a political position are so closely tied to identity – at the same time as the rhetorical gesture maintains the sense of a strong degree of physical and cultural distance between the audience and indigenous people. So again, the maintenance of intimacy and distance is key to this formation of elite indigeneity, even where in this case it is a self-representation or “self-performance”.

Finally, the sisters produce an obviously feminine image of Amazonia. Much of their content is their heavily curated photoshoots from political and fashion industry-related events. If the combination of visibility, whiteness, exoticism and feminism produces a palatable form of elite indigeneity, what political message do they then mobilize with the audience they command? Their principal mode of pursuing political indigeneity is environmental politics.¹ In one interview re-posted to Helena’s page, they are presented as “fighting for their home in the face of extractive oil drilling, gold mining, and hydroelectric projects”. At the Green Carpet Fashion Awards, Helena holds a placard that reads, “Stop mining in the Amazon”. They post regularly on the campaign to ban oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park and have sought to call attention to irresponsible company operations that have caused oil to be spilled from pipelines. Their motivations for these positions are poetic and personal. The forest of Yasuní is described as a “sacred space” and the forest of Sarayaku territory as “Kawsak Sachay: Living Forest”. As Nina put it in one post, “In a lot of native languages...[t]here is no word for nature. Because once we use that word, we are separating our own bodies from this body, right? From the big body, the mother body”. Through their connection to Scandinavia, they have also spoken out about wind turbine development, which Nina describes as “killing the South Sami culture and language”. This is followed by comments including, “If they kill the forest where will my heart live?”, and, “Ultimately it comes down to that one moment 23 years ago when I made a promise as a little girl to the soil”. It is a highly sentimental politics, and could be conceived as falling within the broader phenomenon of a politics of care. Clearly, the tone of such representations has shifted a great deal from the “hypermasculine” (Graham 2014) confrontational aggression that was formerly associated with political indigeneity in Amazonia.

CONCLUSION

Two months before the 2022 uprising, the Gualinga sisters appeared on the cover of *Vogue Mexico*. One of the headlines printed beside their photoshoot read, “In

the Ecuadorian Amazon, these women paint their faces as an act of resistance”. This picture of elite indigeneity is one among many possible forms of political indigeneity. The *Vogue* cover could not have stood in starker contrast than with what was to follow in June and July of that year. In the context of a nation-wide uprising against the central government, which had sought to implement IMF-backed neoliberal adjustment policies that would increase the cost of fuel and basic food supplies, indigenous Ecuadorians took to the streets and shut down transport across the country. Shuar indigenous people manufactured spears and stood down police at the blockades in an evocation of their historical symbolic association with warriorhood and armed resistance. Moreover, this was not merely a performative politics. After protestors were shot by security forces in confrontations around the Amazonian city of Puyo, Shuar men stormed the municipal offices of the provincial capital and took the town’s mayor hostage. The nation-wide stoppages lasted for two and a half weeks and the president was obliged to resign a few months later. The Gualingas’ profiles were almost silent during the months of the nation-wide strike and highway blockades. Nina was the only one to comment, posting a simple call for peace and criticizing violence and destruction by both protestors and government. The protests and blockades ran for another ten days and eventually ended with presidential concessions and jubilant street scenes around protest leader Leonidas Iza.

There remains a great deal of optimism around digital media as making possible a more horizontally networked and accessible style of political communication. Bronwyn Carlson, comments, for instance, that social media provides “significant support for identity and collective action” (2023: 162). Yet the analysis undertaken in this article raises the prospect that digital media may nonetheless lead to the reproduction of long-standing forms of elite indigeneity, that is, the role, style and scope afforded to indigenous (self-)representation within elite-controlled control. Digital media literally facilitates person-to-person communication, but mass influence as determined by audience preferences may still end up relying on historically established tropes of questionable political benefit for ordinary indigenous people.

The study of the commonalities in the aesthetics and representational techniques of Juan León Mera’s *Cumandá* and the self-representation of the Gualinga sisters on Instagram illustrates how this works in practice. In the Romanticist novel of the nineteenth century, we see excessive naturalistic detail in the representation of the indigenous protagonist and Amazonia itself. This is paralleled in the face and body-centered images produced by the two sisters, often interspersed with biotic Amazonian imagery, which often even intercedes in the line of the camera shots themselves. The images of *Cumandá* and the Gualingas that are produced, with

their focus on the visual details of face and expression, in combination with the established prevalence of visualism, generate an ambiguous intimacy that maintains the possibilities for distance and exoticism. The ambiguous whiteness of the three figures enhances this effect; from various locations around the globe, they speak on behalf of profound difference in a language the Northern consumer can understand and via an aesthetic they can admire. The feminine-coded politics, finally, emphasizes poetry and sentimentality over historically dominant modes of male-coded oppositional politics that have predominated in Amazonia and which drove opposition to the elite-implemented political-economy in Ecuador in 2022. These case studies, I suggest, may provide a window into the future of elite indigeneity. Indigeneity is kept at a distance (with all the political benefits this has) and at the same time aestheticized and made to feel intimate. Indeed, these cases raise the prospect that dominant forms of recognition may become even more “cunning” in the digital-platform era: the figures and cultural productions being elevated are determined by the same deep structures of feeling related to gender, ethnicity and nature, and yet appear to emerge organically from the people themselves.

NOTE

- 1 The sisters also campaign admirably on the issue of domestic violence.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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