

## Book Review

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Carelli, Rita. *Terrapreta*. Editora 34, 2021.

Following the sudden death of her mother, Ana moves to an Indigenous village in the Xingu region to accompany her father for fieldwork. This storyline forms the basis of *Terrapreta* (2021), Brazilian writer Rita Carelli's debut novel. Narrated from the perspective of an inquisitive teenage girl, the novel is a coming-of-age story about living in between cultures and navigating change, love, and belonging in the age of anthropogenic climate collapse. Split between three places and periods—Ana's childhood in São Paulo, her teenage years in the village, and her early adulthood in Paris—the novel moves back and forth in space and time to tell the story of the protagonist's deep relationship with the Indigenous community into which she becomes inserted.

Although this is Carelli's first work of fiction, she has written children's books about Indigenous topics (including *Minha família Enauenê*, a finalist for the Jabuti Prize in 2019 in the children's book category). She also directed the video series *Um dia na aldeia* (SESI) and collaborated with the prominent Indigenous thinker and activist Ailton Krenak, transforming his lectures and conferences into books. Although not explicitly referenced within the book, *Terrapreta* is semiautobiographical.<sup>1</sup> Carelli lost her mother at a young age and has vast experience living and working in Indigenous territories with her father, Vincent Carelli, a French filmmaker specializing in Indigenous studies. While *Terrapreta* did not get much attention from literary critics when it was published, it received the Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura in the category of debut novel and the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Infanto-Juvenil Orígenes Lessa prize in 2022. Carelli's own experience living among people in the Xingu as well as her training as a playwright and actress are noticeable in the subtle transitions between different times of the narrative, the prosaic and natural tone used by the narrator,

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<sup>1</sup> The author has mentioned this aspect of the novel in interviews. See, for example, Adriana Brandão, "Romance de estreia de Rita Carelli é recebido com elogios pela crítica francesa," 2 Apr. 2024, [www.rfi.fr/br/podcasts/rfi-convida/20240402-romance-de-estrea-de-rita-carelli-terrapreta-e-recebido-com-elogios-pela-critica-francesa](http://www.rfi.fr/br/podcasts/rfi-convida/20240402-romance-de-estrea-de-rita-carelli-terrapreta-e-recebido-com-elogios-pela-critica-francesa).

and the detailed descriptions of the landscape that always serve the plot and never seem like embellishment.

From the moment she arrives in the village, Ana feels this experience will change her life forever. By moving to the forest, a new world filled with different stories, cosmologies, and rituals opens up to the protagonist. The village becomes a space of independence, where Ana will learn how to orient herself and experience a series of encounters, either with other humans or with other-than-human beings: “iam morar num sítio arqueológico, mas vivo, e cheio de gente. E gente, no Xingu, é muita coisa: tem homem que é jacaré, beija-flor que já foi humano, mulher que namorou peixe” (49). As Ana grows, the reader partakes in her discovery of love through her affair with Yakaru, the boy with whom she falls in love in the village, and her friendship with Kassuri, a girl her age who is in seclusion for her initiation ritual (the Kuarup) and with whom she whispers through the gaps in the maloca’s walls.

Without falling into clichés or stereotypes, the novel focuses on the protagonist’s relationship with her body as a way to link physical transformations with emotional self-discovery. The events that fuel the narrative are never told as isolated or distant facts but always through Ana’s embodied perspective: “é o corpo da gente que pensa. Na floresta tudo passa pelo corpo” (87). The different spaces of the narrative also affect Ana’s physical and psychological descriptions. While the events that take place in the village often result in reflections on time, transformation, and shamanism, the passages where she is in Paris writing her master’s thesis are more self-centered and hesitant.

Carelli’s novel also explores Indigenous epistemologies, stressing the complex relationship between humans and other-than-human beings in the village, the importance of mythology and ritual for the community, and Indigenous conceptions of time. The superposition of different times and spaces is closely related to shamanism: “o tempo na aldeia é outro; existe um antes e um depois, mas eles rodam, como o dia e a noite, as chuvas e a seca, a hora de plantar e a de colher. O passado e o futuro não estão separados pelo presente, ambos moram nele” (120). By going backward and forward, the narrator occupies the role of a mediator and translator (sometimes literally), who, instead of stressing the differences that come out of this movement, focuses on layering them. This textually emulates memory’s nonlinear movements while also drawing on the

book's title, a reference to the fertile black soil through which archaeologists can trace different genealogies of pre-Columbian occupation in the Amazon region.

Ana's perspective never results in an exoticizing or anthropological gaze, often present in books that explore cross-cultural encounters from a non-Indigenous perspective, like Pedro Cesarino's *Rio acima* (2012), or Bernardo Carvalho's *Nove noites* (2002), for example. In fact, *Terrapreta* does not emulate ethnographic texts. Cultural mediation is not treated as an issue, nor is the contact based on an intellectual or exchange endeavor; rather, the text presents a personal tone, which evolves as the protagonist grows up, and is close to the diary genre. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that some of the novel's passages assume an almost didactic tone. Here, the protagonist, a white, middle-class girl, seems to explain aspects of a different culture to a white audience. While that could initially seem like a shortcoming, this tactic reveals itself as a virtue in the context of a bildungsroman. The fact that the protagonist speaks from the point of view of someone not only in-between two cultures but also in the process of constant learning and maturing makes these explanatory passages sound natural.

While the book avoids using precise historical data or terms, a note at the end explains that the author made up all the words in the Indigenous language, and the name of the Indigenous village and people among whom she lived is purportedly never mentioned throughout the book. In avoiding problematic correspondences, does the novel gain more originality or does it contribute to an overgeneralization of the diverse cultures living in the Xingu region? The careful character construction and the meticulous description of rituals, such as the Kuarup at the end, the sensitive conversations with Kassuri, and the dialogues with her dad point toward the former.

In a context where Indigenous voices are gaining prominence and reshaping the artistic sphere in Brazil, Carelli's book might appeal to readers interested in fiction about Indigenous peoples written by Indigenous authors as well as those interested in memory studies, the bildungsroman, and fictional narratives that explore Indigenous cultures from a non-Indigenous perspective. Without falling into dichotomic comparisons, the book explores the themes of transformation, time, and growing up generatively, avoiding the distant and exoticizing gaze that has long been the mark of such narratives, providing instead a sensitive narrative about Indigeneity and how to engage with the cultural and social richness of Indigenous cultures without exotification.

**João Pedro Coleta**

*Brown University*