

## **Yūgen: siete viajes por Alaska. By Mario Dávalos**

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## Yügen: siete viajes por Alaska. By Mario Dávalos

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Mario Dávalos is a multifaceted artist from the Dominican Republic. As a professional photographer, he pours his personal experiences and thoughts during his work travels to Alaska into photographs and others' reflections within the book *Yügen: siete viajes por Alaska* (*Yügen: Seven Trips Around Alaska*). It is neither a textbook nor a photograph catalog, but a mixture of sensations and emotions transmitted by both words and images in a nonlinear but natural piece of art. Dávalos has actively spotted wild nature and remote societies in Alaska, South America, and Africa, among other places (Dávalos n.d.), but he has had a crush on Alaska since his first visit on a family trip. This is the ultimate soul of this book: his passion for the silence, wildness, and natural purity of the remote places and life in this northern region of the world.

As the author states at the beginning of his work, we learn to read the world from geography; however, the reader should not expect a standard geography nor detailed description of the Alaskan places that make up this book. The integrated text-photograph sequence has no specific spatial routing or chronology. Not even a single map is included, nor have the breathtaking black and white photographs any illustrating captions or identifying numbers. One cannot guess if this is a deliberate or spontaneous attempt by the author, but the result is impressive as a means to focus on and transmit the somehow ancestral feelings of authenticity and solitude of the traveler that mixes him- or herself within and faces the natural risks of the isolated places in Alaska pictured in the book. By contrast, those interested in learning about the scientific discovery of Alaska's geography and nature would do well to read *Alaska and Its Resources* by William Dall (1870), the first such detailed publication, followed by many others.

As its title promises, the book is divided into 7 chapters, each devoted to a location along or near the coastal areas of Alaska: Kaktovik, Katmai, Krusenstern, Delong, Kelly, Teshekpuk, and finally somewhere in the southeast. None of them are easily found at first glance on a general map, as they are not among the populated towns in this state of the northernmost region of the United States. The stories are based on the author's diaries written during several trips to

photograph different places with specific objectives related to wild nature. However, they are not meant to be a literal account of his experiences, but rather something halfway between reality and memories. An initial chapter titled "La mirada al norte" (The Look to the North) introduces the author's dual character to the reader. The narration begins with a sensitive description of Dávalos's homeland, full of colors, rich vegetation, smells, and contrasts, which is not what one would expect from a book on trips to Alaska. This shared passion for the northern region of Alaska and warm yearning for his home roots is indirectly present through all the stories told in each chapter. This brings to the reader's mind remembrances of a similar dual feeling described by Ariel Dorfman (1998) in his autobiography *Rumbo al sur, deseando el norte* (*To the South, Craving for the North*), also placed along the American continent, though in a different context. Curiously enough, both books have another common feature. Dávalos, who had lived in New Jersey for years, wrote these travel diaries in English, not his mother tongue, and later translated his writing into Spanish when gathering all of them for the purpose of this book, as Dorfman did with his book.

Writing a review of *Yügen: siete viajes por Alaska* poses the risk of spoiling the book's reading by revealing its ultimate spirit, so outstanding is its capability of surprising the reader. Nevertheless, some hints can be addressed without perverting its authenticity. The first trip story, "Kaktovik," abruptly puts the reader in front of the hardness of wild nature and breaks the commonly found romantic vision of cold regions as quiet and peaceful areas of the world. The fight for life is efficiently brought to light and introduces the behavior of bears, and human vulnerability to wild animals, indirectly. This is very likely the only chapter in the book that is presented in chronological order, related to a family trip by the author to this land. Tracking bears is a leitmotif in the book, with "Katmai," "Kelly," and "Southeast" going back to them in different ways. Other fauna living in the tundra are also distinguished stars in the other chapters, but they are all more of an excuse than an objective of the author's. Dávalos is a born storyteller who fascinates the reader with his insight and his internal struggle about what his life is and what it should be. During his camping periods, patiently observing and pursuing unique snapshots to bring back home, he subtly praises human solitude and freedom, along with the adrenaline rush in extreme conditions.

Across the chapters (the trips), different characters are also introduced, professional relationships that turn into familiar faces every time Mario goes unavoidably back to Alaska's places. All of them have a role in his links to the land and his emotions, created by the shared hard conditions of life, absolute dependence on climatic conditions for decision making, and love for this part of the world. At this point, the author's style of language deserves attention. Dávalos exhibits his capacity to describe the atmosphere of these places and situations without detailed narratives or long dialogues, but rather using short sentences in the first person (with the exception of 1 chapter, to be discovered and

interpreted by the reader) and sparse bits of conversation between the characters. The entire book is tailored in this way, with no color photographs, just a glimpse of red on the cover (the only animal in the cover illustration) and the faintly colored photographs on the inner cover pages. Like an exercise in self-containment, the starring role is left to the whiteness of the land, life being gray and black spots, footprints, or shadows, in a silent, infinite space. The absence of needed accent marks here and there distracts the reader's attention from the storyline and constitutes the book's only notable flaw.

There are additional features worth mentioning with regard to this book, but then little room for surprise would be left for the reader. Let Dávalos's voice tell this uttermost trail of emotions and experiences. No better description

could be found for this book than *yūgen* (幽玄), a Japanese word that means "a mysterious and deep feeling for the beauty of the universe, and the sad beauty of human suffering." This is the personal insight Dávalos soaks the reader with after the last page turn of this amazing adventure—a sensorial artwork on white, cold, wild, and true scenarios that the readers of *Mountain Research and Development* will certainly enjoy.

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