

Mermaids and Other Fetishes: *Images of Latin America*

by Geoffrey Fox

Columbus' mermaids

On January 9, 1493, on his way back to Spain from his first trans-Atlantic voyage, Christopher Columbus noted in his journal that he had seen three mermaids which "rose high out of the sea. But they were not as lovely as they have been described, looking rather more like men in the face."



Nearly a century and a half later, in 1632 in the sea of Chiloé off the coast of Chile, according to a contemporary account, "many Spaniards and Indians saw a beast approaching the beach which, protruding from the water, showed by the front part of its head, the face and breasts of a woman, of pleasing appearance, with long, loose blond hair or mane; she carried a child in her arms. And when she dived they saw that she had a tail and back of a fish, covered with thick scales, like little shells."

They had probably frightened a dugong, and what Columbus had seen in the Caribbean and on an earlier voyage to Africa were probably manatees -- related varieties of large sea mammals, today called sirenians, that nurse their young at a pair of mammary glands on the chest.

There are no known varieties with "long, loose blond hair or mane" or a "pleasing" face of a woman.

Seeing and believing

"The world was so new that many things still lacked names, and to mention them, one had to point with a finger." (Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*)

The men of Chiloé, and Columbus before them, had two perceptual problems when confronted by something strange. First was to find a category by which they could apprehend it, and second to describe it so that others would understand: to name, and to explain. Columbus used the only word available

-- *sirenas*, or mermaids -- even though, as he noted, they were not quite the way sirenas were supposed to be; thus, whatever his private reservations, "sirenas" they would be to whoever read his reports. The men of Chiloé, in contrast, were so excited by "the beast" that they gave it all the attributes that tradition said it was supposed to have.

The myth of Latin America operates in much the same way -- the vocabulary for naming and explaining associates it with a tradition that makes it hard to see what is really there.

Latins and mermaids

The term "Latin America" -- coined by a Chilean writer and sociologist, Francisco Bilbao, in about 1865 -- was popularized in the mid-nineteenth century by French propaganda. The new sciences of linguistics and evolutionary biology were being used to construct such supposed "races" as "Latins," "Slavs," "Teutons," et alii, in which national character was thought to be passed down along with language. For Napoleon III, "Latin America" implied a special connection between "Latin" France and those New World lands where the elites spoke Spanish or Portuguese. The people of England and the United States, in contrast, were said to be "Anglo-Saxons" -- an opposing "race," with a dissimilar soul and destiny.

Napoleon's ideology implicitly scorned the polyglot and multicolored masses in the Americas, and the masses returned the sentiment. In Mexico they routed his army of occupation and shot his satrap, Maximilian, at Querétaro in 1867. But eventually -- after the problem of Maximilian was taken care of -- urban elites in Spanish America came to accept the "Latin" label for their own reasons. It declared their unity against a common enemy more dangerous than France: "Latin" America was an assertion of identity against the hegemony of "Anglo" America. Also, it helped the light-skinned elites deny their other heritages, indigenous and African, of which they were ashamed. Even Porfirio Díaz, a Zapotec Indian who had fought against the French, became a "Latin" and Francophile during his long presidency of Mexico (1876-1911, with brief interruptions).

For the English and North Americans, however, the concept of "Latin" America served, and continues to serve, a different psychological function. It dumped all the diverse peoples south of the Río Bravo into a ready-made anti-Latin myth, going back at least as far as the Reformation -- the break from the Roman, or Latin, church -- and the long imperial conflict between England and Spain.

"Latins," as Englishmen saw them, were romantic (from "romance," a novel written in a "romance" language) and Roman Catholic, which meant they were

superstitious, mysterious and irrational. Though craven, they could be provoked to extreme violence if the odds were in their favor; otherwise, they could be held in the most abject subjugation indefinitely. They were cruel (the Inquisition was a favorite element in images of Spain and Spanish America). They were oversexed, or -- more precisely -- underrepressed, which was why they had so many babies and why Anglos found them so seductive.

The imagined Latin was the sum of the delicious temptations that an Anglo was supposed to resist, beckoning as the Sirens had beckoned Odysseus to crash against the rocks.

Sightings of Latin America

"The truth is beyond reach; it's in all the lies, like God." (Tomás Eloy Martínez, *La novela de Perón*)

Those of us who write of Latin America for an English-language audience face the same challenge as Columbus in 1493: to name and explain something strange, in a vocabulary freighted with the falsely familiar. Because Latin America is strange to us, stranger than we think. This is not just because the history and traditions of our countries are different, or that their political assumptions may be startling or their economies much poorer. There is the more fundamental question of language, which is to say, the way people think.

At a first level of difficulty, some words or phrases in one language have no near equivalents in the other -- caudillo, for example, or gauchada, or, *la puta que lo parió*. Or, in the other direction, "call-girl," "whistleblower," "self-help."

More importantly, the clusters of associations around each word, the assonances and puns, the grammar itself (word order, the subjunctive mood, the gender of adjectives) suggest particular sequences of images. These then shape courtship rituals, ideological constructs, interpretations of disaster, or any other action or expression that develops from the free play of the imagination. A stream of consciousness or an inspired repartee will take a very different direction in, say, Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*, about prerevolutionary Havana nightlife, than could ever occur to an author writing in English.

Most writers avoid these difficulties by writing about the alien imagination rather than from within it, as DeFoe wrote about Friday. In English language novels set in Latin America, the most fully imagined characters are most commonly other English-speakers: the priest, the spy and the nun in Robert

Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*, the consul in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, and so on.

For those who do try to write from the alien viewpoint, the most common error is to assume that, at bottom, "they" are just like "us," because human nature is universal and immutable. The priest and the policeman in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, for example, are Mexican only in their props and setting. This view of the essential sameness of human beings, generally associated with a liberal political outlook, masks or ignores the true relations of power that shape personalities and make them capable of inflicting, resisting, submitting or enduring in particular ways. And of course, if we cannot see these relations of power, we cannot act consciously to change them.

A pair of novels on the recent (1976–1983) terroristic regime in Argentina will make the point. In *Imagining Argentina*, Lawrence Thornton imagined as a protagonist a liberal minded, middle class Argentine as nice as Mr. Rogers (like Mr. Rogers, he works with children) whose wife is suddenly "disappeared" by military goons. The story evokes our empathy precisely because the protagonist, Carlos Rueda, is so much like the probable reader, and because the Argentina that Thornton imagines is also familiar -- vaguely like small cities and farmland in the United States.

The bad guys, however, are completely opaque, their motives no clearer than those of the troll in "Billy Goat Gruff." Thornton's imagined place is not really Argentina at all, but the magical kingdom of fairy tales where spirit triumphs over fear by the appropriate gesture of an individual.

An Argentine novel, *The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis* by Humberto Constantini, gives a much more precise sense of what was happening to Argentines at the time. This is a comical, horrifying tale of an apolitical Buenos Aires bookkeeper whose low-level lust, nostalgia and a sense of decency cause him to fall into a trap set by the military torturers. An English reader can follow Francisco Sanctis' predicament quite well in the translation, but it would have been impossible to imagine if the author had not been able to think as his character thinks, in the peculiar dialect and logic of his corner of Buenos Aires.

From Thornton, we get the impression that the evil of a military regime in, say, Argentina is simply its kidnapping, torture and murder. Turkey, Chile, the Philippines or a totally invented country might have served his narrative purposes quite as well. The true insidiousness of the Argentine rightists' actions -- how they exploited and manipulated the assumptions of their Argentine victims, in a code of terror of many subtle gradations calculated to reproduce itself far beyond the direct victims and so to change the nature of discourse in the entire society -- is knowable only in a work, like Constantini's, that makes that code transparent.

In *A Totally Free Man*, John Krich imagines himself into the head of Fidel Castro, who is supposedly dictating his memoirs into a taperecorder. The book has several virtues, including being a witty and fairly thorough biography of its hero. Its central implausibility is that such a man would dictate such memoirs. Fidel is not Richard Nixon, obsessed with his personal crises and anxious to protect his reputation. Rather, as Krich (accurately, I think) portrays him, he is supremely confident of his place in history, and far more concerned about how he can act upon the world than what the world has done to him. For those reasons, we should not expect the real Fidel's memoirs any time soon. But if we accept the premise, Krich stretches his imagination and ours, to force us to look at grand historical events -- Moncada, the triumph of the revolution (but not the missile crisis or other, later events) -- from one possible Cuban point of view.

It is only when we can see the world through an alien consciousness that we can become aware of the specific structure of that consciousness, and it is only then that we can be made aware of the assumptions of our own consciousness. This is the imaginative projection that Max Weber called *Verstehen* and a folk saying calls "walking in another man's shoes," and it springs from one of our strongest impulses -- the desire to know the strange.

Revenge of flowers

*Mi venganza personal será el derecho
de tus hijos a la escuela y a las flores...
Cuando vos, aplicador de la tortura,
ya no podés levantar ni la mirada,
entregarte esta manos que maltrataste
sin lograr que abandonaran la ternura.*

My personal revenge will be your children's right to school, and to flowers ...
When you, applier of torture, / can no longer even lift your gaze, / to offer
you these hands that you mistreated / without succeeding in removing their
gentleness.

-- Luis E. Mejía Godoy, "*Mi venganza personal*"

One morning in Masaya, Nicaragua, in October 1983, I gave a talk at a training school for Sandinista cadres. (My topic was U.S. trade unions.) Afterwards some of the *compas*, *compañeros* -- Edgardo, Reynaldo, Carlos Salinas and his *compañera* Aída -- drove me in a Ministry of Agriculture jeep to an outdoor restaurant by the lovely and tranquil Puerto de Aseses, an inlet of Lake Nicaragua. We sat at a table among green trees and mossy rocks, where I could watch the waters splashing over a black rock that looked like the back of a swimming hippopotamus. We ate that peculiarly ugly, sweet-

fleshed fish without bones that lives only in Lake Nicaragua, and we drank Nicaraguan beer and I took Carlos and Aída's squirming four-month old daughter to give Carlos a break so he could eat. Her names, Yaosca Yala Nuh, come from the Sumo language of eastern Nicaragua, and mean "Mountain Flower" and "Star of the Morning." Wherever I go, it seems that at some point I find myself holding a little child, and every time I am startled by the trust and hunger for experience. She made herself comfortable in the strange arms and watched quietly as adult hands picked up salt, replaced a napkin, uncurled fingers to emphasize a point. The air was fresh and cool, and the water on the rocks made a soothing sound beneath the relaxed and whimsical conversation.

After lunch we drove into nearby Granada -- hot, hot Granada -- and stopped at an old, huge house, with a tile roof some five meters (more than 15 feet) above the floor, and we sat in those big rockers of white cane which are made in this old colonial city. From a radio in the background we could hear a rich, baritone, insistent voice, reciting biblical passages against wars and, by insinuation, against sandinismo, with the refrain, "This is the word of God." Edgardo said he had been baptized three times, by the Catholics, the Evangelicals and the socialists. Now he didn't know what to believe, he said. I answered too flippantly, I think, that he could be a socialist on Sunday mornings if he didn't feel like going to mass, and a Catholic when he didn't feel like doing guard duty for the militia.

Leila, the young compañera who lived in the house and was a friend of Aída and Carlos, brought us cold atol suave to drink and told us, because she had seen it, that right there where we had eaten lunch, on that dirt road by the edge of the lake at the entry to Puerto de Aseses, was where Somoza's National Guards left the destroyed cadavers of the young people who had fallen into their hands. I wanted to hold Yaosca Yala Nuh once more.

A dream of the heroic essay

Aquí, la verdad está clarísima. El pueblo está haciendo la revolución, que es hacer patria.

Notebook, 16.x.1983

Before I left Masaya, a newspaper column by Eduardo Galeano ("Pablo Neruda, la literatura y el compromiso") inspired these agitated reflections about the difficulties of writing about Nicaragua so that a North American could "feel what the revolution is, to... imagine... what it is to live it."

"Here" -- I wrote in Spanish -- "the truth is absolutely clear. The people is making the revolution, which is to create a country. Up there, everything looks different. I shall have to write an essay so strong, so hard, so clear, so

beautiful and so alive that there will be no possibility of refuting it. The only way to combat it would be for the enemy to write his own, even more beautiful and alive -- in which case, at least, our universal literature would be enriched."

Such a heroic and absurd ambition! The people I met, and the stories of all they had gone through to "hacer patria," seemed to require some such heroic effort of me. But I had failed to realize something, something the Nicaraguans would help me understand. For that lesson, I would have to go to another place, another Sandinista cadre school, in the mountains of Matagalpa.

Fetishism of images

Although it was early afternoon, I was exhausted and trying to sleep on the thin mattress of a bunk. I dreamed that I was sleepy, so sleepy that I didn't dare climb a stair, broken and dangerous, that I normally would have climbed, because I was afraid of falling. A not-quite familiar phrase reached me from the next room, *el fetichismo de la mercancía*, in a nasal, high-pitched, country voice.

I had been too nervous to sleep much the previous night, and had stayed up with the young Sandinistas on watch. The school was in a small, ranch-style farm house, probably built in the '60s, and abandoned by the owner when the Sandinistas came to power. The land was now a cooperative, growing mainly coffee. The house, on a hill before a higher hill thick with corn stalks, would be an easy and attractive target to contras, who had recently attacked another co-op nearby. My Sandinista comrades had one AK47, one pistol, and one guitar.

El fetichismo de la mercancía was said again, this time by another country voice. Finally I got what they were saying: "the fetishism of commodities." It was a study group, reading volume I of *Capital*.

I knew something about these kids by now. They were all in their early twenties and they were all veterans of "the war," the popular insurrection against Somoza which had ended four years earlier. They were proud of their membership in the FSLN, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, and wanted to prove themselves worthy of it. A couple of them were farmers, one young woman was a mechanic, all of them had low-level, manual jobs in the countryside or in the town of Matagalpa. None had finished high school. I had a Ph.D. when I first tried to read *Capital*, and I'd found it rough going.

They talked about people they had all known, names that were familiar to them from Matagalpa. A landowner who had kept his permanent workers in debt peonage through a system they called "*la rata*" -- selling goods on

credit, the landowner keeping the accounts, the workers, the fathers of some of these Sandinistas, getting deeper and deeper into debt. Seasonal workers, who had their own small plots of land but hired themselves out for the harvests. Peasants who dreamed of becoming rich with a good harvest, so they could hire others to do the work.

All these people had names, faces, particular histories, all were known to the members of the study group, all were from the area. These familiar figures were now making the text come alive. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the text was making them come alive in another dimension, a historical dimension that gave their lives a larger, longer-term meaning than any of them might have imagined.

When I read *Capital*, I had grappled with the fetishism of commodities and the history of feudalism and capitalism as abstractions about remote events. For these young Sandinistas it was at once urgent and easy to understand these relations, because they were deliberately working to transform them.

In fact, that was the important thing to know about the people whose voices reached me as I lay on that lumpy cot. They were transforming themselves by working to transform their world. To describe them in static terms, as people who were and would continue to be a certain way -- as "Latinos," for example -- would be to fetishize our imagery. To name, to explain, to change

My note to myself about writing the heroic essay was silly, but quite understandable. Most of us in our society, the urban and college-educated of the U.S., think of the production of literature as an isolated and heroic act, each individual before his or her word processor or pad of paper. If we think at all of the social conditions of literary production, we tend to think of superagents or giant publishers or mafias of book reviewers whose interests, of course, are not our own. The production itself is still, I repeat, considered an individual act.

In fact, to name and explain and thereby to change our relations to Latin America does not require a single essay, nor the work of a single inspired genius. The literature of revolution can only be a collective project, like the revolution.

And there is no danger that the enemy of the revolution will write anything more beautiful or alive, for then "the enemy" would be a revolutionary; the danger is rather that we may be so entranced by dead and static images that we do not see the changes before us.

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The image of the mermaid was borrowed from a web site called “The History of Mermaids” whose url no longer works. However, through Google you will find many more images and stories of mermaid sightings.