

Anthropology, Anthropophagy and Amazons

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From the sirens, cannibals, and Amazons of Discovery literature to late twentieth-century representations of the Caribbean as Charybdis, feminine monsters have been integral to descriptions of identity in Latin America. The great Latin American Regionalist novels of the 1920s depicted the struggle for Latin America's future as an epic battle between modern man and a pre-modern, feminized landscape, whose avatars –grasping, sensual women, bloodthirsty animals and exotic, sucking topographical features-- echoed its castrating and/or anthropophagic capacities. Informed by the disciplines of psychology, sociology and anthropology, the *novela de la tierra* turned to the cannibal, the Amazon, and ultimately, the *vagina dentata* to characterize the social and natural landscape. Ethnography, or the ordered scrutiny of an unfamiliar society in its environment, drives the development of this imagery from the earliest accounts of the New World to the twentieth century novels.

The popular and textual traditions of the fifteenth century, rooted in medieval cosmographies, supported misogynistic interpretations of the New World. In addition to the allegorical bestiaries, biblical and mythological sources provided a variety of ready references for describing an unfamiliar environment and led to the creation of a vocabulary of words, stories, and images that Stephen Greenblatt calls the "discourse of the marvelous." This discourse was predominantly binary in nature, positing a masculine civilizing subject and a feminized subaltern object (cf. Montrose). At the turn of the nineteenth century, European scientific exploration in the colonies reinforced this formula, inspiring in some of Latin America's greatest thinkers the rhetorical framework of civilization and barbarism, later elaborated on by positivist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The persistence of these images in Latin America well into the twentieth century is confirmed by numerous positivist and modernist texts on the phenomena of atavism and degeneration, where the putatively masculine forces of science, reason and progress confront an implicitly feminized, barbaric other. The great national novels *La vorágine* (Colombia, 1924) and *Doña Bárbara* (Venezuela, 1929) both map this confrontation to the medieval monster figure of the *vagina dentata*, a voracious sexual predator who is embodied by a powerful female antagonist. At the same time, these novels link the monster figure to specific animal figures and topographical features that echo its castrating and/or anthropophagic capacities. This eccentric landscape threatens the protagonist with spiritual and even physical emasculation.

Cannibal women

The New World encounter with cannibals, as Peter Hulme observes, "Was prefigured by the European experience with the internal other of women, witches and heretics" (in Barker et. al. 20). Beginning with the first textual assertions about New World cannibalism made by Dr. Diego Álvarez Chanca on Columbus's second voyage in 1493, anthropophagy was linked to female sexuality. Dr. Chanca knew in advance of the existence of cannibals from Columbus's reports of his historic 1492 voyage. Through some captive indigenous women, Dr. Chanca learned that the Caribs loved to eat human flesh – specifically adult male flesh, since, as his

informants told him, “The flesh of boys and women is not good to eat.” Indeed, he elaborated, captive boys were often castrated and raised as servants until they were big enough to make a meal of. Thus, from the moment when cannibalism was first mentioned in connection with the New World, it was construed as a threat to masculine sexuality.

Some anthropologists now believe that Columbus never actually met any anthropophagous Indians; indeed, William Arens notoriously asserted in 1979 that anthropophagy is a figment of the ethnographic imagination. Columbus’s readings of the apocryphal fourteenth-century text *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and Marco Polo’s accounts of his travels to the East had acquainted him with the varieties of monstrous beings he could expect to encounter in the Indies, which included anthropophagi as well as dog-headed and otherwise fantastic figures within a generally anthropomorphic classificatory system. He therefore expected to meet anthropophagi in his travels and he did, notoriously, coin the word *cannibal*. Tzvetan Todorov’s comical rendition of the etymological misadventure is worth repeating here:

The Indians utter the word *Cariba*, designating the (man-eating) inhabitants of the Caribbean islands. Columbus hears *Caniba*, which is to say, the people of the khan. But he also understands that according to the Indians these persons have dogs’ heads (from the Spanish *cane*, “dog”) with which, precisely, they eat people.

Following Arens, many anthropologists have come to question the motivations for imputing cannibalistic practices to others, if not the fact of cannibalism itself. As Hulme asserts, “Cannibalism is –as practice or accusation– quite simply the mark of greatest imaginable cultural difference and therefore the greatest challenge to our categories of understanding.” This sense of difference, nurtured by an accumulation of proto-ethnographic observations, has historically provided Europeans with a moral justification for the economic and political domination of other peoples. Reports of cannibalistic practices purportedly given by indigenous interlocutors fostered a facile division of the indigenous populations into “good” and “bad” Indians. Hulme traces how subsequent chronicles gradually amplified and embellished Dr. Chanca’s narrative, until by virtually all accounts cannibals were rampant in the Caribbean (Columbus, Dr. Chanca, Pedro Martyr); Brazil (Vespucci, Staden, Léry); and Tierra Firme, or what is now northern Venezuela and Colombia (various sources, cited by Herrera y Tordesillas in 1601). As Spanish conquerors penetrated further into the Americas, increasing resistance on the part of the indigenous population was answered by an increase in the numbers of cannibals sighted (cf. Palencia-Roth).

From early chronicles onward, anthropophagy was associated with emasculating and libidinous behaviors by women (cf. Castro-Klarén). Amerigo Vespucci claimed to have seen a shipmate clubbed and eaten before his very eyes by a bunch of women whom he was attempting to charm. Vespucci also commented in detail on the native women’s strength and marksmanship, and described their licentious custom of using snake venom to enlarge their men’s penises, “and by reason of this many lose their virile organ and remain eunuchs” (Montrose 181).

Hans Staden’s narrative of his captivity among the Tupinamba of Brazil from 1552-1555 is instructive in this respect. In his account the women carry out a variety of activities that undermine the European captive’s masculinity: plucking his beard, shaving his eyebrows,

ritually mocking him, and leading him around the camp on a leash. The Jesuit Father José de Anchieta also reported on a Tupi cannibal incident, in 1554:

Like wolves the Indians pulled at him [the slave] with great fury; finally they took him outside and broke [open] his head, and together with him they killed another one of their enemies, whom they soon tore into pieces with great rejoicing, especially the women, who went around singing and dancing, some [of the women] pierced the cut off members [of the body] with sharp sticks, others smeared their hands with [the victim's] fat and went about smearing [the fat on] the faces and mouths of others, and it was such that they gathered [the victim's] blood in their hands and licked it, an abominable spectacle, such that they had a great slaughter on which to gorge themselves. (Harris 208)

The Frenchman Jean de Léry lived among the Tupi Indians of Brazil for some months in 1557-8, and made extensive observations of their anthropophagic customs. A product of the religious clashes of his era, Léry was a Calvinist who drew parallels between Tupi ritual and what he saw as the ritual excesses of the Catholic mass.) However, Léry also differentiated between the “holy” anthropophagy of the Christian Eucharist and the ceremonial or pleasure-based anthropophagy of the Tupi. The designated victims were often given many wives before they were sacrificed and eaten, reinforcing the conflation of sexual and gastronomic pleasure. Women and sex were thus instrumental in the Tupi rituals, converting them, for Léry, from sacrament to orgy.

These textual accounts were copiously supported by graphic evidence. Well-known maps by Sebastian Münster (1540) and others represented Northern South America (present-day Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia) as the land of the Cannibal and the Caribbean as the “Mar de Caníbales” or Cannibal Sea. Other visual representations of New World in the sixteenth century often allegorized it as a warrior or cannibal woman. In this way the female figure became an important element of the image of cannibalism in the Americas.

The tendency to concentrate the savagery of cannibalism in the feminine figure was greatly aided by Theodor de Bry's enormously popular images of cannibal “super-markets” published in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. Volume 3 of de Bry's *Great voyages* (1590-1634) is based on the Staden and Léry narratives. An astute businessman as well as an artist, de Bry worked from Staden's illustrations, liberally mixing in elements of different regions, cultures, and traditions in his portrayal of the Indians. Thus a representation of the Tupinamba cannibals in Brazil combines elements of Léry's descriptions such as “tonsured” hair, with archetypal features of the medieval Wild Man figure—hairy bodies, long hair and beards, etc.—; Pliny's taxonomy; biblical figures such as Adam and Eve and Leviathan; figures from classical mythology, Thevet's *Cosmography*, etc. Among these generally idealized images are, as Bernadette Bucher notes, a number of hag-like female figures with sagging breasts, associated in medieval tradition with “maleficent women, vampires, witches, demons, the incarnation of Envy and Lust, and the depiction of Death” (38). These hags are frequently depicted licking their fingers. Bucher observes that the sagging-breasted women appear only in the context of the Tupinamba cannibal rites. The association between women's sexual and gastronomic appetites (and men's misadventures) can therefore be ascribed to the specific temporal and geographic context of Amazonia and the Caribbean.

As we know, Columbus fully expected to meet sirens in his voyages, and contemporary images of the Discovery were populated with sirens and sea creatures of all kinds. (According to Bartolomé de Las Casas's edition of Columbus's journal, he did spot three sirens, but was disappointed by their lack of feminine charm.) In the medieval bestiaries, sirens represented sins and vices commonly attributed to women: inconstancy, corruption, and ostentation. The siren figure also evokes the biblical twisted serpent Leviathan, bane of sailors and herald of the vortex. Medieval mariners believed that sirens took their victims for sexual gratification, and ate those who left them unsatisfied. The dual role of the siren as a rapacious sexual object and a consuming vortex echoes the dual motif of temptation and fall –lust and death—that characterized the earliest definitions of the Americas.

Amazons and anthropologists

Claude Lévi Strauss described Jean de Léry as the first modern ethnographer. Since the time of Columbus and Léry, cannibalism and the debates on its existence, causes and implications have become a mainstay of anthropology as a discipline. Léry's writings on the Tupinambá inspired Michel de Montaigne's 1580 essay "On cannibals," a famous critique of European intolerance and hypocrisy, and he is also the subject of Michel de Certeau's groundbreaking essay on ethnography and the construction of the Other (*The Writing of History*, 1975). These and many other texts demonstrate the relationship of the modern subject to the non-modern object in the ethnographic characterization of self and society. The following review of early Amazonian explorers' accounts of their encounters with native societies demonstrates the continuity and power of cannibal woman imagery through another, related trope, that of the Amazon.

Like other New World marvels, the Amazon was born from a combination of European preconceptions rooted in ancient and medieval cosmographies, and interrogations of native peoples that were subject to the pressures of prejudice, fear, deceit (on both sides) and an undeniable language barrier. The first encounter with Amazons is documented by Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal in his diary of Francisco de Orellana's historic expedition in search of El Dorado, which took him down the Marañón (Amazon) River to the Atlantic coast in 1542. Carvajal's prior knowledge of the Greek (Scythian) warrior women came to the fore when he was told of warlike indigenous women who demanded tribute from their neighbors, and henceforth the Marañón was populated with Amazons. The Amazons were reputed to possess much wealth in the form of gold, silver and "camels," and other wondrous beasts. In June 1542 in a large village the Spaniards saw a replica of the walled Amazon city carved into an immense tree stump:

The Indian answered that they were subjects and tributaries of the Amazons And that their villages were all of that kind, and that they had that thing there as a reminder, and worshipped as the symbol of their mistress, who rules over the all the land of the aforesaid women. (Leonard 48)

Carvajal linked the Amazons with the practice of sacrifice, possibly human:

There was also on this same square a not very small house, within which there were many vestments of feathers of various colors, that the Indians put on to celebrate their festivals and to dance when they wished to rejoice before this aforesaid hewn tree trunk; it was here that they offered up their sacrifices with their wicked purpose.

Shortly afterward, the explorers came “suddenly upon the excellent land and dominion of the Amazons.” They were attacked by a large and well-organized group of Indians who fought with unusual ferocity and determination. Carvajal explains:

I want it to be known why these Indians defended themselves in this manner. It must be explained that they are the subjects of, and tributaries to, the Amazons, and our coming being known to them, the Indians sent to them to ask help, and as many as ten or twelve of them came, for we ourselves saw these women, who were fighting in front of all the Indian men as women captains. (Leonard 1972)

The women are described as tall and fair with long braids wrapped around their heads, and capable of fighting like ten men. It was they who encouraged the warriors, killing all those who tried to leave the fray. The Spaniards finally won the battle only after killing several Amazons.

The Amazons became notorious also for their sexual habits: rejecting domestic life, they captured men from nearby villages and used them to satisfy their “caprices”:

When that desire came to them, they assembled a great horde of warriors and went off to make war on a very great overlord... by force they brought the men to their own region and kept them for the time that suited their caprice. After they found themselves pregnant they sent the men back to their country without doing them harm.... If they gave birth to male children, they killed them and sent them to their fathers...

Other reports hinted at the life-draining attributes of the Amazon women: “the Indians further up had told us that anyone who took it into his head to go down to the country of these women was destined to go a boy and return an old man” (Leonard 1972).

In other European accounts the image of South American women as indolent and sensual sirens competed with the image of the enterprising Amazons, but the same motif united them: the insatiable desire of women to consume men, sexually, psychologically and socially. The French visitor Amedée Frezier (1712-14) was scandalized by South American women, and blamed them for draining the health and fortunes of the Creole men:

They are perfectly skilled in the art of imposing on the frailty a man shows for them....[and] take a pride in ruining many lovers, as a warrior does in having vanquished many enemies... That misfortune is not the only punishment of those who suffer themselves to be taken. They there often lose the inestimable treasure of health... The women, as I have said, are the principal cause, vanity and sensuality render them insatiable as to ornaments and good feeding. (Leonard 1972)

The French explorer Charles Marie de la Condamine was the first non-Iberian to survey the New World (1735-45); he published his findings in 1751. Condamine heard the same story from several different groups of Indians: no one had directly encountered the Amazons, but most had a relative or ancestors who had: “the women lived always to the North [in present day Venezuela]... and they favoured green stones” (Smith 1990). He and other Europeans were repeatedly caught in whirlpools while navigating the Amazon. These could keep a raft trapped for days, until its occupants either died of hunger or were rescued (as was Condamine) by local Indians. This episode, itself a repetition of the classic Charybdis myth, prefigures the vortex imagined by José Eustasio Rivera some 200 years later in *La vorágine*.

The German natural philosopher Alexander Von Humboldt’s accounts of his explorations in the Americas from 1799 to 1804 made him the most celebrated man of his time. In both fact and effect, Humboldt put South America on the world map. Humboldt’s lasting influence on Latin American thought is well-known, as Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and others have demonstrated.¹ Simón Bolívar and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in particular, broadcast their admiration for him and adapted his universalist methodology in their political writings. Bolívar called him “the true discoverer of America” (Humboldt 1995).

Humboldt was an early proponent of tellurism, or the theory of a single vital principle linking man to his natural environment. He was influenced by the prevailing currents of Romantic thought, which insisted on the interconnectedness of climate, geography, and the physical, social and even moral attributes of living organisms. He began his scientific journal with the telling words: “I shall try to find out how the forces of nature interact upon one another and how the geographic environment influences plant and animal life. In other words, I must find out about the unity of nature” (Humboldt 1995). As the term “natural philosophy” suggests, Humboldt’s interests led him to embrace the metaphysical as well as the physical aspects of the phenomena he studied. His ideas influenced generations of Latin American scientists, sociologists and other intellectuals –among them the Regionalist writers-- who attributed political and social phenomena to the characteristics of their physical environment.

In Venezuela Humboldt studied the Carib Indians, who were widely believed to practice cannibalism. He praised the Caribs’ energy, dignity and intelligence and took pains to differentiate them from the other Indians in the region, and challenge the prevailing image of them as cannibals: “When you travel through Carib missions and observe the order and submission there it is hard to remind yourself that you are among cannibals. ... All the missionaries that I asked assured me that the Caribs are perhaps the least cannibalistic of the New World tribes....” Humboldt also endeavored to dispel the Romantic images of the Amazonian Indian as “a man whose head and waist are decorated with beautiful macaw, toucan and hummingbird feathers” by describing the extreme poverty and nakedness of the real Indians. Likewise, he frequently commented on the misery of the women, who did the lion’s share of the work and seemed to suffer the greatest misery and degradation from their enslavement.

Humboldt’s emotional descriptions of the Venezuelan llanos contrast with his objectivity in dealing with the Caribs, and invite comparison with Sarmiento’s later description of the Argentine pampas:

the monotony of these steppes is imposing, sad and oppressive....the infinite monotony of the llanos; the extreme rarity of inhabitants; the difficulties of traveling in such heat and in an atmosphere darkened by dust; the perspective of the horizon, which constantly retreats before the traveler; the few scattered palms that are so similar that one despairs of ever reaching them, and confuses them with ones farther afield; all these aspects together make the stranger looking at the llanos think they are far larger than they are. (1995)

While fording a river, Humboldt's horse was mysteriously sucked down into the water and lost. The trope of the vortex, prefigured by Condamine's experience, was compounded by that of Humboldt's botanist companion, Aimé Bonpland, who apparently became enchanted by a mestiza girl in Angostura (Ciudad Bolívar) and pursued her into the jungle. His disappearance lasted months and Humboldt thought he would never return (Smith 243).

Although Amazonian missionaries frequently spoke of Blemmyes and men with dog's heads who supposedly lived beyond the Orinoco rapids, Humboldt's scientific approach to the fabulous allowed him to report skeptically on the monsters of Amazonia: "Up here serious missionaries have located tribes whose people have one eye in the middle of their foreheads, the heads of dogs, and mouths below their stomachs." He attributed these stories to Indian legends, which the missionaries exploited for entertainment value.

Given his general skepticism, Humboldt's response to the Amazon legend seems oddly credulous: in the Río Negro they find some carved "Amazon stones" which Indians attributed to the "women without men." Rather than disproving this claim, Humboldt tried to give a rational, even pseudo-ethnographic explanation:

A taste for the marvelous and a wish to describe the New World with some of the tones of antiquity no doubt contribute to the reputation of the Amazons. But this is not enough to reject a tradition shared by so many isolated tribes. I would conclude that women, tired of the state of slavery in which men have held them, united together and kept their independence as warriors. They received visits one a year from men, and probably killed off their male babies. This society of women may have been quite powerful in one part of Guiana. (Humboldt 1995)

Likewise, Humboldt accepted stories of cannibalism among the Guiana (a white guide told him of a local "Indian chief" who fattened his wife and ate her). In a long description of indigenous cannibalistic practices (which he never witnessed first-hand), Humboldt remarked: "No feelings of compassion prevent them from killing women or children of an enemy tribe. These latter are their favorite food after a skirmish or ambush." However, Humboldt was incredulous about reports of earth-eating Indians, and took pains to measure the phenomenon by scientific means. This strange willingness to suspend his scientific skepticism in both the Amazon and Guiana cannibalism cases conflicts with his evident desire to offer a scientifically-framed (or at least a positivist) response. However, his apparent willingness to arrive at a "conclusion" without the benefit of empirical data is an anomaly in the narrative, and substantially strengthens the discursive chain of *vagina dentata* imagery.

Humboldt's influence on the telluric concept of Latin American society is at its most obvious in the writings of Argentine intellectual Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. During Latin America's struggles for independence and nationhood in the nineteenth century, both Simón Bolívar and Sarmiento used monstrous imagery to define the terms of civilization and barbarism. Civilization enacted Enlightenment paradigms of science, reason and forensic legitimacy, and barbarism embodied an atavistic, homicidal other. While tales of monstrosity had been deployed by America's conquerors to dehumanize the natives principally as a prerequisite to enslaving them, Bolívar and Sarmiento described the monstrous as a hermetic, mysterious, but integral part of the Latin American polity—the feminine part. Bolívar's symbol of Spain, the engendering culture, was an "unnatural stepmother"; her progeny, Latin America, was a deformed, hybrid orphan, riddled with the Spanish vices of savagery and greed. Sarmiento described Argentina as a man-eating Sphinx: "half tiger, in its blood-lust, and half woman, in its cowardice." (The Theban Sphinx is female, and devours men. Oedipus defeated the Sphinx by answering her riddle, on which she threw herself off the Acropolis.) Equally gyno-morphic were his descriptions of the seductive but sterile pampas, awaiting the enlightened "penetration" and "fecundization" of a Tocqueville-like father figure. Sarmiento's Argentina was "una vorágine" – a sucking vortex or Charybdis enticing the unwary (although enlightened) European to his demise:

La República Argentina es hoy la sección hispanoamericana que en sus manifestaciones exteriores ha llamado preferentemente la atención de las naciones europeas, que no pocas veces se han visto envueltas en sus extravíos, o atraídas, como por una vorágine, a acercarse al centro en que remolinean elementos tan contrarios. La Francia estuvo a punto de ceder a esta atracción, y no sin grandes esfuerzos de remo y vela, no sin perder el gobernalle, logró alejarse y mantenerse a la distancia. (Sarmiento 1938)

In the late nineteenth century, Positivist intellectuals perpetuated Sarmiento's civilization/barbarism dichotomy in a variety of fora including drama, fiction, and sociological, educational and other treatises of a scientific nature, which pitted the forces of modernity against those of decadence and degeneration (usually represented as female, or at the very least, homosexual).

Enter Anthropology

The Great War shook the world's confidence in European-style progress. In Latin America the result was a turn toward the autochthonous and the regional. Roberto González Echevarría (1998) argues that this drove the re-encounter with, and re-evaluation of, regional cultures: "the crisis of the West ... removed natural science as the mediating discourse in Latin American narrative, and made way for a new one, that of anthropology."² As in other fields such as psychoanalysis,³ art and literature (in movements like surrealism, primitivism, symbolism, Art Nouveau), the anthropologies of the post-war years rejected the unambiguous proposals of positivist and rationalist thought in favor of the primitive, the non-rational, and the non-modern. At the same time, European anthropologists were becoming fascinated with the indigenous, non-modern cultures of Latin America, and there were at least nine major expeditions in northern South America between the 1890s and the mid-1930s. This intensity of anthropological activity

strongly suggests that anthropology might have influenced regional identity discourse during the 1920s.⁴

The Brazilian *antropofagia* movement of the 1920s was one expression of the confluence of irrationalist thought, anthropological imagery, and the quest for autochthony—particularly with respect to European modernity-- that informed *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine*. Oswald de Andrade's 1928 manifesto emphasized recovering "primitive wisdom" to defend against and profit from modern technological society (Prado Bellei 1998). Andrade described the production of authentic Brazilian culture as the cannibalistic incorporation of selected aspects of modern technical culture by the primitive: *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine* suggest a similar process, albeit with differing outcomes.

The Latin American critique of modernity was an ambivalent one that, while it characterized the non-modern as aberrant or monstrous, in many instances questioned the viability of the modern in a Latin American setting. Julie Skurski describes the outcome of these tensions as the "irrationalist" movement, and suggests that its utility to the *novela de la tierra* [specifically in Gallegos' case] was precisely in its valorization of the "spiritual and instinctual dimensions of life" as opposed to the foregoing positivist movements' emphasis on the material, the rational and the empirical (1994). In this way, as Carlos Alonso suggests, the discourse of regional or national autochthony became a rationale for the failures and contradictions of modernity in Latin America.

The dentate vagina in myth

Mircea Eliade wrote, "The vulva is the primordial gate, the mysterious divide between nonlife and life" (1987). The *vagina dentata* has many manifestations, from the classical Greek figures of the sucking vortex Charybdis and Scylla --a beautiful woman from the waist up, with slavering dogs heads for genitals-- to the Indian mother goddess Kali, the Sumero-Babylonian fertility goddess Ishtar, Eve, Lilith, Delilah, and Mother Nature, with her grottoes, caves, pits, vortices and quicksand bogs, her hybrid carnivorous plants and amphibious serpents. Some classical cultures painted female genitalia on shields to terrify the enemy; the Irish displayed the *sheelagh*, or Woman of the Vulva, over their church doorways to ward off evil.

A version of the *vagina dentata* found popular expression in Spanish Medieval and Golden Age literature in the sexually aggressive *serranas*, or mountain women, of Lope de Vega's *Serrana de la Vera* (before 1603) who, as Roger Bartra points out, were probably inspired by one of the *serranas* in the *Libro de Buen Amor*. Lope's Leonora, whose aggression is a direct result of her dishonor and rejection by society, offers an interesting precursor to Doña Bárbara. In fact, there was a tradition of *serranas* in the Spanish Peninsula, from the Basque *Basajuana* to the Cantabrian "so-called she-bear of Andara." These *serranas* forced men to have sex and, their lust satisfied, killed them.

The *serranas* are typically associated with a transformative journey into hostile and difficult terrain—both spiritual and geographic--, and as Stephen Kirby has suggested, they are intended to signal an inversion of traditional gender roles in which "the would-be victimizer of women is himself victimized by women." Arturo Cova, an inveterate womanizer who becomes

increasingly unhinged as he penetrates further and further into the Amazon jungle (where the sensual and sinister Madona Zoraida awaits him), could be a direct descendent of Juan Ruiz's traveler. Both *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine* are travel narratives –novels of displacement and conquest (consumption)--with all that connotes: the encounter with alterity, the perceptions colored by desire or preconception; the objectification of the landscape and its inhabitants, the exoticizing (or eroticizing) of difference, and the transformation or annealment of the subject through his fearsome passage.

The vagina dentata or devouring mother is ubiquitous in Native American mythologies as well, as seen in the Mexica serpent goddess Coatlicue, from whose womb the war-god Huitzilopochtli springs; the Huichol Mother-goddess Nakawé and the Yanamomo origin myth. “Examinando en conjunto los citados relatos míticos en torno a las fantásticas mujeres de vagina dentada y los héroes que las vencen” in Native American and Mexican Indian mythologies, the anthropologist Báez-Jorge concludes that the role of the hero in typical American foundation myths has as his principle task the destruction, or at the very least the de-fanging, of the toothed vagina. This neutralization must take place to allow for the vigorous procreative activity requisite to founding a nation.⁵ Gallegos's Santos Luzardo is the classic civilizing hero of American myth, who believes that the salvation of the llano lies in populating it.

Female sexuality in *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine*

There is a consensus among some scholars (Shaw 1974, Alonso 1990, to some extent Sommer 1991) that the regionalist novel deploys sexuality only as a mirror or allegory of the much more overarching theme of nationality. Shaw asserts that the sexuality in *Doña Bárbara* runs along very conventional lines that reinforce images of national harmony--traditional marriage in accordance with patriarchal norms, vs. a sexually aggressive harpy. However, he himself acknowledges that Gallegos's first impulse was to make his antagonist something of a nymphomaniac, so indiscriminate that she habitually slept with *peones*. This element was excised in later editions of the novel in favor of an intensified focus on the national theme.

However, as opposed to a male or non-gendered monster, the monstrous female (and Doña Bárbara is, without a doubt, characterized as monstrous) is always defined by her sexuality --her monstrosity is gendered, and therefore monstrous (cf. Creed 1993). Inevitably, this gendering is centered in the reproductive organs. The very notion of teratology, the study of monstrous births, demonstrates (or reveals, like a divine omen) the fusion of monstrosity with problematic procreative processes. The evidence of Doña Bárbara's sexual voracity remains in the wasted figure of the “ex-hombre” Lorenzo Barquero, “súcubo de la mujer insaciable y víctima del brebaje afrodisíaco que le hacía ingerir”: emasculated, apparently, through an excess of sexual activity (Gallegos 1981). Her fecundity, if not her maternity, is confirmed by the existence of Marisela.

Shaw denies that Doña Bárbara embodies the archetypal Woman myth – Lilith, Kali, Coatlicue, etc.—instead insisting that she represents “los tiempos que corrían” – i.e. the dictatorship of the “centauro” Juan Vicente Gómez.⁶ When she recovers her sense of morality at the novel's end, the change is reflected in her change to women's clothes and gentler, more conventional feminine behavior. However, a review of the flora and fauna associated with Doña

Bárbara demonstrates unequivocally that she is in fact a composite of monstrous feminine figures and attributes from various mythologies, of which the foremost is the vagina dentata. She is routinely referred to as Amazon and Sphinx. Lorenzo cites the centaur, or horse-man, as the cause of the ills of the llano (by extension Venezuela). The centaur's violence and barbarism are driven, precisely, by his unbridled sexual appetite. The suggestion that Doña Bárbara's own sexual depravity is attributable to her rape and brutalization is yet another index of the intimate anthropomorphosis depicted in the novel: the conquest of her body mirrors that of the land; hence her voracious appetite for the territory and cattle of Altamira.

Doña Bárbara is associated with two animals that, in combination with the topography of their habitat, evoke the toothed or devouring vagina. *El Tuerto*, an ancient man-and-steer-eating crocodile, inhabits the womb-like Bramador channel; Doña Bárbara is aware of its capacity for "embruajamiento" or bewitching and has protected it from hunters. The men of Altamira descend baptismally into the water to hunt and kill this "espanto del Bramador" on a Holy Thursday, the day on which Christ founded the first Christian priesthood. Doña Bárbara is also mapped in the closing scene to the feminized *tremedal* or quicksand bog, *La Chusmita* (heron) where the *culebra de agua* or water serpent strangles a steer. The steer is *una res*, a term for cattle that links the inference of its eventual ingestion —*una carne de res*— with its indeterminate or emasculate gender status. Like Doña Bárbara, the llano is a "devoradora de hombres" and like Doña Bárbara it is gradually redeemed in the process of reclamation initiated by Santos Luzardo. At the end Doña Bárbara has to disappear —to "return to her origins"— because her very presence emasculates the men around her — the *llaneros*.

The story of *La vorágine* was prefigured by Humboldt's companion Aimé Bonpland's adventure in the Amazon jungle. The numerous interpretations of Arturo Cova's relationship with the feminine and its avatars run the gamut from conciliatory and optimistic (Doris Sommer's vision of his "final fatherly enlightenment" on the birth of his son) to the pessimistic or even censorious (Sylvia Molloy's analysis of Cova as the last of the decadents [Molloy 1987], Bull and Magnarelli's descriptions of his hysteria and general psychosis [Bull 1987, Magnarelli 1985]). Magnarelli writes perceptively: "en este sentido, Cova no difiere de los europeos que descubrieron al Nuevo Mundo, ni tampoco de los antropólogos europeos de finales de fines del siglo XIX y comienzos del XX, cuya interpretación del mundo que encontraron se basó y fue una proyección de sí mismos y del Viejo Mundo" (Magnarelli 1985). What is clear on even the most cursory reading of the novel is his fear and loathing of the feminine --and his consequent feminization of all that he fears and loathes. Arturo's hypermasculine, womanizing behavior is undermined by his appalling failure at traditional manly activities: his clumsiness at the round-up which allows his horse to be gored, his inept "leadership" of the jungle party, and so on.

Cova's descriptions of the jungle are transparently gynomorphic and his images evocative of castration. As Susan Isabel Stein notes, the seductiveness of the jungle vortex is heralded, just at the novel's midpoint, by the labial images of a butterfly, and a flower with its petals opening, associated with the tale of the Indiecita Mapiripana (who, raped by a missionary, engendered parricidal monsters — a vampire and a harpy). The jungle is described as a soul-devouring mouth: "un abismo antropófago... abierta ante el alma [el ego?] como una boca que se engulle los hombres a quienes el hambre y el desaliento le van colocando entre las mandíbulas" (Rivera 1976). Termites and other devouring insects mimic sexually transmitted diseases:

El comején enferma los árboles cual galopante sífilis, que solapa su lepra suplicatoria mientras va carcomiéndoles los tejidos y pulverizándoles la corteza, hasta derrocarlos, súbitamente, con su pesadumbre de ramazones vivas.

....

¡Nada de ruiseñores enamorados, nada de jardín versallesco, nada de panoramas sentimentales! Aquí, los responsos de sapos hidrópicos, las malezas de cerros misántropos, los rebales de caños podridos. Aquí, la parásita afrodisíaco que llena el suelo de abejas muertas; la diversidad de flores inmundas que se contraen con sexuales palpitaciones y su olor pegajoso emborracha como una droga; la liana maligna cuya pelusa enceguece los animales; la pringamosa que inflama la piel, la pepa del curujú que parece irisado globo y sólo contiene ceniza cáustica, la uva purgante, el corozo amargo.

The “selva sádica y virgen” with its devouring ants (tambochas) and miasmic, paralyzing, leach-filled swamps, “el sopor de la muerte, el marasmo de la procreación” is matched, or exceeded, by the fleshy oriental succubus Madona Zoraida Ayram, who inhabits its depths. The novel is dotted with mutilated male bodies: Millán the “domador” or horse-tamer who is gored by a bull; the disarmed Pipa; the trees “castrated” by the caucheros. Clemente Silva’s long-dead son, the victim of the Madona’s unhealthy sexuality, is the precursor of Lorenzo Barquero. Zoraida’s “unproductive eroticism” is described as a wasting of Arturo’s virility: “she wastes me like a [sperm] candle that burns upside-down” (Rivera 1935). All the women in the *La vorágine* are insatiable: “they are as insatiable as the jungle or as capitalism; all consume men to produce monsters.” The prostitute Clarita is a wolfish half-starved whore: “escoria de lupanar, ... una loba ambulante y famélica”; she is a pale shadow of the Madona’s “loba insaciable, que oxida con su aliento mi virilidad.” (Rivera 1976).⁷

The recurrence of certain binary themes in the Latin American literary and critical tradition— universal vs. local, civilization vs. barbarism—along with the more conciliatory but equally oppressive elaborations on mestizaje, are the inevitable result of an ongoing, inherently ethnographic effort by intellectuals to locate and describe autochthonous or national culture. In responding to the pressing problems of their region, both Gallegos and Rivera focus on and enhance the eccentricity of these cultures.

The choice of the monstrous *vagina dentata* as a defining trope for regional identity at a specific historical moment characterized by dramatic epistemological challenges —discovery and conquest, nation-building, and post-war modernization—is not surprising. What is surprising is the consistency and unambiguousness with which it recurs throughout history, and the wholeheartedness with which both authors adopt it. While Gallegos’s protagonist repeatedly defeats the monster, she does not die, but simply retires to her place of origin, presumably to await better days.

The idea that monsters occur within a binary relationship to their discoverers --and as a reaction to unfamiliar situations-- fundamentally sustains Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology. But as anthropologists have discovered, anthropology itself is a product of its own culture and history: a story built on other stories and informed by acknowledged archetypes. The

authority of the *vagina dentata* trope in Latin American identity discourse is partly an outcome of the anthropologist's relationship with his subject, and partly an outcome of his relationship to the texts and traditions that define him. Amid the uncertainty and Latin American intellectuals,

While it is absolutely universal in cultural and historical terms, the *vagina dentata* embodies distinctively Latin American concerns rooted in well-documented historical and textual traditions: the colonial encounter with cannibals and sirens; the Amazon myth; and the discourses of civilization and barbarism. The toothed vagina is the ultimate emblem of the story of temptation and fall –lust and death-- that is rehearsed, embellished and reiterated in Latin American identity discourse.

Notes

¹ One of the few Latin American “scientific” travelers of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian Miguel María Lisboa also traveled through Venezuela, Nueva Granada (Colombia) and Ecuador in 1853. His interest was primarily in the political and social organization of Brazil's Amazonian neighbors.

² For Alonso, the rise of the regionalist novel in the first 30 years of the twentieth century is attributable to the influence of Nietzsche and Bergson in LA; also the imminent hegemony of the US and its modernity (no longer Spain/Europe after 1898). The US had achieved modernity in a way the LA had not, and was clearly advancing its hegemonic intentions through Pan Americanism. Latin Americans responded with “Pan-Latinism” (*hispanoamericanismo*) and other constructions which asserted the unity and uniqueness of LA. Expressions of this concern about the US and Latin American cultural autonomy appear in Martí, Ugarte, Rodó, Blanco Fombona, Francisco García Calderón, Vasconcelos, Contreras (*mundonovismo*) ... up to Fernández Retamar.

³ Freud declared that female sexuality was naturally perfidious: “in the woman it is veiled in impenetrable darkness, partly in consequence of cultural stunting and partly on account of the conventional reticence and dishonesty of women” (Freud 2001). In 1927, (halfway between *La vorágine* and *Doña Bárbara*) he wrote: “Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital.” Although the latter novel has been analyzed with reference to Freudian archetypes, Shaw suggests that Gallegos was not familiar with Freud's work.

⁴ González Echevarría specifically locates *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine* with the narratives of what could be loosely termed the pre-anthropological period: the period dominated by the

perspectives of natural history and scientific travel that began with Humboldt and culminated in Positivism. However, both novels demonstrably herald the mythological preoccupations of post-war anthropological thought. In this sense they link aspects of Spanish-American *modernismo*, in particular its anti-scientific and occultist tendencies, to anti-rationalist post-war developments in anthropology, art, folklore and psychoanalysis. For Alonso and other critics, Latin America's encounter with modernity is/was "a discursive event that was not accompanied by the material trappings of modernity (Alonso 1990). Due to the historical disjunction between rhetoric and economic or political realities, the discourse of modernity shares with that of the autochthonous the necessary perception of crisis.

⁵Lévi-Strauss links the vagina dentata with an oversized phallus in numerous American traditions (Lévi-Strauss 1981).

⁶ Alonso sees the centaur as a symbol of the link between geography and human activity— "the idea of a harmonious combination of man and beast where man is bound to nature in the collaborative experience of work" (Alonso 1990).

⁷ Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*, the third of the Regionalist triumvirate, is an elegiac set-piece dedicated to the most manly of archetypes, the Argentine gaucho. There are few feminine characters in the story and none who explicitly menace the male characters. However, there is one anomalous scene in Güiraldes's novel: the episode where the protagonist and his horses are almost swallowed up in a crab-infested swamp or *cangrejal*. Afterwards, he can't stop thinking about being swallowed up by the earth as the crabs devour him:

No podía dejar yo de pensar en los cangrejales. La pampa debía sufrir por ese lado y... ¡Dios ampare las osamentas! Al día siguiente están blancas. ¡Qué momento, sentir que el suelo afloja! Irse sumiendo poco a poco. Y el barrial que debe apretar los costillares. ¡Morirse ahogado en tierra! Y saber que el bicherío le va a arrancar de a pellizcos la carne... Sentirlos llegar al hueso, al vientre, a las partes, convertidas, en una albóndiga de sangre e inmundicias, con millares de cáscaras dentro, removiéndolo el dolor en un vértigo de voracidad.... (Güiraldes 1982)

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