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## The Tropics of the Imagination: "Quetzalcoatl and All That"

Late in *The Plumed Serpent* when Kate, tired of hot weather and hotter bodies, begins to muse about going back to cooler British climes for Christmas, she wonders if it is possible to have too much of the kinds of good things Mexico represents. When Ramón asks her if she has any particular good thing in mind, she responds, "Oh—Quetzalcoatl and all that" (Lawrence, *Plumed Serpent* 471). It is the uneasy tone of this response, both flippant and committed, that returns to me again and again as I read, a bit queasy myself, in the vast and growing bibliography of Anglo-America's fascination with Latin America: Katherine Anne Porter's stories, B. Traven's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions*, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Paul Theroux's *Mosquito Coast*, Daniel Curley's *Mummy*, Harriet Doerr's *Stones for Ibarra*, Nicholas Shakespeare's *The Vision of Elena Silves*, or Lawrence Thornton's *Imagining Argentina*, where the dust-jacket artist imagines a Buenos Aires characterized by tropical foliage, long watery vistas, and colorful parrots. Kate's rejoinder to Ramón's question reminds me that in most of these books even the positioned critique of Eurocentrism occurs within the frame of a markedly Eurocentric paradigm. I want to explore this vexed dis-position towards/against Latin America in this paper in order to help me to come to terms with one of the facets of the underdiscussed underpinnings of Latin America's twentieth-century dependence on First World cultural artifacts, which from Latin America's side takes the form of a self-fulfilling exoticism, of seeing themselves as others see them, only more so.

Cultural circulation between Latin America and the First World offers a number of edifying exchanges. Before the "Boom" novel of the 1960s traveled outside Latin American borders to amaze and enchant us with a literary form often hailed as a Third World version of postmodernism with a magical-realist

charge to it, there was a long tradition of Anglo-American and European authors who traveled to Latin America to seek exotic objects of knowledge or useful objects for trade. For example, Mexican critic José Joaquín Blanco explores the famous obsession with indigenous Mexico in writers like Artaud or Bataille, who, with a tourist's Spanish, rudimentary and second-hand anthropological concepts, no knowledge of Mexican history, and no understanding of indigenous languages, imagine and create a Mexico that fits their preconceived notions (Blanco 26). These notions then find their way into several of the many elaborations of postmodern theory where the staged exoticism of half-imagined indigenous practices resonated strongly with Western anti-canonical cultural projects. At the same time and in a parallel fashion, this transformed, fetishized, and transculturated version of indigenous America serves as the spur for what Mario Vargas Llosa calls the "sed de exotismo," thirst for the exotic, that has created an Anglo-European market for Latin American cultural artifacts. As George Yúdice notes in one of the most important and lucid elaborations of postmodern theory in the Latin American context, "not only did professionalized, superstar novelists like Fuentes or Vargas Llosa sideline 'vocational' writers . . . they also sought to integrate with the growing consumer culture among elites . . . that made popular and indigenous cultures irrelevant unless they too integrated or 'transculturated' into consumer society" (Yúdice 11). It is no wonder that Latin America in general, and these novels in particular, are often acclaimed as postmodern *avant la lettre*, while concurrently metropolitan thinkers decry the lack of theory in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is something about the sidelining of indigenous cultures, while appropriating and even highlighting a certain aestheticized indigenism, that seems to me to mediate an important and underdiscussed thread of the modernism-postmodernism debate as it affects Latin America.

In the broadest possible terms, this debate involves questioning the processes involved in defining any particular cultural identity at all, and of tracing the conceptualizations of cultural identity with respect to their textual inscriptions. Any Western recognition of indigenous voices also and inevitably points toward the aesthetic and institutional models that frame this act of recognition within the context of a specifically Western institutional hierarchy. As Satya Mohanty reminds us, "Notwithstanding our contemporary slogans of otherness, and our fervent denunciations of Reason and the Subject, there is an unavoidable conception of rational action, inquiry, and dialogue inherent in this political-critical project" (Mohanty 26). If, on the one hand, metropolitan postmodernist critics and writers intuit a missing something or someone left out of traditional Western conceptual frameworks, on the other hand, the epistemological possibilities of native self-representation pose significant ethical and political challenges even to iconoclastic cultural projects. One typical postmodern reaction to the High Modernist canon has been to seek out these

missing others to Western culture; the subsequent packaging of the exotic others has, however, tended to turn them into safely exotic artifacts for domestic consumption.

Accordingly, this study is a two-part project that will fit this strained relationship of texts and theories into an uneven dialogue between north and south. In the first part, I will explore two exemplary Anglo-American texts in this uneven cultural exchange, texts which enact variations on the theme of the cosmopolitan's encounter with the irreducibly alien: *The Plumed Serpent*, D. H. Lawrence's classically obsessed modernist novel of an Englishwoman in a post-revolutionary Mexico convulsed by an Aztec revival, and *Keep the River on Your Right*, Tobias Schneebaum's impressionistic-ethnographic account of his stay with Amazonian cannibals. A second, complementary section will look at one of the representative texts in Latin America's "postmodern" exoticization of the alienated other within its borders: Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*). There is a grating consistency in all these texts. On the one hand, they all pose a commitment to indigenous America as a theoretical and artistic position by which the author achieves a significant insight into the workings of society and linguistic form. On the other hand, in each book this privileging of indigenous culture is jarringly matched with a tone ranging from dismissive to flippantly jocular: "Quezacoatl and all that?"

Speaking from the Anglo-American side of the dialogue, Marianna Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* offers an exceptionally helpful account in focusing the terms of the discussion, although her principal examples are seldom drawn from the Latin American context, either represented or imagined. Torgovnick examines the multifarious ways by which certain societies in the Third World (those coded as "primitive") and their artifacts are not only consumed, but also constructed in the West, thus displacing the societies from the very matrix of meaning that, in Western eyes, should have positioned them as identities and licensed their voices in a shared dialogue. The primitive is that patina of the alien that allows Westerners to project their own dreams and fears and thereby to see themselves that much more clearly. It is much less a dialogue with another culture than a strained monologue about some detached and rejected essence of a Western self. Thus, she finds, "To study the primitive is . . . to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world . . . The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it . . . The real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be—has been, will be (?)—whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us" (Torgovnick 8–9). It is this never-never land of projected fantasies that Torgovnick explores in her book: not the thing itself, but the history of giving voice to that thing; not the trope of the enigmatic native, but the story of Euro-American

attempts to penetrate or to appropriate the enigma; not the drama of identity with its play of false analogies, but its potential, and therefore displaced, ex-plotiveness. Here again, the indigenous peoples seem almost naturally to offer themselves up as ready-made postmodern artifacts, ripe for theorization. Furthermore, as James Clifford reminds us with reference to native objects that find their way into Western collections, these aesthetic artifacts return to us with a specific psychic charge: "At a more intimate level, rather than grasping objects only as cultural signs and artistic icons, . . . we can return to them . . . their lost status as fetishes—not specimens of a deviant or exotic 'fetishism' but *our own fetishes*" (Clifford 229).

In the Anglo-European works under discussion here, as in other similar novels from this tradition, violent death is the narrative crux—the metaphorical fetish—that serves as a convenient shorthand for the unleashing of primitive forces that can/will rewrite history, returning "civilized" men and women to their primitive origins, while at the same time undermining the absolute distinction between two theoretical stances, two historical moments, two cultures, two races, two gender orientations, so as to enact the thoroughly "civilized" drama of leaving the tropics, of stepping forward into the future and into the writing of the novel. Unlike the Latin American texts which, no matter how close their ties to the Anglo-American romances of the primitive, cannot resolve the strain of double voicing, cannot entirely lay the primitive to rest, the Anglo-American storyteller seems less problematically both to locate meaning in the primitive, and then to search out the conjectural uncodings of this constructed locus of signification. The effect in both Latin and Anglo-American texts is of a strained theatricality, but it hinges on a somewhat different misreading of the generalized/derived trope.

D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* stands out among the hundreds of novels and stories written by Anglo-Americans and set in Mexico for the particular forcefulness of Lawrence's obsession with, and equally forceful rejection of, that country and its people.<sup>2</sup> This fascinated attraction/repulsion is at the heart of his imaged rebirth of a cult of Quetzalcoatl. On the one hand, Lawrence found a challenge to his literary powers in the exoticism of the Mexican Indian, upon whom he intermittently projects a laudable lack of artificiality, a physical majesty, and a commendable fervor for uncontaminated religious rituals. In his depiction of this sensual and anti-rational other, Lawrence allows his own messianic ideas free rein. On the other hand, Lawrence is repelled by the actual Indians, who deviate from the script he has written for them with depressing frequency. The men creep along insect-like; "reptilian

gloom" dominates their habitual outlook on life; they are idiotic and childlike in the intensity of their misguided fervor; despite their beautiful skins and "richness of the flesh" they stubbornly exist in "the complete absence of what we call 'spirit.'" They are, finally, a people very like the gods Lawrence insists they still worship: ugly, incomprehensible, violent, unreasoning, unlovable, ungraceful, unpoetic, charmless (Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico* 35–36, 49, 53–55, 69).

Even worse, they terrify Lawrence with their obscurely menacing blankness: "And to this day, most of the Mexican Indian women seem to bring forth stone knives. Look at them, these sons of incomprehensible mothers, with their black eyes like flints, and their stiff little bodies as taut and keen as knives of obsidian. Take care they don't rip you up" (55). Lawrence's straightforwardly racist warning clearly addresses itself to a white, Anglo-European audience that can be expected to share his discomfort when facing an alien culture that refuses to be penetrated by the wise and poetic gaze of the British writer. Nevertheless, the positioning of that alien people also hints at something the white man reads as possessing a penetrating menace of its own. It is the stone knife that both compels and repulses Lawrence; he wants to appropriate the ritual of the stone knife on his own terms, freeing it from the dark people whose spiritless, brutish minds are incapable of manipulating its force. At the same time, he intuits that the Mexican Indians are, vaguely, in themselves the stone knives, and that they could turn on him. It puzzles and enrages him that the tool will not come quietly to his hand. After all, as Lawrence reasons, "That which is fit only to survive will survive only to supply food or contribute in some way to the existence of a higher form of life, which is able to do more than survive, which can really *vive, live*." In these terms, the Mexican Indian (reptile, insect, stone knife) is fit only for service:

Life is more vivid in the Mexican who drives the wagon, than in the two horses in the wagon.

Life is more vivid in me than in the Mexican who drives the wagon for me.

We are speaking in terms of *existence*: that is, in terms of species, race, or type. (Lawrence, *Porcupine* 357)

There is no significant point to be gained in belaboring the obvious implications here. Lawrence found in Mexico the *tabula rasa* upon which to write the story of his own obsessions, and the alien other provides a more malleable form for this self-imagining than the resistant molds of his own countrymen. To the degree that Mexico confirms his fictional image, he loves it and its people; to the degree that it insists on deviating from his dream, on confirming a stubborn incomprehensibility, he rejects it utterly. Mexico exists precisely and specifically to nurture his infinitely more vivid species. Unsurprisingly,

Lawrence considered the tale of that fantasy, *The Plumed Serpent*, to be his best novel.

One of the curious twists in the reception of the novel is, as Ruffinelli points out and Torgovnick confirms, that "Mexico" serves both the author and his critics as a convenient symbol that does not require deconstruction. In Lawrence's account of Mexico, Torgovnick notes, "the primitive is put to the service of the West: its sensuality clarifies through contrast Western rationality. . . . They have what the West has lost. . . . The primitive lets Lawrence return to origins, rewrite Western history, and imagine a radically different kind of future" (Torgovnick 162, 169). The spiritual direction taken in the West is "pale" in both senses of the word, so Lawrence turns from Western Eucharist to black volcanic glass, from the prissy, bloodless Christianity to the sensual, bloody Aztec religion, resurrecting/creating an alternative past as his contribution to the discussion, between Westerners, of the West's ongoing dialogue with itself.

Ruffinelli would agree with this assessment, but he adds a Latin Americanist's perspective on this dialogue: "lo curioso es que la visión mexicana de Lawrence se juzga siempre a la luz de otros ojos *extranjeros*, es decir, a la sombra del desconocimiento del mismo país que Lawrence conoció y desconoció." [It is curious that Lawrence's Mexican vision is always judged by light of other foreign eyes, that is to say, in the shadow of an unfamiliarity with the same country that Lawrence knew and did not know] (Ruffinelli 93). What these shadowed foreign eyes see of Mexico, then, is the invented Mexico that Lawrence loves, and not the alien Mexico that Lawrence repudiates. Ruffinelli's own study intends to partially remedy that lack, and he concludes that, because of Lawrence's obsession with seeking a personalized version of utopia, that novelist underutilizes his opportunity to elaborate a theory of Mexico's own conscious return to its origins, in its effort to elaborate a coherent discourse of nationalism in the aftermath of the 1910–20 revolution. Yet, Lawrence's occasional insights are valuable, as the privileged position of the detached outsider often is valuable, in preserving certain sketches of landscapes, certain shades of perception about Mexican hermeticism and cruelty permeating the atmosphere in those years of recovery from the bloodiest war in Mexico's history (115).

It is the mix of insights and incoherence that has proved most disconcerting to the relatively few Mexican writers who have discussed this novel. What strikes me most, and concerns me the most, as a feminist Latin Americanist, is not only the enclosed and strictly delimited dialogue between Westerners that implicitly, if unwittingly, excludes Latin Americans from commenting on a work in which they are prominently positioned as subject/objects, but also the terms upon which Latin American thinkers insert themselves into that ongoing dialogue. Thus, for example, Octavio Paz praises Lawrence's depiction of

landscape: "Lawrence's prose reflects the extremely subtle, nearly imperceptible changes of light, the feeling of panic when torrential rains begin to fall, the terror of darkness descending on the altiplano, the shimmering vibrations of the sky at twilight in harmony with the respiratory rhythms of the great forests and the pulsing heartbeat of women" (Paz *Alternating Current* 14). Strikingly, in this manner, Paz reiterates uncritically one of Lawrence's central metaphors, linking Mexican women to an anthropomorphized vision of landscape: "Mexican Indian women seem to bring forth stone knives" (Lawrence); "the sky at twilight [is] in harmony with the respiratory rhythms of the great forests and the pulsing heartbeat of women" (Paz). In both passages, the inanimate takes on life at the expense of the women, who are deparicularized as the spirit of the mountain or the heartbeat of the land. In this respect, the Mexican woman falls a step below the male primitive/savage/native: not only does she exist outside rational discussion, but, as Torgovnick notes, "once she enters the narrative, she is made to embody the landscape, rendered throughout in the language of pathetic fallacy" (Torgovnick 155). She is reduced to a prop in the drama of identity.

Latin American(ist)s, it seems, enter the dialogue, if at all, only on Western terms, and only as confirmatory voices (if differently accented ones) in this conversation among men extending from Lawrence and Paz to more recent critics like Ruffinelli. It is a long conversation, echoed in the romantic Latin American novels contemporaneous with Lawrence, though unknown to him, of the early part of the twentieth century. In those Latin American nation-building novels, Doris Sommer finds, "the rhythms of male desire and female enthrallment. . . . [raise] the ideal gender types to national proportions. . . . by using different rhetorical moves: metonymic aggrandizement for the male; metaphoric substitution for the female" (Sommer 56). Men become fathers, rooted in the land; good women become the Land itself, birthing nationhood, whether in the form of good sons or obsidian knives. The praise-worthy or alienating quality determined as a consequence of this metaphoric substitution pales next to the fact of substitution itself, and significantly, all the metaphors of nation-forming derive from an examined overlay of Western models on non-Western landscapes and cultures.

Modern Mexicans look on their founding myths, including the myth Lawrence exploits, with a well-justified skepticism that derives partly from an uneasiness about the unresolved clash between European and indigenous thought systems. That clash is, in fact, central to Mexico's understanding of the Quetzalcoatl story. Quetzalcoatl, the winged serpent, the creator and comforter of humankind, the culture god signifying a spiritual regeneration, disappeared from the Valley of Mexico in 987. Prophecy foretold his return; Hernán Cortés's appearance precisely in a *ce acatl* year both fulfilled the prophecy and demonstrated the error in Aztec theological claims, thus blurring Mexico's



"At moments," said Ramón. "Later they will murder you and violate you, for having worshipped you."

"Is it inevitable?" she said flippantly.

"I think so," he replied. (478)

Nobility is Kate's birthright; she believes she is intrinsically superior because her blood is "another, finer fluid" than that of the commoners and the Mexican peasants who taunt her with their "strange, reptilian insistence" that "*Blood is one blood*" (456). It is because these commoners, despite their resistance, respect the superiority of her more refined spirit, her finer blood, that they have chosen her, a foreigner, to become the incarnated Malintzi. Furthermore, at the very point in which her natural nobility is acknowledged and inserted into a "Latin American" meaning system—the triad Quetzalcoatl/Huitzilopochtli/Malintzi—her foreignness dissolves and her legitimacy not only as the silent mother/virgin goddess, but also as the voice off/for Mexico is established. She provides the connection to European high culture that the educated mestizos, Ramón and Cipriano, are unable to make alone. At the same time, Ramón reminds her, the common people's animal resentment will eventually bring her down. To the degree that her difference from them cannot be internalized (her orientation is modern/spiritual to their primitive/corporeal), she becomes the obvious sacrificial victim, both the unwanted element that must be cast out as well as the representative of the best that can be achieved through miscegenation. In Lawrence's novel, however, this delicately avoided topic of the potential vitality of a miscegenated race and culture, in equal parts desired and undesirable, resists its own spiritualized/brutalized conception in ritual and in narration.

Kate's ambivalence to the Mexican Indians is concocted of inherited prejudices combined with the author's own particular obsessions. Thus, for Torgovnick, Lawrence retells "in personalized terms the two major stories about primitive peoples he inherited from the nineteenth century: primitive peoples as dangerous and irrational . . . ; primitive peoples as the idealized noble savage . . ." To these inherited stereotypes Lawrence adds his own gendering twist: the first, or "feminine," story represents "the primitive as degeneration, as a cautionary tale for the modern West; the second, 'masculine' version, is the primitive as regeneration, as the last best hope for the modern West" (Torgovnick 159). What is interesting to me, however, is the degree to which these inherited prejudices intersect with Mexico's own, creating a partial overlap, but one with an entirely distinct political edge. The mystique of the superiority of white people's blood sounds familiar in miscegenated Mexico as the trope of an inherited (from the Spanish) passion for "purity of the blood" that undergirds the classist and racist prejudices of Mexicans to this day. At the same time, alongside the obsession with pure blood, the myth of the glorious

Aztec past helped the colonial creoles endow their struggle for an independent identity from Spain with a moral or spiritual authority. Thus, Paz writes, Sigüenza y Góngora proposed to the viceroy the idea of using Aztec, rather than Roman, emperors as the theme of a triumphal arch celebrating good government. Furthermore, Paz finds, "noteworthy, too, is the frequency with which, in all texts of this period, there appears the adjective 'imperial' applied indifferently to the Aztec state and Mexico City" (Paz, "Flight of Quetzalcoatl" xvii). Even more interestingly, the same general division that Lawrence, with his nineteenth-century prejudices, discerns between the degenerate and the regenerative forms of the primitive obtains in seventeenth-century Mexico as well, where the exaltation of the disappeared Aztec past—a mythic invention parallel to the equally mythologized Roman empire in stature and spiritual status—is paired to an absolute denigration of and disgust for the living Indian. Early-twentieth-century Mexico, despite its official exaltation of "the cosmic race" (Vasconcelos) unmistakably downgraded the indigenous component of that mixture of blood as shiftless peons while pointing ritually to Benito Juárez, the Indian president, as a sign of a national lack of racial prejudice. Patriotism, consequently, in the post-revolutionary period familiar to Lawrence, as in the period preceding independence, involves a resurrection of an invented past, along with a rejection of the living present.

Finally, Lawrence's image of the revived religion of Quetzalcoatl seems to have less to do with coincidental parallels to Mexican myth, nation-forming or not, and a good deal that aligns it closely with the work of his contemporary Georges Bataille, who imagines a sinisterly subversive Aztec America, one that offers a devastating critique of the rational obsessions of the civilized world. In his reading/celebration of the Aztec civilization, Bataille emphasizes the value of openly affirmed human sacrifice, and he explicitly underscores the fiercely intense sensuality of the sacrifice in his masculinist fantasies. The Inca civilization, says Bataille, is dull, but the Aztecs, "the liveliest, the most seductive" of the American natives, had "air and violence, . . . poetry and humor" (Bataille, "Extinct America" 4-5). In another article Bataille clarifies that he wants "to become part of the history of sacrifice, not of science," and while he "had nothing more serious to say of the reasons for our joy than the Mexican has of his own satisfaction," he hints that "only when death is at stake does life seem to reach the extreme incandescence of light" (Bataille, "Sacrifice" 68). Like Lawrence, Bataille seems to feel that the joy reaches a special incandescence when the element of miscegenation is factored into the sacrifice:

An Englishwoman, transfigured by a halo of blond hair, abandons her splendid body to the lubricity and the imagination (driven to the point of ecstasy by the stunning odor of decay) of a number of nude men.

Her humid hips open to kisses like a sweet swamp, like a noiseless flowing river,

and her eyes, drowned in pleasure, are as immensely lost as her mouth. Above the entwined human beasts who embrace and handle her, she raises her marvelous head, so heavy with dazzlement, and her eyes open on a scene of madness. (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 85)

Bataille's vision, like that of innumerable pulp novels, juxtaposes the Barbie-like image of the blonde Western beauty against the pornographic gaze filtered through "primitive," over-sexed, and racially othered men. It is precisely the contrast between the iconic beauty of the woman and the iconic bestiality of the men that proves so stimulating; madness and death are the natural concomitant results, intensifying the erotic charge for the implicit white male voyeur. In Lawrence too, the revival of the old gods requires blood sacrifice, though the assurance that the men executed as part of the Huitzilopochtli ritual, mere brutish Indians after all, are criminals deserving of death placates Kate's more queasy conscience.

As in Lawrence's novel, Tobias Schneebaum's narrative of his eight months in the Amazon with the Akarama people tells of the writer's encounter with a primitive people that represent at the same time the virile noble savage and the degenerate cannibal. In telling this story, Schneebaum too focuses on a fetishized act of ritual violence. Furthermore, Schneebaum structures his tale as that of an educated Westerner who, like Kate in *The Plumed Serpent*, is both detached from the Latin American culture observed, and ritually and spiritually part of that culture. Like the British writer, he blurs his own subjectivity into that of the native, thus lending the account an insider's authority. Schneebaum, with the ostentatious rejection of the ethnographer's reasoned and distanced account of his field work in favor of a more subjective account of his experiences, treads close to the novelist's territory. He is at the same time a Western person who marks his ethnographer's training in the text. Implicitly, then, he is apparently taking a step closer to the native than the imagined fetish object of a Lawrence or a Bataille. If as in Lawrence, the Latin American initially seems mysterious, unfathomable, and intensely male, nevertheless, the Anglo-European, by virtue of adoption into this alien culture, soon learns everything there is to know, even to the point of becoming, as Schneebaum does, the spokesperson for "my people" and privileged explicator of "our way of life" (Schneebaum 130, 177). These people, as we know from reading the prologues to the book, are a cultural variant lost to humanity. They have no speech, no future.

Schneebaum is deeply aware of the audience in whose terms "our way of life" needs both explication and defense. After opening the story of his travels *in medias res* with a chapter that begins, "Manolo came into the clearing below me . . ." (3), Schneebaum starts his second chapter, with a mental clearing in this rapidly sketched narrative jungle, through direct address to the reader

"Now that I've begun this diary, these letters, whatever they are, it is difficult to know how to go on . . . And I think of all those who will read this. My friends, that is. You, that is" (16). The readers become friends, people with similar intellectual and aesthetic interests and ideological goals, and these multiple friends (literate and unliterate) condense into those of his friends who can read and who both sympathize with and influence the form of this telling: the shadowy shapes of "C" and "M," the anthropologist and the artist, and perhaps, the less shadowy shape of the Spanish wanderer, Manolo, whose tortured homosexuality causes him to exile himself in the jungle, in the furthest outpost of Catholicism. These friends are further condensed into the figure of the letter's recipient, the intimate ur-Friend, "You, that is." That is to say, me. I, the letter's recipient, am participating in a long, and long-distance, conversation with my friend who, writing from the immediacy of the moment, from the day-by-day experience, needs my insight, my detachment, in order to evaluate the adventure as a whole. "There will be no pretense of objectivity here," Schneebaum warns (16). He is feeling his way along, depending on instincts, and he continues, inviting my participation, "I must tell my own story in this same way; perhaps you will connect it all together and analyze my motives and methods" (20). Not only am I urged to listen to the story, but to perform the eminently postmodern occidental critical act of forging connections among scattered fragments and theorizing about methodological issues based on sparse evidence.

One effect of the method is immediately clear. Schneebaum quickly establishes a relation of immediacy and intimacy between himself and the reader that suggests his powers of intuition and empathy, hinting at the strikingly unique qualities of his sensibility (and of his sexuality) that allow him not only to make contact with the Akarama and avoid being eaten in the initial meeting, but also to become one with that people in what is, after all, a relatively short stay. Furthermore, the letter-writing strategy, with its intimate, informal tone, and its half-bewildered account of developing events, permits Schneebaum a latitude in narrative construction decried in the more formalized accounts of ethnography or anthropology. In some sense, Schneebaum's intense self-awareness can lead us to the conclusion that his little book sets the precedent for (post)modern cultural anthropology and serves as a primer for the exploration of the relation of modern ethnographical studies to indigenismo. We readers (I, that is) tend to forget quickly how multiply hedged and shaped this letter/diary actually is.

Schneebaum's visit with the Akarama took place in 1955, when he went to Peru on a Fulbright fellowship. And, he notes in a preface to the original 1969 edition of *Keep the River on Your Right*, "although I kept notes at the time, it has taken me all these years to come to the actual writing of the pages that follow"—a very delayed letter, indeed, and one reciprocally conditioned by the

late 1960s and Rachel Carson rather than the mid-fifties. Time enough for contemplation, one would think. Time for analysis to have taken place at some level. But again, analysis is left to me, that is my job as reader, my job because I can *read*; Schneebaum places himself, the writer, fictitiously on the "primitiv" side of the divide, ranged alongside those who neither read nor find any reason for analyzing actions.

Schneebaum is also aware that the readers of the second edition of the narrative are different from the first edition's readers twenty years earlier. Readers in 1988 are more consciously concerned about the problem of deforestation in the Third World, have been appalled by the Union Carbide disaster in India, and remain deeply incensed by Western insensitivity to other cultures. As the author tells us in his new preface to the 1988 edition, he discovered a few years after the book originally came out that the entire Akarama people had been wiped out by trans-Amazon highway constructors, who used incendiary bombs to kill them. It is not so much, or not only, that the 1960s were "a simpler time, a more beautiful time," but that memory makes it so; thus not only nostalgia, but also outrage condition the old-new story of the Akarama people. Curiously, however, Schneebaum's own outrage is more for himself than his Akarama friends: "I had searched out that particular encounter without realizing the fulfillment that would thereby come to me. . . . An entire culture disappeared, and with it went a whole section of my life" (Schneebaum preface). What we readers—what I—tend to forget is that *Keep the River on Your Right* is, precisely, a narrative of a period in our friend Tobias Schneebaum's life. As is more obviously the case in Lawrence's novel, the Akarama in Schneebaum's narrative serve as the correlative of the other within; they focus and rechannel and empower his repressed sex/sensuality. His trip to the deepest, most unexplored regions of the Peruvian Amazon is a homecoming and a self-encounter.

Thus, one of the most striking things for me, as I read Schneebaum's narrative, is the network of allusion he deploys to define himself *and* his reader in terms of a shared cultural heritage. On his first night in the Mission, his mind overflows with possibilities that derive from a well-established background in Tarzan comics and afternoon television serials: "Of course, nothing happened; there were no snakes, no tigers, no headhunters, no tarantulas. Yet my mind overflowed with all these possibilities" (9); his mind, and, by osmosis, mine as well. The image that prevails is not that of an uneventful evening, but rather of a jungle full of potential adventure and rife with dangerous encounters with exotic men and beasts. Schneebaum's decision to journey, like Kurtz and Marlowe, into the heart of darkness, to go, *Star Trek*-like, where no one has gone before, ratifies this first impression. Perhaps because his command of Spanish is shaky, and he speaks the other languages of the region not at all, Schneebaum, like Lawrence, is freer to dream, to invent the "rightness" and love he

feels bursting out around him in all directions. "It is becoming the realization of a dream, my being here," he says, "it's as if I were back in *Bomba the Sun-gle Boy*, my favorite reading in my early teens" (19). Events are profounder, richer, sillier, by relation to the pop-culture context.

Our shared cultural context includes not only Tarzan and Bomba, however. He also expects me to share his interest in T. S. Eliot, to navigate in the ideological waters familiar to *The Nation's* readers, to sense this friend's connection to Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (the borrows Manolo's Spanish translation to read by candlelight while native men and women are conducting orgies on the beach under the crescent moon), to recognize his allusions to Proust: "the shock of cold water was my madeleine" (41). The first moments of his encounter with the Akarama function as another madeleine, a shock of foremen-ory of an event yet to take place. From the beginning, he feels that he can understand these people without the slightest familiarity with their language, that an empathic bond allows them to communicate with each other (76, 78-79). I, his reader, am evidently meant to share that bond as well. But in 1988, and even perhaps in 1969, we might well suspect that Schneebaum, like the crazy old priest in the frontier mission "most of the time . . . makes himself misunderstand" (26), that the experience of mutual comprehension might be considerably less mutual than he imagines, that in constituting himself the speaker for the people, he is, again like Lawrence, actually speaking only for a construction of his own desire.

He sees the Akarama in terms of certain basic categories—human, and eaters of other humans—and as he hopes they are—"the first men who had ever walked upon the earth." This implicit confusion of what he is, or how he sees himself, with what he hopes and what he sees of the Akarama conditions all of his (mis)understandings of his adoptive people, his longing for their pristine innocence, for their knowledge, as well as his recognition that he is forever expelled from the Eden of their lives:

In writing, I think. That is, in writing here, it has become necessary to put thoughts together to go down on these pages . . . And coming upon my people, now my lovers, my friends, I shed my past as I did my clothes, even knowing inside me that I could never be a Michii or Yoreione, that a shirt, though gone now in shreds, though it no longer is an object for which I have any desire or need, remains forever something that I know has somewhere a use, and I can never strip myself of the knowledge of how to open a button, how to put my arms in sleeves, how to put the tails inside a pair of pants. To become Michii, I must not only rid myself of the need to write, but also of the very knowledge that writing exists . . .

Time after time they ran their hands over my chest and belly and penis. They touched with gentle fingers my nose, my eyes, my ears, my hair, and they prodded into my navel with their noses. They repeated one word over and over, Habe, habe, and it has taken me all this time to understand its meaning: "ignorant one." (69-71)

Schneebaum knows that he is ignorant because he writes, that in order to understand the Akarama and to be like them he has to forget his knowledge of Eliot and Proust and Bomba the Jungle Boy. Yet, at the same time, he realizes that he thinks in writing, and that he will continue to write during his time with the Akarama, using whatever makeshift ink and paper he can devise. The end result of all of his thinking, and all of his writing, has a single, simple conclusion. He now understands the most basic fact of all; he sees the Akarama as brothers, lovers, friends, *his* people, while they see him as a mascot, a pet, an "ignorant one." He continually puzzles over why these eaters of their fellow human beings have not eaten him; it does not occur to him (or at least does not occur to him in the pages of this narrative) that they might see him as inedible.

As is the case with Lawrence's novel, there is a violent blood ritual at the heart of *Keep the River on Your Right* that seals the spiritual relationship between the white Euro-American and the native Latin American. In *The Plummed Serpent*, Kate witnesses executions and accepts her elevation to a goddess; in *Keep the River on Your Right*, Schneebaum takes part in a graphically described male fertility ritual of hunting, killing, and eating men from another Amazonian group, followed by ritual homosexuality. The entire process, Schneebaum hints, is at the same time a deeply religious ceremony, a celebration of life, a declaration of identity, an assertion of the hunting male's dominance over his prey, and a nutritional necessity. This is *The Heart of Darkness* from Kurtz's side of the divide between barbarity and civilization, a *Heart of Darkness* where the values are, Bataille-like, inverted: "I was hypnotized by movement always up and down, kaleidoscopic lights that flickered through my iris, a chant that soon became a roar that drained out thoughts that came my way . . . I took a piece of meat that Michi held out and ate and swallowed and ate some more, and entered the circle again to dance" (106). At the same time, Schneebaum feels a wondering guilt at having gone so far native that he eats human flesh, that he loses both writing and thoughts in the chant "Mayariihá," "roaring jaguar."

The roar of the jaguar sounds throughout the rest of the narrative, paired to its minor key partner, an obsessively repeated, *written* sentence: "I am a cannibal." In sharing the Akarama males' ritual meal, he declares himself irrevocably one of them; in reflecting upon his participation in their communion, he knows that he is equally irrevocably set apart. No matter how deeply he goes, or thinks he goes, into their practices, he is not one of them. He suffers a crisis of identity; they do not. Their laughing attitude towards death, their frankly ritual homosexuality are intensely unlike his own lacerated needs, at least insofar as we, his friends, can filter them through the writings of and conversations with his alter ego, the other writer in this narrative, the Spanish homosexual Manolo, whose only reader is the one man who understands him, his friend, Tobias Schneebaum. For all his love of Bomba and other exotica, and despite

his conversion experience with the Akarama, for Schneebaum the drama of meaning is played out in a field that has nothing to do with Michi, Yoreione, or his other Akarama companions. Schneebaum, inevitably, processes these experiences in terms that have to do with letter writing for a Western-educated audience, albeit a sympathetic one, and not for his Amazonian friends. "I am a cannibal," he writes, "but I am no savage" (181). For the Akarama people, neither of the two clauses has any linguistic or existential referent, and the distinction Schneebaum makes between "cannibal" and "savage" is utterly meaningless, as would be the distinction Western society makes between people according to sexual preference. "Here I am," they say simply, "a roaring jaguar." Tobias Schneebaum, for all his adventures, is still, or perhaps more intensely, Bomba, the jungle boy, a little lost, oppressed by lingering twinges of superiority.

But what of the Akarama? Just as the reader of the 1960s is different from the reader of the 1980s, so too I posit that the Akarama, as given to us by Tobias Schneebaum, need to be read differently. The Akarama of both decades are deeply misunderstood people. Previously taken to be bloodthirsty, primitive savages, Schneebaum shows us that they are really happy, loving, community-oriented people. While the community he describes seems strangely devoid of women, there are any number of good reasons for Schneebaum's inability to mingle with the female groupings as easily as he does with the men. Yet because even the Akarama men whom Schneebaum personalizes by reference to a name and a couple of personality traits seem so sketchily drawn, the reader is ultimately left to her own devices. Thus, the Akarama of the 1960s are genial inversions of their hippie counterparts up north. They groove on peace and togetherness, love and understanding, and are real back-to-nature folks. If they seem a bit simple, they are endearing in their simplicity. The reader of 1988, unlike the reader of the 1960s, knows the Akarama have been brutally extinguished, and our sympathy for them is conditioned by this foreknowledge. Theirs is now a tragic story of the cruelty and violence of the white man, whose inexplicable conviction of his rightness and superiority colors this moral tale. Darinimbiak's death seems a foreshadowing; the curing of Pendiari and Awake's ills, an ironic commentary on the greater tragedy to come. Schneebaum ends his narrative with the reflection: "I go where my legs will take me and if I look ahead, it seems like time gone by, for I see myself no matter where I go, forever here" (184). His memory—here and now in 1969, or here and now in 1988, or here in the now of this critical study—is all that remains of an entire people, but it is a people processed and reprocessed as the site of self-construction, of critical analysis. "Here I am," says the Akarama, only a memory now, the roaring jaguar stilled in the jaguar-skin throw rug, the "here" unaccountably shifting locale.

There are several points that need to be made briefly, and by way of con-

clusion, about the body of texts represented by these works. (1) For reasons that still require exploration, ritual violence, or what I've been calling a Western fetishization of violence—as opposed to banal or inexplicable violence—plays an essential role in these narrations about the exotic, “other” America, and ritual is linked to an explicit, temporally conscious positioning. In these works, time is manipulated as a value structure, either to contrast a timeless, primitive existence (Akarama, Mexican Indians) with a time-bound one (Schneebaum's New York; Kate's London),<sup>3</sup> or to suggest a variation on what Bataille calls the “empty toxicity” at the doubled end of history when modes of consciousness and production and modes of excess, sacrifice, and art will join (see Stoekl 107–8). One compelling feature of this paradigm is the linking of sexuality and violence with the “primitive” culture, suggesting that the familiar postmodern trope of the end of history also predicts a return to this imagined primitive past. I do not believe that the underlying connection with utopic and/or pastoral discursive traditions is insignificant. (2) Issues of domination also need to be explored. Both Lawrence and Schneebaum, in their different ways, manipulate an ingrown sense of superiority as a tool for opening up and understanding an alien culture. In his article “The National Longing for Form,” Timothy Brennan hints at the imbrication of such a desire for mastery with self-indulgence, and with destruction, as well as with the colonialist's unconscious linkage of “to enlighten” with “to control.” Brennan focuses on the motives that have, in a large sense, been at the basis of imperialism. “The ‘novel of empire’ in its classic modernist versions . . . has been blind to the impact of a world system largely directed by Anglo-American interests, however much it involved itself passionately, unevenly, and contradictorily in some of the human realities of world domination” (Brennan 48). Likewise, Torgovnick reminds us that the sense of the literary recuperation of the primitive upon which such works as Lawrence's and Schneebaum's depend is neither coherent nor particularly well-founded, and that closer scrutiny uncovers nationalistic biases, ethnocentric prejudices, and sexist values that are now impossible to defend (Torgovnick 3). At the same time, the strong connection between nation and narration needs to be uncoupled and explored, especially, as is the case in these texts, when the underlying notions about narrative construction seem at odds with the concept of nation under discussion. This problem seems particularly acute when exploring the origins (Lawrence) or boundaries (Schneebaum) or gender inflections of stories/myths/rituals about nation/nation.

These trends are disturbing ones, and implicitly undercut much of the overt theoretical and political discursive positionings of postmodern thought. Other scholars, similarly aware of this problem, have turned to the Third World for more authentic, or at least more culturally sensitive, renderings of this postmodern indigenist paradigm that I have been discussing through my comments

on the novel by D. H. Lawrence and the personalized ethnography of Tobias Schneebaum. As Michael Fischer notes, “bifocality, or reciprocity of perspective between societies: members of cultures described are increasingly critical readers of ethnography. No longer can rhetorical figures of the ‘primitive’ or the ‘exotic’ be used with impunity; audiences have become multiple” (Fischer 199). Postmodern readers can no longer safely or simply appropriate indigenous cultural objects as our own fetishes—they remain stubbornly connected to their native source. In response to such epistemological complications, we felt incompleteness and recognized Western bias in earlier versions of postmodern indigenism by turning to renowned Latin American writers and thinkers who have also taken up such concerns. It will be my contention in the second half of this paper that texts like Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*), which seemingly presents a response to Kate's Malintzi and Schneebaum's Bomba the Jungle Boy, in actuality distance themselves very little, if at all, from the strong, if discredited, paradigm represented by such works as those of Schneebaum and Lawrence.

## II

Torgovnick ends *Gone Primitive* with the reminder that her book is itself biased in particular ways, and offers only one study among many possible studies of the phenomenon: “The present study has traced, in essence, a male-centered, canonical line in of Western primitivism—without question the major line . . . But I can imagine alternative lines of primitivism that would, necessarily, be based on an entirely different selection of texts. Some of those texts would be produced by women; many (whether by men or women) would probe alternative versions of knowledge and social order, including many marginalized in the West” (Torgovnick 248). Mario Vargas Llosa is deeply suspicious of the “sed de exotismo,” thirst for the exotic, relieved in these works of the canonical sort, and finds particularly invidious the exploitation of ingenious “proletarian” Third World writers by well-fed European leftists to confirm their own preconceptions about Latin America and their own frustrated romanticism about their own countries. The simple fictions about Latin America, says Vargas Llosa, are what they demand and what they get; such fictions feed both their Bomba-the-Jungle-Boy exoticism and their ideological programs. On the occasion of a speech by a working-class Peruvian brought to address a group of Danish intellectuals, he writes with distaste of the Danes' enthusiastic reception of an exceptionally one-sided and biased account of life in Peru:

La razón principal es, sin duda, ese fenómeno de *transferecia* tan frecuente en los intelectuales europeos que dicen interesarse en América Latina. En realidad, se interesan en una América Latina ficticia, en la que han proyectado esos apetitos ideológicos que la realidad de sus propios países no puede materializar, esas convicciones que la vida que viven desmentirían diariamente. La compensación de su frustración es ese otro mundo, al que se vuelven a mirar a fin de que les muestre siempre lo que quieren ver . . .

[The function of the third-world writer] consistía en resarcirlos vicariamente de la desgracia que es para ellos—los pobres—vivir y escribir en un país culto y democrático donde los sindicalistas preferían ver la televisión, en sus casas propias, en vez de editar las novelas de los escritores revolucionarios que les elevarían la conciencia. (Vargas Llosa, *Contra* 343-44)

[The main reason is, doubtlessly, that very common phenomenon of *transference* in European intellectuals who say they are interested in Latin America. What they are really interested in is a fictitious Latin America, onto which they have projected those ideological appetites that the reality of their own countries cannot materialize, those convictions that the life they live contradicts on a daily basis. The compensation for their frustration is that other world, the one they go back to again and again so long as it shows them exactly what they want to see . . . [The function of the third-world writer] consists in vicariously indemnifying their disgrace, which for those poor intellectuals consists of living and writing in a civilized and democratic country where union organizers would rather watch television, in their own homes, rather than publish the novels by those revolutionary writers who would raise their consciousness.]

Vargas Llosa, then, decries oversimplification of complex Latin American realities in order to exploit specific Latin American difficulties for first-world aesthetic enjoyment, and finds particularly reprehensible the political erotics of a continuing exoticism that insistently rewrites Latin America in terms of Western intellectual desires. From his point of view, amply supported by many thoughtful critics, his own difficult, highly fragmented, self-reflexive, eminently postmodern novels make their claim on Anglo-European attention through reference to a nuanced multi-cultural Peru reaffirmed in its multifarious vitality rather than displayed as an uncomplicated and easily marketable folklore. To counter first-world intellectuals, or writers like Lawrence and Schneebaum, who find western tools of analysis adequate for the study of any culture, in *El hablador* Vargas Llosa proposes a model in which the production of knowledge is a joint undertaking. A western-trained narrator and a Machiguenga storyteller speak alternately in the text, implicitly to each other and to us, who find their complementarity and the grounds for dialogue in the textual interstices. The immediate attractiveness of such a work is that, unlike those works studied by Torgovnick, in *El hablador* Vargas Llosa, ostensibly at least, does not pretend to speak for or from the margins of his own (in Western terms) marginalized society. Instead, his point-of-view character speaks from the very center of that society—Lima, Peru, and Florence, Italy—while giving the Amazonian storyteller (almost) equal space to speak in his own voice.

Nevertheless, the question I want to ask this text is, first of all, to what degree does Vargas Llosa's affirmation of the political and artistic complexity of such work as his lay claim to Western attention through a deployment of stylistic techniques that are both white-male canonical and "universal" rather than local in orientation, and secondly, how much of the authority of Vargas Llosa's novel derives from the reader's sense that in it, unlike in traditional ethnographical accounts, the novelist speaks for the margin because in this book he licenses his own, differently constituted, margin to speak for itself?

In *El hablador* the problem almost too easily breaks down into a question of narrative orientation. There are two narrators, both Peruvian: one speaks from Florence, having chosen the route of westernization (though he agonizes about writing the story of the Machiguenga Indians), the other from the unexplored (by westerners) rain forest of the Amazon. In depicting a reality that is at least double, Vargas Llosa would seem to respond to those European intellectuals he describes who want Latin America to retain a straightforward, fairy-tale simplicity. Yet, at the same time, his bid for relevance comes uncomfortably close to duplicating their analogous anxiety. Those European intellectuals he criticizes want Latin America to provide a standard of relevance for their ideological programs, to provide them with the forum that their own people, too involved in television to bother, deny them. But when he turns to his own society, Vargas Llosa describes the Latin American writer as a person similarly, although for different reasons, without a place: "En una sociedad en que la literatura no cumple función alguna porque la mayoría de sus miembros no saben o no están en condiciones de leer y la minoría que sabe y puede leer no lo hace nunca, el escritor resulta un ser anómalo, sin ubicación precisa, . . . una especie de loco benigno" [In a society in which literature has no real function whatsoever because the majority of the members of that society do not know how to read, or are not able to do so, and the minority that knows how to read and can read never does so, the writer turns out to be an anomalous being, without any precise position . . . a type of benign madman] (Vargas Llosa, *Contra* 93). Western intellectuals look to Latin America for the practical validation of their theories; Latin American intellectuals, hints Vargas Llosa, look to Europe for their reading public. Vargas Llosa, then, is concerned with the writer as exile and exemplary citizen, and with the strained linguistic/literary modes of coding a text for two different and incompatible audiences, the more-or-less indifferent educated elite of his own country, and the relatively unformed reader abroad. I need not go into the implications of this practice. Several years ago Fernández Retamar pointed out the orientatizing tendency in his contemporaries' targeting of the reading publics in Europe and North America, and he has eloquently explored the issues involved in inscribing a Latin American identity for (or against) a supposedly "universal" audience. His *Calbán* confronts the issue of cultural and linguistic alienation not only

in relation to the Spanish-speaking Latin American's relation to indigenous and other minority peoples, but also in terms of a vexed consciousness of the overriding effects of cultural imperialism.

There is a second issue beyond the ironies involved in a fall into exoticism when the frenzy to escape such orientaling tendencies is at its height, however. Not only are Europe and Latin America caught in a mutually validating narrative bind involving the very heart of postmodern critical and theoretical practices, but both the Europeans he critiques and Vargas Llosa himself use the exotic as the validating trope of authenticity. Like the ingenuous proletarian writer who repeats to the Danish audience all the stereotypes about an exotic Latin American city that they most desire to see fulfilled, so too Vargas Llosa, the Latin American city dweller, looks to the exotic margins of Peru for the image of an authentic narrative voice. If the Western intellectual or the metropolitan storyteller is a barely tolerated benign madman, the same is not true in the Amazon. The Machiguenga storytellers, the narrator tells Mascarita, "son una prueba palpable de que contar historias puede ser algo más que una mera diversión . . . Algo primordial, algo de lo que depende la existencia misma de un pueblo" [They're a tangible proof that storytelling can be something more than mere entertainment . . . Something primordial, something that the very existence of a people may depend on] (Vargas Llosa, *Hablador 92/Storyteller 94*). The Machiguenga storyteller is at the center of his culture in a way the Latin American novelist or Western intellectual can never hope to be, but his very existence there, on the margins, describes the conditions by which they can imagine a way out of the multifarious postmodern fictional impasses and achieve cultural empowerment. Fiction in the Amazon is not just the amusing lie that supplements reality,<sup>4</sup> it is the reality that constitutes a community, validating the old ties between a nation (however defined) and narration in a particularly strong sense. Academic fascination with such a model of dynamic empowered ethnicity is entirely to be expected, since this model allows for a reimagining of the interplay between speaker and society that we, in our twilight admissions in conference corridors, uncomfortably suspect to be highly attenuated in postmodern theorizing and literary practice.

Furthermore, while the fully empowered Machiguenga oral storyteller is new, the novel that runs simultaneously along two well-defined tracks has become a well-established feature of Vargas Llosa's recent work. *La tía Julia y el escribidor* and *Elogio de la madrastra* both use a similar technique of setting up two narrative voices, and Carlos Alonso suggests in an article on *tía Julia* that the divided novel "can be read as an example of that more general current within postmodernism which seeks to explode the chasm between high and low cultures by using popular forms and discourses to produce objects that ostensibly belong to high literary culture" (47). Clearly, if we agree with Alonso, we conclude that Vargas Llosa is concerned with setting two discrete narrative

modes side by side so as to abstract the essential components of storytelling. What is so interesting about Vargas Llosa's recent efforts, however, is that he "explodes the chasm" in the chasm itself, in the double and double-voiced text, unlike as in, say, *Historia de Mayta* where he exploits/explodes the detective formula from within for high-art ends. Vargas Llosa's doubled text reminds me again of Barthes's formulation that "Culture . . . recurs as an edge," an edge defined in the aesthetic seam between pleasure and violence, between modernity and the primitive: the destroyer mourning/revealing in the loss of what he has destroyed.

Vargas Llosa's double narrative, then, is caught in a bind that is at least triple. (1) The Machiguenga storyteller represents the best hope for a revitalized, constructive narrative tradition at the center of culture rather than at the destructive seam, but the westernized novelist who tries to write a story about the Machiguenga oral storyteller is unable to find a voice that is either "authentic" (102/104) or even "credible" (152/158). (2) Ethnography, the alternative traditional method of explicating the primitive to the modern, is suspect on both cultural and ideological grounds. Concern about non-Latin American investigators' motivations for field study in the Amazon is widespread, and not only in fictional accounts.<sup>5</sup> As one of Vargas Llosa's characters says, not entirely tongue in cheek: "la Etnología es una pseudociencia inventada por los gringos para destruir las Humanidades" [ethnology is a pseudo-science invented by gringos to destroy the Humanities] (34/32), and the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano or the Dominican priests who staff a mission at Urbamba, both organizations acknowledged in Vargas Llosa's endnote, implicitly have their own nefarious reasons for wanting to study Amazonian Indians and their languages (e.g., veiled hints that such organizations have been the object "de virulentas controversias," "of virulent controversy" [69/71]). (3) To go native—in Schneebaum's terms, to blur the distinction cannibal/savage—would seem to find a way out of the contradiction by replacing the western-oriented, canonical author with an indigenous figure. Nevertheless, the indigenous storyteller by definition does not enter into any dialogue about authorship, living or dead, and remains completely outside the burning conflict in postmodern aesthetic modes. Without the intervention of the modern, westernized author-figure, there is no book. Without a reader who accepts narrative fragmentation, there is no community bound together (rather than cut on the edge) of the story.

What Vargas Llosa attempts, then, is a both/and operation: he includes both the native informant (the Machiguenga storyteller) and the analytic framework (the westernized intellectual). The storyteller blurs all temporal modes into a continuous present line: "¡Estamos vivos, decían. Y ellos seguían andando!" [We're alive,] they said. And they went on walking! (44/43). Like Schneebaum and the Akarama, they live in the "here," with no time or inclination for

western-style analysis. The intellectual, in contrast, emphasizes the retrospective mode of meditative reflection upon a history now "visto con la perspectiva del tiempo" [with hindsight] (21/19), where the tell-tale marker "ya" indicates the direction contemplation must take: "¿Sentía ya esa fascinación de embrujado por los hombres del bosque y la Naturaleza sin hollar, por las culturas primitivas, minúsculas, desperdigadas . . . ? ¿Ardía ya en él ese fuego solidario brotado oscuremente de lo más hondo de su personalidad . . . ? Sí, ya había comenzado todo eso" [Did he already feel that spellbound fascination for the peoples of the jungle and for unsullied nature, for minute primitive cultures . . . Was that ardent fell feeling, spring from the darkest depths of his personality, already burning within him . . . Yes, all that had already begun] (15/12-13). The narrator's "ya" ("already") betrays his methodology, his repeated "already" marking the repetitious and necessary scene of analysis of an event not yet, and already defined. This narrator, our westernized guide to the Amazon, is aware of the role of the reader, aware of his own role, aware as well of the institutional status of a certain kind of privileged intellectual activity that creates its own, albeit rejected, community, one defined by a shared matrix involving Kafka and Proust, Corín Tellado and popular television programs, local news and literary gossip. This familiar narrative territory, alternating with the impossibly exotic realm of the Machiguenga storyteller, inevitably suggests its own blurring of edges, its own narrative recharting. For the storyteller's odd mish-mash of news and gossip retold and mixed with myth and traditional tales, all spiced with ritual expressions begins to sound suspiciously similar to the westernized writer's combination of travelogue and gossip about friends, flavored with references to reading, spiced with literary allusions. Reduced to its essential components, the wandering storyteller begins to look like the jet-setting novelist, just as the novelist adduced the *hablador's* kinship with the European troubadour, the Brazilian *caboclo*, the Irish *seanchaí* (see 158-59/164-65). The Machiguenga serves, ominously, as a defamiliarization device in the continuing story of the Western intellectual's long monologue about himself, never fully escaping into (or from) the social matrix that declares the Western writer a benign madman and the Machiguenga storyteller as defining element of community. Slyly, the story about the Machiguenga storyteller does get written; our mistake would be to take it as a Machiguenga story rather than a talented westerner's variation on his own autobiographical tale.

Vargas Llosa's triple bind is understandable, perhaps inescapable. And the nature of that problematic suggests not so much the enlightened multi-cultural Latin American as someone far more similar to the Danish intellectuals Vargas Llosa belittles before finally rejecting. Like them, Vargas Llosa chooses a specific and stereotypical representative of an exotic culture so as to reaffirm predrawn conclusions, not in this case about the revolution of the proletariat, but rather about the role of the committed writer in (post)modern society. What

is of concern to me, however, is the particular framework of literary allusion chosen to surround the Machiguenga elements. In this novel, the overt text of the westernized narrator's admiration for the social status of the Machiguenga storyteller is paired with a repressed subtext hinting at the impotence of the Machiguenga people, who need a converted westerner to come in and revive their dying civilization, and also implying the physical and spiritual monstrosity that is the most they can hope to achieve for themselves in the best of cases.

The narrator's first image of the Amazonian tribes is accompanied by a grimace of distaste. What else, he asks, can a modern, cosmopolitan Peruvian feel for those subhuman beings that sit around naked in the jungle, gabbling incomprehensibly and eating lice? "Esos hipibos, hamibisas, aguarunas, yaguas, shapras, canipas, mashcos representan en la sociedad peruana . . . un horror pintoresco, una excepcionalidad que los otros compadecían o escañecían, pero sin concederle el respeto y la dignidad que sólo merecían quienes se ajustaban en su físico, costumbres y creencias a la 'normalidad'" [In the Peruvian social order those Shipibos, Huambisas, Aguarunas, Yaguas, Shapras, Campas, Mashcos represented something that he could understand better than anyone else: a picturesque horror, an aberration that other people ridiculed or pitied without granting it the respect and dignity deserved only by those whose physical appearance, customs, and beliefs were "normal"] (29-30/28). The narrator's original "picturesque horror" ostensibly changes as the novel progresses, and he too begins to appreciate and yearn for the unquestioned respect in which the Machiguengas hold their storytellers. Nevertheless, underlying this superficial change persists the image of an unredeemable, incurable monstrosity.

The first monstrosity lies in the Indians' "perfectionism," their lack of human compassion: new mothers will bury alive or drown babies born with physical handicaps or deformities of any sort (27/25). Yet, despite this horror of deformity, despite their tendency to let themselves die if afflicted by even the most minor illness, the Amazonians seem to support more than their share of human grotesques. The spiritual monstrosity that the narrator "knows" about finds its parallel in the physical deformation all around him when he reaches the Amazon. He describes his impression of Urakusa, an Aguaruna town; first, the "espectáculo acostumbrado" [familiar spectacle]: "vetas colgantes, niños de vientres hinchados por los parásitos, pieles rayados de negro" [gangling tits, the children with parasite-swollen bodies and skins striped red o black], and then something new, "un espectáculo que nunca ovidé: el de un hombre recientemente torturado" [a spectacle I have never forgotten: that of a man recently tortured] (the torturers were whites and mestizos who objected to the Aguaruna leader's foresight in trying to improve living conditions for his people) (72-73/74). The implication is that the unassimilated Indians are monstrous; the semi-assimilated ones are victims of horrible and subhuman

treatment; the fully assimilated (e.g. city-dwelling) Indians are merely pathetic. As the narrator rhetorically asks himself later, "¿de 'salvajes' libros y soberanos habían empezado a convertirse en 'zombies' . . . ?" [Or were they, rather, from the free and sovereign "savages" they had been, beginning to turn into "zombies"?] (157/163). The poles of his transformative equation are not insignificant; they suggest no roles for the Indian in westernized imagination other than minor parts in either "Tarzan" or "The Night of the Living Dead." By contrast, the linguists and anthropologists who immerse themselves in this world are "personajes Faulknerianos de una sola idea, testardez intrépida y alarmante heroísmo" [a character out of Faulkner—single-mindedly, fearlessly stubborn, and frightening heroic] (178/184).

On one of the narrator's subsequent trips to the Amazon, he travels with the Schnellis to visit a Machiguenga town, in itself an anomaly for this people whose most basic, traditional belief is that the world continues to exist because they never stop walking. Characteristically, the narrator's first impression is of deformity: "uno de los niños tenía la cara destruida por esa especie de lepra que es la uta" [the face of one of the children was eaten away by a form of leprous known as uta] (162/168)—but the monster is not shunned by his peers; instead, he interacts freely with the other children. The narrator wants to emphasize both the physical horror and the unquestioning acceptance of monstrosity; in order to maintain the argument, however, he has to make a baroque and rather unconvincing distinction between the Indians' monstrous pursuit of perfectionism that leads to infanticide of children with birth defects, and their natural lack of discrimination against those unfortunate individuals whose handicaps or deformities occur after birth, the only way he can maintain the strong linkage between monster and savage.

The narrator reinforces this connection through the figure of Saúl Zuratas, or Mascarita, who is inextricably linked to Kafka's man-monster Gregor Samsa on the one hand and the Machiguenga on the other. This young man, deformed by an immense mole covering one side of his face, is monstrous in various senses of the word. The drunk in the bar summarizes society's unhindered reaction to his appearance:

—¡Puta, qué monstruo! ¿De qué zoológico te escapaste, oye? . . .

El borracho alargó las manos hacia él, haciendo contra con los dedos, como los niños cuando les mentan la madre.

—Tú no entras, monstruo. . . . Con esa cara, no debías salir a la calle, asustas a la gente. (16)

"Son of a bitch! What a monster! What zoo did you escape from? . . ."

The drunk stretched out his hands, making hex signs with his fingers, the way children do when they're called bad names.

"You're not coming in here, monster. . . . With a face like that, you should keep off the streets. You scare people." (13-14)

Mascarita's enormous mole is a variant on the prominent nose stereotypically thought to be the physical sign of a Jewish heritage, and, indeed, Mascarita's father is a Jew, but as the child of a mixed marriage, a monstrous birth, he is rejected by both his parents' peoples on those grounds. Mascarita is also monstrous in his humor, in his rejection of western models of knowledge, in his passionate commitment to the peoples of the Amazon. He is obsessed with Kafka, and especially "The Metamorphosis," "que había leído innumerables veces y poco menos que memorizado" [which he had read countless times and virtually knew by heart] (19/17), and has a pet parrot he calls Gregorio Samsa. It is, in fact, Kafka's tale of the man-insect that serves as the most persistent literary touchstone for the entire novel. The Machiguengas and Gregor Samsa are Mascarita's twin obsessions, and through this obsessive linking they become identified. Mascarita is a Gregor Samsa; in the Machiguenga world "a los monstruos, a los gregorio samsas, los despeñaban" [little monsters, Gregor Samsas, were hurled from the top of a mountain] (27/25). At the same time, the Machiguengas are the Gregorio Samsas of Peru; only among them can another Gregorio Samsa hope to feel at home. Soon, through an incomprehensible metamorphosis, or conversion experience, Mascarita becomes a Machiguenga; more, he is the Machiguenga storyteller quoted in this book. The Machiguenga, it seems, have no native storyteller left, for although *habladores* are spoken of in the plural, the only one we hear of, meet, or see depicted is this adopted member of the tribe, the monster, the misfit, who can only find acceptance among these picturesque and primitive people.

If Mascarita's conversion had been complete, the novel would fit more neatly into the tradition of tales of the primitive in which romantic and monstrous interpretations jostle for priority. Monstrously, Mascarita's conversion, like his physical metamorphosis, is halted halfway. Once he is fully accepted as a *hablador*, that is, as one of the people upon whom the very existence of the Machiguenga depends, he employs that power to redefine the nature of the community, at first subtly, later more blatantly. From the first, there is a mystery surrounding this albino graft onto the tribe. The Machiguengas, a friendly and open people, "no tienen reservas sobre nada. Pero sobre los *habladores*, sí" [They don't keep anything to themselves. Except anything having to do with the *habladores*] (169/175); the cosmopolitan narrator surmises that these people were not, and had no need, to protect the institution of the storyteller; quite the contrary, since the storyteller was at the root of their sense of community. Instead, "lo protegían a él. A pedido de él mismo, sin duda" [They were protecting him. No doubt because he asked them to] (179/185), and the specific taboo spread to the abstract level.

Mascarita also changes the nature of the Machiguenga belief system in other, even more fundamental ways. One of the horrors of assimilation, says the narrator, is the process by which an independent people is converted into a

herd of victims, losing the primordial, untouchable depths (167/172) by learning to sing the national anthem in Machiguenga and to tell Bible stories in broken Spanish. Mascariita changes the fundamental nature of his adopted people in just such basic ways. The Machiguenga never travels alone; they are a wandering but gregarious people. Mascariita refuses any companion except his parrot. The Machiguenga do not use names: "su nombre era siempre provisional, relativo y transeúnte: el que llega o el que se va, el esposo de la que acaba de morir o el que baja de la canoa, el que nació o el que disparó la flecha." [Their names were always temporary, related to a passing phenomenon and subject to change: the one who arrives, or the one who leaves, the husband of the woman who just died, or the one who is climbing out of his canoe, the one just born, or the one who shot the arrow] (81/83). Mascariita does not dissolve name into function in such a fashion; instead, he insists on retaining his nickname, and on hearing it repeated back to him, preserving his unique identity, attaching the Spanish word "Mascariita" to the abstract Machiguenga word for "one who speaks": "¡o llamo con una palabra que inventé para él. Un ruido de loros pues. A ver, inténtelo. Despertémoslo, llamémoslo. El lo aprendió y lo repite muy bien: Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta. . . ." [I call him by a name I invented for him. A parrot noise. Let's hear you imitate it. Let's wake him up; let's call him. He's learned it and repeats it very well: Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta. . . ] (224/234).

Finally, as the narrator hints, Mascariita's transformation has less to do with his adoption of the Machiguenga belief system than with his Jewish prejudice towards another community that, like his own, is both marginalized and wandering (233/243). Certainly, the long, boring hours he spent in synagogue and the other long hours he spent in a Christian society have their effect on the stories he tells his adopted people. Like the Bible instructors, but more insistently, Mascariita inserts the stories of those other peoples into the compendium of news and legend. He tells the story of "Tasurínchi-jehová" and the Machiguenga-Jews who were cast out by the Yiracocha-Christians and set to wander the earth. I do not want to suggest that what is at issue is the question of retaining some sort of illusory purity of the untouched primitive as an alternative social matrix. What is at issue in this novel is a problem of competing narrative modes—westernized and Amazonian—in which the eccentric, monstrous form of narration is subsumed, almost imperceptibly, into a parody of the same old Judeo-Christian tale. It is perhaps because Mascariita retains his westernized sense of self and heritage and identity that the narrative "I" can so easily recreate the long-desired story of the Machiguenga *hablador*, and do so, moreover, in a form that exactly reproduces the seemingly less authentic (because more overtly western-biased) accounts of ethnographers like Tobias Schneebaum and Kenneth Good (the latter does, in fact, also include the intermittent voice of the native informant in the brief italicized paragraphs provided

by his partially westernized Yanomama wife, Yarima). We could, in fact, argue that Vargas Llosa's account, compared to the accounts of the European thinkers he criticizes, is all the more disturbing because in it the Machiguenga voice seems less mediated, seems more like a transcription of the native speaking out or speaking back in his own voice, on his own terms, from the margins of the margin.

Like Schneebaum's narrative or Lawrence's novel, then, Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* describes the experience of giving oneself over to another way of seeing. This is, in itself, an honorable endeavor. What ultimately disappoints, however, is that in the Latin American novel, as in the British and the American's works, the apparent duality of vision is coupled to no interplay. We see what Kate or Tobias or Mascariita sees, and we have an intuition about what the Mexican or the Akarama or the Machiguenga does *not* see, but at all times we are still looking through the mediated vision of Western eyes. Politically, this narrative technique conforms perfectly to Vargas Llosa's pro-acculturation stance with respect to indigenous peoples in the Americas.<sup>6</sup> Because Vargas Llosa's novel only *apparently* privileges (or gives equal time to) the autoethnography of the Machiguenga, there is no bifocal or multiply conceived discursive encounter in the narrative, no countervision to throw the westernized conclusions into relief or put them in perspective. While in each case we are told, endlessly, about a contradiction between a western individual and a non-western collective subject, in each case the collective transposes itself into narrative as a mediated transcription of a single individual's idiosyncratic vision. As William Rowe says in a recent article, "Those parts of the text that present the voice of Zuratas as a Machiguenga 'storyteller' read like a bad *indigenista* novel. . . . These passages. . . have virtually no intellectual content" (Rowe 60-61).

In her reading of J. M. Coetzee's *Poe*, Gayatri Spivak suggests that "there can be no politics founded on a continuous overdetermined multiplicity of agencies" (Spivak 166), and she continues: "perhaps that is the novel's message: the impossible politics of overdetermination (mothering, authoring, giving voice to the native 'in' the text; a white male South African writer engaging in such inscriptions 'outside' the text) should not be regularized into a blithe continuity, where the European redoes the primitive's project in herself" (174). Coetzee's novel, Spivak reminds us, does not hold together in a continuous narrative space. Tellingly, for all their surface fragmentation, all three of the books examined in this paper do hold together as the exotic "there" reveals itself as another face/mask of the western "here." All of them suggest that they are limit texts—this is as far as we can go into the jungle—when in fact they mark only the first threshold we must cross.

"We" the readers may resist co-optation into the cultural community of the text's value system on various grounds. As Torgovnick writes, "the language

of 'us and them' . . . is powerfully, almost infinitely seductive. Today we seem to have a choice of which 'us' is 'us': the humanist 'us' . . . or the imperialist 'us'." And, Torjovnick adds, even if we are able to choose among the multiple and fragmentary versions of "us," "we still need to ask what is excluded from the 'us'" (Torjovnick 145). Clearly, all three of these works show, both the humanist "us" and the imperialist "us" share a common Anglo-European cultural frame and both, in Mary Louise Pratt's succinct formulation, "continue to locate the whole planet with respect to a European-based historical narrative" (Pratt 8). Neither Tobias Schneebaum's subjective ethnography nor Vargas Llosa's ostensibly de-centered and multiply voiced novel shift this undertheorized cultural bias. Alternative knowledge systems, including those of women-centered and non-western-determined texts, are still all too often among those excluded from the expansive, universalizing "us." The politics of postmodern indigenism continue to betray the fact that in our western textual universe "Quezalcoatl and all that" still have limited consequences for our revisionary intellectual projects, and until we begin to address the implications of this bias our postmodern theorization of indigenous disruptions as textual resistances will remain seriously flawed.

## Notes

1. There is a vast and growing bibliography on postmodernity in Latin American fiction and culture. Among the clearest and most succinct discussions available in English are Ydíce, Beverley, García Canclini, and Benítez Rojo.
2. See Dewey Wayne Gunn, who identifies more than 450 novels, plays, and narrative poems on Mexico between 1805 and 1973 by British and U.S. writers.
3. It ought to be noted that these structures respond to narrative conventions rather than objective reality. Schneebaum finds a charming simplicity in the Amazonian measurement of time and space in terms of walking distance: the Akaramas are "four sleepings" from the Mission, for example (Schneebaum 50), and he doesn't understand if the cycles of ritual cannibalism respond to anything other than whim. In *The Plumed Serpent*, Quezalcoatl's seasonal character is, as Clark notes, "more Mediterranean than Mexican" (Clark 114), and Lawrence's references to the "un-counted, unregistered, unreckoning days" of pre-Columbian times fits oddly with the time-bound Aztecs and their meticulous attention to a calendar more exact than that of their western conquerors (see Clark 108).
4. I am referring to Vargas Llosa's formulation in *Kathie y el hipopótamo* that "la ficción no reproduce la vida: la contradice, cercenándole aquello que en la vida real nos sobra y añadiéndole lo que en la vida real nos falta" [fiction does not reproduce life. It contradicts life, paring away all that in real life is excessive and adding that which real life lacks] (Vargas Llosa 117).

5. See Kenneth Good for a U.S. take on this issue.
6. Vargas Llosa writes, for example, that "if forced to choose between the preservation of Indian cultures and their complete assimilation, with great sadness I would choose modernization of the Indian population because there are priorities" (*Writer's* 36).

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## II

### In the Heat of the Night: Sexuality (South) of the Border