The Phantom Gringo Boat and Meditations on Popular Culture

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The following essay is a poetic exploration of ancient indigenous and contemporary market-driven visual narrative strategies and the complex ligatures that bind them. This meditation is rhizomic in form, carrying the reader across cultural, temporal and discursive boundaries.

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THE PHANTOM GRINGO BOAT

Imagine a boat moving slowly down a tropical river, receding slowly into the mist. Diesel fumes emanate from the motor and the body of the boat is particularly luminous. The place is Panama; the time is an ever-shifting present that the boat has inhabited over generations. Inside the craft may be found riches beyond imagination – the proverbial gifts from the gods.

These gifts are there, the boat exists – for men have seen it. And yet, it remains elusive to all but the chosen few with the spiritual vision to recognize the boat and, what is even more daring and dangerous, to harness its cargo. We may recognize little that is familiar in this story, and yet it has come to mean a great deal to another group of humans – the Emberá, an indigenous group inhabiting the rain forest near Panama's border with Colombia. We have taken much of the above description from an actual siting by two Emberá of the boat, dubbed the "Phantom Gringo Boat" because of its elusiveness and its supposedly Euroamerican crew (Kane 1994:167-168).

The boat may be seen as a metaphor for the lure and danger of development, with the phantom gringos beckoning the Emberá on to the untold and elusive riches of the West (Kane 1994,1). This level of reading seems to make a great deal of sense, and we feel it to be a good reading – particularly since many of us in the West are concerned with the effect of the steamroller of Western culture on indigenous cultures like the Emberá. But this interpretation is not necessarily the Emberá exegesis.

Instead, for the Emberá, the phantom gringos have been equated with the *Chämbëra*, or Underworld deities. These beings must be seduced and cared for in the Emberá tradition, although they are obviously indicative of Emberá contact with "the other" in the guise of "*gringos*." In this way the Emberá integrate the idea of outside beings and their wealth in a typically Emberá fashion (see Sahlins 1985 for another example of this dynamic). Thus the lure of foreign riches is equated with the lure of riches and power of the Underworld deities, the latter a typical indigenous

American cultural logic.

MAGIC, IMAGE & KNOWLEDGE

In a regional context, it is not only the Emberá who see economic relations in what we would consider an irrational, spiritual perspective. The "surreal" may erupt in analyses of things like wealth accumulation among most strata of Panamanian, and the closely related Colombian peoples, be they of Spanish, African, or other descents. The anthropologist Stephanie Kane, who has looked deeply at the Emberá and their relation to both the Spanish whites and the Afro-Panamanians, puts it this way: "While surreal images and survival knowledge circulate among the three races (as they call themselves), overlapping and blurring the boundaries between them, the way that each race uses image and knowledge creates their distinctive forms of cultural politics" (Kane 1994:xv). This overlapping and borrowing in the area is real – the acclaimed Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, who grew up not far from the Emberá, is considered the chief exponent of the

related Latin American literary genre dubbed "magical realism." This literary tendency employs similar structures and at times even the same themes as those of much indigenous thought. For example, in García Márquez' classic novel "*One Hundred Years of Solitude,*" what is considered everyday reality is not always, or even usually, the determining factor in the cultural logic of the characters. Instead, elements of other – non-Western – world views are taken as constituitive factors in the cultural logic of the characters. This is well known and should come as no great surprise, for many of these authors have been students of the mythology and magic of indigenous Americans. Further, like the nearby situation in Panama described above, García Márquez is a premier example of how non-Western modes of thought have ensconced themselves in the wider Latin American discourse.

However, the rubric of magic realism does not explain everything Latin American. Far from it. Politics, mimetic slippages, modernism, and ever greater globalization

are just some of the chief factors that must be taken into consideration when looking at the greater Latin American scene. For example, the globalization of markets has meant that agricultural production, such as coffee, is international in scope. In 1959 the Colombian group the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros* contracted Doyle, Dane, Bernbach and Needham (DDB/Needham) to create a campaign to attract buyers to their product (coffee) on a global level. This is the origin of a fictional character called Juan Valdez, who was meant to embody the qualities of the hard-working, honest laborer that grows quality Colombian coffee. From this date to the present, Juan Valdez has been a defining popular culture icon, which, like García Marquez' work, is an attempt by the cultural forces of the Panama/Colombia region to communicate the identity of the region to the outside world.

CONJURING IDENTITY

Juan was conjured up out of bits and pieces of indigenous costume from differ-

ent regions. Like a montage of normally disconnected scenes, Juan is constructed from the traditional costumes (in Colombia called *traje típico*) of several different regions who are not necessarily coffee producers. For example, his hat comes from the coffeeless coastal region while his *carriel* (shoulder bag) comes from Antioquia, a region with the densest coffee production in Colombia. The shoes reference not space, but time, in the guise of the Precolumbian past. Thus Juan becomes a synthetic indigene – a constructed national identity which is then broadcast to the world.

Juan is imbued with magical characteristics by his conjurors, who present him – and his *burro* companion – in *traje* in cotidian situations that are incongruent with our visceral reality. For example imagine yourself awoken on a typical morning by the friendly nuzzling of Juan's *burro*, but when you open your eyes he is gone. You get out of bed and you shuffle down the hall to the kitchen to start breakfast, you open your pantry door to find Juan, and his *burro*, inside. They greet you with

a hale "*buenos dias*" and hand you your coffee. Unsure whether you've seen a vision, you consult your life partner – who is still asleep. S/he advises you that of course he's in the pantry, because he is on the label of every package of Colombian Coffee. Cross-over fade to Juan holding a cup of steaming brew with his *burro* by his side and dissolve to logo as the voice-over commentary reminds you that only 100% Colombian Coffee can conjure up or carry the image of Juan.

A STRATEGIC CULTURAL SHIFT

Juans' image, his likeness, have been used to sell coffee in a subtle and sophisticated way. In an historic example of what is now called account planning, DDB/Needham realized that a cultural shift had to occur, an education of the market had to take place, over the course of years in order to acheive the *Federación's* ambition to become known as producers of the finest coffee in the world. The strategy has been to introduce the character of Juan Valdez to the world through television and print as a man

of integrity and great pride in his craft, an entrepreneurial peasant farmer willing to forgo the mechanical convenience of mass agribusiness in favor of the harder, lower-yielding, labor-intensive method of hand-picking each coffee bean "at the peak of its ripeness." Who could resist falling in love with or at least respecting this forerunner of the micro-brew?

The *Federación's* strategy has translated respect for the synechdotal man to respect for the bean by shifting emphasis away from Juan and to the coffee in the early eighties and through the present.

The slow, methodical constancy of the advertising campaign – consciously or not – reflects the original message of what it takes to grow "the richest coffee in the world." In this the *Federación* has been rewarded by seeing Juan recognized by up to 83% of the U.S. population and his association to Colombian Coffee recognized by some 65% of the population. In addition *Federación* statistics have shown that 75% of those polled think that Colombian Coffee is "the finest available."

This measure of success has made Juan Valdez an international *über*-celebrity. Case in point: *Cromos* magazine of Colombia – that nation's analog to Time magazine, reported that the number one ranking tennis player in the world, Pete Sampras, asked for a picture with- and an autograph from- Juan Valdez the *persona*, who was attending the US Open, an event co-sponsored by the *Federación*.

PERSONAL IMPLICATIONS

It is this political and economic situation that has prompted me to investigate Juan through my work. In the piece entitled *çeci n'est pas Juan*, the indigenous nature that Juan has been suffused with is foregrounded by the [re]choreographing of his movements and the addition of a hypnotic chanted melody. The motion references not the *salsa* nor the *cumbia* of the post-colonial period, but a more suitable fictitious pre-discovery aboriginal period.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

We have spoken quite a bit about the

West's influence on the imagination of the indigenous people in Panama. We have also seen Latin America create an image of itself – Juan Valdez – for outside consumption. But how are these phenomena intertwined? Are we all in a loop of disconnected miscommunication and mistaken identities? A recent news report on National Public Radio raises this question in a particularly poignant way. NPR reported that a meeting was held in June of 1999 between the *FARC,* the chief revolutionary army in Colombia, and Dick Grasso, the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange. So what was the representative of the world capitalist engine doing in the Colombian countryside with the leaders of an avowedly Marxist group? They were wrestling over the brand created by the *image* of Juan Valdez, and the millions of dollars *that* brand represents in the form of the coffee trade.

In this scenario the web of relations between Colombia and the West grows ever tighter, with globalizing design playing a key role. To use the metaphors of this essay, Juan Valdez himself is on the Phantom

Gringo Boat, an ephemeral figure of wealth for the oppressed. The head of the stock exchange is no longer on the boat, but is in fact looking at Juan floating down the river. How ironic, how postmodern global – and most importantly, how intricately tied up with the various symbolic worlds created by the various groups involved. Those that create further images in this conversation should be very much aware of this discursive history, and of the ways that these symbolic worlds clash and meld in the globalizing economy of images and things. We in the West are no different in this sense than the Emberá, and we no longer occupy a god's ey
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COLLOPHON

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