

Fetishism, Racial Fear and Postcolonial Anxiety in Latin American Culture and Literature

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Abstract: This paper explores the aesthetic, social and political aspects of historical fetishism present in Latin American culture as seen in major representative literary works and cultural phenomena. This paper addresses the study of the figure of the Indian (Native) in the context of the great historical moments in Latin America, beginning with “discovery” and conquest, going through colonial times and ending with independent times. In a Postcolonial context, the issues of race, gender, primitivism, Otherness, slavery, immigration, social change, and their underpinning ideologies inspire and inform literary themes, plots, and representation. This work will contribute to an understanding of the historical development of modern Latin America and will appeal to students and scholars.

Key words: Fetishism, Postcolonial, Freud, race, gender, representation, Native, Indian, literature, film.

Resumen: Este trabajo examina los aspectos sociales, políticos y estéticos del fetichismo histórico en Latinoamérica. Se desarrolla alrededor de la teoría del fetichismo de Sigmund Freud y Homi Bhabha y toma la figura literaria del Indio (nativo) y otros entes subalternos como la mujer y los esclavos en el contexto de la evolución cultural en el continente. El trasfondo de este proceso refleja los momentos históricos en la región como la época del descubrimiento, la conquista, la colonia y los tiempos independientes. En un entorno poscolonial, las cuestiones de la raza, el género, el primitivismo, la Otredad, la esclavitud y sus sustentos occidentales inspira y configura temas literarios, tramas, argumentos y representación. Este ensayo espera contribuir a un mejor entendimiento cultural de Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: Fetichismo, teoría poscolonial, Sigmund Freud, Homi Bhabha, raza, género, representación, nativos, Indios, Otredad, literatura, cine.

[...] there were one-eyed men,
and dog-headed creatures who ate people,
and when they took a man, they cut off
his head, drank his blood and castrated him

November 4, 1492

*Columbus's Diary*¹

In the restless days of his first trip, Christopher Columbus, still without gold and the riches he had offered the Spanish Crown, finds himself in a steering dilemma, both of self-conservation and geography. At the moment of the entry above, he has been unsuccessful to find the potential treasures for his imperial bankrollers and his aspirations of riches in the Caribbean waters are disappointing. As we see above, projecting his fear on paper, Columbus is anxious and fearful; failing to courtly trust usually meant lost of royal grace and liberty as he himself found out in the wake of his third voyage (Fernández-Armesto 178-179). Faithful to his time, Columbus opts to construct an object to stand as the cause and pretext for his failures. Engaging in rhetorical hearsay,² a practice popular in his time, he resorts to construct an imaginary human object, a fantasy enemy metonymically standing for his failure.

In the semantic construction of the epistemology of the New World, the ambivalence of imagination and veracity was hardly an issue because political power had the upper hand in constructing reality. As seen in Columbus' diary, the predisposed written word, the power wielded by Europeans, takes precedent over the facts they encounter in the New World (Cevallos-Candau 2). This practice which is used to ascribe meaning to geography and the human elements in the Caribbean in the early moments of the Conquest, is not only useful for Columbus, but it has had a long axiomatic presence in Latin America into the next centuries. In his *Diary*, Columbus envisions danger and uncertainty, perhaps echoing those old tales of monsters which have posed similar imaginary dangers to European sea fearers. In his mind, Columbus magnifies an object which satisfies a political desire, that is, a pretext for his failures; he is fixed on an image standing as the source of his own fears and the target for his frustrations. This figure of desire, the embodiment of what he thinks prevents the fulfillment of

¹ See Columbus 68. The translation is mine.

² The rhetoric of hearsay together with the rhetoric of personal experience (the writer as a witness) was the basis of knowledge in the medieval mind. See Greenblatt 123-124.

his promises to the Spanish monarchy, is the human entity that he has just come in contact: The Indian.³

Columbus' anxiety about the Indian (native) does not arise from his encounter with the Indian in the flesh whom he, incidentally, has found to be peaceful and helpful as a potential ally (36, 46-48); his anxiety finds its way, as we see above, in the fictional cannibals and Indians with dogs of faces, bending on castration of their enemies. The journey of suffering as the spatial method of acquiring knowledge in medieval times (de Certeau 70) has immediate rewards for Columbus. For him, the Indian danger has to be magnified since his economic expectations are similarly high. The Indian becomes the foundation and the excuse for all the European anxiety in the New World. Columbus' subjectivity is complemented by what Lewis Hanke calls the "Aristotelian" perception of the Indians which sees them as slaves by nature and willing subjects to domination (16-17). In a way, Columbus, without knowing, conceives the first European fetish in the new world.

Fetishism and the Other

This paper aims to identify the negative images and the stereotypes of Indians, blacks and women as the Other in Latin America, and, as Homi Bhabha points out, a postcolonial critique must dwell on the socio-psychological origins of the stereotypic fantasies. In order to accomplish this endeavor, it is necessary to explore the "process of subjectification" of the Other which tells how stereotypes and images attributed to specific characters are built (38). The fetish, it should be emphasized, owns its prevalence to the dichotomies of "desire and derision" in the Western world while simultaneously reflecting those wishes of going back to the traditional realm of "origin and identity" in the Western mind. The time when the Other was not around.

In question of Latin American literature, it is necessary to point to the human object that triggers a psychological pleasure when reading, for example, about cannibalistic Indians in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Lituma en los Andes* (1993), irrational Indians in Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo* (1935), lascivious blacks in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841), submissive women in Jorge Isaacs' *María* (1867) and the desire to exclude native women in Romulo Gallegos' *Doña Barbara* (1929). It seems that these images of Indians, women and blacks provoke in both Latin American literary production and consumption a reassuring

³ Indian and native will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

sentiment while calming anxieties due to the endurance of these signifiers throughout history. Reassuring because these images reflect sociological and canonical referents and anxious since those same images, in the political world, cannot be completely controlled thus posing apprehension in the *criollo* patriarchal mind. These and many other metaphors of the Other provide psychological pleasure and social stability because they are rooted in an old dominant discourse that has satisfied desires and comforted social anxieties in the postcolonial mind.

This prevailing postcolonial discourse owns its success to what Jacques Derrida calls the “iterability” of the sign which grafts on to a chain of diverse signifiers (93) which in Latin America has ranged from anthropological to political praxis. This phenomenon, which although began in the early years of the Spanish arrival, has been cemented in the nineteenth-century and has persisted until contemporary times. In Latin America, the transfer of this anxiety from the personal to the public realm has been crucial in the construction of national identity. In this situation, the blurry figure, no well-defined image of the Other, common in any gestationary political period, has been analogous to the process of human psychological growth.

Kenneth Burke notes that in psychoanalysis the early stage of human psychological growth is crucial for identity formation; this juncture is vital since it provides a unique insight into peoples’ psychological history; it (the stage) turns to be “an informative period of childhood” in which mental experiences are “strongly personalized” in unique internalized images. The latter do not perish in the immediate moment of their inception and in fact their lasting power is patent in the “vessels of character” of the human subject in adulthood (123). In the aftermath of independence in Latin America, if we use Burke’s idea in a historical context, the *criollos* (Spaniards born in the colonies) set up a system of social relations based on an axis of fear and distrust of the Other. This is an agenda similar to that of their predecessors, the *conquistadores*, that in the words of Gerald Martin, was motivated by “lust and power, not love and understanding.”⁴ This Other being women, blacks and primarily the Indians became the most constant tangible proof of this political anxiety.

In his essay on fetishism, Sigmund Freud argues that those early childhood images, whether real in the physical world or imagined in the psychological realm, are the “object-choice” (the fetish) which

⁴ Quoted in Beardsell 9.

provides pleasure for the subject and are always satisfying and perceived to be natural ("Fetishism" 152). For Freud, the fetish is a natural phenomenon for the subject since it satisfies psychological dual needs. First, it, the fetish, also known as the Other, exists outside the Self, so the apparent distance calms the subject's fears and anxieties and, at the same time, provides desire and excitement. Man's mental fixation on an object happens early in childhood in what Jacques Lacan, who reworked Freud's original ideas, would call years later, the "mirror stage" of human psychological formation where this split of desire and rejection of the fetish takes place (*Ecrits* 1-7). The automatic dichotomy of rejection and attraction of the fetish is set.

Freud argues that the subjects' fears are expressed in the rejection of the image (s) emanated by the fetish or attributed to it; moreover, the subject's natural "disavowal" of what the fetish represents and the subject's "desire" of the fetish is articulated precisely in the same image which has produced this fear ("Fetishism" 153). For Freud, this thought process basic axiom is the lack or the absence of normality. The fetish image has sexual origins in that it represents a lack of penis (signifier of absence), thus the male-child disavowal of such image because the subject identifies this lack with the figures of his mother (the female Other). Freud points out that in the subject's mind this lack is understood as being unmanly, feminine, un-fatherly, and in our case, non-European and non-white thus a specific target of rejection; yet this signifier is, at the same time, an object of desire because of the sexual possibilities that this lack (attributed to women) offers the male-child ("Fetishism" 155-156). The fetish helps the subject achieve his goal of protecting himself from the anxiety arising from this experience; he finds calm as he rejects this lack and, at the same time, his desire for this lack, which is now the source of his satisfaction, is confirmed by the attachment to the fetish.

Freud's idea of childhood experiences as the preeminent source of human behavior might lead critics to treat literary works in different ways. First, they may approach literature from the vantage point of psychobiography, inquiring about personality traits or traumas that shed light on a writer's work. Second, others might focus on Freud's contribution to the language and structure of dreams which emphasizes that all human thought and discourse is fundamentally symbolic that find their way into literary inspiration (Dalton 6-9). I want to dwell more on a third mode of approach which borrows from the above and looks for repetitions within fictional works, across different genres and literary

periods; this approach requires identifying how patterns of images reflecting “the repressed unconscious” find their way in literature and thus fulfilling “forbidden wishes [...] in a way that disguises their true nature so that both the repressed tendency and the wish are satisfied” (Dalton 10). Extrapolating this personal fixation to the political realm, the idea of the fetish helps us understand contemporary problems of human subjectivity in the postcolonial world of Latin America.

The solidity of the Freudian image of the Other in postcolonial discourse depends on both the image’s historical and cultural value and its ambivalent characteristics in both the political and the psychological needs of the fetishist. For Homi Bhabha, echoing Freud, this “process of subjectification” is typical of a type of discourse which owns its lasting efficacy to the fixity of Otherness in the Western mind. The image of the Other is always fixed on a dual manner; the image of the fetish evokes fears of abnormality and degeneration which is believed to be a constitutive part of the Other, away from the Self (37). This fixation is, as one might imagine, diachronic and requires dual qualities. First, the image of the Other is subject to repetition through changing historical times, thus the surviving old lies about the Other; second, the colonial mind perceives the excess of the stereotypes attributed to the Other as the proof of its own claims. To be sure, the psychological genesis of human subjectivity, which for Freud echoes early childhood anxiety, in Bhabha’s assertions it has the same source but its ongoing power lies not on the psychological realm but more on racial and political discourse and social praxis.

The colonial object, for example the natives in Latin America, might be only an image (s) in the head of the child (or the Spaniards) but a discursive truth in the adult world (contemporary Latin America); it is in the latter stage, Bhabha believes, where those fears and anxieties become the basic structure for this “range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchisation” (38). For Bhabha, fetishism has the additional function of fixating the masking of difference and aiming at restoring “an original presence” in the mind of the subject, like the ever present impractical idea of going back to the old ways.

This desire for Otherness has its basis on the complementing metaphor of “lack and difference” which propose metonymically that all men have penises while others have not (women for example); in the political realm, some men have the same acceptable skin color, others do not (44). The identity of the Other, reconstituted on the

fetish, owns its texture to the conflicting and recurring feelings of desire and rejection embodied in the dichotomies of “pleasure/unpleasure, master/defense, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence” which vouch for the continuous reiteration of political fantasies (Bhabha 45). These delusions, although restricted to the imaginary, become determinant as real entities in the mind of the fetishist. Moreover, when these images are metaphors for repetitive phenomena, and later metonymies of real world difference, they are historical and very useful as a discursive currency when confronting the Other.

Fetishism in a Historical Context

Let us now transfer this idea of fetishism to a historical context. What for example, we might ask, arouse ambivalent feelings of fear and desire in the young republics of South America back in the uncertain moments of the nineteenth century? After independence, the new elites in Latin America confront difficult tasks in the construction of the new nations. Their challenges are not only of political and economic nature, but social and racial as well. Their obstacles to nation building come not only from finding a political alternative to monarchic government, religious fundamentalism and mercantilism, but also from the failure to integrate to the new nations the non-European folks amongst their midst who were, incidentally, a majority in absolute numbers (Halperin 76-77). As Benigno Trigo notes, the *criollo* begins to see Latin America as a weaken, sick entity; for him, the new nations and the people in them are pathological entities subject to cure and renewal, a curious concept echoing the Lamarckian scientific lingo of the nineteenth century in Europe. The new rulers identify their countries as sick men in need of treatment and finds the Indian as the source of this pathology (124). The promise of the nation as a panacea for all the socio-political challenges of the time is preserved for the *criollo* and not extended to non-whites. The political heirs to the *conquistadores* make use of what comes naturally to them; they simply rely and apply the Aristotelian form of government, which in the Latin American context, is the rule of the best, the male, the white, the pure blood with the right to wage a “just” war over the “savage” (Hanke 40-41). The new nation is for the *criollo* to exploit and this decision, which becomes the *de facto* law, materializes itself in the lasting relationships between them and the non-whites upon whom they have authority. In other realms, such as literature, this desire becomes visible in the ‘aristocratic’ typology of nineteenth century romances which Doris Sommer calls the

“foundational” structure for subsequent literary production (“Love and Country” 118). In them, the new master of the realm goes about identifying the sources of their countries’ problems.

The teleology of progress in the new nations, which has been the spirit of political action, becomes imbedded in an exclusionary set of aspirations. The Peruvian *criollo*, for example, must reject any links to the Indian past and claims that Peru’s place is in the “concert of European, white and civilized nations”⁵ perhaps preannouncing what the Europeans have in mind for the future countries: to exclude non-whites from the national membership. It was not strange that well into the twentieth century, Alejandro Deustua, who designed Peru’s educational system, believed that Indians were biological failures and incapable of progress (Hanke 105). It is also revealing Simón Bolívar’s anxiety when discovering the ethnic background of a Mexican freedom fighter.

Early in the wars of Mexican independence, the mere presence of Vicente Guerrero provokes an outburst in Bolívar. Finding out that Guerrero is not of European extraction, Bolívar refers to him as a “vile abortion of a savage Indian and a fierce African.”⁶ In independent times, the *criollo* deals with political challenges in a way that was not different from what his Spanish forefathers have done. He demonizes the Other with the ultimate telos of exploitation and political control; soon the target of his anxieties, as it has been for Columbus three centuries before, are the natives thus the old Spanish fetish finds a renewal in the young republics. The natives are now seen not as the sodomites and cannibals haunting the old Spanish mind but as the “lazy, shiftless” individuals identified as the prime “obstacle to national progress” (Skimmore 178). In the worst cases, the *criollo*’s anxiety soon finds its way in more extreme political programs which violently conveys the idea that the Indian has no place in the new nations.

More radical policies, such as the one carried out in the *pampas* of Argentina, the *llanos* of Venezuela, the hills of Guatemala, and many other places, engendered violence toward the Indian in many forms ranging from political and economic oppression to the outright extermination (Bushnell et al 56-57, 213-214).⁷ The antithesis to the well-being of the new nations is embodied in the mere presence of the original inhabitants; in fact, as ironically as it might sound, some allege

⁵ Quoted in Munoz 155.

⁶ Quoted in Burkholder et al 332.

⁷ See also Rausch 68.

that, in some cases, Indians fared better under Spanish rule than in the new independent countries (Skidmore et al. 39).

The examples abound. The need for the exclusion of the Indian becomes a prerequisite to build the nation where the land/Indian dichotomy embodies the tropes of desire and rejection embedded in political programs. This desire for satisfaction is completed by the fear of the Indian inheritance which Andrés Bello prefers to bury, at least in the imaginary, calling the native influence merely “shades” in the new Latin American soul (41-47). A man of letters, and one of the early independent poets, Bello sees Indian land as the object of desire and the place of survival and regeneration of the Latin American Self; yet, at the same time, Bello’s musings also imply the denial of the Other’s presence. For Bello, a senator, a foreign minister in Chile and the author of a very influential book on Spanish grammar, it is not sufficient that the land (nation) provides satisfaction in the agricultural dimension but also gratification in the spiritual sense. He calls for his fellow Latin Americans to renew themselves in their desire to own and work in the Other’s land.

This call for renewal, the “process of subjectification,” to borrow Bhabha’s words, requires the removal, the erasure of the antithetical Self. In Argentina, Domingo Sarmiento’s fear of Indians and miscegenated *gauchos* finds its expression in the rejection of native blood; he sees Indians and *gauchos* as the usurpers of land promised to European immigrants whom he would entice later on to Argentina when he became president. For him, order and moral are reserved to Europeans along with the deserving land. Sarmiento’s call for the extermination of the natives and the replacement of them with European immigrants as seen as part of the development of the natural world and as the only solution for Argentina; he firmly fixes the disavowal of nonwhites as the central moral value for his country (15, 32-33, 159). In another part of the continent, this is the same fear and desire which prompts the Mexican government to expel the Yaquis from their land so that it can be available for new settlers and not strangely, the same policy is pursued by the Chilean government in its dealings with the Araucanos (Bauer 184) who are put in reservations thus freeing their land for European ownership.

In the psychological realm, the above is precisely the “thetic” stage of personal growth, to use Julia Kristeva’s word, the point at which the subject takes up a position, an identification in the world that surrounds him (113) and in our case it is where Latin American identity is formed.

The mirror stage, to recall Lacan, shows a growing psychology in the new nations refusing to acknowledge difference yet reaffirming a Western identity while advancing the *criollo*'s not so hidden desires. Even in canonical works of the twentieth-century such as Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924), Rómulo Gallego's *Doña Bárbara* (1929) there is the reenactment of this underlying longing. In both cases, the land is the object of desire while the native is the target of disavowal and removal.

The tropes of desire and rejection of the Indian fetish reflect the useful dichotomy of "pasure/unpleasure," to echo Bhabha's words, which is how the Indian presence is perceived. Sometimes this pleasure is provided by what is apparent (in the European mind) as having worth in the indigenous culture. On the one hand, this fetishist desire to be identified with what is good in the Indian past reflects a strangely teleology of satisfaction and, on the other hand, this identification parallels the fetishist longing to widen the distance from what is thought to be negative features in Indian life. Political leaders, for instance, identify themselves with the glory of the old Indian empires, like the Incas or the Aztecs, but see the contemporary Indian in the flesh as the antithesis to the national project of modernity. In the early days of independence in Ecuador, the Indian is a useful icon for the political elites; they claim to be heirs to Inca glory yet they manipulate the Inca image and those of Indians to gain political legitimacy and control these images for their own interests (Muratorio 105-107). Something similar happens in Peru; late in the nineteenth century, local politicians preach Inca glory and maintain to be the heirs to that grandeur while simultaneously stressing the view that non-whites (not just Indians) are "socially stagnant" because of their "barbaric customs, idleness, and bad hygienic habits" (Muñoz 159). Wishful thinking however cannot take the place of reality and the uncertainty about the future translates in fear which metastasizes into organic figures as seen above. With the Spaniards gone, the colonial mind, at least in the imaginary, has to find its own enemies to lessen its anxiety of governing the new republics. Masking its inabilities to govern with stereotypes of the Other, the *criollo* takes for granted the fixed attributions to the Other, and these markers are today the medium of exchange amongst Latin Americans.

The fetish in the Canon

The problem with the *criollo* fetish is that with fetishizing the Indian he was not only masking the Indian ontology, but also his own

inadequacies. In the early stages of the fixation of Otherness, the anti-thetical Self is constructed and identified permanently in his relationship to the fetish; in our case, it is the human elements, especially Indians, women and sometimes blacks. Esteban Echevarría, writing during the years of political consolidation of Argentina, sees Argentinean blacks in his *Matadero* (1838) as the evil antithesis to civilized society. Even though political anarchy in Argentina reflects the animosity between *unitarios* and *federalists* rather than the presence of blacks, Echevarría's explanation makes sense because of the social referent in which *El matadero* is produced. Echevarría perceives blacks as the epitome of savagery, primitivism and the opposite to European political habits; the latter were, ironically, the actual sources of political anarchy in Argentina (428-438). Sometimes the image is not organic, such as the body of the black or the Indian, but a moral attribution to their beings. Carlos Fuentes in Artemio Cruz (1962) proposes, for example, that corruption of the Mexican persona is the source of Mexico's problems, a troubling suggestion since most Mexicans are partly of Indian descent. If the masking of political problems translates in the stereotypes of Indians and blacks, this concealing of inadequacies must be repetitive and pliable as needed. The Peruvian eagerness to attribute social problems in the country to specific people is revealing. Besides the natives, blame falls onto the new Others who is causing alarms in the *criollo* mind (Klarén 231, 283). In early twentieth century, Peruvian politicians disguise their own inabilities at governing the nation with blaming Chinese and Japanese immigrants for Peru's economic problems.

The fetish, which is the embodiment of lack (civilization, good manners, right gender, right skin color) and the potential danger to the civilized Self, is also the immanent object of desire embodied in the fixity of its dual attributions: the psychological split of the Other. The fetish reflecting the Other, besides providing imaginary pleasure, also supplies physical satisfaction and becomes the perennial simultaneous source of desire and rejection-pleasure and perverse need. Recalling Freud, the fetish provides dual services to the subject not just in the psychological realm but in the physical world as well. Bhabha writes that in postcolonial discourse the "black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the sophisticated and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces" (51). In Vargas Llosa's *La Guerra del fin del mundo* (1981). Joao Grande, a

gigantic Brazilian slave fits this fetishist desire. Joao, not only fulfills the characteristics described above but his simple mind is degenerate and carries the eternal split of good and evil. He, although the author of horrendous crimes, and a killer par excellence, is also the sheepish religious follower and, in his past as a house slave, the nicest, helpful and humble servant. In Latin America, this desire for dual satisfaction does not only come from servitude but from the lure of sex as part of the repertoire of the dichotomy of sensuality and danger looming large in the postcolonial mind.

Anthony Pagden writes that forbidden yet soothing sex was a common staple in the Spanish sexual agenda in the Americas (86-87), yet this satisfaction was compounded by the horror of sexual practices that Spaniards thought was common to Indians. Colonial authorities, in fact, would write down a set of sexual behaviors and force the natives to confess the practice of them (Harrison 140-143). This is the disposition which becomes part of the texture of the *criollo* fetish after becoming independent from Spain. If the Other is a savage and a primitive, it is also the subject of sexual and economic desire. Blacks, for example, are portrayed as savages and pagans yet they are the sought after slave labor needed in the plantations; as expected, they also provide an added service to the *criollo* imagination: sex. In literature, the images of blacks conveying sexual possibilities to Europeans who feel the metonymical connection to the forbidden fruit is clearly perceived in Getrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841) and Enrique López Albuja's *Matalaché* (1928). Black women are portrayed to have an acceptable nature yet their precocious and uncontrollable sexuality is part of their subjectivity as seen in Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdéz* (1882) and Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989). This duplicity is also seen in the characterization of Rosario in Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) which provides a variation of this split in the *criollo* mind.

The fetish of the tropical women is embodied in Rosario. The latter provides the allure of exotic sex for the *criollo* traveler plus she might be the reason behind the loss of civilized man to the wild; Marisela in *Doña Barbara* shows the same ambivalence. She is a wild creature, at first no more than a little animal, the antithesis to civility and deportment; she, nonetheless, soon becomes the potential sexual partner to Luzardo, which Gallegos points as the impending contamination of the master of the house. Similar images emanate from Vargas Llosa's *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (1973) where dimwitted, ignorant, insatiable and

sex-starved yet very accommodating women are running wild in the Peruvian jungle. To further illustrate this assertion, we might mention incidentally a phenomenon which repeats itself in Latin American on a continual basis. Lack of work, political upheaval and economic pressures compel many Indian individuals to leave the countryside and head to urban centers (Butterworth and Chance 54-58). These poor laborers, specially women, flock to the cities in search of jobs where they become the evil new comer yet, at the same time, the most precious, coveted, ubiquitous cheap source of domestic help and, many times, the unwilling providers of sexual satisfaction to their employers.

Sometimes, the split transcends literary structures and geographical boundaries yet it reflects those wishes in seeing the Other as part of the mental disavowal and desire which translates in symptoms of imaginary vanishing of the Other. Sometimes, sexuality must be vanished to the wild, away from civilized society. It is revealing, for example, the emphasis on the not so subtle sexuality among Colombian blacks which is celebrated as the exotic (yet marginalized activity from cultured society) by Jorge Isaacs in *María* (1867). In another case, that sexuality is too much to bear to the clean, Western soul (Luzardo in *Doña Bárbara*) which must expel the potential source of pollution and unbridled sex offered by the Indian vamp Doña Bárbara. To give another example, the fetish presents itself not with sexual connotations but with political desires of control and this Otherness attributed to the fetish is precisely what encourages this disposition. Carlos Paz, in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) suggests that Mexicans, for example, can be good citizens if they keep themselves under the umbrella of the Mexican-European worldview. Mexicans become *pachucos*, the embodiment of social anarchy, if left unguarded outside the influences of *mejicanidad* (9-28) which in Mexico is defined by the local Euro-thinking elites.

The fetish seems to provide diachronic satisfaction to the subject and the mechanics of the fetish and its attributions of desire and disavowal have a natural occurrence for the subject. As Freud points out, the subject enjoys the fetish and is “quiet satisfied with it,” after all, the fetish is “precisely designed to preserve it [the fetish itself] from extinction” (Fetishism 152). This satisfaction and the easing of the subjects’ life, is not necessarily only erotic but political and historical as well. The Self imagines the Other within a range of possibilities which underpin the versatility and endurance of postcolonial discourse and this fixity can only be achieved through “a continual and repetitive chain

of other stereotypes” (Bhabha 47). This satisfaction emanating from the fetish, for example, has provided the base for multidimensional ways of seeing Indians where this pleasure changes accordingly to times and places. Lacan, in his reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, tells of the different meanings a letter conveys when it changes hands. The letter, which in the story is stolen, is assigned personal values by different people. The meaning of the letter (the subject of desire) changes according to the person who has possession of it, be the king, the queen, or the minister who stole it.⁸ Lacan’s reading allows us to see that the signifier changes qualities according to social and historical agendas yet the meaning (s) of the signifier, as it happens with the contents of the purloined letter, remain unknown.

In Latin American literary history, the Indian signifier encompasses a tremendous range of stereotypical cataloguing, each representing different historical periods and literary genres yet the real Indian has remained absent in the same written pages. Indians, for instance, must be primitives as in the Columbus’ *Diary* (c. 1492) and devil worshipers in Hernán Cortéz’ *Cartas de Relación* (c. 1520-1525). They are sodomites for Díaz de Castillo in his *Historia verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (public. c. 1632); superstitious as told by a long line of writers: Cabeza de Vaca in *Naufragios* (1542), Domingo Sarmiento in *Facundo* (1845), Jorge Icaza in *Huasipungo* (1934), Miguel Angel Asturias in *El Señor Presidente* (1946), José María Arguedas in *Los ríos profundos* (1956); cannibals if told by Columbus in his *Diario*, Vargas Llosa in *Lituma* (1993); valiants (to a limit) in Alonso de Ercilla’s *La araucana* (c. 1590); the Indian is irrational for Icaza in *Huasipungo*; naïve in Vargas Llosa *Historia de Mayta* (1984); tamed and docile in Clorinda Matto’s *Aves sin nido* (1889) and, finally, Indians bear an intrinsic pathology beyond redemption as proposed by Alcides Arguedas in *Pueblo enfermo* (1909).

The fetishist space of desire and disavowal in which Elena Poniatowska meets Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte, Jesús Mío* (1969), León Mera constructs his natives in *Cumandá* (1879) and when Moema Viezzer writes up Domitila Barrios in *Si me permiten hablar* (1978), for example, embody also these ambivalent desires. These works perform the endless search for *jouissance* (enjoyment) that the Indian fetish provides to writers and readers alike. Co-opting the Other’s plight (at a safe distance) the Self avoids doubts of authenticity and exchange, yet

⁸ Lacan’s seminar on Poe’s *The purloined letter* is reproduced in John P. Muller et al. (28-53).

it is this power position which allows the contrived knowledge about the fetish to circulate in this system of desire. The pleasure in these cases can only be achieved when Palancares, Cumandá and Barrios are recognized as the symbols of difference (they are known as such), that is, the Other, whose positionality is proposed as something to be read and enjoyed.

The fetish allows the subject to perceive the apprehensions about the Other and transfer these fears to political systems, ideologies and economic constructs which are identified with the fetish by epistemological categories. Sometimes these fears are not materialized in organic object-choices but in inorganic images such as the widely acclaimed exoticism of Rubén Darío, *el poeta de América*. Darío sings to the sensuality, exoticism, sexual allure of the Orient which he perceives as an object to be enjoyed; doing that, he is contrasting the object of his desire (the Orient) to the West while unwittingly praising Western colonial referents from which he elaborates his poem (60-63). Pablo Neruda in his poem to Macchu Picchu defends ideal Western (*criollo*) notions of behavior as he sees the Inca ruins as the evidence of a bloody, non-western (savage?) social system (56-58). On his own, César Vallejo celebrates European medieval notions of suffering and helplessness which he sees as the unavoidable and deserving fate for his fellow Peruvian Indians (104, 116). Without going further, the lionizing of Western capitalism and Western-Peruvian bourgeois values and the rejection of Indian contribution to Peru's political life is not so subtly suggested in Vargas Llosa's *Historia de Mayta* and *Lituma en los Andes*.

Doris Sommer, in her "For Love and Money," writes that literary tropes embedded in Latin American must-reads have reflected political goals which although restricted to the elites, they have become part of the popular literary tradition by the twentieth century:

[those] books, immediately seductive for elite readers,
whose private desires overlapped with public institutions,
could reinscribe for each future citizen the (natural and irresistible)
foundational desires for and of the government in power (382).

These "books" are, in effect, political and economic currency. They are a body of knowledge, an iterative referent in the region not just in academic circles and public school systems but also in political traditions. In them, to specify their teleology, there is the desire to uphold Western-

criollo ideologies and to preclude alternatives which may prevent closure to the pathology of the fetish. Second, their intent in inspiration and use is to establish permanent boundaries between them and us, between savage and civilized, male and female, normal and exotic. In both instances, the written word is the living proof of this desire as it masks social relationships clouded by the presence of the fetish and also conceals the Lacanian Real (the real Indian, the real woman), thus impeding the emerging of it.⁹ These methods of enjoying the fetish is part of the *criollo* Self while cataloguing geographies, ethnic groups, systems of thought and forms of behavior. And this enjoyment of the fetish justifies the interpellation of the native as the target of discursive violence, the site of image appropriation, the object of social reification and the focus of estrangement, ridicule and paradoxically the bearer of aesthetic value.

Pleasure and Commercial Value of the Fetish

In the examples above, we see the enjoyment of the image of the Other resembling the mechanics of Freud's comment on the "pleasure principle" which dominates man's psychology from early age and in fact dominates his life. This dominance is such that man will forever try to cling to that object which provides pleasure and thus the "avoidance" of unhappiness becomes his main goal in life (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 23). But later in history, desire and imagination become conventional knowledge. And this internal *jouissance*, to use Lacan's terms, and used by Christian Metz, who writes on film and fetishism, requires now the full attention of the fetishist and requires the rational admission of this absence (lack) on which the fetish is constructed. For Metz, the fetish is narrowly related to the features of the "good object" which repeatedly reassures the subject of the "terrifying discovery of the lack" yet it does not pose a hurdle to the subject's continuous revisiting the engendering of the fetish without a high degree of anxiety (74). The acceptance of the fetish has been rationalized and accepted. In our case, the different approaches to the Indian image are careful enterprises of repetitive emphasis, always emphasizing the dichotomy of knowledge/disavowal which informs the relationships between the Self and the Other. In this situation, the fetish is a given. In late

⁹ For Lacan the Real is subdued by the Symbolic which prevents its emersion thus the Real remain unknown possibility (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis 51-54, 59-61).

capitalism, this “lack,” now a commercial commodity as a tangible sign, is appropriated, taken out of its social milieu and enjoyed in that liminal place that the fetish praxis allows: the metonymic safe space provided by Latin American consciousness. That is, I tell *your* story in my own terms, my own discourse and my own mechanics.

This enjoyment of the object-choice however entails perceptual processes, which are not only of psychological nature. The desire and disavowal of the object-choice embedded in the fetish is not an automatic “prop” available, but this fetish itself has evolved into an object with “knowledge value” (Metz 76). Knowledge of course implies reason and contemplation of length, size, composure and meaning not only as a psychological but a commodity in the physical world as well. It is the consumption of literary images, characters and social groups that become the object of barter not just in academic circles, as I am doing now, but also in strict consumerist superstructures. The image of the Indian has become more than a commodity, it has become what Jean Baudrillard, in his comments on the value exchange of the sign, calls a determinant “code managing the exchanges of values,” serving as an ethnic referent rather than a mere image (146). The fetish, via the subject, has this power to extrapolate itself from being a pre-adolescent phenomenon to an event in the real adult world, because it is only the adult consumer, even transnational ones, who gets excited about horrors and native brutality which is, to give an example, the selling point of an English edition of Vargas Llosa’s *Lituma en los Andes*.¹⁰ The condensation of these images which at first manifested onto the Indians, now manifests itself not only in the object itself but the object converted into a marketable product. This commodity, a signifier with purchase power, finds its way in other mediums which did not exist at the early moments of the fetish formation.

In Latin America, it is not only literary works, but also photography, the harbinger of film and television, where this fetishism is recurrent. Deborah Poole, who has comprehensively studied the Peruvian Indian in photography, asserts that European photography was simply a profitmaking product and not compassionate anthropology. It did not reflect real native culture but specific preconceived views of it. As Poole emphasizes, photography, as practiced in Latin America, especially the portrait and full body shot, has been one the methods of artificially constructing race as a “material, historical, and biological fact” (15).

¹⁰ See the back cover of the English Edition of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Death in the Andes* (Trans. Edith Grossman. London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

In early twentieth century Latin America, the increasing fascination with the picture portrait is revealing.

Deborah Poole scrutinizes, for example, the process in which photographs, especially the postcards of native Peruvians, are manipulated to highlight what are considered “Indian” features: the prominence of high cheekbones and wide noses. Indians’ unkempt hair and looks of anger, also contrived, satisfy what Europeans and bourgeois Peruvian want to believe about Indians. In many cases, nonetheless, Indian subjects appear wary and, at best, unenthusiastic models. Many are forced to pose as “lice-pickers” or asked to hold tools; sometimes, Indians just gaze at the cameras with dread and misgivings (Poole 118-119). However, merely emphasizing Indian features is not enough. The Indian within the frame, as is the case of other European representations of non-European peoples, is not completed unless traditional dances and physical activities “representing” the native’s culture are photographed to complete the intended wider meaning.

Moreover, this photographic obsession is multidimensional; it extends not only to the capture of what is considered exotic and primitive but also the unavoidable techniques of procuring photographs of local natives (Levine 48-49). The continuous re-enactment of power relationships is unavoidable. According to James Faris, photographic images strengthens established systems of social authority; there is simply no representation of culture in them. It is a reassurance of the ongoing fetish. The arrangement of traditional items such as arrows, hats, ponchos within the frame of the postcard where Indians are present continuously define a system of visual consumption and social relationships; the latter not only impose recurring meaning on the native but also on the observer (18). This idea of political power to observe, survey and repeat resembles the *panopticon*, to use Foucault’s metaphor (201-202), which refers to the ever-vigilant system which labels, controls and essentializes oppressed and oppressors in determined political regimes. A quick glance of postcards of Latin America available in a tourist shop should illustrate the socio-commercial fetishism.

This pleasure extends from the Spanish chronicles to independent texts to other postmodern artifacts such as cinema and television. In fact, what occurs in cinema, to use Laura Mulvey’s words, the “scopophilic draw” (seeing pleasure) in the moving image, whether film or television, rests on the attributions of the fetish which are believed to have a physical presence in the real world (56). This pleasure is achieved in the movie theater, the living room, the library and the

classroom. In Latin American television, to illustrate, this fetishism is ubiquitous. It is very enlightening that *telenovelas* always have female native characters as cinematic props; these characters continuously play house servants even in situations when the actresses playing them are non-native. The embodiment of degeneracy attributed to native women is seen clearly by the molding and dissemination of *La India María*, in both Mexican cinema and television. *La paisana Jacinta* has been, as well, a very popular television show in Peru; its commercial success rests precisely on the idea of the less-than-human native women. This visual pleasure is also seen in the film *Like water for chocolate*, where one native woman has strange mystical powers and the other is irrational and over sexual. In *Camila* (1985), in an otherwise a tale of personal endurance, black characters are used as human props in a white drama. Blacks servants even slothfully sleep on the floors of the master mansion as a suggestion of their lazy nature.

To give another example, the Indian fetish as a cinematic consumer product is omnipresent in Francisco Lombardi's *La boca del Lobo* (1988) set in the Peruvian mountains. The enjoyment of this fetish however is not only done by multicultural consumers since this film, it would seem, is also meant to be enjoyed by Peruvians because it deals with internal political problems. In any case, in a country where natives and native descendants overwhelmingly make up the social body, is hard to admit that this Indian fetish is consumed naturally. In the film, the seeing pleasure demands that Indians are portrayed as savages, superstitious, violent; unsurprisingly, the film fails to show Indian interiority (or in-depth information about native culture) and nothing is known about them and yet the movie commercial claim is that it is about a political movement which was born in the Andes among the Indians.

The Latin American Self sees what it wants to see, but he does not want to see it. He represses seeing the real Indian and opts to see what gives him pleasure. The Indians fetish is not limited to intrinsic behaviors; it must also provide pleasure of geographic distance. The idea that Peruvian mountains is the land of the savage and the inhabitants of this topography are the precise proof of their own timeless existence. The mountains are the antithesis to the coastal (civilized) part of Peru and the basic pleasure coming from the film is that this precise division of desire and derision marks the Indian as the perennial savage unrelated to coastal Peruvians and the Peruvian state. Sometimes is not the mountains but the jungle which serves as background to

these wild ruminations as seen in the film *Río Negro* (1992) where civilized *criollos* find their doom. The film *La Tigra* (1990), as well, puts together issues of gender, ethnicity and geography to construct a bizarre tale of fetishism in the Ecuadorian jungle.

The use of Indians in different artistic mediums whether novels, postcards and films leads us to perceive symptoms of control and fixation. It seems that the signifier never really changes, but what changes are the interpretations of it according to different historical moments. Jerome Neu recalls Freud's comments on fixation and exclusive attention in that the object-choice becomes a problem when this object becomes "normal" (184). This is the time when the object-choice which in the past had a temporary usefulness to the subject, now becomes a full-fledged source of meaning. The fetish, in a way, with all its symbolic force now real and dominant in social constructs, becomes the reflection of political desire. To use Lacan's words, the symbolic owes its currency to the philosophical referent, the "name of the Father" (67), in our case, the foundational beliefs whose power is reflected in that socialized thinking that provoked the establishment to the fetish in the first place.

Perhaps it is time to redirect our gaze toward different object of desire, and find pleasure in different ways. As Freud point out, "[if] the motive force of all human activities is a striving towards the two confluent goals of utility and a yield of pleasure" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 41) perhaps it is time to find usefulness and pleasure away from the Other. Jerome Neu proposes that the alteration of fetishism can be achieved if the connection between the fetishist and the object-choice is revealed. Closure might come when the thought process with respect to the object is understood, and when the connections and the history between desire and the human object are made transparent. Most importantly, change of patterns of thinking and desire might only come "via reflective self-understanding" (198), that is, the use of the fetish image might only come to an end as the product of a personal decision.

In our case, it is perhaps time to ask why the Indian is the preferred object of desire of writers as in the case of Vargas Llosa, a writer who lives outside Latin America but keeps writing on Indians as antithetical to Euro-Peruvian values. His type of writing continually revisits the precise moment of condensation of both capitalist fetishism and obsessive desire. Laura Mulvey comments very insightfully about this moment. For her "[f]etishism, like the grain of sand in the oyster that

produces the pearl, creates social and sexual constructions of things at intractable points [...] where relations between people are liable to become relations between things" (3). Fetishism of the Other in Latin America points out to patterns of knowledge about Indians in established literary praxis which go beyond psychological fixations. They suggest that early Indian fetishism established back in the sixteenth century might have found a niche not only in psychological pleasure but in the physical world where it provides aesthetic and political pleasure.

In closing these comments it might be instructive to return to the epigraph above when Columbus "hears" about those Indian cannibals, Indian with faces of dogs he writes in his *Diario*. Columbus, who is both, an explorer and a laborer for the Spanish crown, cannot allow himself to find normal beings in the new World. Having claimed that nice Indians populated the New World would have diminished his claims of his sorrowful journey and the looming dangers in Caribbean waters. It is at this the moment that the Indian becomes the fetish of the European mind. It serves a dual purpose; it masks Columbus shortcomings (he has not seen and not obtained richness at the moment) yet provides him with an image which embodies the burden and the pretext for his goals. The Caribbean natives became the object of his desire (of seeing the danger coming from the Indians) and his automatic disavowal of them (the primitive, un-European, pagan being preventing the reaching of his goals). As it was later in colonial times, the fixation on Indians and the appropriation of the Indian in the flesh bears not only a psychological but the symbiotic nature of political, religious and economic objectives. Bartolomé De las Casas's claims that "his" Indians deserved salvation does not differ from the *encomenderos*' rights to Indian labor yet both illuminate the abnormality of possessiveness of the Indian fetish. As in literature in contemporary times, the Indian is the fetish not only of imagined danger, but also the object of the physical world.

As indicated throughout, the persistence of literary characters, tropes, images and stereotypes that make for much of literary and cultural production in the region reflect psychological-cum political desires which have reflected old strategies of power. As is the case of the Indian as a fetish in the days of discovery, there is ample evidence that Indian Otherness today comes from the fear of the Latin American socio-cultural establishment whose Indian fetish embodies the pretext for all their political failures. It is true that fictional characters have

their origins in myths, historical events and aesthetic considerations, but they are useful historical commodities, not just in the psychological but also in the institutional realm; they are repetitive within different literary traditions because they provide historical satisfaction throughout the years. Unfortunately, these are the images of racial and gendered subjects which seem to diachronically persist even when the historical referent to literary and popular culture production (the native) is still unknown.

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