

An attempt to write the story of my fantasies -By Flora Reznik

Maria

The road – if one can call a thing that can get you hopelessly lost in a forest or even divide itself aimlessly, a “road” – still carried marks of the rainy season that recently ended. Heavy truck tires sank in mud or in the deep treads of vehicles that passed before them; they crossed streams and wide rivers over the bridges called ‘mataburros,’ or donkey-killers, precariously as elephantine ballerinas. At times we put off travel until late at night.

Narratives of heroism and exploitation have built us and everything around us. Classic narrative wants a hero. We know we are too tired to be a hero, and yet, we punish ourselves every time we don't accomplish what the hero imposed on us wants us to be. We are exhausted, and the earth we dwell upon is exhausted too.

Maria (Cont'd)

We move on. Suddenly vegetation becomes abundant. We go through a true tropical forest. We arrive at an elevation and we climb up to the top. From there, a clear panorama opens itself for us. On the opposite shore of the river, we can see a clearing cut out by the expedition to avoid surprise attacks by the Indians that inhabit the vast territory that extends between the Rio das Mortes and the river Xingú.

Rio das Mortes – the river of death – is a river that has gained that dreadful name by having its waters dyed with human blood throughout its history.

Almost no one has crossed the Rio das Mortes and come out alive, I’ve been told. But now we are in the company of a fiercely armed group of men that will protect us while we work on our explorations.

Researcher

The name of my great aunt Maria appears registered on a list from the Brazilian Inspection Council on Artistic and Scientific Expeditions, a federal agency responsible for monitoring scientific excursions in the country from 1933 to 1968. Among the hundreds of names listed, only thirty-eight belong to women. According to the register, they were among the first group of white female explorers in the Amazon. "Some of them were well known scientists in their countries and others practically anonymous. Many came accompanied by husbands and worked as their assistants, while others came as coordinators of their own expeditions.

Maria was no professional explorer. She had joined the expedition as the lover of a Yugoslav explorer, in the capacity of photographer, a convenient title to fill in the forms.

The seminal science fiction novel titled *The lost world*, by Arhtur Conan Doyle, most famous for being the author of the saga of Sherlock Holmes, is

the story of an English expedition that finds dinosaurs and savages in the heartlands of the New World (Brazil in the 20th Century). Edward Malone, a young reporter for the Daily Gazette, asks his editor for a dangerous assignment to impress the woman he loves, Gladys, who wishes for a great man capable of brave deeds and actions. "There are heroisms all around us waiting to be done. - says she. It's for men to do them, and for women to reserve their love as a reward for such men." Connan Doyle was inspired by letters from his friend Percy Fawcett, an English explorer that had traveled to the South Amazon and disappeared, supposedly in the search for the lost city of Atlantis, a city in the middle of the jungle, inhabited by beautiful and wise people, white as marble. In turn, *The lost world* inspired the novel with the same title written by Michael Crichton, on which Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* was based.

These explorer's stories that persist and prevail in our culture imply a racist and rapist fantasy: they have conceived of the forests as virgin lands, they have exoticized and objectified the other. Invisibilized and abused, far overseas, and right around the corner, in the blind spots of our neighborhoods. It is the individual's actions and will that need to carry the plot further, always further.

Maria

President Getulio Vargas had, over the last few years of his term, initiated a campaign to 'push Westward', through the Roncador-Xingu expedition that we have been invited to join. As such, Vargas decided that interest should be drummed up around the workings of the expedition, in which the government had invested large sums.

We are received by Colonel Vanique, head of the expedition. He is an army man and personal chief of security of Vargas (...) He takes us to his camp and presents us to his crew. Soon we are surrounded by the sinister figures of his fellow adventurers. With their long hair, which some of them bind with multi-colored kerchiefs, and their full beards, many shirtless but all with a revolver and long knife at the waist. They could easily have been characters in a pirates novel.

Researcher

My great aunt Maria Reznik types on her stenographic machine like there's no tomorrow. These machines were used to type very fast in order to capture live testimony. An ad of the time claimed: "put yourself at the center of important events!".

But "like there's no tomorrow" is just a saying, that's not what she has in mind: It's 1944, and in fact, she can't stop thinking about tomorrow, about the future life she dreams of once she publishes her book and gets enough money to get out of there. She codes in her experience. The story flows in her head faster than what is possible for human fingers to type on a normal typewriter.

She is pregnant and needs to write this fast. At least she kept the machine from the time she worked as a secretary in a municipal court, transcribing speech in shorthand. Now she transcribes her memories.

Maria

Rio das Mortes... No white man has even been so close as we are now. One of the least well-known rivers in the world. Its existence has been disputed until a short time ago by authorities on the subject. Its name has been repeated countless times, featuring in fantasies and dreams of adventurers. And now, it quietly laid in front of us, like a dormant beast.

"Over there - I think - through the tremendous Mato Grosso, the road to civilization will cross".

How uncomfortable is the notion of science fiction? Doesn't it sound like a contradiction in terms? Why this resistance to call certain narratives simply fantasy? Is it the fear of losing touch with reality? Adolfo Bioy Casares writes in the prologue to *Antologia de Literatura Fantastica*, compiled by himself, Jorge Luis Borges and Silvina Ocampo, in relation to the laws or elements of fantastic literature about the importance of the notion of atmosphere: "The first plots were simple - for example: they would narrate the simple event of the apparition of a ghost - and authors would try to create an ambience conducive to fear. (...) A blind that bangs, the rain, a phrase that returns, or, more abstractly, memory and patience to rewrite every so many lines, those leitmotifs, create the most suffocating of atmospheres." (The translation from Spanish is mine).

In fantasy the barrier between fiction and historical fact blurs. Fact is immersed in fiction as we are immersed in an atmosphere. Fantasy is not detached from experience: in it, fact and imagination coexist. Fantasy has to do with a certain will, a want. Something that fantasy storytelling can do and historiography or journalism can't, is to speak about what's unprovable. So much of what happens leaves no recognizable trace, and yet, the event must have happened. Or it might be a process of which we have no critical distance, because we are in it. Who is going to embrace the risky task of speculating about it? Who is going to acknowledge uncertainty and be willing to create the discursive entanglements necessary for a social process to become a reality? The fantasy is to be able to talk about the understory, to give words to the unspeakable.

As long as what matters are the interior worlds of the characters, their emotions and backgrounds, the focus point will be their intentions. An individual character may be flawed, may act against their own good once or twice, but it is a sound character when we feel we know their intentions and we can anticipate potential outcomes based on those intentions. Anticipation requires the underlying assumption that time is linear and empty, that we can more or less predict what will happen in a logical way. This logic considers only what is present and known as the possible cause of a consequence. The consequence is novelty.

Ursula Le Guin writes in "On the frontier", an essay from 2009: "North Americans [and I would add, namely Western Culture] have looked at their

future as they looked at their Western lands: as an empty place (animals, Indians, aliens don't count) to be "conquered", "tamed", filled up with themselves and their doings: a meaningless blank on which to write their names. This is the same future one finds in much science fiction, but not in mine. In mine *the future is already full*; it is much older and larger than our present; and we are the aliens in it. My fantasies explore the use of power as art and its misuse as domination (...)" . [The italics are mine]. A future that is already full is a future we can't anticipate, because anything that happens will be the result of an encounter with something unknown that has the power to modify the intended outcome.

Maria

It is true that in the 16th century adventurer expeditions began their penetration through the Mato Grosso and the purpose of these incursions was, first of all, the hunting of the Indians that they subjected by brutal force, to sell them as slaves, mercilessly killing those who resisted imprisonment. This is the reason why in Brazil there are still many isolated tribes, scattered around the jungle in places difficult to access from where they defend themselves against the invasion of the whites, in whom they see nothing else than their declared enemies, whose purpose is to exterminate the indigenous race.

(...)

The second attraction for the expeditions was gold and diamonds. (...) Later came the rubber era. Both attracted fantastic waves of dark individuals to the region, gathered from all latitudes.

The spirit of adventurers has calmed down with time, and the Brazilians, together with a few foreigners like us, devoted themselves to more peaceful tasks.

Researcher

Between 1942 and 1945, more than 32,000 male migrant workers were transported to the Brazilian Amazon from the country's Northeast, in the largest state-sponsored relocation of free labor in Brazilian history. These men were responsible for supplying the United States with much needed rubber for war efforts. This was the result of an agreement between the Brazilian government, at the time under the rule of dictator Getulio Vargas, and the US. The US faced the threat of Japan gaining control of the young Southeast Asian rubber plantations. Southeast Asian plantations had controlled the market ever since a British explorer managed to smuggle rubber tree seeds to their colonies, ending the Brazilian rubber monopoly. Up until the war, they were effectively controlled by British and Dutch cartels.

The war brought a new momentum to attempts to implement rubber plantations in South America, which failed due to the presence of a fungus endemic to the Amazon which attacks rubber trees when they are planted too close to each other. No cure has ever been found for this plant disease. The alternative was to rely on the never fully dismantled patron system and collect rubber from wild trees, scattered across the landscape.

32,000 men: they were brought from the dry and poor Northeast of the country to the heart of the Amazon. Usually under false promises of prosperity. To find themselves engaged in a debt slavery system: always already in debt, forced to work to pay for the travel costs, or for the food they had to buy from the same company that would pay a salary low enough to make the debt unpayable. 20,000 of them never returned. They disappeared.

Maria, did you ever see any of them? Nobody talked about them?

In *How forests think*, Eduardo Kohn suggests that rubber trees grow scattered across the landscape because of the fungus. As if this "form of nature", as he puts it, produces an "effortless efficacy": in this case, a distribution of trees that assures that both creatures can live in harmony. What startled me when reading this text is that he states that humans may "harness" these forms of nature, if they manage to "be inside form": a beyond-human and even beyond-life collaboration.

This idea of effortless efficacy of which humans could be part of stayed with me ever since. I don't quite grasp it. He also states that it actually took a lot of effort and work to produce the chains of exploitation that took place during the rubber boom, imposing themselves over other forms. How can harnessing be different from exploitation? Could humans do anything without effort? Could we just flow downstream?

Since then, I've been fantasizing of an underground political movement inspired by Brazilian ecosocialist movement that engages in an interspecies political alliance with a mutant fungus. In this alliance, the humans take an aiding role to the fungus attacking rubber plantations. This fungus is endemic from the Amazon and has coexisted with rubber trees in the wild for millenia, as long as trees grow separate from each other, instead of being planted close to each other to maximize efficiency when harvesting.

Since the fungus exists as sexual spores that benefit from moisture and heat to spread, the way humans engage with it is by surrendering to its exciting powers, which lead to interspecies sexual encounters. Pleasure becomes a political tool to resist the advancement of gene-edited rubber plantations engineered to be resistant to the fungus.

This could still be classic narrative: the protagonist now is the fungus, and the humans are the aid, the sidekick. It is hard to not find intricate ways to make all narratives fit these molds. But there's a problem now: we can't know the interior world of the fungus. It has no goals or predictable paths of action. The way it operates, is it tries all paths possible all at once. Its search is done by multiplying itself, spreading, differentiating. The notion of individual simply does not apply to a fungus. We can't ask it: what do you want?

Through her notion of 'hydrofeminism', Astrida Neimanis asks: "are fluid, fragmentary narratives potential escape routes from the existing infrastructure that dominates our world?" With Ursula, I ask: can we tell a non-linear story without heroes? It is hard to tell a story like this: no big events, and no identifiable individual responsible for those deeds. It seems that it turns into an uneventful story. Boring.

But something still happens. In fact, a lot happens. It is not an uneventful story. But now as readers, our attention must be divided, always on many things at the same time, like existing in parallel universes. It is an attention of the potential rather than an attention set on one realistic, attainable goal. The story spills inevitably into fantasy.

We might even lose sight of the protagonist: this is the ultimate sin in classic storytelling. We were following each of her moves, we were anticipating that she would reach her goals or she would fail, but we could see that arrow pointing straight into the future, and we were disappointed, misled. She has lost herself among the crowd, she is being carried away. The protagonist became *them*. And how is even talking now?

Weightless warm air currents dense with the sexual spores of the fungus became now charged with the power of regeneration. The dense cloud moved purposely over the canopy, caressing trees as it passed, their leaves trembling, slightly excited, animated.

Filled with countless bits of matter and life descended onto the Rio das Mortes, where a void was framed by the trees on its shores. The haze hovered over the water surface letting minuscule ripples tickle its underbelly. The spores danced carried by the vapor that was the extension of the river towards the sky and the breath of the night creatures.

The spores, little bits of future fungus, could sense the pulsating vibration of long sound waves in the water coming from the nearby village. Human creatures, intoxicated and dehydrated by copious ingestion of yeasts and ferments in liquid solutions, crawled out of the village party seeking relief in the river. They disrupted the pattern of the current as they submerged. Feet disappeared into the mud, the warm brown water licked knees and groins.

In the murky haze, they moved about blindly, slithering through the interstices between them. The humans were forced to behave in the manners of the spores, blurring the shape of a multi body being thriving through pleasure. They searched, they moved in all directions simultaneously, and occasionally they reached.

The air became turbid and inescapable. Urgent grasps of sporulated air filled holes with rushes of exhilaration and

desperation alike. The sweet and sour contaminated river, dense with newly born fluids hosted pleasures familiar and unknown.

Sweat and heavy respiration met the suspended water, splashing and discharges agitated it, throbbing created friction that elevated its temperature up to the point of evaporation, and the spores trembled, thrilled and eager.

They indulged in the swirls and blows of viscous air exhaled from one direction to another and back, a mix of moisture and heat that saturated the night, the atmosphere thickened and expanded, there was no clear line dividing above from under, inside from outside. The surface of the river simply ceased to exist.

Ground is where we anchor certainty. But groundness can become muddy. Lines get blurry, definitions lose weight, things and beings and times and densities start permeating each other. They become an atmosphere. And this is what matters now.

We say "they" when we don't know the identity of the individual we are talking about. A way of doing justice towards another, which is absolutely impossible but at least it is an attempt at doing less violence, is by refraining from wanting to know all about them. By maintaining a respectful distance. Instead of aiming to portray someone's inner world by being as close as possible, a mediation device needs to be established to resist the temptation to know it all. Fantasy is from the Greek *phantasia*, lit. 'making visible', 'to show'. Yet, fantasy also obscures, it stands between the observer and the fact (if those existed). Fantasy, as long as it is not deceiving and pretending to pass as objective observation, could fulfill the role of a mediator that assures a respectful distance is maintained. In a collective set up, then, this could mean that the entanglement is like a loose mesh, with space between the knots, porous, flexible, even if some of the meaning that could compose a solid whole slips away.

Resistance works through friction. It's about surfaces, more than it is about interior worlds, the depths. Or better put, a moist atmosphere so dense that the line that divides the surface from the depth is blurred. The horizon and the coordinates it imposes are lost out of sight. We are left ungrounded at the same time we are deep in the mud. Nothing is certain, and all becomes relevant. All is full of potential, all is intertwined. The plot is not carried forward: it's all there all at once.

Researcher

In a desert of meaning in the middle of the jungle white ghosts of past explorers, like Fawcett who was in the search of the road to El Dorado, the lost city of Atlantis,- and politicians and filmmakers, real and fictional, gather. And among them, my great aunt Maria. All dressed in ragged khakis, they meet for an informal chat about their contributions to science and the progress of humanity. Their voices echo through the forest,

alongside their fables and tales about their expeditions, small talk about their estates back in the Old World, about the colonies of their cousins in South East Asia, the shortage of good quality labor in these inhospitable lands. Maria is somewhat disoriented, but she plays the part as best as she is capable of. She smiles a lot, she gets around.

An atmosphere is nothing like a static background, a decor painted with acrylics. An atmosphere in a fantasy story is as much an agent that moves the plot in all directions, pushing characters into certain directions. An atmosphere is closer to a process, an all encompassing realm where characters, spaces, non-human inhabitants and historical processes all converge to form a force, a movement. I'll call that for now an 'atmospheric process'. So how to narrate an atmospheric process when we have characters getting in the way all the time?

The model for the kind of story that I am trying to convey cannot be reliant on natural perception or the *reading* of a character's intentions as if we could look at their intentions with x-rays. A story of an atmospheric process would not be told once and for all: it would haunt like dreams in the minds of the living, like rot in the skulls of the dead, it would threaten to suffocate us. I would require a river-text. A text like a muddy river that meanders, like a fungus that moves in all directions at once, searching, sometimes reaching. Massive, wide and long, unrestricted. Picking up drivel on the way, taking them to where they are needed.

Researcher

Maria, what brought you there? What great force took you to this place?

Maria

We are on the line that divides the water systems of the Amazon and of Rio de la Plata, on which mi Buenos Aires querido lies. I feel a desire to build two paper boats, like the ones I used to make when I was a child, place them on the two streams and let them go down as they please. One would go to the north and encounter the ocean close to Belén, in the Amazon basin. In the meantime, the other one would reach the South Atlantic after passing the municipal beach in Buenos Aires. My little boats would be almost 4,700km apart.

I do not make the paper boats. I only let my thoughts float downstream, to the North and the South, covering the whole American continent in one stroke.

Words, pebbles, mycelium, minerals, seeds of stories. Never one stroke that covers a whole. There's always loss. And yet some of it would have reached a shore for me to find it. The ripples caressing the sand, some seeds spread by the wind. I would carefully place them in a bag, marveled by the discovery and bring them back home to share with my loved ones.

They would be eaten, drunk mixed with delicious juices, used to make jewels that last forever, or placed on beautiful vases to dry exposed to the sun and air. And even though I would have worked hard to construct sentences to be understood, they will sound and bounce in a certain way in a bag over my shoulders, shaken by the movement of my walk as I walk alongside others. This bag will be a rocking cradle, and its contents will learn the rhythm and the language to tell a different kind of adventures' story, a bedtime story for the brave ones that dare to let go of the certainty of daylight, and drift into the dream where a multiplicity of voices mingle.

Ripples caressing the sand. "A movement is not a project -someone once told me once-, it is a work done by a lot of people". Collective action is like love or a dream, it is about a leap of faith into the realm of fantasy, of the unknown. In trusting, loving others, each might be fantasizing about something else. The fantasy story is the soup we are all in together. In *Weather*, Jenny Offill tells a lovely story of a woman we can relate to for whom retreat is becoming impossible. She is worried about climate change, the local political atmosphere doesn't help. She is dealing with issues that feel out of reach, out of human scale. To talk about these things, I still enjoy characters in the story. Just not rapist heroes anymore. And even one good character is not enough. I need an atmosphere, which leads to fantasy, a certain want, a sexual desire, since it is a desire for pleasure, and pleasure comes from new encounters, from friction, from resistance.

Underwater plants tickled backs and groins, river creatures sang wildly, circulating the news about the newcomers. Lips nipped nipples, wings softly stroke behind the ears, twigs scratched, piranha fish bit, water algae caressed, snakes choke, hair curled and weaved slithering moebius strings.

Gleaming curved soft brown skins sunk and emerged, sunk and emerged.

Millions of tiny drops of water reflected the starlight and trembled on the humps of the heavy breathing creatures.

They found ways deeper into the tissues. They pressed, they squeezed, they pulled closer, harder, unable to wait. The spirit of the river is a shapeshifting nocturnal beast that draws castaways towards its bed.

I will finish going back to my friend Ursula. I just can't get enough of her. When I am lost, when I feel stuck, I go back and read some pages of her again. It's a sort of dance I do over the years, a regression, a repetition that I am sure that if I could trace it, would reveal itself as a rhythm. The passage I came back to this time is about rhythm. She is in turn turning back to Virginia Woolf, who I imagine is the one Ursula goes to when she needs comfort or confrontation, just like I do with her. Virginia says that rhythm "is something very profound and goes far deeper

than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it". This wave she talks about, is a movement the storyteller must attune to. To be able to feel a rhythm means to be touched, to be vulnerable, to be somehow intimately connected with, immersed in the water where the stone creates the ripples. And then, once one can move with that rhythm, there comes joy "where there are no wrong words". It is the joy of being "carried far beyond all [one's] ideas and opinions"¹, far beyond oneself. To be implicated in the movement, to have to deal with it, away and beyond oneself, not in front but in the midst of the horror that poses the impossibility of closure, of having to see and feel trace over trace over trace of damage all at once, right before the words, an instant open as a mouth about to give its first cry, and the promise that there will be no wrong words: this for me personally is the sweetest fantasy that I can only hope to experience in writing one day.

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The wave in the mind, Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*, "On Writing", pp. 280-281, Shambala, Boulder, 2004.