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William Guajardo

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Echoes of Conrad's Congo

By William Guajardo

In an effort to connect with my fading Hispanic past, I once lived under a bridge, the longest in Central America—two kilometers of cement spanning the Rio Dulce—an elongated, serpentine river that slithers down from inland Guatemala. This is the only bridge that crosses the mass of moving water because the United Fruit Company—once the largest land-holder here—suppressed competition by restricting transportation routes. The construction of the bridge brought wider access, and broader problems, to the little town of Fronteras, turning it into a multicultural crossroads.

Many Maya live as they have for hundreds of years in hamlets along streams, rivers, and lakes. Darwin's ideas about the survival of the fittest are evident as a number of cultures collide. Many Maya eke out a hardscrabble subsistence; rich drug lords and politicians—of Spanish descent—vacation in holiday homes accessed by private plane; expatriates from the U.S. and Europe—refugees from “civilization”—fill numerous marinas with foreign-flagged yachts; Mestizo merchants maintain the trade essential to economic “progress.” Most of these disparate groups clutch cautionary fears and suspicions of each other. Cruisers stay in marinas that hire armed guards. The rich do not shop in town; they send servants. Yet all of these groups flock to these ethereal rivers and forests—where there is still something primeval and majestic.

Already the land shows signs of stress: tiny fish are sold in the market before they reproduce. Day and night, hungry Maya cast nets from tippy *cayucas* steadily depleting their food supply. Inland, rainforests fall to accommodate vast panoramas of banana plantations which fill the corporate freighters of Dole and Chiquita. But it isn't just multinational companies that mar the landscape. Tourism and even Eco-tourism leaves its mark—several resorts have been hurriedly erected, and like mushrooms, shabby hostels sprout overnight. Jungle tours, Jet Ski rentals, and paragliding trips are available under the shadow of my bridge.

As I survey this from the cockpit of our sailboat—I think of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Marlow's day the center of Africa was blank space on the map, the center of the unknown; it was explored because the profitable ivory trade enticed adventurers, fortune hunters, and capitalists who went to exploit and dominate. In Conrad's era, locals had limited roles: Africans provided labor, but never leadership or advice. Similarly in the little town of Fronteras, the indigenous people, who once flourished, are slowly being displaced, but I'm getting ahead of myself. First, the arrival.

Our vessel slinks cautiously under a dim moon. At the helm, I give the wheel half my attention: the other half is occupied by a small backlit GPS screen riddled with waypoints. Livingston, Guatemala, our destination, may have been named after Dr. David Livingston, intrepid explorer of Africa's Congo, and this seems nearly as remote. Livingston is not accessible by roads, only by boat or plane. This outermost station marks the entrance to the Rio Dulce—yet the path from the sea is deceitful. The flow of water is adulterated with trees and sediment and impregnated with trash which has built an ever-shifting sandbar. There are no aids to navigation here, no buoys or nautical markers; we rely blindly on a set of GPS way-points. As our boat, *Boisterous*, twists and weaves, it feels like we're traveling blind. Reaching the last waypoint, my family and I sigh with relief. However, the moment is short-lived as we slam into something; our propeller emits a screeching noise. I kill the engine, and dad deploys our 55 pound anchor even though we're stuck tight in the malicious maws of night. Dad and I look at each other, but neither of us wants to dive into the dark water to investigate.

At 5:30 a.m. I'm startled to hear splashing by the bow. Peering from the porthole, I spy a local in a *cayuca* trying to release our 12-ton boat from his nets. We hastily climb on deck. The Maya man speaks Spanish with a sing-song-y intonation. He illegally set his nets at night, and inadvertently caught a fiberglass leviathan. He apologizes, and dives under our boat. After a few failed attempts, we loan him a snorkel, fins, and a sharp knife. When we're finally free, Dad hands him \$20, a week's wages.

After this drama, and for the first time, we notice our surroundings. In the slow-dawning light, we're entranced by hills like green camels. The town of Livingston sits sleepily on a steep slope to starboard; ahead, obscured by veils of white mist, we see the stunning entrance of the Rio Dulce cutting its way through towering cliffs on either side. The canyon is still shaded by dawn and infused with an airy mystery. The cool, damp, breeze echoes cheerful choirs of tropical birds. Magnificent sea-swallows swoop over the water on short, triangular, wings. Our morning routine seems reverent; we are awed by the discovery of a magical realm.

We dinghy ashore and deal with self-important officials who, for a fee, grant the required stamps in our passports; finally free of bureaucracy, we weigh anchor and turn toward the ancient river gorge. The 30 mile trip up-river serpentine alongside crags, jungles, streams, hot-springs, and cliff-side caves. We spy semi-hidden huts amidst the vegetation. Invisible birds shriek, and the occasional monkey howls, and any minute Tarzan himself will come swinging into view on a vine.

For hours we chug upstream, but then before being trapped by a blanket of blackness, we motor off the main channel and anchor. Up ahead, just past the town and bridge—guarding the entrance of the 30 mile long, several miles wide lake Lago Izabal—is a Spanish fortress built in 1595 to ward off British and Dutch pirates.

The next morning we awake to the exuberance of howler monkeys rustling in tree tops two-hundred yards from our ketch. After breakfast we make our way through El Golfete, and tie up at Xalaja Marina—a dilapidated little dock—that lurks under the shadow of the auspicious bridge. All of my senses are accosted walking through the town built along a busy road, dirty, loud, and perfumed with diesel fumes and animal droppings. Since this is the only bridge in the area, it sees a steady supply of trucks carrying animals and produce—the modern ivory. Walking down the sidewalk-less street I know I'm on foreign soil; colorful open-air markets beckon; men stroll by with pistols sticking out of their pockets or with machetes dangling from their waists. Coffins are displayed next to a shop that sells guns. The bank is a low building that would go unnoticed in South Texas, except for the uniformed guard brandishing a sawed-off shotgun.

In Conrad's novella, Marlow leaves London aboard a small cruising yawl and there spin his yarn about a quest for fame and fortune: like Conrad himself, Marlow yearns for uncharted places, the middle of Africa—the heart of darkness, or to quote, "...the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" (32). The white heart of the so-called black continent has an allure for European empire-builders. Yet as the story progresses the European explorers are not the heroic figures we might imagine. White merchants abuse the natives and the land. At the outer company station, they drive slaves on pointless exercises: detonating dynamite in a coast-side cliff, or transporting water in leaky buckets.

In this nightmare, Marlow sees the inhumane suffering of the dying slaves whose captors coolly wear starched white collars, sip tea, and maintain a veneer of respectability. On the outside they seem successful and clean, but all is not as it appears as Marlow steers his steamer up the crooked Congo: something has infected the men; they have become a white sepulcher (35): polished clean on the outside yet housing the rotting corpse of greedy "civilization" on the inside; mounted human heads placed around a hut with the regularity of modern-day garden lights testify of man's degeneracy. Kurtz's moral detour occurs because he pushed himself far into the heart of darkness. In service to a cannibalistic corporate world, Kurtz shed all layers of propriety and restraint apparent in his opus titled: *The Suppression of Savage Customs*—which ends with the ironic line "exterminate the brutes!"

The Rio Dulce winds into the heart of the lowlands of Guatemala. There are the station's equivalents: Livingston is the outer station; the bridge and Fronteras are the central; and the distant Lago Izabal is the inner station where untamed rainforests, howler monkeys, water-walking lizards, and majestic quetzal birds lurk in the jungle; humans are mere specks. As a result of the environment, nomadic travelers are resourceful, and friendships are often instantaneous. Like Marlow, cruisers can recline in the cockpit recounting yarns. Some sailors have circumnavigated, and some are sailing solo. Most are wholly cut off from pop-culture, politics, and TV pundits. Many live almost as minimally as the Maya.

My grandmother also had a Spartan upbringing in a tiny village. My dad tells stories of her rural rearing—how stark the contrast between her childhood and mine. Only two generations down, and you get Tex-Mex me: a Chicano English major who happens to be taking Spanish 102—and struggling to roll his “R’s.” My roots seemed so foreign until, like Marlow, I went up a river and into the center of my own heart, searching for connections as old as DNA.

I hope, however, that I’m not merely a tourist in the Rio. Part of my Hispanic father’s impetus for this voyage was to reconnect with our Latin-American heritage, to peruse our past. But I wonder if we too are like Kurtz and those who inadvertently brought out the heart of darkness. The dollars we spend often instill greed. Natives paddling dugouts become dissatisfied with their *cuyucas* when we whiz by with our outboard motors. Increasingly, cruisers are robbed and sometimes killed. And though we also wanted a back-to-nature experience, our boat’s diesel engine and our dinghy’s outboard do not help the environment.

Life on the Rio still reflects my grandmother’s era of traditional techniques instead of technology: they dug wells or caught rainwater; they grew vegetables or speared fish. On our trip, we didn’t just observe, my brothers and I also caught, cleaned, and cooked fish—thus developing an appreciation for the origins of supermarket filets. We washed clothes in a bucket. We showered with a gallon of tepid water. Our source of electricity was solar-panels and a wind-generator which resulted in living closer to nature.

Marlow came to the Congo too late to experience the original culture, when the land was shrouded in mystery, before the infestation of Company agents. In Central America, change has also come: a Maya man sits in a dugout talking on a cell phone, and some huts sprout TV antennae. Though modernity is busting down the door, in my memory I still visualize a creek where women wash clothes on a slab of stone. Chickens cackle about; a stream of smoke rises lazily from the *palapas*, and clusters of children cavort buck-naked. Back home in Houston

contemporary life seems so distantly disconcerting. During our quest to uncover our roots it sometimes seemed we were living in a pleasant time warp. My friends can't fathom my experiences. Similarly, when Marlow meets Kurtz's fiancée back in "civilized" Europe, he finds her gullibly innocent about Kurtz' character and life at the fringe. Like some of my urban acquaintances, she seems to live in a bubble.

Reminiscing about our cruise, I realize how unaware I was of life before my generation, and what life is still like on the borderlands—and beyond. Because up to this time, Fronteras, Guatemala, that crossroads of cultures, was, as Conrad wrote, "the culminating point of my experience" (32).

Work Cited

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Penguin, 1983.

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