



Dance of the Dolphin

**TRANSFORMATION AND DISENCHANTMENT
IN THE AMAZONIAN IMAGINATION**

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My interest in the Amazon in general and the Dolphin in particular began with a request from students in a Brazilian civilization course at the University of California at Berkeley for something about the region. What I thought was going to be a quick trip to the library became an extended research project and ongoing passion. Intrigued by the shelves of studies on a part of Brazil about which I knew relatively little, I decided to see the Amazon for myself. This book is one result.

My former students, Ted Whitesell and Brent Millikan, and Ted's wife, Lucilene Lira, provided me with my first contacts in Amazônia (the Brazilian Amazon) and invited me to visit them in their respective research locations during my third trip to the region. In addition, as my research assistant back at Berkeley, Lucilene transcribed a number of the stories quoted in this book. I am grateful as well to my students in subsequent undergraduate and graduate courses on images of the Amazon, and to colleagues in the NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers which I directed in 1992 for their questions and observations. Major financial backing for this project came from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of California President's Fellowships in the Humanities Program, with supplements from Berkeley's Committee on Research and its Joint Center for Latin American Studies. Good counsel and much-appreciated editorial assistance was provided by my editor, T. David Brent, copy editor Carol Saller, and their colleagues at the University of Chicago Press.

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book. First and last, I am indebted to the several hundred storytellers, including the half dozen individuals in Parintins who appear throughout this book. Although, in the interest of their privacy, their real names do not appear here, their absence in no way indicates a lack of gratitude, as I am well aware that they took me places I could not have gone alone.

INVITATION TO THE DANCE

O Boto se transforma em gente e vai dançar na festa. A minha avó dançou com Boto uma vez, aí, eu tenho toda certeza que estas coisas acontecem. Pelo menos, aconteciam. Hoje, é mais difícil.

(Dolphins turn into people and show up to dance at parties. My own grandmother once danced with a Dolphin, so I know for sure that these things happen. At least, they used to happen. Today, it is more difficult.)

—Young woman, interior of Parintins

Transformation is this study's end, and also its beginning. The book, however, is about quite different sorts of change. On the most literal level, it is an examination of widely familiar folk stories involving the metamorphosis of Amazonian freshwater dolphins into human beings. Unlike in many other traditions, where these animals are viewed as highly intelligent fellow mammals, when not symbols of selfless charity or the immortal soul, dolphins in the Amazon are often *encantados*, supernatural entities in the guise of aquatic animals who turn into men and women in order to carry off the objects of their desire to an underwater city, or *Encante*, from which few ever return.¹

And yet, if this book's immediate subject is Dolphins (I will use the capitalized form to indicate the more-than-animal being), it deals through them with other, far broader and more complex sorts of metamorphoses. Indirect, and for this reason, particularly vivid, reflections of the massive physical, social, and economic changes that the Amazon is currently undergoing, the stories—told by Portuguese-speaking individuals, often of mixed

1. There are actually two types of Amazonian freshwater dolphin. The reddish dolphin believed to be an enchanted being is the *boto vermelho* (*Inia geoffrensis*) while its smaller, dark-bodied counterpart, said to help fishermen and shipwrecks, is known as the *tucuxi* (*Sotalia fluviatilis*). Despite recent articles in the popular press that have underscored these animals' "dark side" (most notably, the males' tendency to gang up on fertile females), dolphins continue to attract overwhelmingly positive attention in the United States and Europe.

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racial heritage—mediate and transmute experience into narrative. Seen against a backdrop of many-faceted encounters between a largely traditional regional culture and a development-minded national culture, they suggest how perpetual motion (the Dolphin's refusal to assume an assigned niche within a stable, outwardly imposed order) may constitute a potential way of standing firm. In so doing, they challenge and expand conventional definitions of resistance as conscious oppositional force.²

Although they reveal little or no militant capacity for action, the stories' stubborn faith in a world beyond everyday experience suggests an intricate web of ambivalences and ambiguities between dominant and dominated within Amazônia today. One of many sorts of narratives that deal with the supernatural, the Dolphin stories stand apart in their protagonists' difficult-to-fathom behavior. Unlike forest spirits or UFOs or Roman Catholic saints, whose actions obey a logic clear to storytellers, *encantados* in general and Dolphins in particular often act for no apparent reason. The unpredictability and instability that make them especially appealing to many of the people I encountered piqued my own interest in these stories. So did storytellers' propensity to use them, and not some other sort of narrative, as a framework for extended commentary on the profound changes the Amazon is presently undergoing.

Unlike previous writers who have judged the Dolphin to be a European import, I argue for these tales' ultimately non-Western vision of the world.³ While the Dolphin stories unquestionably incorporate Iberian elements, as well as African Brazilian and numerous indigenous elements, they continue to reveal a nonanthropocentric perspective and a supremely fluid sense of self and other very different from imported images such as El Dorado, Paradise Lost, or Green Hell. This composite vision is less proof of the staying power of the past than of present-day Amazonians' ability to recuperate and continually reconfigure traditional forms for their own, dis-

2. Michael F. Brown ("Beyond Resistance") and Lila Abu-Lughod ("The Romance of Resistance"), among others, caution that the term "resistance" may cloud the intricacies and contradictions of power when used unreflectively, and I by no means suggest that all Dolphin tales reveal a single dynamic or that the storytellers necessarily have any sort of active political consciousness or engagement. In most cases, the resistance of which I am speaking is a half-conscious, though for this reason no less strong, reaction to a capitalist economic order that is making life in the countryside increasingly untenable and to an accompanying rationalistic vision of the world in which there is no place for the Dolphin's *mistério*, or enigmatic force.

3. Luís da Câmara Cascudo, one of Brazil's most influential folklore scholars, acknowledges the antiquity of the Dolphin cycle but insists that nothing "leads one to believe in its existence among the Indians of pre-colonial Brazil" (Cascudo, *Geografia dos mitos brasileiros*, p. 141).

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tinctly contemporary, ends. Now funny, now frightening, frequently strange and beautiful, the tales demand a reexamination of the Judeo-Christian premises that shape, often unconsciously, not just literary representations, but also much contemporary scientific writing and policy debate. In the end, they offer an alternate way of looking at both the Amazon and human experience.

Conceived as the conclusion to a study of representations of the Amazon by outsider observers, what was to have been a chapter grew into a book. All too cognizant of the ironies and limits inherent in my own identity as a foreigner—"What you want is impossible," Dona Marina says flatly—I have focused as much as possible on the transformation of a people and a landscape as reflected through their own symbolic forms. The resulting study of the Amazonian imagination provides a complement and counterbalance to economic, ecological, and political analyses that tend to deal with impersonal forces in either very general or extremely narrow terms. Any narrative is in some way about its author, and I have tried to acknowledge my own involvement in the experiences that lie behind this study. At the same time, I have sought to go beyond the large collection of unabashedly impressionistic travel literature that describes the author's adventures in a vast unknown ("That night we camped beside the river and ate alligator stew!").

Because I began my fieldwork with the conviction that the close to ninety-nine percent of the Brazilian Amazonian population of some thirteen million that does not define itself as indigenous deserves far more attention, I was not looking for Amazonian Indian influences.⁴ The Dolphin stories attracted me precisely because of their apparently unremarkable, extremely widespread character; their interest to many different kinds of people; and their presence in both the countryside and cities into which rural migrants continue to flood. Although, as time went on, I became increasingly interested in the stories' non-European aspects, including specific parallels in indigenous culture, this study is not intended as any sort of literary archaeology. Ultimately, I am far less concerned with what might be Amerindian—or African Brazilian or European—in these stories than

4. There is a large and growing body of scholarship on Amazonian Indian oral traditions. For studies specifically relating to narrative see Susan A. Niles, *South American Indian Narrative*. Articles concerning more recent research frequently appear in the *Latin Amerindian Literatures Journal*, published by the Latin American Indigenous Literatures Association, and the *Journal of Latin American Lore* (Center for Latin American Studies at UCLA). As Charles Wagley noted in his introduction to *The Amazon Caboclo* in 1985, there is dramatically less scholarship on mixed-ancestry or *caboclo* groups. A list of existing studies appears in Pennie L. Magee, "The Water Is Our Land," p. 4.