

# Old perils, old fears: The (still) vulnerable creole body in *Selva Misteriosa*

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## Abstract

*In 2019, the Peruvian comic strip Selva Misteriosa was republished in the format of a graphic novel, reintroducing one of Peru's most important comic referents to a contemporary audience. An icon of the early 70s, Selva Misteriosa is an adventure comic that follows Javico, an adventurer and family man making a living in the Peruvian Rainforest. The main focus of this article is tracing back the corporeal representation in the comic as a remnant of the anxieties the Spanish colonizers faced when confronted with the new environment of the Americas. This paper argues that, although the understanding of the body has changed dramatically, the underlying anxieties the Spanish conquistadors faced have remained with the Peruvian creole elite, and Selva Misteriosa shows a new expression of these anxieties in the, at the time, still unknown environment of the rainforest. In this regard, Javico's idealized body and subjectivity is contrasted with the vulnerability the creole body still shows in the character of "El Finado". As such, the ambivalent portrayal of the creole body shows the lack of resolution for the possibility of contaminating and changing the purity of the creole body and subjectivity.*

**Keywords:** graphic novel, adventure comic, creole body, *Selva Misteriosa*

## 1. Introduction

The early colonial experience in what would become Spanish America was defined by its own instability. According to Rebecca Earle (2012),

Far from being an enterprise based on an unquestioning assumption of European superiority, early modern colonialism was an anxious pursuit. This anxiety is captured most profoundly in the fear that living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of settlers. (3)

In this regard, the mutability of bodies and the danger the new American environment posed for the Spaniards arriving to the New World became a topic to be addressed to guarantee the success of what would become the Spanish colonial empire. It could be argued, and indeed I will argue, that this anxiousness remained in the

republics that sprang from the Spanish colonies. Once those nation states emerged and began to crystallize, it became a matter of state to preserve the creole nation against the perceived danger of the indigenous populations and their environments. Modern economic and cultural nationalism was founded upon this colonial regime of indigenous segregation (Franco 20). In particular, I will focus on the case of Peru, specifically how this fear of transformation or mutation into the indigenous manifested in the comic *Selva Misteriosa*.

This article examines how the creole body is shown in danger in its representation in the comic. My hypothesis is that the narrative arc called "El Finado" shows the harmful effects of the still foreign environment of the Amazonian rainforest. This effect, this transformation, is not conceptualized through the humoral theory that informed the colonizers during much of the Early Modern period, but one can see traces of how that original fear and conceptualization of body and climate still influence Creole perception.

Thus, the environment is still a source of danger to the body and the whiteness of the subject, but it can also be tamed and lessened, as seen in the case of the protagonist. While more than 400 years separate these different understandings of body and climate, the same guiding principle applies: the foreign environment is a dangerous influence on the European/Creole body, which must be protected lest its transformation lead to its demise. In this regard, the indigenous bodies in the comic are to be read in opposition to the Creole ones, as these also foreign bodies are part of this dangerous environment waiting to be tamed, an aspect highlighted by the graphic register employed in the comic.

Even more so, the context of the original comic's publication is significant for this endeavor. It not only coincides with profound transformations in Peruvian society by the so-called "Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces", but also coincides with the end of the Amazonia's integration into the Peruvian nation and the beginning of an oil boom in the region. This entailed a sharp increase in the state's presence and an economic development that would not sustain itself in the long run. In a way, *Selva Misteriosa* functions as a tale of this optimism regarding modernization and the economic possibilities of the rainforest. However, while its protagonist embodies the ideal creole subject, strong, knowledgeable, quick-witted, and capable, who can make the jungle his home, the lurking danger present in the unknowable jungle is ever-present. Even though he survives, many others die, victims of the treacherous environment. It is quite symptomatic that there is no satisfactory narrative resolution to this conflict with the environment, as it mirrors the conflictive relationship the Peruvian state and society at large still has with this geographical space and the populations that live there.

## 2. The historical basis of the creole body

One of the key aspects of the Spanish colonial experience was the confrontation with the unknown and the implications said encounter had for the European colonizer. Almost right from the beginning, the encounter with the American environment elicited as much wonder as fear.

This fear would manifest in many venues, but one of the more recurring ones was the fear that the American environment would change or damage the European body. For example, Columbus believed, as Earle points out, that "the damaging effects of an unfamiliar climate and inadequate and inappropriate foods posed a serious threat to his settlers" (2). This was rooted in a particular conception of body, its function, and its relationship with what was understood at the time as the climate. This does not mean that this relationship remained stable as the discourse about both elements evolved quite dramatically, in part because of the American experience. Rather, what becomes clear is that this early conception of the body and the climate would influence the future understanding of both, if not on a scientific level then definitely on a discursive one. Specifically, what I wish to show in this section is that one can detect the imprint of these Early Modern ideas of the body and environment far into the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, these first conceptualizations will be fundamental to understanding how the bodies of *Selva Misteriosa* are conceived and understood.

### 2.1. From the Spanish body to the Creole bodily identity

What constituted the Spanish, or European, body at the onset of the colonial period is not the same as what constituted the Creole body. Nor is the Spanish identity equal to the later Creole one. However, there is a lineage to follow, as the Creole body and identity are heavily related to this first Spanish conception of themselves in relationship to their new environment. The key aspect is the instability that rooted the bodily understanding as "the early-modern body was not a well-enclosed space designed to remain stable over generations" (Cañizares 314). The body was the site of much anxiety, particularly the anxiety of transformation, which can be characterized as the anxiety of transformation in the Other. In the Spanish case, this was a significant problem given its liminal situation after the *Reconquista*. This is crystalized in the idea of blood purity:

The differences [...] between individuals with an unblemished heritage of religious orthodoxy and those with heretical or unconverted ancestors, were articulated through a language of blood purity, or *limpieza de sangre*. From the mid fifteenth century, individual Spanish towns and institutions began drawing up statutes that made proof of ‘clean blood’ a requirement for occupying certain positions. (Earle 9)

In this sense, not having this clean blood can be understood as losing one’s standing in society or being in a precarious situation.

Of course, it is not a simple process in which residing in the Americas would immediately transform the Spanish into this non-Christian. Rather, a humoral understanding of the body built upon a complex and ancient set of medical and philosophical ideas, explained the possibility of this change:

Humoralism provided the framework that shaped Spanish understandings of how all bodies functioned [...] good health required a balance of the four humours that governed the body: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile [...] Each person was born with an individual complexion, but *a variety of external forces could alter their humoral makeup* (Earle 26, my emphasis).

As can be gleaned, altering the balance of the humours is not an immediately negative process but, during the first colonial expeditions, this understanding of the body met with the foreign bodies of American natives and their environment. Although the process by which these different bodies would be understood and categorized would still take some time to coalesce into a coherent discourse, the threat of difference and becoming the native would appear fairly early in the period.

This can be observed in other colonial contexts, such as the English, where the danger to the body manifested clearly: “Promoters of colonization had therefore to combat the apprehension that new climates would damage or destroy English bodies [...] Water was of particular concern because, according to Hippocratic theory, it could impart its region-

distinct qualities to people, with disastrous consequences if they were not adapted to these properties” (Chaplin 239). In this case, as in the Spanish one, the first identified threat was quite simply that the body would suffer because of the different characteristics of the environment. However, even in this context, the threat of being like the Indian appeared, as “colonists explained permanent adaptations as behavioral, not physical, similarities to Indians. To have asserted a physical adaptation would have made them, paradoxically, not proper inhabitants of America, but inferior” (Chaplin 244). And while this inferiority is explained in terms of the perceived fragility of the Indian body to diseases, brought from Europe but thought at the time as being of American origin, this perceived inferiority would be more poignant in the Spanish American context as the complex relationship established between the indigenous and colonial populations developed further onwards.

Related to this, how the body could change became an ever-pressing question for the settlers and their descendants, as they seemed to be most in danger to change in the new environment. For, “to be ‘creole’ in this early American world was not necessarily to be born in America, but simply to be physically and culturally acclimatized to it” (McFarlane 311). As such, the rhetoric developed to protect themselves from the potential inferiority of living in America became a key element of creole identity. In essence, they had to rhetorically guard their bodies to maintain their status, but this also distinguished them from their European counterparts. Cañizares explains this thusly:

Learned colonists articulated a form of scientific racism that claimed there were innate bodily and mental differences separating peoples from one another. They maintained that although constellations and climate could in fact render white colonists more intelligent than the Europeans, bodies remained impervious to environmental and/or cultural influences. (35)

However, as Cañizares points out, “none of the ideas created in Spanish America later

proved influential in Europe” (36), and, although constant reformulations of this argument would remain part of creole rhetoric throughout the colonial period, it would not cancel the fears and instability at the core of creole identity. This would manifest in the racial anxiety that developed in the independent republics that succeeded the colonial administration.

To understand this, we must understand how Creole identity became the basis of these republics as it took shape during the colonial period. On the one hand, before independence, “the underpinnings of Creole patriotism were, then, those of an *ancien régime* society. An aristocratic conception of society and a Hispanocentric conception of ethnic hierarchy gave the Creole elites a sense of themselves as a ruling class by reason of their noble, Spanish descent” (McFarlane 313). This becomes the point of view through which Creoles understood themselves and thus,

in all the late eighteenth-century rebellions, Creole coalitions with lower-class rebels soon foundered, as fear of Indians and other people of color outweighed Creole dislike of Spaniards and Spanish policies. Creoles involved in the rebellions saw the rights of ‘Americans’ as the rights of Creoles within the Spanish ‘nation’, and were still far from framing a cultural identity which embraced all the populations of their territories, envisaged as potentially unified nations. (McFarlane 322)

Nonetheless, as Spanish control over America crumbled and the new nation-states appeared, the Creole outlook came to dominate this process:

Post-independence political leaders invariably reflected the outlook of social elites which, while they proclaimed a shared national identity, continued to see the social order as an ethnic hierarchy. Their idea of a nation was based in the identity which the white elites had formed under colonial rule. (McFarlane 334)

In this context, the Peruvian case is significant as its elites saw themselves as the natural

descendants of the Incan Empire but wholly different from the native populations that were most of the country at the time of independence. This would mean that “the Creole nation-building project would have to invent one nation - the ‘Peruvian Nation’ - where formally two nations - the ‘Spanish’ and ‘Indian’ —had existed” (Thurner, “‘Republicans’” 295). This can be summarized in Cecilia Mendez’s *dictum* as “Incas Sí, Indios no”. In the article of the same name, Mendez shows how, during the short-lived Peru-Bolivian confederation, creoles, in particular writer Pardo de Aliaga, construed themselves as the heirs of the Inca in opposition to the contemporary Indians, exemplified by the Confederation’s leader, Santa Cruz. Through this rhetoric

the Indian is accepted, therefore, insofar as he represents a scenic milieu and distant glory. He is ‘wise’ if abstract and long-departed, like Manco Capac. He is a brutish or ‘stupid’ (*estolid*) and ‘impure’ and ‘vandal-like’ if present, like Santa Cruz. The memory of the Incas is invoked in order to spurn and segregate the Indian. (Mendez 210)

What remains fundamental in this operation is that the protection of the nation becomes a protection of Creole identity. The danger that Santa Cruz posed to the Peruvian nation the creoles conceived was not only political but ontological as their creoleness, their own whiteness, was at stake.

This helps explain what Mendez finds as the crucial paradox in Pardo’s rhetoric:

It is not just any Indian who is despised, but one who has not remained in his ‘rightful’ place. And Indian subjection is necessary for the preservation of ‘national integrity’. [...] This fact would not be so paradoxical were it not the case that Indians comprised the majority of the population of that nation whose integrity Pardo and his followers claimed to be defending. (219)

In the Creole ideology that formed the basis of the country, the Indian is undesirable but becomes a danger once they go beyond their supposed place. This danger can be understood

as the fear of contamination and change of the country, and by metonymy the Creole constitution, which would happen because the racial classification of people was not as stable as can be observed in other contexts. For example, for the Peruvians of the 1920s, race was not so clearly discernable, as the color of the skin become uncertain because of the racial mixtures of the population (Araujo 59). Although it is not a direct persistence of the earlier mutability of the body, it is possible to see how the body can still be a site of instability for the Creole elite.

Even in the present day, the fears of becoming like the Indian are part of Peruvian society. As Nugent points out, what is considered most authentically Peruvian is at the same time in the lowest of socially and publicly recognized places, but the core of meaning is given by the effort to not just stop looking like the Indian, but the others who are considered a generalized Indian (56). As much as the racism of the 19th century can explain the contours of the racial ideology that was established in modern Peruvian society, the anxieties, fears and beliefs regarding the body that were at the core of earliest colonial experiences left an imprint in the way Creoles understood themselves, the Nation and the Other. This will be one of the key aspects of my reading of *Selva Misteriosa*, because, as the understanding of the American environment shifted during the colonial period, the danger of change focused on what can be understood as the environment that belonged to the Indian.

## 2.2. The perception and appropriation of the American environment

If the body was the site of many anxieties for Europeans at the beginning of the colonial period, the environment was perceived as the source of danger. However, the first encounters with the American climate were still somewhat surprising for Europeans as they expected a far more unforgiving situation given its location in the torrid zone. Explaining the whole set of beliefs regarding the climate division of the globe would surpass considerably the scope of this article, so a sufficient summary would be that the torrid zone was the tropic belt of the globe that should be uninhabitable because of its high temperature.

Columbus found a different situation that would challenge this view as “contrary to the conventional wisdom about the torrid zone, the territories he had found in the high Atlantic were not only admirably productive and populous but also more generally temperate than even he had dared anticipate” (Wey Gomez 53). This first contradiction set the stage for the complex relationship that would develop with the American environment both as a desirable territory full of resources and a dangerous territory that could threaten Europeans. This complex relationship shaped creole understanding of their territories and what can be seen in *Selva Misteriosa*.

As seen before regarding the body,

many aspects of early modern colonial expansion proved unsettling for its European protagonists. The encounter with entirely new territories and peoples raised doubts about the reliability of existing knowledge and also posed theoretical and practical questions about the proper way for Europeans to interact with these new peoples and places. (Earle 3)

In short, the American environment was a challenge not just on a physical-survival level, but also on an intellectual level for the Europeans. They would rise to this challenge, however, and by the middle of the 16th century they would have an answer:

As conquistadors discovered large river basins, lakes, and tropical forests, a sense that America was a temperate yet humid continent came to dominate the imagination of European scholars. [...] The Torrid Zone was temperate because it lay below sea level and attracted waters from the poles, which were the highest continental masses over the globe. (Canizares Esguerra 38)

In the hierarchy of European thought, that meant America was in a disadvantageous position, as the humidity was understood as a weakening force over the whole continent.

This was further emphasized as the scientific thought of the time developed. For example,

in Buffon's writings the inferiority of American nature is conceptualized first by the inferiority of its animals (Gerbi 3) and moreover "this weakness of nature is confirmed by the fate of such domestic animals as were introduced into America by the Europeans. It is one long story of failure. In the new continent all of them dwindled, shrank, became reduced to dwarves, caricatures in miniature of their prototypes" (5). Thus, the pernicious effect of the environment and the land seemed obvious and unavoidable. Even after these ideas were discarded, the whole region of the tropics was reconstructed as a site of biological danger for human beings as "Disease remained in the European mind one of the defining characteristics of the tropical world [...] for Europeans, just living in the tropics was thought to be a physical and mental torment" (Arnold 153). This evident inferiority was one of the dangers that haunted Europeans in America and forced them to either defend themselves and their bodies or embrace the new American environment and rhetorically defend it.

This defense was a task that many Creoles took as it became imperative to maintain equality with their European peers to sustain their privileges. This would lead to what Cañizares calls a "patriotic astrology in which the heavenly influences on America were consistently cast as having soothing and beneficial effects, revealing God's providential design for Spanish America" (50). I believe this can be understood as an attempt to reappropriate the American space and is also one of the core elements that shaped Creole understanding of their place in the Spanish Empire and, later, the Republics they founded. Although this particular genre of defense would be abandoned, the spirit of it remained. For example, Hipolito Unanue, a Peruvian naturalist and intellectual of the late colonial period and early Republic, explicitly defended Peruvian nature against European denigration. On the one hand, he rhetorically deployed the name of the country as bonded with its soil and nature, thus making its environment a quality that provided many riches (Turner, "El nombre" 133). On the other hand, he partially accepted the idea that the environment affected the characteristics of a population, in reference to Montesquieu's ideas about the effect on the

nerves, but stated that this imbued those who lived in warmer, southern climates with a greater political and social imagination (134).

This, however, would not solve a greater issue that appeared from the beginning of this defense: the environment of the native population. If Peruvian nature could be defended, rescued, and even reappropriated, the uncomfortable reality for Creoles was that they were inadvertently defending the Indian population they wished to control through denigration: "To sustain the notion that the New World was a temperate Paradise implied, of necessity, arguing that the Indians were superior to Europeans" (Cañizares Esguerra 38). This was, and in some ways still is, the stumbling block of the whole Creole identity, which still manifests in *Selva Misteriosa*. It is a contradiction at the root of the whole endeavor:

The 'creole patriotism' reflected in the literature and culture of colonial elites reflected a cultural effort to resolve the dilemmas faced by whites who felt both Spanish and American: it was a quest for an identity which would reconcile the 'civilized' world of Europe with the 'barbarism' of the New World. (McFarlane 315)

The barbarism that Creoles identified with the native population and the spaces they inhabited would not cease threatening their ideological constructs and would require more rhetorical and technical developments to combat. In this regard, national geography is a site of contention and many conflicts not yet solved, of which *Selva Misteriosa* is a just a particular testimony.

### 3. The creole body in *Selva Misteriosa*

One of the main reasons it can be fruitful to work with a comic like *Selva Misteriosa*, especially regarding the topic of this article, is that, unlike other types of text, the comic form introduces a pictorial register in the narration. This allows for a subjective representation of both the body, "what we are confronted with from the very first until the very last panel is not the character *thinking* [...] but the character's *body*,

more specifically the character's *face*" (Baetens and Frey 174), and the space, "drawing a character often implies also drawing the setting in which that character will evolve" (167), wholly different from the written word. As such, the ideologies and beliefs explored in the previous section are materialized almost literally in the pages of the comic. This is not to devalue the written aspect of the comic, as it plays a crucial role in the narrative, but rather to explain how the comic form takes shape by employing both at the same time.

Another important thing to note is the publication history of *Selva Misteriosa* as well as the different formats and contexts in which it has been read. First, it appeared as a serialized comic strip in *El Comercio*, one of the most important newspapers in Lima. This original run lasted between November 1971 and October 1974, the month in which the newspaper was seized by the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces and nationalized. I will explain this context in the next sections, but for now it will suffice to say that one of the reasons the comic stands out is this production context. The Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces brought many radical changes in Peruvian society, some which are contested to this day.

After the end of its original run, the comic languished as a somewhat mythical text which was recognized at the time and long after as one of the best comics produced in Peru. In 2019, almost 50 years after its original publication, the comic strips were published in a book format, including a canonical ending to the last narrative arc that wasn't completed at the time. This new format recontextualized the strip as a graphic novel. This term can, and indeed has been, controversial as its many meanings can be retooled to fit basically any comic published as a book. While I will not contest the labelling or get into that debate, I find it important to point out how the denomination has cemented its historical significance in the history of the Peruvian comic. This is also why it becomes significant as a historical, albeit fictional, document that has been given new life and new authority in this book format.

### 3.1 The Peruvian "amazonía" of the early 70s in *Selva Misteriosa*

The space being represented in the *Selva Misteriosa* is put front and center right from the title. Not only is the reader localized geographically in the rainforest, but this location is characterized by its mystery. It could be puzzling for some that the rainforest, from now on Amazonía, can be attributed this unknowability at the beginning of the 1970s, but this is symptomatic of the complex nature of its integration into the national space and mentality. Even though the Amazonía has nominally been part of Peru since its founding as a colonial viceroyalty, it is only at the end of the 19th century that Peru consolidated its image as an Amazon country because of the importance of the rubber trade (Garay Vera 109). This does not mean that the Amazonía had no relationship with the political or state structures that have existed in the rest of the country, but it does mean that the colonial and later Republican state had little interest in the region because of the many challenges it posed. In general, the many new South American nation-states had little control over the Amazon territories, so they would lease the land for private exploitation, which would in turn cause conflicts with the native populations and thus the "colonos" would be protected by the army (Pinedo 8).

This relationship with the Amazonía would frame how it was understood by society at large and in particular by the governing elites. Overall, the geographical space proved challenging and conflictive, but profitable as the rubber boom was helping to pay international debts, which were further encouraged by the ideological drive for material progress at any cost (Pinedo 9). However, this required a violent process of integration both within and outside the country's border. For the indigenous population, this would be an absolute debacle as, just in the first ten years of the rubber exploitation, around 50% of the native population died (Rodríguez 130). This also led to the growth and development of cities like Iquitos, as it became the keystone in the exportation of the rubber. Thus, urban development coupled with economic growth secured a more stable presence of the non-native population as well as the consolidation of

a local elite (Rodríguez 135).

This last element would be key in the other significant event in the Amazonía: the war between Peru and Colombia in 1932 and 1933. While explaining this conflict falls well outside the scope of this article, the main aspect to highlight is how its origin stemmed from the wish to reintegrate the town of Leticia back into Peru after President Leguía relinquished it in the 1922 treaty with Colombia. For the men that seized the town, this was a disgraceful treaty that was worth even seceding from the country in order to reject (Camacho Arango 347-348). This justification shows how the Amazonía had become a part of the national space for the population in Iquitos and how they identified with the territory they now inhabited. This is clear as most of the invaders came from Iquitos, where the seizure was first announced and celebrated (Camacho Arango 356-357). While the conflict would result in the same territorial boundaries as before, with Leticia remaining in Colombian hands, the ideological meaning of the war points towards the consolidation of the Amazonía as part of the country, even if not yet entirely integrated.

Now the question becomes: what happened in the context of the 1970s and how does *Selva Misteriosa* represent the region? To answer

the latter question, it is evident that the comic creates a space fraught with danger and wonder, reminiscent of an inaccessible frontier land. This is of course inscribed in the way that Latin-American literature of the 20th century has employed the rainforest as a foreground that facilitates uncontrollable and risky situations (De Llano 389). Thus, in *Selva Misteriosa*, the Amazonía appears as a space of potentiality, both positive and negative, nurturing and dangerous. This can be seen in the narrative arc “Otorongo”, in which the protagonist, Javico, must capture said animal for the zoo in Lima. This action is framed in the context of ecological efforts to prevent its extinction, by emphasizing that its hunt is forbidden, but is allowed in this case for the zoo. The narrative arc is interesting in that, unlike the other ones, there is no human antagonist to defeat: it is quite literally a fight with nature itself. This leads to a more ominous depiction of the action, with the hunt beginning in the middle of the night and the trees darkening and framing both the truck and the makeshift encampment (Fig. 1). The miniscule figures at the beginning of strip 81 are overwhelmed by the vegetation through which they have to hack with a machete, after which they discover a black jaguar that will threaten the party.



Fig. 1. (Flores del Águila 42)



This particular sequence introduces the rainforest in terms of challenge and danger. Securing the otorongo is presented to the reader as a mission that requires entering the proverbial heart of darkness, with even the animal to capture depicted presenting its fangs. The adventure itself reenacts the extraction of a valuable resource, the otorongo, from the environment. Thus, the relationship with the rainforest is still framed in the colonial terms of extracting value, which is worth braving the dangers for. The Amazonía then functions in similar terms to Arnold's description of the tropics where "they became complementary economies and ecologies, designed to serve needs and desires that the temperate lands could not satisfy" (Arnold 162). In this case, Lima as the capital is fulfilling the role of the temperate lands, as it is where the temperate creoles reside.

After this first confrontation with the black jaguar, they find the otorongo hunting and fighting with a crocodile. After the former's victory, it feasts on its prey under the gaze of the rest of the animals. The narration frames this as the otorongo not caring about the witnessing of its banquet, which Javico doesn't find particularly appetizing (Fig. 2). This act of consumption appears as a contrast with the party's more humane expedition to merely capture the animal. The otorongo is presented as a danger even in its natural habitat, a mighty hunter that appears superior to the rest of the animals, in open, if perhaps not conscious, defiance of Buffon's judgment of American animals.

Nonetheless, Javico and his men triumph as they will capture the otorongo by setting a trap, which the animal evades the first time (Fig. 3). This triumph should be read in the context



Fig. 2. (Flores del Águila 49)

of the hierarchy established in the previous sequence. If the otorongo appears as king of the jungle, Javico achieves superiority over it and by extension over the jungle. This type of optimistic representation of the creole character should be read in relationship with the context of the time, at a national and local level.

swaths of the country into the state and not just under petty lords in a quasi-feudal system. An example of this is the assimilation of the Indian communities, renamed as agrarian communities and citizens in tandem with the revalorization of indigenous languages, especially Quichua (Pinedo 10).



Fig. 3. (Flores del Águila 52)

At the national level, the most significant change was the progressive reforms of the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces. In contrast to the other military dictatorships that established themselves in Latin America, this government led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado sought to radically change the country without siding with the USA or the USSR and favored a collectivist integration of the country from top to bottom. The most significant action was the “Ley de Reforma Agraria”, one of the biggest land reforms and land transfers in

the region and a watershed moment for the indigenous population. While the economic results are contested and remain controversial to this day, the return of many communal indigenous lands seized by landlords during the tail end of the 19th century meant the end of a century-long exclusion that effectively put most of the Indian Quichua-speaking communities of the southern Andes under the management of these landlords. It is hard to overstate the significance of this reform as it also came with other electoral and social reforms that formally integrated vast

This was not limited to communities in the Andes, as in 1974 the Decree Law 20653 (“Ley de comunidades nativas”) was proclaimed. This law recognized the indigenous settlements as *comunidades nativas* (native communities) and conferred, for the first time in republican history, legal ownership of the land, which meant the native community became the first law subject in the Amazonía (Pinedo 10). Although this of course happened in the period corresponding to the end of *Selva Misteriosa*’s run, it helps to illustrate how during this time the core elements of the creole state regarding the exclusion of the Indian were being eroded. These changes are neither criticized nor contested by that comic, which more often than not tries to be sympathetic to the native population, but, as we will see in the next section, this cannot mask the fears and anxieties that run through the pages.

Finally, the last significant development in this time period was the acceleration of oil exploration and drilling in the region, because of the first oil well in Trompeteros (San Román 231). This is directly referenced in the comic as Javico’s party arrives at this well after capturing the otorongo (Fig. 4). The graphical representation of this appears in stark contrast to the first images of the rainforest (Fig. 1) as the oil tower seems like an obelisk that parts the vegetation. Instead of the darkness of the hunt, this endeavor is marked by its brightness; the black gold, says Javico, tints the heart of Peruvians with pride. With this we come full circle, with the personal pride and achievement of capturing the otorongo giving way to the national pride of the discovery. The possibility of exploiting this resource to its full potential would signal the ultimate conquest of the Amazonía, its final integration into the nation

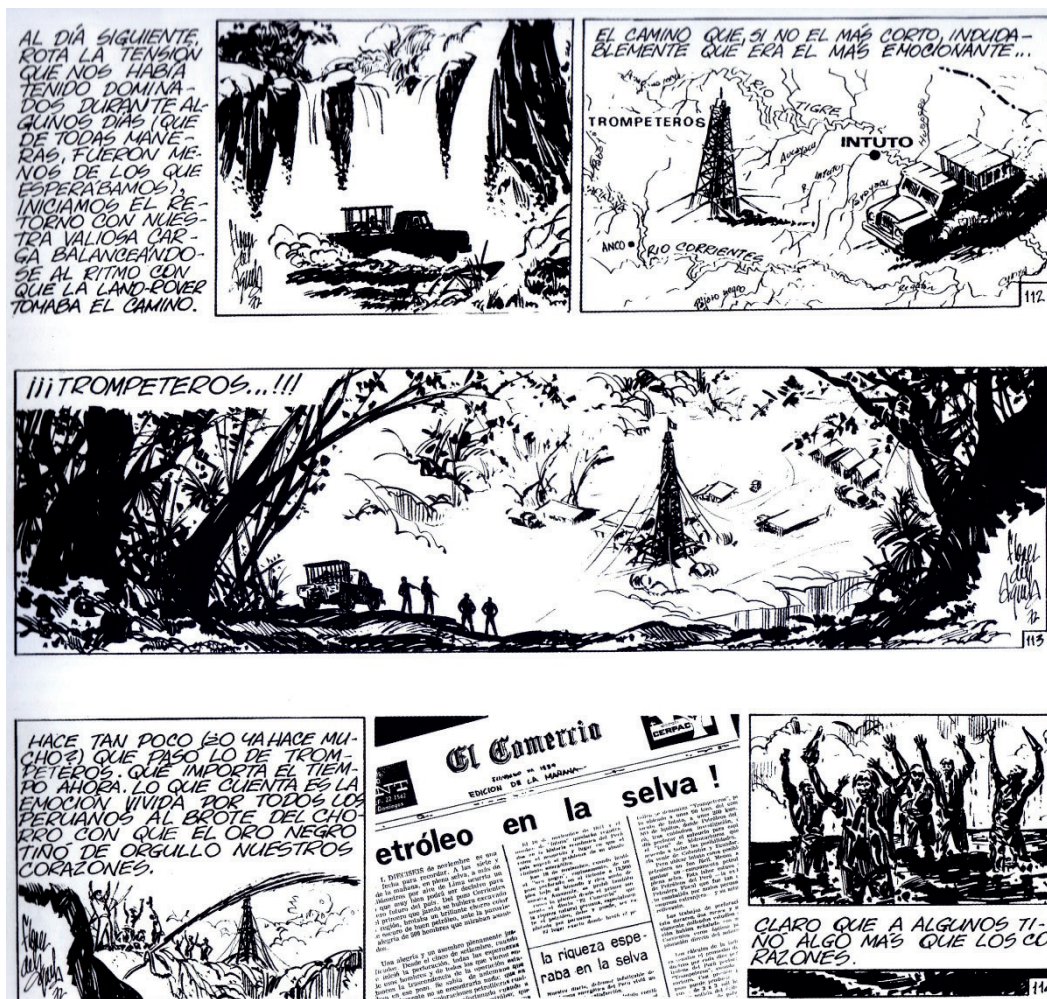


Fig. 4. (Flores del Águila 53)

and the end of the danger that it posed. If Javico can be the typical hero of an adventure comic, the paternalist white man possessed of superior intelligence and morals to the other cultures he finds (Merino 39-40), the oil well of Trompeteros merely confirms the superiority of his people, capable of braving the rainforest to exploit its resources. However, this optimism must be reined in, as the creole body and constitution still haven't completely dominated this environment, and one can risk a destiny such as "el Finado", where one is lost to the transforming powers of the Amazonía.

### 3.2. The dangerous transformation of the creole body

The transformation of "el Finado" is a grim warning of what can happen to the creole body in a foreign environment surrounded by dangers. It is also the first narrative arc of *Selva Misteriosa*, preceding the one previously analyzed, which I find telling as it is not a story about Javico, but a story he retells. Here I will reorganize the narration, which is told out of order in the comic, as it simplifies the task of explaining this character's situation and ultimate fate.

instruct them under the Peruvian flag. However, this idyllic life will be cut short by Buchisapa, who functions as Manuel's antagonist and target of revenge. He and his underlings murder Manuel and his wife, leaving them for dead. What brings him to life once again is the intervention of an unnamed and unknown Indian character (Fig. 7), after which his only objective is to chase and murder Buchisapa.

In a similar way to Javico, Manuel embodies a particular ideal man. He seems aligned with the new individual conceived during the 1920s among the creole elites, an idea influenced by positivist and evolutionist ideals, who would be a strong, healthy, moderate, active, and hard-working individual (Araujo 69). To this we can add the patriotic nature of his job as an educator, which, while highly valued in society, has never been seen as a particularly prestigious station. Thus, he is not really a member of the elite, but by bringing progress, knowledge, and modernity, he acts as a representative of said elite and the nation as a whole, especially given that teachers were often one of the few ways the state was present in these faraway communities.

Of course, Buchisapa is Manuel's murderer and his actions are punished at the end, as

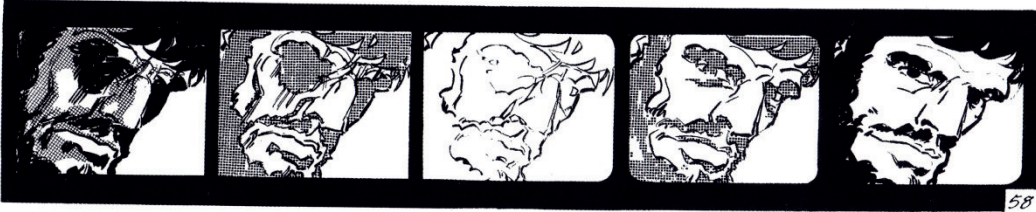


Fig. 5. (Flores del Águila 22)

El Finado is a supernatural being, some kind of undead man searching for revenge (Fig. 5), that Javico was searching for with a group of men for some unclear reason. Originally, he was a teacher named Marcelo who worked in an indigenous community (Fig. 6), married and seemingly content with his work. The graphic depiction suggests the patriotic nature of his job as he teaches the young kids about the geography of the Peruvian Amazonía and later seems to

Manuel gets his revenge. However, Buchisapa's actions are framed as only being possible in this frontier space and are thus part of the danger inherent in this environment. Moreover, Manuel's transformation is the work of an indigenous character and, while one can interpret this as an act of mercy or assistance, his new visage as a grim vengeful spirit is not framed as positive, merely a means to murder Buchisapa in return. Finally, the complete mimesis between the

¿ES ASÍ LA MUERTE?... ESA TERRIBLE SENSACIÓN LA TIENE UNA VEZ MÁS "EL FINADO"... AHORA "RECORRE" SUS PASOS Y NUEVAMENTE VIVE SU PASADO...



EL "RACCONTO" DE "EL FINADO"... CALEIDOSCÓPICAMENTE SU PENSAMIENTO VUELA EN EL TIEMPO Y SE SUMERGE EN EL PASADO... "EL PASADO DE "EL FINADO" Y ESE PASADO LLEGA AHORA A NOSOTROS..."



NOS PERDEMOS EN EL TIEMPO... "EL FINADO" NO ES "EL FINADO" AHORA ES MARCELO, EL MAESTRO DE UNA MODESTA ESCUELITA ENCLAVADA EN MEDIO DE NUESTRA AMAZONIA.



ELLA ES FERNANDA, SU ESPOSA.

¿Y ÉSTE?... ME PARECE CONOCIDO... PERO... ¡CLARO!... ES EL III "BUCHISAPA"!!!



¿QUÉ HACE AQUÍ?

Fig. 6 (Flores del Águila 34)



Fig. 7 (Flores del Águila 38)



#### 4. Conclusion

Although the concepts related to the understanding of the body and the environment have been discarded for more scientific explanations, the anxieties informed by them have merely mutated and still manifest themselves in the Creole imagination of the 1970s in *Selva Misteriosa*. As Nicolás Wey Gomez eloquently remarks,

the geopolitical paradigm that Columbus and his contemporaries inherited from classical antiquity remains alive and well in the West. To the extent that five hundred years after Columbus's death we continue to wrestle with the divide between the "developed" nations of the north and the "developing" nations of the South, we too are heirs to an intellectual tradition whose ancient notions of place paved the way for recent colonialism. (57)

The ways in which this paradigm remains are not that dissimilar from the way the dangers explained by the humoral understanding of the body remained in the Peruvian Creole. Even more so, the graphic depiction of this body in danger is not merely an echo of colonial anxieties but rather an evolution and reinterpretation of said anxieties. The comic seeks to stabilize an idealized creole subject and body by focusing on a character such as Javico, as he can overcome the challenges of this environment. However, the ever-present possibility of failure, as the narrative arc of "El Finado" shows, reminds the reader of the vulnerability the creole still faces. While the comic tries to bridge this ambivalence by later showing the good relationship Javico has with indigenous communities and his adaptability to the environment, the danger persists and remains unsolved. This creole anxiety remains evolving but unchanged, both in 1979 and currently.

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