Ode to the banana tree

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Many 19th-century Latin American presidents were writers, using literature to legitimise their economic beliefs. More recent literature still addresses economic issues, but the stories no longer have happy endings.

Colombian presidents were almost always poets until the early 20th century. Bogotá was the “Athens of South America” with a heavy concentration of famous writers such as Miguel Antonio Caro,who was president and vice-president from 1892 to 1894. The 19th-century Spanish American elite was rich in men of letters — *letrados* — who played a key role in early projects of nation-building. They could write constitutions or novels, diplomatic accords or Latin primers; the *letrados* comfortably traversed politics and art, today considered separate spheres.

Between the mid-19th century and 1930, Latin American countries were gradually introduced to the global market, and writers invented storylines and characters to present this in a favourable light — an artistic legitimisation of market mechanisms.

The Colombian general Rafael Uribe Uribe is now best known outside of Colombia as the inspiration for Colonel Aureliano Buendía in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).But he was himself a *letrado* — also a lawyer, coffee planter and president (1906-07). In 1908 he delivered a 100-page speech on banana cultivation that in form and content illustrated a major current of literary production.

Ode to agriculture

Early in the speech, Uribe quoted the Venezuelan statesman Andrés Bello’s neoclassical *Ode to Agriculture in the Torrid Zone,* written in 1826 to promote Latin American crops on European markets: “And for thee the banana tree / Faints under its sweet burden; / The banana, / richest gift that Providence could bestow/ On happy Ecuador.” Uribe Uribe also drew on the Bible, Sanskrit literature, and Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Romantic novel *Paul et Virginie,* to create a vision of a promising future revolving around the banana — called the “king of vegetables”, even a mythical fruit. There was little mention of the larger economic system, and even less of the actual workerswho picked the fruit.

In this approach, Uribe joined a long tradition of writers who combined aesthetics with political economy to conjure beauty from Latin America’s role in the global division of labour. His discourse was based on a credo of late 19th-century liberalism: the doctrine of competitive advantage, associated with the British political economist David Ricardo, proposed that each country should concentrate on whatever it was naturally best placed to do. For Latin America, that meant producing commodities for the European market — including bananas.

Imagination did not bridge the gap

Yet imagination was not enough to bridge the gap between promises and reality. As the critics of liberalism had predicted, fantasies fed by the growth of exports ran up against growing inequality between big landowners and agricultural workers, and instability caused by the dependence of peripheral, export-driven economies on European, and later North American economies (1).

From the end of the 19th century, most fiction turned from describing rosy futures to providing a literary response to financial crises. Journalist Julián Martel (1867-1896) embodied the professionalisation of writing at the end of the 19th century. His novel *La Bolsa* (The Stock Exchange),

a classic of Argentinian literature, was first published in Buenos Aires in 1891. In 1890 the London-based bank Barings had faced a crisis (caused by its excessive exposure to risk in Buenos Aires) that threatened to bring down the British financial system. Barings secured the support of a group of private investors, but Argentina's GDP fell by 10% between 1890 and 1891. Fortunes melted away, exposing what Martel called "fictitious prosperity". The sombre mood was captured in the novel's ending, in which a ruined speculator is eaten alive by a monster that declares: "I am the Stock Exchange."

Yet Martel could not imagine a future outside this financial order, so instead of British capitalism, he blamed familiar scapegoats for Argentina's failure — Jewish bankers and female spendthrifts. He wanted to believe that if bad subjects were reformed (or removed), then there would be hope for Argentina's liberal economic model.

A bunch of fallen fruit

Martel's contemporary, the Brazilian journalist Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, commented ironically on the Brazilian financial crisis of 1890-91, mocking the blind faith of speculators and arguing that every financial phenomenon has three correct explanations and a false one, and that it is better to believe them all. Mockery veered towards cynicism in his novel *Esaú e Jacob* (1904), in which he described a Brazilian El Dorado where the streets were paved not with gold as in *Candide,* but with stocks and bonds that reproduced as fast as slaves once produced children, and paid infinite dividends.

The crises of the early 20th century caused literature to produce images of peripheral modernisation not as a dream, but as a nightmare. José Eustacio Rivera's *La Vorágine* (The Vortex, 1924) is a novel set at the height of the Amazonian rubber boom. Rivera, who had trained as lawyer, visited the rubber region to resolve a border dispute between Colombia and Venezuela. Though the boom had long ended, with world production transferred to plantations in Malaysia, there were memories of it and — more than the stories about the fabulous wealth of traders who lit cigars with banknotes and sent their laundry to Europe — Rivera was struck by the harsh living conditions of the indigenous slaves who harvested the rubber. As if to denounce his predecessors' blindness to exploitation, Rivera made his main character a poet who entered the jungle singing odes to an idealised Nature. There he met the worker victims of the economic ambition of the planters. And like them, he died, devoured by the jungle.

The global financial crisis of 1929 weakened the consensus among the elites, and the Depression encouraged an inward looking, protectionist model of growth through industrialisation (the import substitution model). Increasing literacy, the growth of the middle class, and the spread of communist and socialist ideas, allowed new voices to emerge, and writers no longer came exclusively from the upper classes. They continued to tell the Latin American modernisation story, but the model of the liberal *letrado* was replaced by the committed writer, denouncing the exploitation of Latin America by domestic and foreign elites. In the poem by Chilean Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda, *La United Fruit Co.* (1950), the banana becomes a metaphor for the body of a dead worker, "a thing without a name / a bunch of fallen fruit / thrown on the rubbish heap".

By the 1960s, a new literary current, the Latin American boom — a reference to the 19th-century export paradigm — was embodied by Gabriel García Márquez. He was born in Ciénaga, Colombia, near United Fruit's banana plantations, and was influenced by the social damage caused by the rise of this economic model. While his works are appreciated by North Americans and Europeans for their exoticism, they are mostly a critical reflection on the legacies of dependency. His masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an epic about a banana enclave, from its founding to its erasure from the earth after the banana company moves on. His *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975)imagines a Caribbean nation with nothing left to sell but the sea.

Latin American countries re-opened their markets to foreign capital with the turn to neoliberalism in the late 20th century, and returned to an extractive, export-driven model rooted in the 19th century. This seeks legitimacy in treatises on economics, and Bello's lyrical appreciation of the banana has given way to *El Ladrillo* (The Brick), the document drafted by Chile's "Chicago boys" that formed the basis of the free trade policies adopted by General Augusto Pinochet's government. The title encapsulates the document's subtlety.

In the Chilean novelist Diamela Eltit's *Impuesto a la Carne* (Tax on Meat, 2010), all a mother and daughter have left to sell under the hyper-commodified system are their internal organs. In the novel *2666,* another Chilean writer, Roberto Bolaño, presents a horrific vision of the post-Nafta *maquila* manufacturing zones of northern Mexico. In Argentinian novelist Pedro Aimral's *El Año del Desierto* (The Year of the Desert, 2005), written after the Argentinian crisis of 2001, the breakdown of the financial sectors leads to a dystopia in which the country moves backward in time until all trace of civilisation has been swallowed up by wilderness. The economic powers-that-be do not depend on literature for their legitimisation. The press, which they largely control, sees to that.