



Sturgeon Paper
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Pez/Pescado

I traveled to Cuba in March 2018 to learn about human-fish relationships in the social-ist context. After searching through much of Havana, I learned that fish are not as common as one would think for an island nation. Cuba has a small industrial fishing operation that is state run in addition to a tourist driven sport fishing industry that many people travel to the island to enjoy. Pet fish are incredibly rare, although I did see a man walking down the street carrying a plastic bag filled with water and fish. The bag held three small tetra and a snail, much like the fish in the aquarium at my home in Portland. I ate an octopus. I also talked to two fishermen on a car ride from Cienfuegos back to Havana. They explained some aspects of fish and fishing in Cuba, from the ever expanding natural zones that exclude locals for the sake of tourists, to the differences between captaining a state owned boat and having your own. I also met a fish biologist, who was an enthusiastic supporter of both fish and the fishing industry.

One day, while in Cienfuegos, I saw a dead fish on the beach. The fish was about shoe sized, vibrant blue, with orange lips. It was rolling in the waves in a little cove, still perfect, as if it had just died moments before. I was walking with my friend Hector, his sister and his father when we saw it. We paused and looked at the fish for a long time. I tried pushing it back into the water, but the waves just rolled it back on the sand. We decided it was certainly dead. The sun was beating down and I could feel my forehead burning. We looked at it a while longer, then moved on. I do not have a photo of the fish, but I assume it is still there, still dead.

In Spanish there are two words for fish — pez and pescado. The former refers to a living fish and the latter refers to a dead fish, such as one you might find on a dinner plate. The word pescado is the past-tense of pescar (to fish), the -ado ending is the past participle for verbs ending in -ar. Pez are the living, swimming fish of oceans, lakes, and streams. Pescado are fish that have been caught by humans, hooked and reeled in or pulled up by nets. In English this might literally translate to fished, as in, “we’re having fished for dinner tonight...” You have fish in your fish tank, and fished in the frying pan. But in English, once a fish has been hooked and landed, it does not turn into a fished. It remains a fish.

It’s a beautiful nuance of the Spanish language. Fish transform linguistically as they die. They say that the human body loses 21 grams when it dies. When a fish is plucked from the ocean and killed, it loses not only some undetermined weight, but it’s very matter changes meaning. The fish becomes a pescado.

It gets more complicated than that. As fish are dying, where do they cross from pez to pescado? Is it when they are pulled out of the water? Is it their last heartbeat? Their final breath of air? Aren’t fish always dying a little bit, just like humans? A few days after the encounter on the beach, I was describing the fish I saw to a local fisherman as a pescado; then corrected myself to a pez muerto. Then, confused, changed back to pescado, finally asking the fisherman which word to use. He shrugged. Linguistically it had already passed over. No matter what it was, it was no longer a pez.

The fish on the beach did not appear to have been hooked and dragged to shore. It was dead of its own accord, so I must assume that this fish had fished itself. This fish was not some victim, no, it was very actively and independently dead. Its deadness was not a condition of our language as humans. If we hadn’t been there to see it, that fish might never have been subjected to any of our words or meaning. Until that moment, it existed only in its own world, in its own ontologies that humans will never know.

Since I never knew that fish on the beach personally, I can only know it as a pescado, or perhaps a pez muerto. One cannot, except in memory, go from pescado back to being a pez, and I have no memory of that fish alive. I never learned its name, its family, its history. How could it? As it happens, I know several fish by name. Herman the Sturgeon, for instance, is a 75-year-old white sturgeon living in a tank near the Columbia River. Unlike the dead fish on the beach, all I know of Herman is the history of a living fish. When Herman dies, I might choose to remember him as a living fish that is now dead, or a dead fish that once was alive. I can politicize Herman’s pez-ness, denying that a fish with a life and personality and identity can be turned into pescado. I would say that by naming and knowing a thing, one can remember it better and more fully. I wish I new if the fish on the beach had a name, so that I might remember it as a pez.



– Dead fish documented by Sturgeon Paper’s Cuban correspondent Adán.



– Red tide is a common name for a worldwide phenomenon known as an algal bloom (large concentrations of aquatic microorganisms—protozoans or unicellular algae) when it is caused by species of dinoflagellates and other organisms. It is currently wreaking havoc on the Florida coast, due to the deregulation of fertilizer factories. It really messed up a lot of peoples vacations.

– Photo sent to me on the occasion of the Sturgeon Moon.

