La novela de la caña:

Insular or International Phenomenon?

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Originally presented in a panel exploring "Modernity, Folklore, and Transcultural Possibilities" at the 2007 American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting in Puebla, Mexico, this expanded paper focuses on the tension between conceptions of the local and the transcultural in the production and reception of a group of twentieth-century regionalist works alternately referred to in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean as the *criollista* novel (the creolist novel) or *la novela de la tierra* (the novel of the earth, land, or homeland, depending on how it is translated).[1] Examining literary works seldom studied beyond their own national or geographical borders, let alone as part of a transnational literary phenomenon, is complicated by questions of geography, language, and genre, all of which serve to divide rather than bring together works sharing strikingly similar aesthetic and ideological concerns: concerns that their authors primarily address by highlighting the uniqueness of the culture—with an emphasis on folklore and regional dialect—that arose from the sugarcane plantation system in the New World. It is my contention that the very insularity defining the works discussed herein, both in terms of a limited readership and the narrow geographical focus of the novels, constitutes a transnational feature of literary production in the cultural area Caribbean theorists such as the Rex Nettleford (Jamaica) and Édouard Glissant (Martinique) call Plantation America (Nettleford 149; Glissant 1981, 229, n. 1).

Although viewed as a minor genre and generally overlooked in contemporary criticism on Latin American literature, the *novela de la tierra* dominated the literary scene in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean with an "explosive intensity" during the first thirty years of the twentieth century (Alonso 196). The stigma of the minor literature adheres to these works in three different ways. First of all, although ubiquitous during this period, the *novela de la tierra* (or regionalist novel, if we want

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to attach a more universal label to it) has received little scholarly attention in recent years, having been totally eclipsed by the literary phenomenon we call modernism emerging in the Americas and the Caribbean shortly thereafter. The second reason the *criollista* novel is perceived as belonging to a lesser genre is it does not represent a departure from traditional so-called realistic modes of representation aesthetically or in terms of narrative structure. Considering these works outdated and lacking in innovation, literary historians and critics tend to dismiss *criollista* novels, merely citing them as examples of local color fiction. Finally, the restricted setting of these rural novels, particularly the ones I discuss here, taking place within the confines of the patriarchal sugarcane plantation, contribute to the image of these works as little more than nostalgic agrarian idylls. The regionalist, nationalist, and pro-independence social, cultural, and political agendas underlying individual texts emphasize the local and detract attention from cross-cultural commonalities.

Generalized notions of what constitutes local color fiction further obscure the transnational and transcultural links between works functioning as literary responses to similar historical experiences across the greater Caribbean and Atlantic coast of the Americas. In an attempt to circumvent national, linguistic, and aesthetic boundaries, I prefer to group the novels in question under the subgenre of *novelas de la caña* ([sugar]cane novels), a literary category used in the Dominican Republic to refer to a group of neo-realist novels published between 1930 and 1970, documenting life on the island's sugarcane plantations. The main exponents of the Dominican *novela de la caña* include Francisco Eugenio Moscoso Puello (*Cañas y bueyes* [Cane and Oxen], 1936), Ramón Marrero-Aristy (*Over*, 1939), and Manuel Antonio Amiama (*El Tierrateniente* [The Landowner], written in the 1960s and published in 1970).[2] When applied to the plantation novels of northeastern Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Martinique, the narrower *novela de la caña* designation enables us to move beyond the "local" in the local color, in order to explore the overarching elements that unite these insular and inward-gazing novels.

Mapping the *novela de la caña*

I propose geography both in its material and metaphorical sense as a means of connecting the Brazilian, Cuban, Dominican, Martinican, and Puerto Rican novelas de la caña, on the basis of their *real* physical and cultural geography (the landscape of the sugar plantation system and the Creole societies that emerged from it) and the aesthetic and ideological dimension of their *imagined* textual sugarcane worlds. Previous studies at the crossroads of literary criticism and geography have tended to separate representational spaces and material spaces, as Andrew Thacker discusses in "The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography" (2005). Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* (1998) is a noteworthy example. Moretti, who coined the term literary geography, defines it as comprising two distinct forms of inquiry:

"the study of *space in literature*" (fictional space) or the study of "*literature in space*" (historical space), which "may occasionally (and interestingly) overlap" (Moretti 3, original emphasis). Whereas Moretti insists upon separating the two, I advocate an interconnected approach to analyzing historical and fictional space, the "interesting overlap" to which Moretti refers.[3]

To understand how social spaces (the materialist or historicist domain) and literary spaces (the metaphorical domain) mutually act upon each other, a dialectical approach is necessary (Thacker 62).[4] Alison Sharrock proposes intratextuality, "with its emphasis on the interaction of detail and big picture, and the renegotiation of apparently natural segmentation" as a means of "contribut[ing] to the reading of the text of the world and the world as a text" (Sharrock 4). Although the study of both literary geography (within literary criticism) and cultural geography (on the disciplinary median between anthropology and geography) share theoretical terrain, particularly in terms of examining the cultural dynamics of transnationalism, cultural geographers consistently reproach literary critics for being too abstract, for not grounding their research empirically, and for not making use of contemporary geographical knowledge and methodologies to frame their work (Mitchell 84). A truly critical literary geography therefore mediates between geography—specifically the field of cultural geography—and literary criticism. In the pages that follow I will suggest a methodological approach capable of bridging the fields of literature, geography, and cultural studies, enabling us to bring Raphaël Confiant's recent *romans de la canne* into the orbit of the *novela de la caña* phenomenon in Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, anticipating the Martinican author's sugarcane trilogy by sixty years.[5]

Benedict Anderson has proposed that what connects events in a novel or a newspaper to real life episodes is the "imagined linkage" of the two based on temporal coincidence—the perception of the forward march of "homogenous empty time"—and the relationship between the text as a type of commodity and world markets (Anderson 33). If, in accordance with Anderson's formulation, a novel's ability to represent real life is contingent on its own circulation as a product along with the reader's awareness and sense of belonging to a community of readers—an imagined community—, then literary works that document and enact the production of sugar—one of the most important agricultural commodities to have been traded globally since the sixteenth century—appear doubly inscribed in a relationship with capitalist forces. Through a combined emphasis on literary and historical approaches to the study of space in the sugarcane novels of the New World, it is possible to rethink traditional categories of geography, culture, and genre underlying the concept of national literatures. As the cultural geographer Nigel Thrift asserts, "[t]he literary meaning of the experience of place and the literary experience of that meaning of place are both part of an active process of cultural creation and destruction. They do not start or stop with an author…They are all moments in a cumulatively historical spiral of signification" (Thrift 1981, 12). A reconfiguration or remapping along geographical,

temporal, and aesthetic borders allows for alternate patterns and linkages to emerge, or in Édouard Glissant's words, for new and dynamic forms of "relation"— literary, cultural, and historical—to arise.

The Stories Behind the Maps

In the introduction to *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (2003), the editors of the collection invoke the spirit of what they call a "geographical imagination" to inspire new discoveries and interpretations in the field (8). Above all, they explain, a geographical imagination involves the ability to simultaneously conceive "geography as a story and a story as geography" (8). Before approaching the sugarcane novel as geography or literary *topos* —the Greek etymology refers literally to a "place"— a brief overview of previous geographic and literary configurations (the material borders as they have been defined) of comparative Latin American and Caribbean literature is in order.

The geographical and disciplinary divisiveness of recent studies highlights the complexity of the ever-growing field of transnational literary and cultural analysis, particularly that which bestrides the Americas and the Caribbean. This is exemplified by the varying academic designations applied concomitantly to an area encompassing the Caribbean and continental North, South, and Central America, an area whose epistemological and physical boundaries (as they are conceived by scholars) are essentially the same: the Atlantic World, the New World, the Americas, the Black Atlantic, Plantation America, Postplantation America, Postslavery America, etc. These denominations illustrate the interdisciplinary direction of contemporary literary and cultural studies as they seek to break out of rigid geographic, linguistic (colonial), and epistemological confines.

Communication between different academic disciplines has made it possible to discover new relationships by redefining and expanding the cultural map of the New World. Although by definition these new paradigms are both more malleable and self-reflexive than the geographical constructions they seek to *replace* or even *displace*, in their systematizing thrust they too inevitably impose a certain vision or organizing principle on the territories they mark. While geography cannot and should not be dismissed in these theoretical debates, acknowledging that geographical and epistemological categories express a particular worldview in themselves, is an important first step for those engaging in transnational literary studies.[6]

Plantation and Narration

Colonialism, slavery, a capitalist economy based on the sugar monoculture, intense assimilationism, miscegenation and cultural blending, political dictatorships or military occupations, economic dependence, endangered cultures and oral languages,

these experiences transcend linguistic and territorial boundaries in the Plantation America of the sugarcane novel. Whether independent as in the case of Brazil, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, or still under neo-colonial control, as in the American "Free Associated State" of Puerto Rico and the French *région monodépartementale* (overseas department) of Martinique, each of these islands and nations has expressed its hybrid, multivalent national identity discursively at one point or another through a literary enactment of the sugarcane plantation experience.

In places where the reification of miscegenation was or continues to be part of official cultural politics, as in Brazil and Martinique, respectively, the sugarcane plantation, despite the horrors of slavery, is seen as the cradle of a truly unique New World culture blending elements of Amerindian, African, and European cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. José Lins do Rego's *cíclo da cana de açúcar* (sugarcane cycle) in Brazil's northeast (five novels published between 1932-1943), Raphaël Confiant's *trilogie de la canne à sucre* (sugarcane trilogy) in Martinique (three novels published between 1994 and 2002), plus a later novel, *La panse du chacal* (2004), belong broadly to this tradition. In turns nostalgic for and critical of plantation life, Lins do Rego's and Confiant's novels decry the erosion of local culture, traditions, and story-telling native to plantation societies and warn of a time when the demise of the sugar industry will signal not only the end of economic self-sufficiency for the region and island, respectively but also the loss of identity.

Conversely, the plantation can also serve as a space of contestation from which writers criticize the presence of colonial occupiers, international investors, and foreign migrant workers. These elements are typical of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican *novelas de la caña* from the 1930s. American-owned sugar companies and their *centrales* (huge sugar refineries) are the cause of the exploitation of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican workers and pose an imminent threat to the local way of life in *Marcos Antilla*: *Relatos de cañaveral* by Luis Felipe Rodríguez (Cuba), *Cañas y bueyes* by Francisco Moscoso Puello and Over by Ramón Marrero Aristy (Dominican Republic), and *La llamarada* by Enrique Laguerre (Puerto Rico). Resentment towards American sugar companies in *Cañas y bueyes, Over,* and *La llamarada* parallels anti-American sentiment in the Dominican Republic, which experienced a U.S. military occupation from 1916 to 1924, and in Puerto Rico, which has been under some form of American control since troops occupied the island in 1898. Haitian migrant workers working alongside Dominican *peones* (farmhands) in the cane fields endanger and corrupt local culture in the Dominican novels, adding another layer of xenophobia and heightened racism to the plot.

Through a series of *mises en abyme* the sugar plantation stands in synecdochically for the region, and by extension, for the nation, and as such it embodies either an idealized or dystopian vision of the nation. The plantation functions as the self-contained representation of the nation, a stable signifier or microcosm that simultaneously bridges the "historical" past and the narrative present.[7] As Benedict

Anderson explains, "[i]f nations states are widely considered to be 'new' and 'historical', the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past…and glide into a limitless future" (19).

An intertextual reading of Confiant's *romans de la canne* and the twentieth-century sugarcane novels of Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, provides a useful framework for understanding the literary and cultural history of Plantation America. It should be noted that although Confiant's novels were published some sixty years after those of Lins do Rego, Moscoso Puello, Marrero Aristy, Rodríguez, and Laguerre, the narrative timeframe of his novels in fact coincides with theirs. Viewing the sugarcane novel as an ensemble, that is, as a series of episodes within a larger literary phenomenon, also reveals how nineteenth-century European literary modes such as Spanish and Portuguese *costumbrismo* and French *régionalisme,* the novel of manners and local color fiction, respectively, were adapted in order to convey specific conditions—and a particular worldview—in the New World. The tension between parts and wholes, specific islands/regions and Plantation America, individual novels and broader genres, makes it possible to perceive the sugarcane novel of the extended Caribbean as a larger literary landscape without losing sight of the elements that compose it.

Toward an "Archipelic" Vision of the Sugarcane Novel

In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land,* 1939), the Martinican négritude poet Aimé Césaire crafts a poignant yet puzzling allegory of the relationship between the Caribbean archipelago, the Atlantic Ocean, and the continental Americas just beyond. The verse "…l'archipel arqué comme le désir inquiet de se nier, on dirait une anxiété maternelle pour protéger la ténuité plus delicate qui sépare l'une de l'autre Amérique…" ("the archipelago arched with an anguished desire to negate itself, as if from maternal anxiety to protect this impossibly delicate tenuity separating one America from another…"), has been the basis of multiple theorizations by Caribbean writers and critics, who have imagined the archipelago as either a link to the Americas or as a separate entity altogether, a barrier of sorts, keeping the two Americas apart. In *Insularismo: Ensayos de interpretación puertorriqueña* (1934), Puerto Rican writer and critic Antonio Pedreira sees the Atlantic Ocean surrounding the Caribbean and his island in particular, as a constricting belt ("el cinturón de mar que nos cerca"), preventing the islands from accessing universal culture, as it gradually tightens and condemns them to greater isolation (Pedreira 161). J. Michael Dash's interpretation of Césaire in *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New*

World Context (1998) and Antonio Benítez Rojo's vision of the archipelago in *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (1989), on the other hand, both posit the Caribbean as the bridge that connects the Americas.

It is Édouard Glissant who best articulates the relationship between the Caribbean and the Americas. What brings parts of North and South America into the Caribbean experience is the legacy of the plantation system, which was the basis of the colonial enterprise. European imperialism and emerging global capitalism—expressed as an appetite for sugar—fuelled the demand for a cheap labor force, ultimately leading to the enslavement and transplantation of millions of Africans to the New World. The encounter of three races, Amerindians, Africans, and Europeans in the Plantation Americas serves as the foundational cultural bond between the nations along the Atlantic coast of the Americas and the islands of the greater Caribbean region (Glissant 1981, 229-30). Glissant derives the term "Plantation America," from to Rex Nettleford's book, *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica* (1978). Although the book focuses on Jamaica, as the title indicates, Nettleford advocates first and foremost a trans-Caribbean cultural approach to understanding Jamaican identity; the word "Jamaica" appears only in the subtitle of the book. "The case of Jamaica" figures as one installment in a series of linked experiences, as one example among a number of instances in which the individual experience of a Caribbean island fits into a broader regional pattern of experience. Implicit in this and any other comparative cultural approach is the necessary presence of a common denominator, whether geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic, or theoretical. Far from predicating an identical identity or destiny for the societies in question, a rigorous investigation of this type can reveal the uniqueness of each society's response to similar historical phenomena,[8] a point Nettleford seeks to underscore. In the fourth chapter of *Caribbean Cultural Identity,* titled "Cultural Integration and Cooperation in the Wider Caribbean and Latin America," Nettleford stresses the "common history…and experiences in the process of creoli[z]ation" as a means of communication between Latin America and the Caribbean that transcends very real linguistic and geographic barriers (Nettleford 149-50). Dividing the Caribbean and Latin America into three cultural spheres, Plantation America, Meso-America, and Euro-America, Nettleford nevertheless designates Plantation America as the common cultural sphere and locus of authentic creolized culture in the New World, for it has absorbed elements of Meso-America, Africa, and Europe.

While expressed differently, Nettleford and Glissant essentially draw the same cultural map of Plantation America. For Nettleford, "[a]ll the Commonwealth Caribbean, Haiti, Cuba, Santo Domingo, as well as the Eastern littoral of the American continent from Nova Scotia to Northern Uruguay are good examples

of Plantation America where Europe has met Africa on foreign soil" (Nettleford 149, n.233). For Glissant, a certain cultural continuity exists between the people of *l'autre Amérique* and the Caribbean as a result of the plantation system.[9] The perimeter of this cultural confluence consists of three spaces:

> …les hauts des Andes où la passion indienne perdure, le Mitan des plaines et des plateaux où le métissage s'accélère, la mer Caraïbe où les îles présagent. J'ai dit en introduction à ce livre que le paysage martiniquais (le Nord et le mont, la plaine du Mitan, les sables au Sud) reproduit en résumé de telles ambages. (Glissant 1981, 229)

> …the heights of the Andes, where the Amerindian world passionately endures, the plains and plateaus in the middle, where the pace of creolization quickens, the Caribbean [S]ea, where the islands loom! I have said it in the introduction to this book that the Martinican landscape (the mountains in the north, the plains in the middle, the sands to the [s]outh) reproduces in miniature these spaces]. (*Caribbean Discourse* 115)

Thus for both Nettleford and Glissant (more explicitly for Glissant), their native islands of Jamaica and Martinique contain *in miniature* not only the topographical elements of Plantation America at large, but also the imprint of the cultures which have converged there, Amerindian, African, and European. A sense of *mise en abyme* inflects these perceptions, as if the Caribbean could stand in synecdochically for the New World at large.[10]

Seeing the Caribbean as a microcosm for a broader "asymmetrical" cultural dynamic across the Americas, Benítez-Rojo assigns an "archipelic character" to the Atlantic Basin—including to the continental Americas—, the metaphor of the archipelago conveying the "discontinuous unity" of the region (Benítez-Rojo iii).[11] Glissant, in turn, advocates what he calls "archipelic thinking" ("la pensée archipélique"), in volume IV of his *Poétique* series, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997) as a means of understanding not only creolization in Martinique, the Caribbean, and in the New World, but as a way to envision a dynamic and on-going process of creolization and cultural cross-fertilization worldwide. Like Benítez-Rojo, Glissant conceives his archipelago in metaphorical terms, as an archipelago of the mind, as a liberating way of thinking that "opens up these oceans to us" (31). The figure of the archipelago evokes "ambiguity, fragility, and the derivative drift" ("le dérivé")[12] and is opposed to "les pensées de système" ("systematizing or universalizing thought"). Glissant's open-ended archipelic thinking seeks to free the Caribbean subject from the burden of (an impossible) continental unity and provide an alternative to linear, grand historical narratives incapable of representing Caribbean peoples' discontinuous histories of errantry (31).

An archipelic vision of the *novelas de la caña* of the New World, would involve the simultaneous consideration of local and regional social, cultural, economic, and literary histories. Rather than dissolving the boundaries between local and transcultural elements, it will be necessary to work both within them and across them,

treating them as both a continuous and a fragmented text. In Kent D. Palmer's words, intratextuality is a process that involves "treating the given text or set of texts as a fractal landscape which we explore in detail with a full realization of their overlapping and interpenetrating internal contexts" (1). The necessary tension between parts and wholes, which I have stressed both in terms of individual novels and my main corpus (especially Confiant's novels within the context of the earlier sugarcane novels of Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), also applies to the reading of individual texts. As Alison Sharrock explains, "[i]t is only when we pull texts apart, and look at the myriad ways of their putting-together and their points of view, that we can fully engage with the whole range of epistemological, historical, philosophical, aesthetic, and critical exegeses that constitute our response to literary texts and cultural poetics" (3). Given the theoretical stance implied by intratextuality, the answer to my original question as to whether the *novela de la caña* is an insular or international literary phenomenon should be rather obvious: it is both insular *and* international.

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Endnotes

1 Carlos J. Alonso explains that the terms *criollista* novel and *la novela de la tierra* (the novel of the land) are basically interchangeable in Spanish America and the Caribbean.

2 Very few studies have approached the *novela de la caña* as an actual genre. Berta Graciano's doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Los Angeles, published in the Dominican Republic as *La novela de la caña: estética e ideología* (1990), examines *Cañas y bueyes, Over,* and *El Tierrateniente*. A master's thesis by Sofía Solis Monteagudo at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, *La novela de la caña en el Caribe: Un acercamiento sociológico a las novelas "Over" y "La Llamarada"* (1998), compares a Dominican and a Puerto Rican *novela de la caña*.

3 Thacker argues that the only effective critical literary geography is one that bridges both historical and textual spaces.

4 See Thacker's discussion of textual space and his critique of postmodern approaches that tend to neglect material spaces (62).

5 I use the verb anticipate here in its formal sense of doing something before it becomes fashionable or widespread. I do not mean to imply that Confiant was directly influenced by the earlier sugarcane novels.

6 See J.B. Harley. *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (2001).

7 (Colonial) History in the "New" World—at least the linear Western conception of it—begins with the arrival of European scholars and *Conquistadores*.

8 It is important to stress that the phenomena is similar, not identical. Transnational literary studies sometimes run the risk of generalizing or oversimplifying national histories for the sake of demonstrating continuity.

9 "Il y a pourtant continuité, de l'archipel au continent…," ("There is nevertheless continuity between the archipelago and the continent"), writes Glissant (my translation). See *Le discours antillais* 229.

10 I use two literary terms to illustrate the relationship between the Caribbean archipelago and the Continental Americas, "mise en abyme" and "synecdoche." The mise en abyme is "a literary recursion" or the "literary effect of infinite regression," according to J.A. Cuddon in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* fourth ed. The mise en abyme is more commonly seen as an image that contains within it a smaller copy of itself (as in the packaging of *La vache qui rit cheese*). Plantation America, as reflected in the sugarcane novel, consists of a representation of the nation, which is echoed in the structure of the plantation world of the novel. As a figure of speech, the synecdoche involves the use of a "part" of something to refer to the "whole" or the thing itself. In my example, the Caribbean archipelago—a part of the New World—, expresses through its topography and land-

scape, economic history, and cultural hybridity, the experience of the New World at large.

11 See *La isla que se repite:* "…las Antillas constituyen un puente de islas que conecta…de una manera asimétrica Suramérica con Norteamérica. Este curioso accidente geográfico le confiere a toda el area, incluso a sus focos continentales, un carácter de archipelago…" ("… the Caribbean constitutes a bridge of islands that connects…in an asymmetrical manner North and South America. This curious geographical accident confers upon the entire area, including the more visible continental entities, the character of an archipelago…," my translation).

12 I borrow Gordon Collier's translation of "le dérivé" in Andrea Schweiger Hiepko's essay "Creolization as a Poetics of Culture: Édouard Glissant's 'Archipelic' Thinking" in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean* (2003).