

Down Under: New World Literatures and Ecocriticism

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ABSTRACT

African, Asian, and European diasporas and more recent regional migrations between and among Latin American and Caribbean nations and the United States have challenged the very utility of literary regionalisms which have enjoyed long and fruitful histories in the U.S. South and in Latin America. It is by now well known that regionalism failed in its national aims, but perhaps a new form of regionalism may still prove useful in a more advanced globalized age. “Going south” has come to signify what it means to search for diasporic community; it is to imagine transgressively across what Cristina García describes in *Dreaming in Cuban* as a geography carved up by political and economic interests. There is little guarantee, however, that such newly imagined communities are sufficient responses to the threat that a global migratory age poses to the environment. Pablo Neruda’s poetry provides a model of how going south can also mean going down under to *bioregional* spaces affected by history’s violence. His praise of the earth articulates, and recovers from, the experience of strange displacement in the New World and demonstrates that human and natural histories need not remain mutually exclusive.

Our postnational yearnings in the Americas have yielded deeper understanding of the submarine “parallel in histories,” to quote from Édouard Glissant, throughout the Caribbean basin and beyond (*Caribbean* 63). African, Asian, and European diasporas, and more recent regional migrations between and among Latin American and Caribbean nations and the United States, have challenged the very utility of literary regionalisms that have enjoyed long and fruitful histories in the U.S. South and in Latin America. It is by now well known that regionalism failed in its national aims, but perhaps a new form of regionalism may still prove useful to us in a more advanced globalized age.

Celia's geography is both literal and metaphorical; it signifies the physical freedom to cross borders, and the imaginative freedom to do so when the for-

If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable. Don't you see how they're carving up the world, Gustavo? How they're stealing our geography? Our fates? The arbitrary is no longer in our hands. (99)

As Celia, in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, complains presciently prior to the exacerbations of the Cuban Revolution and the U.S. embargo:

events and intentions, but is constructed by arbitrary accidents (140).
gins," because it understands that the present is not the logical consequence of meanderings of genealogy, paradoxically "opposes itself to the search for ori- and have value for us" (146). This kind of search, although interested in the and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist tions—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, account for what Michel Foucault calls "the accidents, the minute devia- equal, since they are not all reconstructed with the same biological honesty to regionalists, these writers understand that not all family trees are created logical reach of kinship stretched across geopolitical borders. Unlike old-time postnational global age, invoking the power of fiction to imagine the genea- branch on the family tree. Such has been the conviction of many writers of the sible, and chasing with undying determination the fruit at the end of every Correcting this appears to be a matter of being more historically respon-

frontiers and shallow time.
to resist the pull of myth and fixed the "folk" within spatial territories of stable impossible complexity and geographical reach, literary regionalists often failed collection. Stopping short of tracing the roots of the local back across routes of oxisms of alterity, like so many flightless wings in the entomologist's butterfly denying western anthropologist, local color now reads more like the last part- seem to receive their death notice once recorded by a well-intentioned and self- tional nationalities. Just as the oral traditions of a remote Amazonian tribe seemed to satisfy the thirst for ample and documentable evidence of excep- chos of the pampa, guajiros of the monte, mestizos wandering the llanos, all- dernity. Cowboys and Indians, farmers from Scandinavia, former slaves, gau- communities, transplanted since 1492 by the globalizing forces of western mo- tions of the local as evidence of the long-sought-after rootedness of New World ing bounds of the nation. Patrician writers and critics paraded the representa- whose racial and cultural roots extended well beyond the limited and delimit- ing national character, was paradoxically most often drawn to populations Regionalism's emphasis on local color, ostensibly in the service of express-

mer is denied. The latter freedom, which sustains the fictional world Garcia creates, means "Going South," to borrow a title of one of Garcia's chapters; it is to engage in and value the transgressive ways of knowing, singing, dancing, invoking the loas, writing—that enable the women in the novel to transcend the limitations imposed by a globalized "carving up" of geopolitical territories, and to see their kinship. To go south is to imagine a diasporic community—which is what it means to dream in Cuban for Garcia—so as to include the neo-patrician force of such "carvings" that continues to hold national borders inviolate, despite increasing evidence the novel exposes of the Americas' parallels. In a global South, genealogy can no longer function as the narrative of what Glissant calls "root identity," and its concomitant "possession of a land," similar to the impulse of much literary regionalism (*Poetics* 143); rather than tapping into a past envisioned as the moment of the world's creation, genealogy becomes an expression of kinship, of close relations ("close" holds "relations" in a paradox; they are admittedly "almost" relations at the same time that they are declared in the family) that effectively expose the rhyzomatic family tales of diasporic wanderings, "route" identities that understand themselves relationally with other lands and peoples across space rather than back through time.

For such counter-memories to prove effective in resisting the effects of globalization, however, a global South must avoid at least one significant pitfall. Genealogy, even when it is traced diasporically, holds the allure of an alter-native home, a mythological elsewhere that disrupts the New World subject's sense of place. Naïve regionalisms of New World nativity, of course, have never been interested in assessing the reality of transpiration and amnesia that characterize so much New World history, but neither are post-national neo-native appeals to a prior land of origin. Indeed, what is often created by such fiction, a risk Garcia herself runs, is the impression of a sentimental recovery of a lost home, a new transnational wholeness that simply displaces the merely local with a regionalism more broad in its geographic scope, but no less impatient with the New World's seeming lack of historical depth, and no less interested in genealogical legitimacy and authenticity. The cost of such nostalgia, as Derek Walcott has argued, is the New World itself, its landscapes, seascapes, watersheds, and skies that, instead of providing inspiration for a newly placed imagination, are allowed to degrade, because their rawness appears to signify one's homelessness.¹ That is, historical knowledge of the pathways of diaspora will undoubtedly always be useful, but investigations into New World pasts must also reckon with the empty spaces of amnesia that the violence of the hemisphere's diasporas have wrought.² While the imagination of a global South wants to resist the limitations imposed by the colonial machine, it must also resist the seduction of the illusion of its own limitless-ness, otherwise it cannot assess the contours of the violence which rendered

Some years ago now, José David Saldívar argued that Havana might be a suitable site for the "Other America," a geography of political resistance to the contemporary embodiments of the Western zeitgeist. Havana's Vedado neighborhood is now the site of Cuba's Casa de las Américas [House of the Americas] (which inhabits a former church), a critical center Saldívar cites for cultural production and criticism from the left. The neighborhood itself has come to signify the great triumph of the Cuban Revolution over the class hierarchies that this neighborhood represented. García's Celia describes the pre-revolution neighborhood: "[the] destitute were everywhere. . . . Remember . . . the beggar families

and untranslatable record of human hands. The critique of epistemic machinations, and into the realm of nature's silent the global south, to move beyond Foucault's merely political and anthropocentric century. It is time for critics, especially those concerned with the social fate of teach in this regard than the poststructuralist criticism of the late twentieth is protagonist not scenery. Poets and novelists, on the whole, have more to reorientation of culture toward the natural world, one that assures that nature of deconstruction of the uses of nature. What is called for is a fundamental justice in order to expose complicity with such destruction, usually by means this will require more than dragging New World literature to the tribunals of for that matter of a natural history independent of human family trees. But expansion that it is almost anachronistic to talk of "native" plants, or to conceive were so dramatically altered as a result of the transplantsations of western history's comparable insignificance. In many cases New World landscapes our incapacity to absorb multiple horrors than with some notion of natural been a victim of the colonial machine, but the banality has more to do with an afterthought, and perhaps a banal one at that, to say that nature too has source of arbitrary accidents that disrupt the consequential logic of human natural processes of mutation and regeneration provide at least one important fact that human and natural histories are not separate genealogies, and that it isn't overtly environmental. It becomes necessary to understand the natural native but is, more importantly, profoundly ecological, even or especially when

The point here is that the imagination of the global South is not politically sia and elated discovery. behind nature's seeming emptiness a profound collusion of melancholic amnesia and elated discovery. who keep reaching for history, and instead find fistfuls of soil, learn to see able backdrop to the more central unfolding human drama, but those writers tendency in regionalist literature to mythologize land as territory, as dispensers, they might prefer praising family trees to trees themselves. A writer facing such history leaves behind cannot satisfy the more historically impatient writer such imaginative transgressions necessary. If the ordinary stuff of nature that

from the countryside looking for work in the iron-fenced mansions of Vedado? The smart couples in their convertible roadsters driving by without a second glance?" (98). Lost in the ironic story of the once destitute (most of whom were of African descent) who now occupy these former mansions is a deeper irony. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo has recently written, the neighborhood also tells the story of the loss of landscape and ecological health effected by the plantation economy. Sugar brought slavery, to be sure, but it also brought ecological trauma to the entire Caribbean region, arguably the most environmentally altered region in the world. By the 1630s, many of Havana's "nature preserves" were threatened, including the Monte Vedado (the Forbidden Woods) the ultimate destruction of which provided the neighborhood its space and name (38). Perhaps this implies the need to look to more environmentally oriented centers, like Cuba's Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez de la Naturaleza y el Hombre [Antonio Núñez Fundación for Man and the Environment], that will redress our neglect of the physical world.

This is not the tired and problematic argument of the Deep Ecologists that all life forms are of equal ethical value, an argument that has too frequently failed to redress the plight of the poor and to address the ways in which social and environmental ills often cause and exacerbate each other. Slavery's evils were social *and* environmental, but this is not to say that we must pick our poison. The colonial machine, after all, did not. Deforestation has been devastating to the integrity of ecosystems and human communities alike, especially when the latter, such as the Caribbean's Neo-African religions, are animistic and tree-centered.³ The recent floods in Haiti were caused by heavy rainfall, yes, but even more by the political and economic forces that have perpetuated the extensive deforestation begun by slavery; destitute descendants of slaves are forced to rely on wood for fuel and thus continue to find their hold on their sense of place slipping away. The consequences of natural events are often distributed according to the tragedies of human oppression and poverty, and for precisely that reason, ecology cannot be ignored in a global South.

Of course, speaking for nature is as problematic as speaking for the subaltern or for the repressed past, and the political exigencies of the global south are enough to discourage many otherwise fine writers from having to admit that they are essentially engaged in the impossible task of translating the untranslatable. To so confess sounds too much like failure or concession, and many choose instead to continue the search for root identities. Nature remains, as the tidal movements do for Celis, as an illusion of change and backdrop to the human story, but not as the enigmatic and alluring repository of history's motions, and hence, a needed source of inspiration for the creation of a new politically unbounded yet nature-bound culture.

Pablo Neruda flirted his entire career with the seductions of merely po-

Although Neruda's ambition is totalizing in its scope (to "englobar"), it is kept in check by the aesthetic inspired by an encounter with "the great mystery of the universe."

The poem pauses to reflect on the poetic and procreative nature of the history he constructs, since, despite his solidarity and compassion for human suffering and natural devastation, he remains ignorant of the full story: "Estoy hecho de tus raíces, / pero no entiendo, no me entrega/ la tierra su sabiduría" ["I am made of your roots, / but I do not understand, the earth/ will not concede its wisdom"] (464). All that he knows is what historiography tells him were the actions of the so-called protagonists, and so he pleads to be led down into the very belly of the earth "hasta llegar/ a la boca del oro" ["until I reach/ the mouth of gold"] where he hopes that the natural oracle will speak the tale of "la desdicha" ["sorrows"] of New World history (465). But as he discovers in "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," this tale has been eroded by ecological forces and has been carried by the Andean watershed to the sea, where it leaves what he calls in his great ecological poem, "The Great Ocean," "una herencia herida/ bajo el mar" ["a wounded inheritance/ under the sea"] (772).

Neruda's ocean, unlike Celias, presents no illusion of change, but is the very context of perpetual regeneration and transformation in which all human suffering takes place. The ocean is the repository of New World dead and thus contains the stories New World colonialism has buried. But precisely because of nature's capacity to regenerate, the stories will forever be transformed into

ambición de una poesía que englobara no sólo al hombre sino a la naturaleza, a las fuerzas escondidas, una poesía epopéyica que se enfrentara con el gran misterio del universo y también con las posibilidades del hombre. [ambition for a poetry that would include [literally "englobe"] not only man but nature and its hidden forces, an epic poetry that would confront the great mystery of the universe as well as the possibilities of man.] (qtd in Santí 25)

logical readings of events was his awareness of nature's deep time, and the need for society to learn from its regenerations, even when this challenged the urgency of his own political aims. In *Canto general*, he attempts a recuperation of histories lost by the workings of colonial violence across the American hemisphere. He began with an interest in his native Chile, but he soon discovered its experiences are diasporic and that "las raíces de todos los chilenos se extendían por debajo de la tierra y venían de otros territorios" ["the roots of all Chileans extended beneath the soil and came from other territories"] (qtd. in Santí 20).⁴ Although he ostensibly wishes to write a totalizing story of human and natural histories, he becomes increasingly aware of nature's elusiveness and thus of his own limitations. He confesses to an

the stuff of the sea. The world-traveler came to understand that his duty was to observe and make poems about seashells, rocks, and other detritus at his feet near his home, but even though his poetry of nature reaches the most sublime heights of praise, it is never politically indifferent. It is neither nostalgic for other lands or for the past, nor offended by nature's seeming indifference to human tales of sorrow. Neruda's poetry demonstrates that going south must eventually mean taking him down under to the *bioregional* spaces—submarine and subterranean—where language must concede its power to control knowledge. Literature of nature, then, does not have to oppose the political; it can instead point the way to a poetics that does not deny the confluence of human and natural histories. That this poetics would become politically relevant is, for the imagination of the global South, just a natural part of the dialectic of recovering a sense of place in the wake of history's wreckage.

Endnotes

1. See "Muse."

2. For elaboration on this point, see Handley.

3. See Paravisini-Gebert.

4. [This and all following translations are the author's. – Ed.]

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