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Guest Editor's Introduction

John Lowe
University of Georgia, jwlowe@uga.edu

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Confluence of Caribbean and Southern Literatures and Cultures

John Wharton Lowe

Since the earliest days of European exploration and conquest of the Americas, the circumCaribbean has been the arena for multicultural contact and conflict. As the Spanish, English, French, and Dutch competed for new territories and trade routes, Native Americans of the basin were enslaved, infected with disease, and, in many cases, exterminated. This era was a time of constantly shifting boundaries and cultural collisions. Early explorers such as De Soto and Ponce de Leon ranged widely through the islands and coastal rims; later, naturalists such as the Bartrams and Humboldt mapped the region, noticed the affinities between flora and fauna, and saw the sea not as a barrier but a connector; the waters of the basin were increasingly criss-crossed with traders and pirates, as the riches of the new world were shipped to imperial centers in Europe. The raw commodities of the circumCaribbean were produced by millions of enslaved Africans, who brought important knowledge of agricultural production and rich African folk cultures to the islands and coastal rims. Sugar, cotton, coffee, rice, and indigo production brought incredible wealth to planters and created an intricate and cruelly-structured plantation economy. As new states were created in the continental United States, ties between them and the Caribbean expanded exponentially, particularly with the advent of steam-driven vessels. French Louisiana and Spanish Florida were closer to in culture to the Caribbean than to those of the adjacent English speaking colonies. Eventually, Louisiana came under Spanish domination and worked within the webbed circuits between Vera Cruz, Havana, and New Orleans.

The Haitian Revolution's exiles brought new French and African impulses to New Orleans, while the U.S.-Mexican war introduced thousands of combat troops drawn from the

U.S. South to the Native and Latinx cultures of Mexico. The addition of new states—most prominently Texas—to the U.S. created an expanded sense of the South, a regional concept that took on heft and new meaning as the nation began to grapple with the curse of slavery. Filibuster expeditions, usually departing from Gulf cities such as New Orleans and Mobile, sought to conquer islands and lands south of the South. Cuba in particular was coveted for both its fabled fertility and the prospect of adding it to the Southern contingent of slave-owning states, thereby adding senators and congressmen who could buttress slave economies in Congress.

In the early nineteenth century, and especially after the Civil War and Reconstruction, advances in technology created new business and political ties across national boundaries; the new tourist industry rapidly transformed economies of the islands and coastal rims, while enforced mono-crop agricultural practices played havoc with traditional patterns of circumCaribbean rural life. CircumCaribbean writers such as Lorenzo de Zavala, José Teurbe Tolon, Cirilo Villaverde, and José Martí spent much time (often in exile) in the U.S., and drew on those experiences in their work. Writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. South, such as Martin Delany, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Lafcadio Hearn, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Andrew Lytle, and Evelyn Scott created tales that intersected with cultures south of the South.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the flux of the circumCaribbean was reflected in the many Spanish and French newspapers of the region, especially in New Orleans, a city that welcomed refugees from conflict torn countries to the south. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz has observed, the twenty Spanish language newspapers of the Crescent City—particularly *La Patria*—were active participants in political discourse, and strongly objected to the U.S. invasion

of Mexico, thus aligning the journals with Northern abolitionists who feared the extension of slavery to newly annexed territories. These papers, along with those written in French (especially New Orleans's *L'Abeille*, which was published from 1825 to 1925) reported on events across the coastal South and the Caribbean, knitting readers and communities together. All of these periods and events generated fascinating transnational narratives, both fictional and non-fictional. Many of the texts written in languages other than English have now been translated, enabling us to rethink the circumCaribbean as a complex cultural construct that annuls national boundaries. As such, we need to reconfigure our notions of U.S. Southern history, the supposed isolation of island cultures, and the antiquated notion of a Confederacy-defined U.S. South.

Over the past hundred years, air travel, new forms of tourism, and exponentially increasing trade and communication networks have knit the peoples of the wider basin together in unexpected ways. Miami now functions as the fulcrum of all these activities, and is just as much a circumCaribbean city as it is Southern. Even more interior cities, such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and Nashville, have been transformed and invigorated by immigrants from the south, particularly Mexico, but also from the islands and Latin America.

Setting the U.S. South's literature and culture next to that of the wider circumCaribbean (of which it has always been part) parallels the ongoing project of globalizing the nation as a whole. As Amy Kaplan has cogently put it, "The new pluralistic model of diversity [in American Studies] runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly on the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating their formation" (15). Applying this formula to new concepts of a global U.S. South, it comes as a relief to discover that many writers of the circumCaribbean (which

includes the U.S. South) have often ignored imaginary lines drawn as national boundaries. As Michel de Certeau has observed, “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (129).

Overlapping Diasporas; Archipelagic Studies

The relatively new field of Diaspora Studies (see especially Brent Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora* [2003]) has provided an expanded lens for considering the network of slavery that knew no national boundary. A foundational critical study, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), demands that we see our modern world as a hybrid construct. His sweeping theories aim to uncover the roots of modernism and double-consciousness, and plumb many of the texts this collection considers. At the same time, his work has accelerated examination of other diasporas, such as the East Asian migration to the Caribbean, and the Cuban diaspora that began before and after Castro’s ascent. Concurrently, building on the work of Glissant and Antonio Benítez Rojo, other critics have developed theories of tidalectics (Elizabeth DeLoughrey) and archipelagics (Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens), drawing attention to oceanic currents, voyages, and to the islands that have all too often been ignored in favor of continental subjects and issues. Henri Lefebvre, in his *The Production of Space* (1991), helpfully posits the concept of a hydraulic web that has linked the rivers and ports of Europe to those of the entire globe, in a gigantic network of sea lanes and trade routes. He would seem to agree with the intent of Roberts and Stephens, who have declared “we are calling for a decontinentalization of perceptions of U.S. and generally American space, and a shift toward recognizing the Americas as a set of spaces that has been persistently intertwined with, constituted by, and grounded in the archipelagic” (17). This kind of scholarship naturally

valuably extends existing work by scholars in Caribbean and Pacific studies.

Recent Critical Analyses of CircumCaribbean Literature

My recent study, *Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature* (2016), examines the work of over twenty writers and many circumCaribbean critics, to remake the map of the cultures of the Americas, thereby revealing the deep, persistent connections between the ideas and works produced by the writers of the U.S. South and the Caribbean. *Calypso Magnolia* builds upon the foundation erected by literary scholars such as Deborah Cohn, George Handley, Stephanie Russ, and Valérie Loichot (all based in Spanish or French studies), and historians such as Rebecca Scott and Matthew Guterl, whose studies of slavery across the circumCaribbean constitutes a crucial rupture of traditional national boxes.

Cohn's *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (1999) demonstrates the strong influence of U.S. Southern literature on Latin American writers of the hemisphere, comparing Faulkner and Mario Vargas Llosa, Ralph Ellison and Isabel Allende, Katherine Anne Porter and Juan Rulfo, while also commenting on connections between other U.S. writers and figures such as Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, and Gabriel García Márquez. Similarly, Handley, in *Postslavery Literature in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (2000), draws together Cirilo Villoverde and George Washington Cable; Martín Morúa Delgado, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Frances E. W. Harper; Alejo Carpentier and William Faulkner; and Jean Rhys, Rosario Ferré and Toni Morrison. Russ, in *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (2009), begins by drawing a connection between Vanderbilt's Agrarians and their contemporaries in Cuba, and goes on to comparisons of works by: Teresa de

la Parra and Ellen Glasgow; Dulce Maria Loynaz and Eudora Welty; Antonio Benítez-Rojo and William Faulkner; Aída Cartagena Portalatín and Gayl Jones; and Toni Morrison and Mayra Santos-Febres. The Francophone scholar Valérie Loichot operates in a parallel fashion, linking Faulkner and Morrison with Glissant and Saint-John Perse. While there are other studies that link U.S. writers in general with those further South, these critics mainly concentrate on the “Two Souths,” to use Cohn’s phrase.

Mention must be made here of the key work of Keith Cartwright, whose *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways* (2013) concentrates on African American writers of the South, such as James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston, but simultaneously addresses the myriad links with the Caribbean that shaped these writers work. He pays special tribute to New Orleans literary and musical history, and throughout displays a keen awareness of the many African religions that affected Afro-Caribbean cultural production—especially poetry.

One of the consequences of situating the U. S. as part of the circumCaribbean is that it creates an opportunity to examine important subjects—such as slavery, agricultural production, trade patterns, immigration, diaspora, travel writing and tourism—through a more comprehensive lens. Numerous slave owners had plantations in both the lower South and on the islands. Maroon culture created by runaways were common across the circumCaribbean, be they in lowland swamps or mountain retreats. Runaways also found refuge with Native Americans, leading to intermarriage and cultural exchange. Transnational studies are beginning to clear away artificial barriers separating the peoples and cultures of the circumCaribbean, revealing centuries of connection, Creolization, and exchanges of all types. We believe this collection valuably extends that burgeoning movement.

Essays in this Collection

We begin the issue with three essays examining the historicity of the circumCaribbean. First, Erica Johnson analyzes how hemispheric events influenced the reception of French Caribbean immigrants in the early nineteenth century; her portrayal of the Pierre Dormenon court case offers a gripping example of the effect of the Haitian Revolution on the circumCaribbean in general and Louisiana in particular. Shifting our gaze to Latin American, Alvis E. Dunn next considers the journal of an ex-Confederate general, whose time in Guatemala offers a broad perspective on the links between the U.S. South and the Caribbean in the late nineteenth century. The extensive and varied diplomatic history of Pierce M. B. Young—in Congress, Russia, and France, in addition to Guatemala—testifies to the cosmopolitan life of many elite Southerners during this period, and to their international machinations. Young’s devotion to the Lost Cause, his close relationship with Guatemala’s first lady—who was from New Orleans—and his efforts to negotiate difficult situations faced by U.S. citizens reflect a sea change in his attitudes, from patriarchal white supremacist to diplomatic cosmopolitan, whose final transnational insights redeemed him. Finally, William Seabrook’s notorious ethnography, *The Magic Island* (1929), receives a searching and revealing reading from Margaret T. McGehee and Emily Taylor. His sensationalist account of Vodou—replete with the apparently first mention of zombie in U.S. literature—held much credence in a time when the U.S. was in occupation of Haiti. McGehee and Taylor show how Seabrook’s Southern background inevitably led to his problematic presentation of Haitians and their mysterious religion. They pair this reading with his 1942 memoir, *No Hiding Place*, which leads to a complex analysis of his

criticism of slavery and colonialism, a position in contradistinction to his racism.

Next, the essays examine authors whose viewpoints unexpectedly reflect different aspects of the circumCaribbean. Scholars have recently made a strong case for rereading the work of Eric Walrond, heretofore regarded as one of the minor lights of the Harlem Renaissance. His West Indian background—and its effect on his 1926 masterpiece, *Tropic Death*—has now emphasized his key role in transnational literature. Stephen Park employs concepts of the notions of lost and found to invigorate this rediscovery of an exceptional artist, who was born in Barbados but grew up in the Panama Canal Zone. His tales of the Caribbean were seen in Harlem as counterpoints to those being written by Southerners such as Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Richard Wright has seldom been associated with the Caribbean, yet as I and others have recently demonstrated, his interest in the “south of the South” and his myriad experiences with writers from the basin and its shores have much to tell us about his always-expanding cosmopolitan and transnational perspectives. Jeff Karem, an expert in circumCaribbean narrative, probes the ways in which Wright’s views of the region were conflicted; his reading includes a re-thinking of *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and a demonstration of how the Caribbean influenced the last work published in his lifetime, *The Long Dream* (1958). Karem’s presentation of a little-known (and uncompleted) Wright manuscript, *Haitian Biographies* (likely written around 1950), adds significantly to our understanding of Wright’s sense of affinity with the wider black diaspora. My own contribution to this volume considers one of Wright’s contemporaries, Frank Yerby, the best-selling African American writer in history, whose works have sadly fallen into eclipse. I consider his third costume romance, a pirate novel, *The Golden Hawk* (1948). While Yerby was catering to the popularity of

the pirate movies of his time, he set his swashbucklers against the dramatic and very real historical events of the late seventeenth century. Annulling national boundaries as his hero and his sidekick sweep over the bounding main, from island to island, culture to culture, Yerby acquaints us with the polyglot peoples of the basin, from the few remaining Native Americans to black and nearly white Haitians, Jamaicans, and Peruvians.

In April, 2004, as founding director of the Program in Louisiana and Caribbean Studies, I welcomed an international company of scholars to our inaugural conference, “Beyond the Islands: Extending the Meaning of Caribbean Cultures.” Two of the talks that were given then, by J. Michael Dash and Antonio Benitez-Rojo, have never been published until now. The latter’s contribution—which I believe was one of the last things he wrote before his tragically premature death—is appended in this collection as a coda. Dash’s essay pays tribute to Benitez-Rojo and my former colleague, Édouard Glissant (now also deceased). Dash emphasizes Glissant’s determination to retrieve the concept of Caribbean location and ground from essentialist colonial notions, but also from anti-colonialist discourse; his projection of archipelagic space into global common places; and his insistence on the Caribbean’s violently modernizing process of relationality. Dash also probes Glissant’s special attention to Haiti, whose strength proceeds from historical memory, a necessary resource for all Caribbean peoples. This leads to a consideration of Glissant’s little known play, *Monsieur Toussaint* (2005), which Femi Euba directed at Louisiana State University during my time there. In Dash’s reading, Glissant extends the intent of C.L.R. James in his magisterial *The Black Jacobins* (1938), and presses the concept that the revolution on the island was the most dramatic emergence of the ideal of human rights, since neither the French or the U.S. Revolutions succeeded in ending slavery. This review of

Glissant's achievement concludes with an appreciation of his circumCaribbean travel narrative *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1999), a key intervention in studies of links between the U.S. South and the Caribbean.

Surely the affinities between New World, African-derived religions constitute a backbone of circumCaribbean life and myth. Solimar Otero's contribution to this volume focuses on one of these practices, Cuba's Santería, especially on its prominent *orisha* Inle, who helps us to understand how hybrid bodies are understood in circumCaribbean myth, folklore, and literature. A kind of hybrid city itself, New Orleans is both Southern and Caribbean, and is situated at the terminus of North America's great gateway to the south of the South, the Mississippi. The city has generated an electrifying contemporary poet in native daughter Brenda Marie Osbey. Keith Cartwright and Dolores Flores-Silva's essay on Osbey's two most recent collections, *All Saints* and *All Souls*, employs classic theories of reader-response criticism, but work these in tandem with the African American practice of call and response. They are particularly concerned with Osbey's—and her natal city's—peculiar fascination with the dead. Flores-Silva attempts to read Osbey through a Mexican lens, in order to glean what Osbey's work has to say about a larger Gulf poetics, one that encompasses the great Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead. The preceding essay also considers music's role in Mexican/New Orleans culture, and many critics have noted the migratory riffs of African-inspired music across the waters. Justin Mellette here considers the Global South and the Jamaican musical tradition, arguing a triangular set of reciprocal influences between the U.S. South, Britain, and Jamaica, a fluid exchange that has had a significant effect on the development of blues, reggae, and punk. He is especially useful in tracing the network of African cultural continuities in the Americas, a network initially made

feasible through radio, which only reached Jamaica in 1939.

The coda to this collection comes in the form of the previously cited talk given by Antonio Benitez-Rojo shortly before his death. “The Caribbean: From a Sea Basin to an Atlantic Network” begins with an assertion about the impossibility of defining the boundaries of the Caribbean. Warning against reductionist criteria of cultural definition, Benitez-Rojo cautions against over-reliance on the African cultures of the basin in seeking a broad cultural definition, as this can too easily occlude consideration of Asians and Indoamerica. Aligning himself with Glissant and Wilson Harris, he embraces the new concept of the Caribbean that transcends the boundaries of both the Caribbean Sea and plantation America, one that examines repeating patterns and rejects artificial notions of unity or coherence. Yet he also cautions against postmodern perspectives that lean too heavily on science at the expense of belief, myth, and folk traditions. Benitez-Rojo refers to his magisterial *The Repeating Island*, noting it appeared fifteen years earlier, and attempts to formulate his current theoretical position, one that transcends the geographical Caribbean to encompass the Atlantic world, a realm reflected in Afro-Atlantic, tri-continental literature formed by the consequences of the plantation. He finds evidence by tracing the early abolitionist novels written by women from 1688 to 1861, particularly Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*; Claire de Duras’s *Ourika*; and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sab*. These novels, he shows us, though written in widely different settings and cultures, nevertheless moved to a formation of rhetoric that is both anti-colonialist and anti-patriarchal.

We intend this collection of essays to unmoor the U.S. South from its embedded mythical impressions, thereby annulling previously provincial and merely local stereotypes of the region. It is long past time to jettison the notion of the South’s role as the nation’s negative “other,” and

to insist instead on its crucial role in transnational discourse. We also hope that our work will explode the parallel stereotype of a bi-chromatic South. Setting all these texts we have explored alongside each other facilitates a new awareness of our need to acknowledge and extend the ties that have always bound the South and the Caribbean. The literature that has grown out of this transnational region has in turn generated a dynamic process, one that has rendered profound insights into notions of personal, regional, national, and global identities. Our joint heritage is still emerging; it continues to astonish, challenge, illuminate, and enrich all our lives.

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