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Touring In-Country and Out: Reflections on Traveling

It is hard to imagine a theme more complex than that of travel; it involves the Self as much as the Other, the "here" as much as the "there". The trip, either in itself or as metaphor, can be made to relate to the organization of all knowledge, culture, dream, desire, interpretation, communication, ^{nation-building} and many other things.

As an example of a trip within a country itself, I should like to talk about a work entitled Excursión a Vueltabajo, written by Cirilo Villaverde in 1838. If I choose this text rather than another that is read more often --let's say Excursión a los indios ranqueles by Lucio V. Mancilla-- it is because its complexity allows one to illustrate at once several of the objectives that travel narratives have gone after in Latin America.

According to what Villaverde tells us, his trip took place in the summer of 1831, six or seven years before he would write Excursión a Vueltabajo. At this time he was a nineteen-year-old law student in Havana. Before going further, I'll say that Vueltabajo is a mountainous, sparsely populated region --even today-- in Western Cuba. Since it was precisely there that Villaverde was born, we can see his excursion right away as a journey of return to his own origins.

At any rate, Villaverde begins his story without giving an account of his departure from Havana. The story takes him-up as

he penetrates the rugged Vueltabajo, ~~scarcely settled at that~~
~~time~~. From the start, this narrator sees himself as a discoverer.
He goes on horseback through still-unnamed places; he tells us of
"wild formations without a name by which they could be generally
known".^{!!} Nonetheless, Villaverde doesn't give himself the role of
sole discoverer; he tells us that the naturalist Felipe Poey has
also passed through there naming a few of the mountains, valleys
and streams for his Geografía de Cuba (Geography of Cuba), the
first work of its kind. This information turns out to be
valuable, not only because it dates the writing of the text
between 1836, the year that the Geografía was published, and
1838, but also because it acknowledges that the effort of
discovery was of a joint nature. Let me explain: Felipe Poey and
Villaverde belonged then to the Domingo Delmonte circle, a broad
group of intellectuals that included writers, poets, ~~theater~~ *play*
writers ~~people~~, economists, historians, naturalists, lexicographers,
educators and literary critics. It is precisely within this
circle that there emerge the first statements about Cubanness.
Their ~~plans~~ *wishes* for the nation's future did not look toward
independence from Spain --an impractical thing in those years
according to them-- but rather toward reforming within the
liberal spirit of the Cadiz Constitution (1812), for example, the
ending of Cuba's status as a colony, the abolition of the slave
trade, the right to a free press, the modernizing of agriculture,
the right of women to work in certain kinds of manufacturing, the
importation of white workers, the creation of a Cuban Institute
for education and a Cuban Academy for Literature, the improvement

of roads and of medicine, and also the establishing of magazines and the promotion of literary works that would foster those ideas. And thus, the text of Excursión a Vueltabajo, while it tells the story of Villaverde's journey to his origins, also narrates the Delmonte circle reformist program. Upon arriving at his birthplace, Villaverde will be newly baptized, this time as the legitimate son of the land, as the knower of the essence of Cubanness. That is why his narration, as is also the case in the foundational voyage of Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude), adopts mythical formulations that sometimes remind one of the Bible, of fairy tales, and chivalrous romances.

Naturally, as would happen with these codes, the voyage is not free of dangers. Villaverde sees himself as a kind of Knight of the Round Table (the Delmonte circle) searching for the Holy Grail (nationhood). These dangers will be described as tests or rituals which the hero will have to take on in order to be recognized as no longer a descendant of Spanish colonists but rather as a Cuban. Also, as we will see, Excursión a Vueltabajo is an anthropological voyage; a voyage of investigation into the culture of the Other, the peasant as well as the black slave, with the intent of appropriation. But unlike the implacable taking over characteristic of the Spanish colonization, with its homogenizing and repressive nature, the movement from Havana to Vueltabajo does not symbolize domination of the Other, but rather the study of its culture in order to integrate it, as a difference, into the emerging system of Cuba's national culture. We will also see that Villaverde's narrative has a socioeconomic

objective. To a plantation economy oriented toward covering the map of Cuba with African slaves and sugar, Villaverde counterpoises the reforming project of the Delmonte circle, that is, diversifying the agricultural production, gradually getting rid of slavery and making the former slave a subject of the Cuban nation, if indeed a second-class one, since the group was not free on racist ideas.

The narrative's legendary character can be seen already at the text's beginning. "Just past the Tumba, the last parcel of earth that is flat and covered with sugar cane, a border put there by Nature, the traveler's eyes get lost with sadness and *mélancholy* wandering over the trunks of enormous trees, the tangles, the promontory cliffs." La Tumba (the grave in English) is the first threshold; it separates wild Nature from the domesticated; the straight road from the labyrinth, the light from the shadow. Beyond this threshold (or the hero's first initiation, according to the double meaning that this symbol carries), time changes into non-linear mythic space.

After a couple of descriptive passages, a black man appears in the role of a magical character, or rather, as Hermes. His dual nature (benevolent/malevolent) is confirmed immediately by Villaverde. "His *phísionomy*, when examined slowly, was the happiest that has ever been seen: eyes round and dancing, wide forehead, prominent cheekbones, dark skin; all of this subject to being transformed into a severe, hard face." This mercurial black man, who walks the forest paths with his staff, carrying a basket on his head with fruits to sell, is in fact a Test. Villaverde

passes it by greeting him amiably and offering him a silver coin. In exchange, the black Hermes leads him to the second Gate, a tavern called San Salvador (St. Savior). Now then, a reader who is familiar with Afro-Cuban beliefs will see in this black man, not just Hermes, but also Eleguá, the deity of Yoruba origin whose domains are voyages, commerce, transitional spaces, roads and doors. Furthermore, Eleguá is the only god in the Yoruba pantheon who can communicate with the Creator, and therefore, like Hermes, he is the bearer of the Word, of the message, of knowledge; he is the interpreter of that which remains obscure; he is, in himself, that which is (re)vealed. And so, we might say that Villaverde goes after two things in introducing this character: first, the bringing to the national culture of a component that came from Africa and that had been marginalized for centuries; second, passing successfully the Test that the encounter entails, legitimating himself as a member of the Delmonte circle, that is, as a knight of an order or lodge that is working toward the construction of a Cuban nation.

Before one gets to the San Salvador tavern there is a barrier in the road, that is, the second threshold. This barrier is guarded by a gate-keeper. In the narrative, such a person is characterized as an old slave, sick and repulsive-looking: "He came forth to open up for us, with his face daubed with soot, with naked shoulders and bare belly, from which its deformed navel stuck out like a wart, and limping with a leg whose shin was wrapped in a rags." From this description, it is easy for a Cuban reader to identify Babalú-Ayé, the orisha of disease who,

in the syncretic cult of santería is represented as Lazarus, the leprous beggar from the New Testament who is the main character in the parable of the Rich Man. The magical quality of the situation is underlined by Villaverde: "My traveling companion (that is Eleguá) approached him in greeting; I passed on by, because I could now see the San Salvador tavern. On going under its roof, the same young black man with the basket appeared to hold my stirrup while I dismounted. His sudden appearance, when I had left off conversing with him a half a league back, couldn't help but surprise me." What has happened is that Eleguá, Villaverde's protector, has asked Babalú-Ayé to let his protegé go by. With this achieved, he flies to await him by the tavern and to assure him that he can count on his help, that he is the chosen hero.

In the tavern, Villaverde meets a muleskinner, with whom he eats lunch and holds a long conversation about possible roads to take. But this new traveling companion, as we will soon see, is a false hero within the ideological perspective of the Delmonte circle, since he represents the interests of slavery and apartheid. His antagonism toward blacks will take him along the road that does not lead to Cubanness; furthermore, just like those who do not pass the tests of myths and fairy tales, the false hero will be punished. It is interesting to note that for the muleskinner it does not suffice that he is a guajiro, a peasant, to enable him to inhabit the space of the nation. This space, according to the agenda of the Delmonte circle, must be a place where the black man turns into a citizen. At any rate, on

reaching the third threshold --the fence of a ranch named Cuzco-- the muleskinner mistreats a slave who works as gate-keeper. The quarreling is produced when the muleskinner finds in the Black man's hut some arms and objects left there by a runaway slave the night before. On this occasion the gate-keeper is characterized as the orisha Changó: "Dressed in a bright red flannel shirt, a cap of the same on his head in the shape of a Spanish montera and a kind of leather sandals; gay and vivacious as a flame, he opened the barrier making a lot of noise." Inside the hut there are gourds of firewater, a bonfire and a steel-tipped javelin. Now then, the color red, the dress and the peculiar shape of the hat, the Negro's gay and vivacious personality, the fire, the alcoholic drink and the arms are attributes of Changó. This oricha, very popular in Cuba, is a fearsome warrior and, at the same time, a great drinker and womanizer who likes fun and games; he is the lord of the dance, of lightning and fire. It is easy to see that the gate-keeper and the runaway slave are the same entity. The hut is shared by both and their attributes complement each other to make up the figure of Changó. So when the muleskinner strikes the gate-keeper, he is also attacking the fearsome Changó.

When Villaverde protects the black man from the muleskinner's blows, he gains his favor, that is, he passes the third test and is rewarded with the warning that he ought not to take the road that passes near la Peña Blanca (the White Boulder), words that the Negro murmurs into Villaverde's ear. Further on, the muleskinner pays no attention to Villaverde's

words and takes the wrong path, the one going by the White Boulder, an icon that refers to a skeleton, to death. The next day his lifeless body will be found at that place, the presumption being that he has been killed by a runaway slave --in fact he has been killed by Changó. Notice that, as is often the case in fairy tales and in romances of chivalry, the seeker, in this case Villaverde, has successfully passed three tests, each of them represented as a santería oricha.

The fact that the muleskinner is killed by a fugitive slave is a clear reference to a possible slave revolt. Keep in mind that the reforming group argued that, in failing to suppress the slave trade, Cuba invited the risk of a bloody rebellion like the one that took place in the French colony of Saint-Domingue; more than that, it ran the risk of becoming an independent nation run by illiterate people of color. The message of the muleskinner incident could not be clearer: if one continues to enslave the blacks, they will wreak their vengeance on us, the whites; therefore, if we wish to build a Cuban nation, it will have to bring together both whites and blacks.

Following this meaningful passage, Villaverde finally gets to the little town of San Diego de Núñez, that is, to his origins. We're dealing with a settlement of only one street situated on the slope of the Los Organos range. San Diego de Núñez's economy is not like that of the province's north coast, where you would find the bays of Cabañas and Bahía Honda; that is ports of the so-called "Cuba grande" ("greater Cuba"), that of the sugar mill, that which imports slaves and looks toward

external markets, toward exporting, outward. In spite of its proximity to those ports, the town has kept separate from the "greater Cuba", subsisting precariously with an economy based on livestock and with only a land connection to Havana. San Diego de Núñez inscribes itself then within the so-called "Cuba chiquita" ("little Cuba"), the Cuba that does not produce sugar, that lives from the fruits of the earth and looks toward the past. It was from this "little Cuba" that the "greater Cuba" emerged, as Villaverde illustrates: ^{Angos} "When they first started building the fifteen mills and twenty-two coffee plantations that now make up the region's wealth, it might well have been believed that the town would progress, but since shortly thereafter each one of the plantations set itself up in a separate civil and political jurisdiction, with its stores stocked with all that's needed for living, such as tailor shops and shoe shops, doctors, pharmacies, and churches, to which the priest could bring God's word; the town wasn't needed for a damn thing any more, and they left it to its own fate."

At one end of San Diego de Núñez there still can be found the ruins of a great cedar house, called "la Casa Grande" ("The Big House") by the locals; a hardwood cross still stands before it. The Big House was the first thing built at the place. There used to live a person of Biblical type whom Villaverde calls the Patriarch. This man, with no name and no past, came to the place when those forest reaches still belonged to no one. After felling the trees and beginning to cultivate the earth, the Patriarch engendered a big family of settlers. Villaverde narrates the

epoch of decadence and dissolution of the clan: ¶When they began to marry among themselves, to graft and intertwine in a single family, they came across the need to divide up and the bitterness of separation. This tribe of Jacob began to spill out among the mountains, forming several families. Among them there were, nevertheless, those who no matter that they knew better, fell into the hands of litigators, for which they went to the capital in order to settle matters of inheritance. To pay for the legal costs they had to put up for sale I don't know how much land, the only money they had to pay with... They sold off to whatever buyers shoed up; each one tried to grab the biggest portion; in the end, having sold more than they had, you can imagine the mess that followed... It must be that the wrath of God, uttered in the solemn words of Scripture, had fallen on the heads of this chosen tribe... ¶ Finally, Villaverde closes this paragraph by referring to the owners of the new plantations, the makers of the "greater Cuba": ¶other tribes, other families, other men, have come to populate, to raze the earth and destroy the woodlands above which so many times, along with the forest birds, the Patriarch's children celebrated the coming of the light. ¶

Such is the version of origins that Villaverde offers: a kind of mythic clan that lived from the fruits of the earth, in harmony with nature. Their natural right of possession is signified by the cross stuck into the earth; the upright indicating the patriarchal relationship, the crossbar the horizontal relationship of economic collaboration that united the extended family. Below these axes is the earth, one and

indivisible. The Big House is the original space of Cubanness, that of the "little Cuba"; Cuba before the arrival of the Plantation. It is also the cedar arch built by the Patriarch for the chosen tribe. In this mythic time there are no differences, the tribe is one, the house is one, the cross is one, the land is one, nature is one, and it all fits together with the harmony that the Logos expresses. The Punishment occurs because of the greed of those who try to divide up the earth for their own gain; then the Expulsion comes, ordered by the Patriarch who watches from Heaven. Havana is Babylon; there one lives in confusion. The tribe had come to it looking toward a juridical proceeding to legalize the division of the Patriarch's legacy. But the law of Havana is not the true Law, but rather a string of twisting entanglements that turn against the tribe. In the end, the slaveholding Havana planters take hold of the Legacy and the tribe is dispersed; "Little Cuba" is displaced by "Greater Cuba".

Villaverde's next step is to visit the tribe's only survivor, don Tiburcio, whom he also calls "Patriarch". But we're dealing here with a blind old man (that is, symbolically castrated). The encounter has a dual function. In the first place Villaverde is recognized by the worn-out patriarch as his inheritor.: ¶ He lifted up his head, he fixed his white and lightless eyes on mine... --No, don't tell me. I know who you are... Give me a hug! I, who saw your birth, who carried you so many times in these arms that are now thin and weak, who saw you playing with my dead child... ¶ In the second place, thanks to this legitimating encounter, Villaverde experiences and takes

possession of Cubanness at the very place of its origin. Let's take a look: don Tiburcio lets himself be led by Villaverde to the top of a mountain from which one can see the entire region. Once there, Villaverde enumerates the towns that can be seen, the ranges and the forests, the coffee plantations and the sugar mills, the rivers and the roads, the earth and sky. The act of naming can be seen as a ritual of possession of the vast landscape, that is, the earth and nature according to the codes of both "greater Cuba" and "little Cuba". Immediately afterwards, comes the symbolic wedding of Villaverde and the fairy-like daughters of Cubanness: "At this point we heard the hubbub and the noise of the young maidens, running through the bushes and paths. The forest clearing in which the old man and I were talking, was a fairly wide circle; so that the rapid coming together of those heads, crowned with flowers, their clothes covered in thistles, their faces scratched, could not fail to draw a shout of joy from me. Their mouths filled with guavas and other country fruits, they made a noise that was so excited that I called them to account for their gluttony... Animated with such good humor, we all, women, men and dogs, went down to the houses... We entered the town at the hour when the candles were lighted... In the ruins of the Big House, we shared the fruits that had been left."

With power invested in him by the patriarch, all of Cuban nature now belongs to Villaverde --women, men, trees, fruits, animals. He has come to possess it through a legitimate transferral of power, a second founding. In the rest of the

story, Villaverde draws a wide and bucolic picture of Vueltabajo, he describes minutely its agricultural nature, and tells us about the simple life of country people, of their picturesque customs. He also narrates an incident in which a black man slave saves a white guajiro from drowning in a river, which can be taken as a metaphor for racial reconciliation. The voyage ends with the patriarch's farewell visit, now at the point of death.

The text of Excursión a Vueltabajo was published for the first time in El Album, one of the magazines of the Delmonte circle. Since that time it has remained as one of the major Cuban narratives. In 1938, exactly one hundred years later, I had the chance to read a fragment of the work in my second-grade reader.

In 1842 Villaverde wrote another Excursión a Vueltabajo, this one considerably longer, although toward the same ends. The need to take voyages toward places of origin speaks of the real impossibility of the traveler's reaching his goal, whether this be the Self, the Other, the here or the there. Then to write about Cubanness is to write about the search for Cubanness; to revisit time and again the different roads that lead to its impossible center. For Villaverde --also for Carpentier in his Viaje a la semilla (Journey to the Source)-- such a center is a house in ruins, always about to disappear, always in the midst of things. And so, each visit can be seen as a failed act of reconstitution.

Now, in this second part of my paper, I'll talk a little about what I call creolization on the Caribbean-diaspora stage, just a couple of pages. You don't have to go to the Caribbean to see it. We are all familiar with the fact that there is a new diaspora going on. I am speaking of the Caribbean diaspora that, for several decades, has been launching increasing numbers of Caribbeans in the direction of Europe and the United States.

At present the U.S. population with a Latino background is around 40 millions, and a substantial number of them have Caribbean origins, particularly in the cities of New York, Los Angeles and Miami. I'll quote from John Storm Roberts' Latin

Jazz:

Starting in the 1930's, these immigrants were to provide an infrastructure for U.S.-based Cuban and Puerto Rican music that proved enormously important. Thanks in part to their presence, what might otherwise merely have been another Latin ripple would become a riptide that eventually transformed jazz in ways that are still not fully recognized.

Speaking only about Cuban musical instruments and rhythms, we know that clave, maracas, güiro, cencerro and bongó, along with the son and the conga rhythms, were introduced in the U.S. by Cuban musicians during the 1930's. The conga drum was introduced in the early 40's, and both the mambo and the cha-cha-cha rhythms became popular in the mid 40's and 50's, respectively. Based on these introductions, during the 1960s

emerges an outstanding example of Caribbean popular music in New York City: salsa..., still danced today all over the world. How to define salsa? I would say, a son beat played by a section of Cuban percussion, with the addition of a trombone section, as first arranged by Puerto Rican Mon Rivera using the 1950s trombone duets of J. J. Johnson and Kai Winding, two well-known jazz musicians. In other words, with salsa we have the coming together of the set of Afro-Cuban instruments and beats that originally gave birth to Cuba's national music, with Mon Rivera's and Eddy Palmieri's arrangements for a set of European instruments played according to jazz, a kind of American music influenced mostly by European and African elements. It is easy to see that here, the phenomenon we call creolization has been upgraded in terms of both its density and its complexity thanks to the Caribbean diaspora. In brief, due to the action of immigration, desire, and chance, that that once was strictly Afro-Cuban, is now Latino music.

I would like to stress another example. We already saw how the coming together of Yoruba beliefs and Roman Catholicism contributed to the emergence of Cuban santería. Well, thanks to Cuban immigration a Santería Church has been legally founded in the U.S. under the name of Yoruba Church. Needless to say, its founder and leading figure is a Cuban-American. Because many of the ritual objects --such as shells, feathers, plants, roots and fruits-- that were used in Cuba are not available in the U.S., a number of new objects have replaced the old ones. Note that I say "the old ones", not the original ones. The same pattern of

replacement also occurred in Cuba when Yoruba slaves noticed that a number of sacred objects belonging to Africa's flora and fauna were not available in Cuba. And so, as it happened with salsa, we have a religion originated in Africa that eventually became Afro-Cuban because of the African diaspora, and now, centuries later, is becoming a Latino religion because of the impact of Cuban immigration on the sociocultural fabric of the United States.