



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2012

Cartographies de l'Amérique / Histoires d'esclaves

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6147>

DOI : [10.4000/transatlantica.6147](https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6147)

ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur

AFEA

Référence électronique

Peter Hulme, « American Tropics », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2012, mis en ligne le 21 juin 2013, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6147> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6147>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.



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American Tropics

Peter Hulme

- 1 *American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography* was a project based in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex between 2006 and 2011. It involved seven people—three academics, a post-doctoral researcher, two PhD students, and an administrator—and was funded by the UK Art and Humanities Research Council. The results of the project are still in the process of being published. The participants all came from a literary background and the thrust of the project was to use a geographical approach to present a new way of writing American literary history, one which would be less in thrall to national stories. Mapping was important to us because of the ways in which maps encourage—or discourage—certain ways of seeing places and regions.
- 2 Important to the project's background is that for the nearly fifty years of its existence Essex has specialised in both US and Latin American Studies. One significant strand of that Americanist work was Gordon Brotherston's on indigenous American cultures, not a subject easily susceptible to chopping into "US" and "Latin American" parts. Brotherston's work—in particular *Book of the Fourth World*—certainly encouraged his younger colleagues to think continentally about America, or at the very least to question anachronistic ways of using geographical or national nomenclature. So, when several of us were thinking of starting a project together, it seemed natural to try to visualise a new and larger framework to allow us to connect our varied interests—which would conventionally have been thought of as the US South, the Caribbean, and Latin America.
- 3 Our initial approach was both pragmatic and theoretical. Since our US interests were in the South and our Latin American interests in Colombia and Venezuela, it made sense to contemplate an area which would link these places with the islands of the Caribbean and which would cross existing national and linguistic frontiers. We hit upon 'American Tropics' as a general designation, attracted both the geographical term, which offered some rough grounding, and by the cultural work already available on the significance of the tropics (for example, Driver and Martins). We thought of this area as stretching "from Charleston to Bahia", though one of the books emerging from the

project (containing some of the papers from the project's conference) is entitled "from New York to Rio" in recognition of the fact that patterns of migration make it impossible to fix the co-ordinates of the area in stone. The idea of the plantation, and the literature surrounding it, became for us an important way of stressing the historical dimensions of the area: the environment made available the possibility of growing certain crops which, in the period since 1500, and in the circumstances of European colonial expansion, led to the plantation system and the associated slave trade—all elements that helped give our area its various cultural specificities (Curtin; Wagley).

- 4 We also took inspiration from Édouard Glissant's reference in *Le discours antillais* (427) to the Caribbean as "the estuary of the Americas," the topographical specificity of an area of great rivers—the Mississippi, the Orinoco, the Amazon—hinting at a cultural identity based upon flow and convergence as goods and people travel up and down those river-systems deep into continental America northwards and southwards to and from the four corners of the American Tropics.
- 5 Our other—related but more theoretical—starting point was a dissatisfaction with conventional literary histories. Most literary histories are written in lockstep with national stories. It is perfectly clear what such co-ordination brings to nationalism: it makes that national story deeper and longer, more rooted in its territory. It is less clear that literary history benefits. For a start many of the books herded into such national literary histories were written long before these nations ever existed: to read, say, the writings of Christopher Columbus as part of US literature—as sometimes happens—is to misplace the historical and geographical co-ordinates necessary to understand Columbus. But even within the modern era, dominated by nation-states, literature itself has rarely been disciplined by national borders. Other ways of organising can tell different stories, which can perhaps persuade us to look at texts in different ways, perhaps more pertinent to a transculturated American reality.
- 6 Within our given area, we needed to use our individual expertises to work on particular sub-projects but, knowing that we did not want to just reproduce national literary histories, we tried to envisage different approaches, coming up with three (for our six sub-projects). One approach is *regional* inasmuch as it takes one part of a larger national unit and uses that region to refocus the story. So my own book is about Oriente, the eastern quarter of the island of Cuba, distant from the national capital in Havana, and Jak Peake's is on western Trinidad, again slightly skewing the national perspective. A second approach is *focal*, concentrating on writing about one small place over a longish period of time, as with Owen Robinson's work on the city of New Orleans or Leanne Haynes's PhD thesis, which looked at the writing from St Lucia, a nation-state usually considered too small to even merit a national literary history, with its most important writer, Derek Walcott, hived off into a West Indian or even global poetic canon: his work looks rather different, if no less interesting, when read alongside his local contemporaries. And the third approach is *cross-border*, identifying a significant region which straddles nation-states, as in Maria Cristina Fumagalli's work on the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, or Lesley Wylie's on the Putumayo, a riverine region which covers areas of Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia.
- 7 As with any research project, we needed our parameters and our material to dictate the approaches we would take, but we found that the American Tropics area held water in a number of ways. Our framework certainly changed our sense of literary history.

Different writers came to prominence, ones perhaps that within a national literary history had seemed of merely “local” or “provincial” import, such as George Washington Cable. Some writers of course have never appeared as part of a national literary history because they did not belong to the right nation, but our attention to place meant that we never asked to see a writer’s passport, with the result that travel writers and other visitors took on particular significance: an important strand of the writing about Oriente, for example, comes from US journalists such as Stephen Crane, Harry Scovel, Josephine Herbst, and Herbert Matthews. Of particular interest are the writers who appear in different parts of our area, giving them a prominence again ignored in national stories. Born in Jamaica, W. Adolphe Roberts never features as a US writer, and as somebody who became a US citizen he hardly ever features as a Jamaican writer. But as the author of a rather good novel set in Oriente during the Cuban war of independence, of three historical novels set in nineteenth-century New Orleans, and of the first history of the Caribbean as a region, he suddenly starts to look interesting and significant.

- 8 Each place obviously has its own history. We were all led to focus on different historical moments as having particular significance for our particular places, but we all also ended up giving consideration to the present day as offering renewed evidence of the importance of the region, if not always for savoury reasons—the Putumayo being significant for the global drug trade, Oriente for being the site of the Guantánamo Bay detention camps, New Orleans and Haiti/Dominican Republic hitting the news for the disasters of Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake.
- 9 Given the geographical focus of the project, we were all inevitably drawn to existing writing about place, from the older theoretical work of Bachelard and Lefebvre through cultural geography (Cosgrove and Daniels; Duncan) to the philosophical inquiries of Edward Casey—who proved a particular inspiration. As always happens, we found that other scholars were thinking along parallel lines (Adams et al., Deloughrey et al., Goudie, Handley, Kumar Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, Kutzinski, Levander and Levine, Smith and Cohn).



Fig. 1 The Windward Passage

- 10 There are two particular ways in which mapping has been important to the project. The grain of national literary histories has taken a course parallel to that of cartographical traditions: most maps are framed by national borders. We have all been involved in an attempt to reframe: to draw boundaries in different places so as to direct attention otherwise. This is remarkably difficult when operating with existing maps, even historical ones. The best option, as with this first example (fig. 1), is to take an areal map, in this case of the Caribbean islands, and to draw a new frame, in this case one which concentrates attention on the maritime channels between islands and on the parts of the islands which these channels serve to connect as much as to separate. So, focussing the eye and mind in this way on the relationship between south-eastern Cuba and northern Jamaica encourages an attention to the historical and literary links between these places—which turn out to be multiple (for example, Lipman, Stubbs).



Fig. 2 A map of Trinidad and the Gulf of Paria from Arent Roggeveen's 1675 sea atlas, *Het Eerste Deel Van Het Brandende Veen* [The First Part of the Burning Fen]



Fig. 3 Frontispiece to Thomas Barbour, *A Naturalist in Cuba*

- 11 The other related possibility inherent within the cartographical imagination is defamiliarisation. Maps—though historical and conventional objects—tend to form our view of how things actually are, as if north really were always at the top, as if national boundaries were actually inscribed into the landscape. As Australians have long been aware, just turning the map upside down can make everything look very different indeed. This early chart (fig. 2) of the southeast Caribbean (Trinidad, Tobago, Grenada and Margarita) and Venezuela, which featured in a rare seventeenth-century Dutch sea

atlas is a prominent example. Here, the map's inversion, which places south at the top, emphasises the relationship between the southeast crescent of the Caribbean archipelago and the arc of Venezuela's eastern coast; Trinidad appears almost connected to the South American mainland, like a not-so-distant fragment of the continent, separated on its western coast by the estuarine Gulf of Paria and Orinoco. The sketch map (fig. 3) which appeared as the frontispiece to Thomas Barbour's *A Naturalist in Cuba* offers another reorientation on traditional compass points. Cuba appears central to the peripheral continental masses to its south and north; the mountains of the Andean chain dominate the picture, towering over Florida and the keys which lurk, unusually, at the bottom of the picture. The Caribbean never quite looks the same again once you've realised that this is just as accurate a view of it as the more familiar images we all carry in our heads.

- 12 The American Tropics website: http://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/American_Tropics/index.htm
- 13 This is still operative and includes a link to the American Tropics book series with Liverpool University Press and an extensive bibliography.
- 14 Books emerging from the project, all published by Liverpool University Press:
- 15 Peter Hulme, *Cuba's Wild East: A Literary Geography of Oriente* (published 2011)
Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio, ed. Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Peter Hulme, Owen Robinson, and Lesley Wylie (forthcoming 2013)
- 16 Owen Robinson, *Myriad City: A Literary Geography of New Orleans* (forthcoming 2014)
Lesley Wylie, *Colombia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo* (forthcoming 2014)
Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *On the Edge: A Literary Geography of the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (forthcoming 2014)
- 17 Jak Peake, *Between the Bocas: A Literary Geography of Trinidad's West* (forthcoming 2014)

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