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Abstract

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The Insidious Network

**Translating the Invasive Biology of the Cuban Marabú Tree
into a Model for Radical Politics**

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2016–2017 Penn Humanities Forum

Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship

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Abstract

A species native to Africa, the marabú tree was accidentally transported to Cuba in the form of seeds the transatlantic slave trade. Since then, it has been described as a weed that hinders agricultural development of the island with its dense rhizomatic thickets. Particularly during periods of agricultural stagnation, marabú spread with ease over the colonial legacies of sugarcane monocultures, becoming an insidious threat to the utopic agrarian policies of the Castro regime. Yet this sprawl prevented erosion and extinction of native species, reconfiguring the industrialized agricultural landscape with no regard towards political and colonial paradigms. As a network woven into the landscape, the marabú tree materializes the relationships between issues of migration, environmental decay, state failure, and decolonization. Tracking references in Cuban agronomical reports from the early 19th century and Fidel and Raúl Castro's speeches, this project interprets marabú as a material-discursive system that imposes itself with a biological drive. How does marabú employ tactics of (in)visibility and insidiousness to reshape the landscape and its social, cultural, and political paradigms? How does marabú operate as an agent of dissent and resistance against totalitarian politics and colonial legacies?

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The Insidious Network

Marabú is the local name in Cuba for a species of a thorny, fast-growing woody bush or tree, also known as sicklebush, that has been described as capable of causing significant ecological and economic harm in regions where it is exotic in relation to the local flora. Marabú is native to sub-Saharan Africa, but currently there are distribution records of it in India, parts of Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean (Orwa et al., 2009). Its dense thickets and branches bearing thorn-ended twigs are long-lived, propagating with the expansion and overgrowth of its roots or with the large number of seeds that each plant produces per year, almost year-round. These seeds can remain inert in the soil for long periods, and thus marabú invades fields, wasteland, roadsides, and other idle areas with ease. Its potential for latency allows it to survive especially on highly circulated and unattended fields, aided even further by cattle that feed on its seed-bearing fruit. Its fast, dense growth makes marabú a cause of losses in agricultural production, given that its management involves frequent, heavy, and expensive work.

In Cuba, starting with recounts from the early 20th century, marabú has been recognized as a threat to agricultural development in an island that has been strongly linked historically to the plantation system and specifically to the sugarcane agroindustry. Over time, the impact of the network-like marabú has grown to contest and uproot the economic, political, and cultural paradigms that have been built into the Cuban landscape, particularly the colonial legacy of sugarcane monocultures and the failed agrarian policies of a totalitarian state. Here I want to ask, how has the insidious marabú translated its biological drive to survive into stealthy tactics that upset these rigid structures of oppression deep-rooted into the landscape? How do invasiveness and

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opportunism become emancipating tools in a time when it has become increasingly clear that the larger narratives of crisis and oppression are deeply entangled?

An example of this revision of icons dismissed as treacherous and opportunist is the case of the figure of La Malinche and its shifting interpretations in Chicana feminist discourse of the last half century. La Malinche was a nahua indigenous woman from the Mexican Gulf Coast, who, during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, acted as an interpreter, advisor, lover, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. She was one of 20 women slaves given to the Spaniards by the natives in 1519. In Mexico today, her iconically potent figure has given rise to the term ‘malinchista’, referring to a disloyal countryperson. In conflicting ways, she is understood as the embodiment of treachery or the quintessential victim. Yet, Chicana writer Cordelia Candelaria reads the figure of La Malinche ‘as an account of the prototypical Chicana feminist’ (Taylor 2008). Candelaria’s approach refuses to perpetuate the derogatory depiction of La Malinche as a source of shame, but instead revalues her as a positive role model for the Chicana writer. Naomi Quiñonez writes, ‘The role of first wave Chicana writers may be compared to that of La Malinche, who, as interpreter during the conquest, possessed the skill of adaptation during a time of intense cultural upheaval’ (2002). Here the figure of La Malinche is viewed as emblematic of the Chicana writer in her role as postcolonial interpreter. This practice of revising vilified figures such as La Malinche is of the postcolonial kind, in terms of recuperating indigenous heritage and acknowledging the postcolonial subject as one that embodies the process of interpreting.

With respect to marabú, a revaluation of its role in the Cuban landscape and popular imagination is an analogous project. However, it differs from the figure of La

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Malinche in that marabú becomes a postcolonial subject by challenging notions of indigeneity and nativity. First of all, Cuban marabú has undergone speciation to a certain extent, by diverging biologically from its African and Indian counterparts. Though the current understanding is that marabú was introduced to the island in the 18th century, for a long time there have been speculations about the dynamics of its arrival and, more importantly, the modalities by which it has spread across the territory.

Juan Roig y Mesa, one of Cuba's prominent agronomists of the 20th century, compiled in a 1915 bulletin of Cuba's Agronomical Experimental Station the theories and recommendations regarding the origin and management of marabú at the time, along with an in-depth botanical study of the tree and its impact on agriculture (1915). Here Roig y Mesa indicates that no previous recount of the Caribbean flora makes any mention of marabú, but he gathers a couple of popular versions that locate its introduction to the island towards the end of the 19th century. According to these, marabú was most likely imported accidentally with animals that ingest its fruits but do not digest its seeds, specifically in the guts of Spanish horses during the Cuban War of Independence in 1895, or with foreign cattle that was introduced to replenish farms after the 1868 war against Spain. Both versions find supporting evidence in that marabú spread mainly throughout the farmlands close to paths, roads, and river regions, along which horses and cattle would scatter the seeds. In this agronomical bulletin, Roig y Mesa emphasizes that these mechanisms of propagation grant the marabú tree a strong damaging power over farmlands. It halts all agricultural production on the land by assembling into thickets and forests so dense that it suppresses any surrounding plants that oppose its expansion, taking possession of the fields from which it can hardly be eradicated. The invaded lands

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cannot be used for animal husbandry, since the close-knit thorny branches block the cattle from pacing through them, and any attempt to rip out the deep roots requires major labor-intensive efforts. The characterization of marabú as a predominantly harmful species is aggravated by its foreign origin, yielding a notion of invasiveness that is still in effect in the Cuban folklore. The saying “Eres más malo que el marabú” (You are more evil or mischievous than marabú), for instance, condenses this perception.

Even beyond farmers and any other groups that have been directly impacted by marabú, this invasive figure played a notorious role in the public sphere, especially after the Cuban Revolution that ended in 1959. As the new leader of the Cuban revolutionary regime, Fidel Castro established agriculture as a pillar for national development with a series of agrarian reforms that restructured the previous land ownership practices. During the colonial period and up to the Revolution, Cuba had been an appropriate site for sugar cane farming, and in fact, sugar was the main export, given the abundance of forests for wood and fuel extraction and the availability of fertile lands. The plantation system had distributed the farmlands throughout a reduced number of wealthy property owners, so in 1959 the new regime gave out real estate deeds to 100,000 farmers, but kept about 40% of the land for government tenance and use (Álvarez, 2004). The newly distributed land seemed ready for an agricultural movement that embodied the “spirit of work, the creative spirit of the revolution,” as Fidel Castro announced in a 1967 speech. In this respect, marabú was an obstacle towards progress that the revolutionary communal labor would overcome. In the same speech, Castro promised that “within a 12-month period, not a single marabú bush will be left; farming, not just around the capital, but also in the

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interior of the province, will change considerably, for some 150,000 acres are to be planted with starchy vegetables next year” (Castro Ruz, F.A., 1967).

In 1975, land ownership was reconfigured once more, and the “cooperative” system was established to stimulate agricultural development. Farmers would work on government-owned fields, so state property during this period amounted to 75% of the land, leading to low efficiency, scarcity of goods, and high prices (Álvarez, 2004). During the Cold War, the Cuban economy was still largely dependent on the sugar industry through exports and trades particularly with the Soviet Union, which offered oil supplies in exchange for sugar.

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba entered the so-called “Special Period,” a time of hardship defined by the scarcity of food and other goods due to the trading halt, in addition to the US embargo. The lack of oil and fuel triggered the decline of the sugar agroindustry, which controlled the majority of farmlands. By 2007, after over 15 years of scarcity, 60% of the sugar mills were closed or dismantled, and this long period of idle lands allowed marabú to continue spreading over between 50-70% of cultivable fields (Pérez-López and Álvarez, 2005). In Raul Castro’s speech on July 26, 2007 for the anniversary of the revolutionary movement, he publicly acknowledged the shortcomings on agricultural progress and bureaucratic attitudes towards land distribution. Here in this address to the nation, the figure of marabú made an entrance once again. After mentioning the rising prices of oil, rice, powdered milk, and other imported goods that the government had difficulty in purchasing, Castro spoke with a hint of powerlessness, “I am talking about products that can be made here; also, I find that there is enough land; also, I find that, with the generosity of last year’s and this May 2017.

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year's rain, I took advantage of having come here by land in order to see that everything is green and beautiful, but the most beautiful, what stood out the most to my eyes, was the beauty of the marabú trees growing all along the highway" (Castro Ruz, R., 2014). Here, in this section of his half-planned, half-improvised speech on the anniversary of the Revolution, Castro comes to realize the failure of the agrarian reforms that were meant to ensure the success of the Revolution. The Cuban land and weather might be ideal to farm and grow "the green and beautiful," but upon closer inspection, marabú appears from within the nondescript lush vegetation as a marker of state failure. It could easily be mistaken for any other tree; however, it is the insidiousness at the threshold of visibility that turns marabú into a threat to the political establishment, a reminder to Castro and the public that the utopian ideologies that his regime was founded upon cannot justify its totalitarian approach to policymaking.

Stealth, insidiousness, and dispersion are the mechanisms by which marabú imposes itself as a political agent that embodies the complex dynamics of colonialism, migration, environmental decay, and state failure. As a biological agent, it seems to move forward with an unstoppable drive that disregards any natural, political, or geographic enclosures, with an intrusive intelligence encoded all the way down to the molecular level. On the landscape, it uproots the colonial legacies of sugarcane monocultures by pushing the political regime away from this industry, yet it has aggravated the economic hardship of the Cuban community. In being pervasive, deep-rooted, and stealthy, marabú becomes a decolonial, radical agent that threatens the political rhetoric in place and contests the notion of being invasive.

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In the case of marabú, to be invasive is to protest against long-held political, economic, and cultural paradigms. The invasive claims space for itself, demonstrating its power, or alternatively, its resistance to power. However, marabú operates at different timescales by other means. As opposed to a conventional protest, it focuses on pervasiveness rather than visibility, on scattering rather than gathering. In relation to this expanding notion of the political, scholar Jane Bennett proposes that the field of political action is a kind of ecology; publics are groups of bodies with the capacity of affect and be affected, including even the nonhuman and the nonorganic (2010). As a provocation, Bennett asks, how can communication among different political agents and publics proceed when many members are nonlinguistic? How can humans learn to hear or enhance our receptivity to propositions not expressed in words? In attuning one's receptivity to the propositions of marabú. it offers alternative ways to protest and exert the ability to be political.

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