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## MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE: THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE

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Of this volume's three key terms—also used in the title of the conference on which the volume is based—the one given most emphasis in the present essay is *geography*. This is partly because geography has a smaller presence within comparative literary studies than does translation, so it perhaps needs more help to raise its profile, but is mostly because at Essex I have recently been involved in a collaborative scheme called *American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography*, and the essay draws on my research for this project. *Translation* will tend to feature only in its first meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “transference; removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another”, and so, by extension, translation as the transfer of writing from one place or one context to another. The third term, *literature*, will be implicitly questioned by what I have to say since one element of my argument is that within new postcolonial or transnational frameworks, we need to extend our sense of what counts as ‘literature’, implying that, in particular, we need to find better ways of discussing non-fictional writing of various kinds.

### American Tropics

*American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography* was a funded research project at the University of Essex, which ran from October 2006 to September 2011.<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests, this project aimed to approach literary history in a different way, via literary *geography*, its starting point being the perception that literary history still tends to be in too great a thrall to nationalist agendas of various kinds. Geography—though never

offering a neutral grid—can at least suggest alternative organisations of material, alternative narratives.

As a putative *area*, American Tropics corresponds approximately to what is sometimes called the culture-sphere of ‘Plantation-America’, basically the region of the American continent in which the plantation model—slave labour used to grow crops such as sugar, coffee, cotton—dominated economic and cultural development over the colonial period: very roughly the area which covers the south of the USA, the Atlantic coast of Central America, the islands of the Caribbean, and the north-eastern part of South America (see Wagley 1960, Best 1968, Mandel 1972). Alternative terms might be ‘the Extended Caribbean’ (Wallerstein 1980: 103) or ‘the estuary of the Americas’, the term employed by the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant because it’s where the continent’s three great rivers—the Mississippi, the Orinoco, and the Amazon—meet the Atlantic (Glissant 1981, 249). This area shares a history in which the dominant fact is the arrival of millions of white Europeans and black Africans (with devastating impact for indigenous populations); it shares an environment which is tropical or sub-tropical; and it shares a socio-economic model (the plantation), whose effects lasted at least well into the twentieth century. So an anthropological geography provides a new sense of area, rather different from anything currently operative within comparative literary studies, and perhaps particularly significant because it crosses several national and linguistic frontiers. Instead, the area has cultural and historical logics, which are based on—and inseparable from—a geographical or environmental logic.

Within the American Tropics area, six of us at Essex worked on different *regions*, using that term to suggest a sub-area with a certain cultural identity which is not synonymous with a national identity; in other words trying to take geographical terminology seriously as a way of organising literary analysis. In theoretical terms, then, the *American Tropics* project can roughly be thought of as an attempt to return *place* and *region* to the centre of literary studies.<sup>2</sup> Two points of particular importance follow from this. If place determines, then the nationality and language of the writers involved are secondary: subject matter is paramount. Attention to place never asks to see a passport. Writers are relevant because they’ve written *about* a place, not because of where they themselves happen to come from. And a focus on place will be particularly attentive to landscape in its widest sense, to the meanings of place, whether natural or architectural. It’s always interested in local meanings.

The region I've been working on is Oriente, the easternmost part of Cuba, roughly a quarter of the island's total area. Cuba's Oriente is distinguished by a mountainous terrain, its distance from centres of power, an under-developed economy, and a history of social and political unrest (see, for example, Jerez Villareal 1960 and Pérez de la Riva 2004, 189-208). For all these reasons its population has often been looked down upon from the metropolis: Havana is at the other (western) end of the island. At the same time, however, Oriente has exercised a magnetic pull on the imaginations of those elsewhere in Cuba and outside the country. It was, of course, within Oriente, in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, that the Cuban Revolution was incubated.

## Cuba West and East

Postcolonial writing is intimately connected to postcolonial geography. In general terms what I mean by that is that because the colonising country usually concentrates power in one place, the capital city where its colonial administration is located, the postcolonial nation often has an ambivalent relationship to that city as it proceeds to occupy the buildings associated with the departing colonial power. There are obviously many variants here, such as the size of the country, how much violence was involved in the gaining of independence, and the nature of the postcolonial government itself. In larger countries, such as the USA, for example, or Brazil or Australia, independence is marked by the building of a *new* capital city. In smaller countries such as Cuba the capital remains the same but existing regional differences might be exacerbated, especially if the impetus towards independence had been—as it so often was—located outside that capital city. So other parts of a country can easily become metonyms for the postcolonial state. The old capital city—the “head” of the state's geobody—can become ideologically displaced by other parts, other regions, which are inscribed into this role by postcolonial writing.

The Cuban case is complicated by—what at least in revolutionary discourse is seen as—the double movement towards independence: the wars at the end of the nineteenth century leading to the removal of the colonial power, Spain, followed by a neo-colonial period which came to an end in January 1959 with the triumph of the Revolution. In geographical terms, the first stage of that independence simply saw the consolidation of the city of Havana, even though the wars against Spain

had been initiated and largely fought in the east of the island. Arguably, Cuban history in the first half of the twentieth century could be read as a continuation of colonial-era divisions between the west and the east of the island. That would be an oversimplification, but there's no doubt that power and wealth continued to accumulate in Havana until 1959.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1930s Cuba has been dominated by two figures, both of whom were born and bred in Oriente, not that far from each other—Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro. They are very different figures—though perhaps not quite as different as they both thought they were; and part of that difference comes from their relationship to Havana and what it represents in Cuba. The mixed-race and self-made Batista was scorned by the Havana bourgeoisie whose interests he largely defended but who resented their dependence on his strong-arm tactics; while Castro, the well-educated son of a rich but self-made businessman, prided himself on his scorn for what Havana represented, especially in the 1950s after Batista allowed the US mafia to dominate the city. Batista was an *oriental* who never felt socially comfortable in Havana, but who adopted the life of an *habanero*. Castro, by contrast, developed a rhetoric and indeed a practice in which the occupation of Havana was an unfortunate necessity and the ideological centre of the state's geobody lay elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The Cuban Revolution redrew the imaginative map of postcolonial Cuba. Within that imaginative map the most important feature of the island is its highest mountain, Pico Turquino, at the heart of the Sierra Maestra. This essay discusses three kinds of writing from the top of that mountain.

## **With a Knapsack on his Back**

Geography was a deeply significant aspect of the early development of the Cuban Revolution. The most infamous case of literary censorship in the 1950s in Cuba concerned a book of geography. The story goes that one day in 1953 Batista discovered his children reading a new *Geography of Cuba* by a young writer called Antonio Núñez Jiménez, and was so horrified by what he saw that he quickly had all copies of the book confiscated and burned, and had the lead type used to print it melted down and turned into bullets (Batista 1964, 82). What offended Batista was the openness of the book's social and political critique, expressed in rather spare and objective language. As Núñez Jiménez later recalled:

It was my first geography text. I had intensively lived all the things I said in the book, all that terrible reality of peasant life. They were truths I had seen, that I had felt. I had lived alongside those human beings, alongside millions of hungry, mistreated, indigent, parasitic, tubercular peasants...

So there's no doubt that the geography book was destroyed essentially because of the defence I was making in it of our peasants.<sup>5</sup> (1959b, 391)

In Banes, for example, not accidentally, perhaps, where Batista had been born and raised, and where Núñez Jiménez's own father had worked, this *Geography of Cuba* noted: "The sugar industry is represented by the huge *Central Boston*, US property of the *United Fruit Sugar Co.*, which controls 3,017 *caballerías* of land, half of which it makes use of, the rest lying uncultivated" (1954, 285). Or about the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay: "It's the only place in our country where the flag of the Republic doesn't fly" (304).

The dimensions of this social critique were based on the author's attentiveness to every square mile of the island, and that attentiveness in turn was made possible only through walking. Walking is actually the hidden fourth term here, the one which connects literature, geography, and translation. It was only through Núñez Jiménez's walking that the details of rural deprivation, far from the prosperity of Havana, were brought back to the capital city to be published. As Núñez Jiménez said: "I wrote this book after covering on foot, with my knapsack on my back, the entirety of the Cuban archipelago, from the heights of Turquino to the bottom of the deepest cavern, from north to south, from the Isle of Pines to Cayo Romano" (1989, II, 354). My principal focus here is the heights of Turquino. But Núñez Jiménez was a founding member of the Cuban Speleological Society and he did also specialise in going *beneath* the surface: a different kind of Cuban underground. Speleology is hardly overt politics but, twenty years later, Fidel Castro would be explaining his national revolution by talking about how Cubans had previously been taught to scorn their own country, to look to Miami or Paris rather than inwards. By the early 1950s Núñez Jiménez was already looking inwards, scouring every square metre of the island, above and below ground.

Undeterred by the censorship of his geography book, Núñez Jiménez continued travelling and writing. In December 1956 a Havana journal published one of his essays called "Así es la Sierra Maestra" [This is the Sierra Maestra], containing a relatively neutral but coded description,

which nonetheless provoked a report from the secret police to Batista suggesting that the essay was intended to excite public interest in the insurrectional activities developing in that region, referring of course to the very recent landing of 82 insurgents led by Fidel Castro, the remnants of which were at that moment slowly establishing themselves in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra.

In fact, a few copies of the first edition of Núñez Jiménez's geography textbook had actually survived Batista's incendiary efforts in 1953. When Che Guevara reached the Sierra Maestra he asked for three books from the city: an algebra textbook, a basic history of Cuba, and a basic geography of Cuba. And he got one of these few surviving copies of Núñez Jiménez's *Geography*, which thereby became—despite Batista's best efforts—one of the key textbooks of the struggle in the Sierra. Indeed, Che may have found himself shot at by bullets made from the melted lead type used to print the copy of the very geography book he was reading. In any case, as the last decisive battle of the revolutionary campaign approached—Guevara's bold assault on Santa Clara on 27 December 1958 (which forms the climax of Part One of Steven Soderbergh's film [2008])—Che found himself joined just outside the city by a young geography professor from the university, who brought maps and diagrams to help plan the final approach to the city centre via what he called “un camino vecinal”—a back road which only locals would know: Antonio Núñez Jiménez was putting his geography into revolutionary action. For his reward Núñez Jiménez was given the title of Che's Chief of Topographical Services. A few months later, in October 1959, Editorial Lex hosted the launch of the *second* edition of the *Geography of Cuba*, already adapted to the new revolutionary educational programme (Núñez Jiménez 1959a), a launch attended by Raúl Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, which gives some sense of the status geography was given by the Revolution. Frequently updated, Núñez Jiménez's book has remained the standard geography textbook in Cuba for the last 50 years. And his articles, these travel pieces which he'd been writing since the 1940s, including “Así es la Sierra Maestra”, were collected together and published in 1963 under the title *Cuba, con la mochila al hombro* [Cuba, with his knapsack on his back].<sup>6</sup>

## **Climbing Turquino**

Núñez Jiménez wrote extensively about Pico Turquino, the highest mountain in Cuba, in the heart of the Sierra Maestra, which he first climbed with two colleagues and three guides in March 1945. Turquino is not that difficult to climb, so Núñez Jiménez was far from the first to climb it, although he was perhaps the first to politicise it. The two most significant of his accounts are the pamphlet written after his first ascent in 1945 and the account of the mass ascent on the first anniversary of the triumph of the Revolution in 1960 (Núñez Jiménez 1945 and Núñez Jiménez 1961).

In April 1915 Turquino had been climbed—apparently for the first time—by the Swedish botanist, Erik Ekman. Ekman was an important figure in the study of the natural history of the Caribbean. He had been diverted to Cuba in 1914 when on his way to Brazil, but then spent the remaining 17 years of his life in the Caribbean, making huge botanical collections—around 150,000 specimens in total. The importance of his work is still recognised in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, as well of course as in Sweden, where the Instituto Ekman was established in 1991 to develop scientific and cultural exchanges between Sweden and the Caribbean. An account of Ekman’s ascent of Turquino was published in a leading US botanical journal towards the end of 1915. But then, a few months later the same journal published a letter written to his mother in April 1860 by a 20 year-old Englishman from Essex called Frederick Ramsden, telling her of his ascent of Pico Turquino (N.T. 1916). It seemed as if the Swede had been beaten to the top of the mountain by an Englishman—and by the small matter of 55 years. To illustrate his own ascent Núñez Jiménez drew a cross-section which shows the mountain’s toponymy. Ekman had named Turquino’s two lesser peaks Cuba and Suecia [Sweden], reserving Pico Real [Royal Peak] for the summit. Núñez Jiménez honoured Ramsden with the name of a pass just short of the peak (Núñez Jiménez 1945, 32-33).

The question of priority is still disputed. Some Cuban experts think that Ramsden might have climbed a different and lower mountain, thinking it was Turquino. There are a number of peaks in the Sierra Maestra of similar height, and they’re often all covered in mist, so a mistake is certainly possible. In any case, *writing* is central to that question of priority. Ramsden’s companions in 1860 were two civil engineers and a gentleman of leisure, all probably descendants of French refugees from Haiti, along with a Swiss watchmaker, a free black, an Indian guide, and three black porters. When they got to the peak—whichever peak it was: “We drank a bottle of sauterene, brought up for the purpose—cut our

initials on the trees—wrote and signed a piece of paper, stating that we had ascended on 5 April, and put it in a bottle, which we buried, making a small heap of stones round” (N.T. 1916, 218). Nobody has ever found this bottle and its message, which would be the only conclusive proof that Ramsden had climbed Turquino.

Ekman didn’t travel alone either. There was a large Swedish colony in eastern Cuba in the early twentieth century, in a town called Bayate, and one of its established residents, Johan Nyström, who later wrote a history of the colony (1955; see also Sarusky 1999), accompanied Ekman, as did two Cuban guides. Ekman also left a message on the top of the mountain, in three languages—Spanish, English, and Swedish—in an empty bottle of Bacardi rum, beneath a pile of stones. It read as follows:

18 April 1915. There arrived here on the night of 17-18 April, the Swedish botanist Dr Erik L. Ekman, his friend J. A. Nystrom of Bayate, Oriente, the guide Regino Verdecia y Naga, from Nagua and the guide Joaquín Rodríguez, from Yara.<sup>7</sup>

This message was still there when Ekman climbed the mountain again, seven years later, in the company of three other distinguished scientists, two from the USA, one originally French but long resident in Cuba. Subsequently the message was taken to Santiago by a later climber, who left his own message, establishing a tradition which lasted for many years. The container changed, the message changed, the writers changed, but the one constant was the pile of stones under which the message was placed—always referred to as “las piedras de Ekman” [Ekman’s stones]. The messages accumulated, appropriately enough, in the Bacardí Museum in Santiago.

By the time Núñez Jiménez climbed Turquino in 1945, a degree of formality had entered the writing. He even gave his message a title, “En el techo de Cuba” [On the roof of Cuba]. It then read:

Los que suscriben, componentes de la Expedición Geográfica a Oriente, viaje que patrocina la S.E.C., dan fe por el presente documento que han llegado a este lugar, el Pico Real del Turquino, a las 11.45 del día 27 del mes de marzo del año 1945, registrando una altitud de 1,960 m. sobre el nivel del mar. [Those who sign below, members of the Geographical Expedition to Oriente, a journey sponsored by the S.E.C. (Speological Society of Cuba), testify by means of the present document that they reached this



place, the Royal Peak of Turquino, at 11.45 on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month of March, 1945, registering an altitude of 1,960 metres above sea level.]

But he also introduced a political note:

Nosotros, como hombres amantes de la libertad, hacemos desde aquí votos por el triunfo de la Democracia en su lucha contra las fuerzas esclavizadoras del Mundo. [As lovers of Liberty, we hope from here for the triumph of Democracy in its fight against the slavish forces of the world.]

Before rounding off with:

Rogamos a los que nos sigan en la excursión, que esta nota sea recogida y enviada a la Calle Villegas número 11, en la Ciudad de La Habana, lugar donde radica la Sociedad Espeleológica de Cuba. [We ask those who follow us in this ascent that this note be collected and sent to 11 Calle Villegas, in the city of Havana, home of the Speleological Society of Cuba] (Núñez Jiménez 1945, 55-56)

All the expeditionaries and the three guides then added their signatures.

In March 1945 that political message can obviously be read as supportive of the allied forces in the last year of the Second World War. Cuba had formally joined the war in 1941. But the message could equally well indicate opposition to the corrupt Cuban government of Ramón Grau which had taken power the previous year. It was in any case a harbinger of the politicisation of Turquino.

The mountain message in a bottle is a special genre. It can only be written at the top of Turquino by somebody who has climbed the mountain. Tradition quickly established that the message would be placed in a bottle—and the kind of bottle can certainly be considered part of the meaning of the message; but the message had to be found and removed and read at the bottom of the mountain, preferably within some authorised institution, before its message could be fully received and accepted. Movement of writing across earth—geographical translation—is absolutely essential to the genre. If that geographical translation doesn't happen—as it didn't with Frederick Ramsden's message—then the achievement remains open to dispute.

## The Moral High Ground

The second kind of mountain writing is very different. 1953 was the centenary of the birth of José Martí, Cuba's greatest writer and an icon of the struggle for Cuban independence. A student group in Havana approached a politically liberal doctor called Manuel Sánchez Liveira who worked in El Pilón, a small town on the southern coast of Oriente, quite near Turquino, and asked him to place a bust of Martí on top of the mountain. Martí was the towering presence of Cuban literature and symbol of the country's aspirations; Turquino would thereby *pari passu* become endowed with Martí's own attributes. They would symbolise each other and both would symbolise Cuba. Most of the arrangements were made by the doctor's daughter, Celia Sánchez Manduley, and the bust was carved by a friend of hers, Jilma Madera. After the Revolution Celia Sánchez would become, in effect, Fidel Castro's private secretary, one of the most important figures in Cuba, but in the mid-1950s she did a great deal to prepare the way for the Cuban Revolution, practically but also, as in this case, symbolically (see Álvarez Tabío 2004).

The plaque on the bust has a quotation from Martí: "Escasos, como los montes, son los hombres que saben mirar desde ellos, y sienten con entrañas de nación, o de humanidad" [Scarce as the mountains are the men who can look down from them and feel their nation, or their humanity, move inside them.] These words were written by Martí in a letter to a Dominican friend of his, Federico Henríquez y Carvajal, from the city of Montecristi, just as Martí was about to leave on his clandestine journey to Cuba to join Cuba's war of independence in 1895. In context, the words refer to Henríquez y Carvajal—though perhaps implicitly to their author as he steels himself for his return to Cuba. 25 March 1895 was one of the most important days in Martí's life as a writer. As well as this letter to Henríquez y Carvajal, he wrote "The Montecristi Manifesto" which announced the goals of the rebel forces, and also a letter of farewell to his mother.<sup>8</sup> All these documents were written in a small room in the house of Máximo Gómez, who was to become the military leader of Cuba's war of independence. Two months after writing this letter Martí was killed in combat. The words on the plaque were obviously chosen because of their reference to mountains. But by taking them out of their context like that, by putting them on a plaque and taking them up a mountain—translating

them in that first meaning of the term—they have become some of Martí's best-known words, endlessly quoted.

## Meeting the Press

Two months after the placing of the bust, as his own contribution to Martí's centenary, Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks in Santiago, enshrining himself as Martí's intellectual and political successor. Soon after this, Celia Sánchez began working for Castro's 26 July organisation. She was responsible for organising the reception of the *Granma*, the boat which returned Castro and his 81 comrades to Oriente at the beginning of December 1956. To do so she relied on many years of personal knowledge, walking and riding in that part of Cuba, on a wide network of family acquaintances, on personal contacts in the military to discover information about the timing of naval patrols, and on the careful liberation of maps and charts of the area from the offices of those contacts. She also recruited peasants who would guide the rebels into the Sierra. Castro himself—though fond of the symbolic gesture—was less well-organised: the *Granma* was completely inadequate for the number of men and amount of matériel it was asked to carry; Castro knew so little about sailing or likely weather conditions that he didn't leave enough time to get to the rendezvous at Playa de las Coloradas; once on board there was no way of contacting the Cuban groups who were arranging attacks on Cuban barracks; and when the navigator fell overboard the expedition used up its last remaining fuel supplies sailing in circles looking for him. As a result, the *Granma* landed at Los Cayuelos, a mangrove swamp two kilometres south of the beach where its supporters were waiting, and the invasion force was very nearly wiped out within hours of its arrival (see Guevara and Castro 1996). Celia's knowledge of the geography of the area then proved decisive: it was only the organisation that she had put into place which enabled the survivors to regroup in the mountains, where Celia herself soon joined them, on 17 February 1957.

On this same day Fidel Castro was visited by *New York Times* reporter, Herbert Matthews, producing an interview which became front-page news across the world (Matthews 1957). Later that year, a CBS film crew, consisting of Robert Taber and Wendell Hoffmann, arranged to interview Castro for a documentary which would be broadcast on primetime US television. Castro, attuned to the significance of the moment, decided that

the interview should take place on top of Pico Turquino, which for Taber and Hoffmann meant a difficult climb with heavy equipment: their guides included Celia Sánchez, who was the only one of the insurgents who had actually climbed Turquino before. Not only that, but her name was carved on the monument at the summit. The resulting CBS documentary (Taber 1957) provides the third of the mountain genres.

As might be expected, Castro was deeply aware both of the symbolic import of occupying a mountainside where the Cuban army didn't want to fight and the military possibilities of provocation: "I suggested the interview be done on El Turquino because, among other things, it might provoke a reaction from the troops of the tyranny, and they would have to pursue us and face the forces of nature up there on El Turquino" (in Franqui 1980, 493). What better follow-up to the front-page interview in the *New York Times* than an interview for US television against the backdrop of the highest mountain in Cuba, firmly associating the Cuban rebels with the elemental forces of nature in the minds of Castro's international audience and, at the same time, demonstrating to the Cuban army exactly where the guerrilla force was based, challenging them in almost chivalric fashion to come and test themselves in an environment where Castro was sure he had the tactical advantage? Che called it "an almost mystical operation", perhaps suggesting in his oblique way that from a military point of view occupying the top of a mountain might not be the cleverest idea—though it also says something about the Humboldtian aspect of the Cuban revolutionary struggle that both Castro and Guevara were very keen to take an altimeter reading on top of Turquino to ascertain its real height, which was still a matter of dispute in the 1950s (Guevara 1975, 83).

Taber's film is what's been called a "cubalogue"—one of the series of travelogues by writers and journalists associated with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee who travelled extensively to the island between the onset of the Revolution and the Bay of Pigs fiasco and who openly embraced the Revolution as a third way between the antagonists of the Cold War. Written "cubalogues" include Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Poet's Notes in Cuba" and LeRoi Jones' "Cuba Libre" (see Tietchen 2007). Taber's is the only film travelogue and was particularly significant because it reached a huge national and international audience.

Taber's voiceover buys completely into the geocultural discourse he has obviously learned from his hosts. Turquino, he says, is "a name and a place to strike a spark from the Cuban imagination". He compares it to Pike's Peak in Colorado, just as he compares Martí with George Washington as he strives to give his US viewers some cultural

comparisons. “We are the first American reporters to reach Martí’s towering statue atop Cuba’s highest mountain and it is here that Fidel Castro chose to speak with us.”

The documentary’s obvious main difference from the earlier genres is that its form is primarily visual. The words spoken, even Castro’s, are much less important than the impression conveyed by the film’s images. The top of Turquino is coded as pure nature: sunlight slants through the trees, birds sing, the air is pure, the rebels live a life of rural simplicity, sharing their meagre supplies and sleeping in hammocks (see Gosse 1993, 82-86). Fortuitously, Taber’s arrival coincided with that of three young US volunteers who had absconded from the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay. They end up with the bulk of the film, providing identificatory figures for young American viewers.

So, on 28 April 1957, in front of Hoffman’s camera, the rebels planted the Cuban flag on Turquino, proclaiming it *Territorio Libre de Cuba*. The flag is intentionally associated with the bust of Martí and his words quoted on the plaque, but it is also planted right in front of the stones of Ekman, mute Swedish witness to revolutionary fervour. As Núñez Jiménez later recalled, in his role as official chronicler of the Revolution: “After this proclamation by Fidel Castro and his men in olive green, Turquino became the capital of the Revolutionary Fatherland, the lighthouse that guided peasants, workers, and students towards the true path to National Liberation” (1961, 11). More and more symbolic import was being squeezed out of Turquino. The capital of revolutionary Cuba was now a natural mountaintop which was deliberately contrasted with the artificiality of built Havana, a capital city dominated by a Capitol disconcertingly modelled on the US Capitol in Washington DC and therefore symbol to the rebels of where the real power lay in Batista’s Cuba.

And Turquino remained, symbolically at least, the place where Castro would like to live. He told Núñez Jiménez of his lack of emotion when he finally entered the Presidential Palace on 8 January 1959, what one might have thought would be the symbolic culmination of his revolutionary struggle: “If I could follow my heart, the place where my deepest feelings would lead me to live would be El Pico Turquino. Because against the fortress of the tyranny we established the fortress of our invincible mountains” (in Núñez Jiménez 1983, 31). The Capitol was ignored. The Presidential Palace became the Museum of the Revolution. And Castro made his immediate headquarters in the Havana Hilton, renamed the Havana Libre, whose top floor consisted of a lounge bar called, inevitably,

El Turquino. It's not easy for a mountain range to remain a political location, but Castro insisted on returning there to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution in January 1960, no doubt to the distress of the less active members of the government.

## **Mountains of the Mind**

At least—according to conventional literary history—since Petrarch climbed Mont Ventoux, mountains have held considerable symbolic importance, an importance which increased at the end of the eighteenth century with Romantic appreciation of the sublime (see Macfarlane 2003). Within this broad tradition, Pico Turquino constitutes a particular Cuban topos—a literal place which has become a discursive ‘place’ and which thereby connects, among others, the three rather different genres of writing discussed in this chapter: words scribbled on paper and put in a bottle; words taken from their original context in a letter and quoted, as a fragment, on a plaque; and words spoken into a microphone.

Connections and distinctions can be made between the various genres. The first remains unique, as does the second in its plaque form; while the third only gained its power through broadcast dissemination. But the difference between the first two is acute. The message in a bottle has to be written on top of the mountain in order to be authentic, but its authenticity is only verified by it being taken off the mountain and read elsewhere. Martí never went anywhere near Turquino. His words were written in the Dominican Republic, published in Havana, selected in Pilón, inscribed in Havana, transported by boat to Oriente, and carried physically up the mountain where they now act as a marker of arrival to all who climb the mountain and read the words.

The third genre also shares certain characteristics with the first. Its documentary success depends on the words—particularly Castro's words—being spoken at the top of Turquino in order to associate Castro and his Revolution with the qualities of the mountain itself, which the second genre has already associated with José Martí, the embodiment of Cuban nationalism. But the documentary film form offers immediate self-authentication: rather than needing some future example to validate it, as the earlier mountain-climbers did, it presents a series of pictures of the film-maker on that mountain-top interviewing Castro.

All three examples have the aura of the mountain about them; indeed they would have considerably less significance were it not for their association with Turquino. The first example has the particular aura of authentication: despite the poverty of its materials—a scrap of paper in a bottle—it is a unique item authenticating a unique event, a status confirmed by its being archived in a major museum. With the second example, the aura is dependent on the new context into which Martí's words have been placed. The words themselves can be read in any collection of his works. Here, their monumentalisation provides a frame which focuses the words more intensively, seeming to offer them as a very summary of Martí's worldview. With the third example, the aura lies in the connotations of person and place. The words spoken by Fidel Castro are less important than the natural surroundings, the dramatic mountain top, the sense of freedom and hope, the association with Martí.

In their different ways all three also remain oddly elusive. The archive of the Bacardí Museum in Santiago is difficult of access and Ekman's letter has never to my knowledge been reproduced in its entirety. While seen in 1957 by hundreds of thousands of viewers, relatively few copies of Taber's film are in existence and there is, to my knowledge, only one critical discussion of its significance. And it necessary to climb Turquino to see Gilma Madera's statue and plaque.

Within the field of Comparative Literature there are many different kinds of approaches. What this essay does, on a small scale, is to offer an example of one kind of approach: where the focus on a particular place—here the top of a mountain in eastern Cuba—can offer a way of bringing together kinds of writing which might not otherwise share a frame: writing in different genres, writing in different languages, writers from different places; writing and writers translated—in the very literal sense of the word—to that mountain top from elsewhere in Cuba, from New York, from Sweden, and from Essex.

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# Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/American\\_Tropics](http://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/American_Tropics). Financial support comes from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The project's work will appear in a series called *American Tropics*, to be published by Liverpool University Press.

<sup>2</sup> On the idea of place, see the works of Edward Casey (1993, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For general background, see Kapcia 2000; Gott 2004.

<sup>4</sup> On Batista, see Argote-Freyre 2006; on Castro, Castro 2007. The term "geobody" is drawn from Winichakul 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> For a general introduction to Antonio Núñez Jiménez, see Graña 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Translated from Núñez Jiménez's transcription of the Spanish version (1945, 46).

<sup>8</sup> Spanish versions are in Martí 1992 (III, 507-518). "The Montecristi Manifesto" and the "Letter to His Mother" are translated in Martí 2002 (337-346).