

OF CANE, THE CARIBBEAN AND JOÃO CABRAL DE MELO NETO

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ABSTRACT

In his book *La isla que se repite*, Antonio Benítez Rojo provides an inclusive view of the Caribbean, which extends to Brazil. The centrality of the sugar cane plantation is what permits this extended view, revealing aspects shared by all the latifundio economies. Four poems by the Brazilian João Cabral de Melo Neto, focusing on sugar cane, may be seen as literary corroborations (*avant la lettre*) of this vision of Benítez Rojo. In each poem, the person working in the field of cane becomes conflated with the cane produced, which gives emphasis to the question of masses (human or productive). The texts suggest that each individual is merely a repetition of the others, and that people may be used up, discarded and replaced. The Capibaribe River of northeastern Brazil sustains a chain of plantations, just as the Caribbean Sea holds a chain of islands, each with a similar economy. Both in Benítez Rojo's Caribbean and in João Cabral de Melo Neto's Pernambuco, the sugar plantation is a repeating island.

Keywords: sugar, plantation, Caribbean, Brazilian Northeast, poetry

RESUMEN

En su libro *La isla que se repite*, Antonio Benítez Rojo demuestra una visión pan-caribeña, que se extiende al Brasil. La centralidad del ingenio de azúcar, en tal visión, permite esa extensión, descubriendo rasgos compartidos en todas las economías latifundarias. Cuatro poemas del brasileño João Cabral de Melo Neto, enfocados en la caña de azúcar, sirven como testigo poético (*avant la lettre*) a la visión de Benítez Rojo. En cada uno, el ser humano que trabaja en el cañaveral se confunde con la caña que produce, dando énfasis en la cuestión de la masa (humana o de producción). Se sugiere que cada individuo es solamente una repetición de los otros, y que por lo tanto puede ser usado, tirado al lado, y reemplazado. El río Capibaribe del nordeste brasileño sustenta una cadena de ingenios, así como el mar Caribe sustenta una cadena de islas, cada una con una economía semejante. Tanto en el Caribe de Benítez Rojo como en el Pernambuco de João Cabral de Melo Neto, el ingenio de azúcar es una isla que se repite.

Palabras clave: azúcar, ingenio, el Caribe, el Nordeste brasileño, poesía

RÉSUMÉ

Dans son essai *La isla que se repite*, Antonio Benítez Rojo nous présente une vision Pan-Caraïbe s'étendant jusqu'au Brésil. C'est la centralité de la plantation de canne à sucre qui permet cette vue étendue, qui révèle certains traits que partagent toutes les économies latifundistes. Quatre poèmes axés sur la canne à sucre du brésilien João Cabral de Melo Neto représentent des corroborations littéraires (avant la lettre) de la vision de Benítez Rojo. Dans chaque poème, la personne qui travaille dans le champ de canne à sucre se confond avec la canne produite, ce qui met en relief la question de masse (humaine ou de production). Les textes suggèrent que chaque individu n'est que la répétition de l'autre, et qu'on peut l'épuiser, le jeter et le remplacer. Le fleuve *Capibaribe* dans le nord-est du Brésil nourrit une chaîne de plantations, de même que la mer de la Caraïbe embrasse une chaîne d'îles, dont chacune manifeste une économie semblable. Dans la Caraïbe que Benítez Rojo nous présente, comme celle de Pernambuco, de João Cabral et de Melo Neto, la plantation de canne à sucre se présente comme une île qui se répète.

Mots-clés : sucre, plantation, Caraïbes, le nord-est du Brésil, poésie

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As a concept, the Caribbean could hardly be anything but diverse and flexible. Considering that the region comprises hundreds of different land masses by even the most conservative reckoning; that its inhabitants speak dozens of different idioms, including creoles, one African and four European languages, and numerous aboriginal tongues; and that it involves independent countries and European or American territories (with all the different historical trajectories that this fact implies), it can be no wonder that the discourse about the Caribbean has developed in multiple ways.

One of the most significant lines of differentiation involves the very notion of what spaces should be included when one speaks of the region. In general, we can distinguish two different trends, one less inclusive and one more inclusive. The less inclusive demarcation, which is more traditional and is demonstrated in dozens of studies, has relied primarily on the logic of geography, and has conceptualized the Caribbean as the group of islands (on the North and East) and continental lands (on the South and West) that encircle the Caribbean Sea. Of primary interest to my discussion is the more inclusive view, which recognizes factors other than strict geography as distinguishing characteristics, and therefore has proposed more or less expanded views of the region. I favor this larger

view because I will be discussing a Brazilian poet, João Cabral de Melo Neto, in terms of some of the commonalities his worldview shares with the cultural consciousness of the Caribbean.

These views of a more inclusive Caribbean are sensitive to the confluence of a number of different factors, including climate, geography, historical development, economics, sociology and anthropology. Their characterizations of the region typically consider the interdependence of these factors. They participate, furthermore, in a general trend towards a more globalized orientation less dependent on the paradigm of the nation-state for understanding cultural phenomena, a trend perhaps best illustrated by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which posits the essential hybridity of all black intellectuals, whether in Europe, Africa or America, who must negotiate their contrasting heritages through a "double consciousness." While not casting such a wide geographical net, in *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, Peter Hulme likewise "emphasizes those features, environmental and ideological, that [lie] beyond national differences" (3), choosing to explore the invention of colonizing discourses in a group of writers from the "extended Caribbean," "a coastal and insular region that stretched from what is now southern Virginia in the USA to the most eastern part of Brazil" (3). The basis for establishing these boundaries is ecological and economic (based on a set of conditions that fostered the development of monoculture economies in cotton, tobacco and sugar), ethnographic (relating to the replacement of native populations with slaves from Africa), and ideological (regarding an interest in sustaining colonization). *Look Away!*, a collection of essays published in 2005 and edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, operates with the same regional concept and includes numerous literary essays exploring shared cultures, forms of expression and themes, as well as questions of reception and influence, suggesting that the dialog between the US South and its neighbors in the Caribbean and South America may be just as significant as the one that it maintains with the rest of the United States. Adopting an ethnological perspective in his *Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, Silvio Torres-Saillant emphasizes the importance of migration in an expanded view of the region, pointing out that Miami might now be regarded as a Cuban city because of that group's dominance in its ethnic character (20). Similarly, he states that "the city of New York houses so many millions of Jamaicans, Dominicans, Haitians, and Puerto Ricans [. . .] that one can conceivably think of it as the largest of all Caribbean cities" (20). One of the more poetic characterizations of this notion of a greater Caribbean comes from the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, who stated, "La mer des Antilles n'est pas le lac des États-Unis. C'est l'estuaire des Amériques" (249). In calling the Caribbean Sea the estuary

of the Americas, a rather idealistic Glissant seems to be suggesting that the Caribbean can be a site of confluence, a receptive meeting place for the energies and attentions of both North and South America (like the combined forces of the Mississippi, Orinoco and Amazon rivers) and not simply one more resource of the United States. Notably, Glissant's metaphor includes the Antilles, the United States, Venezuela and Brazil.

Since the arrival of the first Europeans, many plans have appeared for the unification of the Caribbean. Richard Morse's well-known essay, "The Caribbean: Geopolitics and Geohistory," traces the early history of these projects with some irony, under the general headings of "policy aspiration" (such as plans for military protection or commercial prosperity), "scientific conjecture" (the search for integrating cultures or ethnic ties) and "sentimental indulgence" (for example, the negritude and black power movements—155). Because these efforts continue, an update of Morse's article might include programs such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), established in 1973 as a Common Market for the region, which currently has 15 countries or dependencies on its list of members. In recent years, Brazil has invited CARICOM to hold meetings there, and has actively contributed to several community programs. One recent scientific revelation, which Morse might have called a "conjecture," is that not all of the Caribbean native languages belong to the typical Arawakan and Carib groups; a few Mayan and Tupí-derived languages are also represented, which would tend to support a more inclusive Caribbean membership on the basis of ethnicity (Ferreira 132). In general it can be said that these efforts to find common causes and conditions as uniting factors have probably contributed to the impetus for conceptualizing an expanded Caribbean, for once qualities such as African heritage or economic markets are posited, it is easier to look to regions like the Yucatán or the Brazilian Northeast as candidates for inclusion.

Although there are significant precursors (see Wagley, for example), the decline in national paradigms and the coincidental rise of the notion of the expanded Caribbean appear to be producing more comparative studies. I will merely mention three significant examples. Laird W. Bergad's *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba and the United States* is a noteworthy instance of going after the big picture of a trans-national problem. Octavio di Leo's *El descubrimiento de África en Cuba y Brasil, 1889-1969* is both international and interdisciplinary in its scope. The book studies the emergence of African consciousness in the two countries, through key figures such as Fernando Ortiz and Nina Rodrigues, and how this consciousness was made manifest in areas such as anthropology, religious history, musicology and philology. Another important comparative contribution is Jossiana Arroyo's *Travestismos*

culturales: literatura y etnografía en Cuba y Brasil, which evaluates the contributions of Fernando Ortiz and Gilberto Freyre towards new national identities. Using post-colonial, feminist and queer theories, Arroyo is particularly interested in how privileged voices account for otherness (in race, in social standing, in gender, or in sexual orientation).

I have deliberately postponed mentioning one of the most significant treatments of this more inclusive notion, *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* by Antonio Benítez Rojo, because I want to make it the object of a more detailed analysis. The Cuban literary critic could not be more explicit in his claim for a revised and expanded Caribbean, including at least a part of Brazil. His list of the region's prominent explorers includes Pedro Álvares Cabral (p. vii). His enumeration of "repeating islands" includes the "nordestina" capital, Recife (p. v). Speaking of the centrality of the plantation economy to the idea of the Caribbean, he concludes that that of the Brazilian Northeast "debe ser tomada como la de una isla más del Caribe" (p. 51).

The author dedicates his book to Fernando Ortiz, and in reality his extended essay seems to be written in the same poetic modality as the Cuban anthropologist's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Rather than conducting a scientific analysis of any particular phenomenon relating to tobacco or sugar, Ortiz seemed interested in sustaining a kind of musical counterpoint in his own prose, a rhythm suggestive of the many antitheses underlying Cuban reality. Similarly, I would characterize Benítez Rojo's book as an elaborate playout of "polyrhythmic" variations (to use the author's own characterization) of essential structures of life in the Caribbean. Benítez Rojo rings out several poetic changes on the notion of the "máquina," claiming that it underlies the idea of the Caribbean, and that it accounts for both its diversity from one time and one location to another, and its consistency—its rhythm which, like a syncopated musical cadence, gives the region its recognizable identity. This "máquina" has a clear economic basis in the plantation system, but it also derives from theories of Deleuze and Guattari (viii), in that it refers to an elementary psychological impulse, perhaps prone to obsessive repetition but also to creative production. Benítez Rojo's "máquina" is unmistakably involved with the idea of the Caribbean as a kind of profiteering crossroads, a site where the economically developed world looks for its infusion of new resources. Initially, the author characterizes this "máquina" as an elaborate colonial system of protected harbors and *flotillas*, permitting the riches of the new world to be transported to Europe pirate-free (pp. x-xi). But he also gives the machine a more fleshly, libidinal sense by stating that the Atlantic is the navel of capitalism because the Caribbean is its womb or vagina, inseminated by Europe with the blood of Africa (vi). Eventually, Benítez Rojo also

shows that the “máquina” has become a complex system of importable and exportable human resources, an immigration/emigration machine, which has been the crux of one of the largest labor transfers the world has ever seen (p. xi-xiii).

Primarily, though, Benítez Rojo’s “máquina” is the plantation system, that monoculture machine that imported slaves and exported cash crops. Without excluding any of the usual products, he focuses, naturally, on the sugar plantation.

Quite correctly, the Cuban author recognizes the foundational work of Sidney W. Mintz, who identified the centrality of the sugar plantation to the socio-cultural identity of the Caribbean, and that the much earlier work of Gilberto Freyre, who in 1934 claimed a central place for the “engenho de açúcar” in the formation of Brazilian culture:

A casa-grande, completada pela senzala, representa todo um sistema econômico, social, político: de produção (a monocultura latifundiária); de trabalho (a escravidão); de transporte (o carro de boi, o banguê, a rêde, o cavalo): de religião (o catolicismo de família, com capelão subordinado ao *pater familias*, culto dos mortos, etc.); de vida sexual e de família (o patriarcalismo polígamo); de higiene do corpo e da casa (o ‘tigre’, a touceira de bananeira, o banho de rio, o banho de gamela, o banho de assento, o lava-pés); de política (o compadrismo). Foi ainda fortaleza, banco, cemitério, hospedaria, escola, santa casa de misericórdia, amparando os velhos e as viúvas, recolhendo órfãos. (P. 10)

In a particular sense, Benítez Rojo’s “máquina” is the elaborate machine that processes the juice from sugar cane. As an imported technology, a foreign investment geared up for export, as a mechanism that literally squeezes out the juice from products of the soil, the sugar press has a concrete specificity and at the same time a poetic flexibility, an ability to suggest multiple dimensions of the reality of societies dependent on export.

Benítez Rojo’s book is a treatise on the paradoxes of nothing changing while everything changes, on the unity and diversity that are the essence of the Caribbean. His imagining the region as a “repeating island” effectively suggests the continual play of uniqueness and duplication. Like Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo*, it deals not in the terms themselves, but rather in the rhythmic interplay of their oppositional relations—dialectics such as Immigration/Emigration, Individuality/Conformity, Colonization/Independence, Exclusion/Inclusion, Humanization/Commodification.

This essay will focus on a Brazilian poet, who like Benítez Rojo, saw sugar cane as a figurative matrix for various aspects of his society. I am referring to João Cabral de Melo Neto, a native of the state of Pernambuco, who died in 1999. My discussion will focus on four poems—“Festa

na casa-grande,” contained in the compilation *Dois parlamentos* (1958-60), “Morte e vida severina,” which is subtitled “Auto de Natal pernambucano” and which was written in 1954-55, “O rio,” written in 1953 and “A cana dos outros,” which is part of the collection *Serial*, written between 1959 and 1961.

“FESTA NA CASA-GRANDE”

“Festa na casa-grande” consists of 20 stanzas, each of 16 lines and each beginning with the same line, “—O cassaco de engenho.” This poetic *ostinato* has a double meaning, “o cassaco” on the one hand signifying “the opossum” and on the other “the plantation worker.” The opossum/human coincidence is used in the poem to call attention to the dehumanization of poor laborers: “—O cassaco de engenho / de longe é como gente: / —De perto é que se vê / o que há de diferente. [. . .] —Em tudo é como homem, só que de menos preço” (p. 114).

The first stanza emphasizes the lack of differentiation between one “cassaco” and another:

—O cassaco de engenho,
o cassado de usina:
—O cassaco é um só
com diferente rima.
—O cassaco de engenho
banguê ou fornecedor:
—A condição cassaco
é o denominador.
—O cassaco de engenho
de qualquer Pernambuco:
—Dizendo-se cassaco
se terá dito tudo.
—Seja qual for seu nome,
seu trabalho, seu soldo:
—Dizendo-se cassaco
se terá dito todos. (P. 112)

We find a continuity of theme and discourse in the poem, suggested by the statement that the plantation workers (or opossums) are all the same but with varying rhymes. Just as the insistent, repetitive cadence, assonant rhymes and vocabulary of the poem seem to come back again and again, with only slight variations, the poem plays on the sometimes-important, sometimes-negligible difference between the “engenho” (plantation mill) and the “usina” (factory mill). It refers to the fact that there is nothing unusual about seeing “cassacos” on a sugar plantation, that they may differ slightly in appearance or function, but that if you have seen one you have seen them all. This notion of rhythmic insistence

is consonant, of course, with Benítez Rojo's repeating island, playing especially with the Individuality/Conformity dialectic

In describing the "cassaco" as a child, the poem says, "—Parece cruzamento / de canço com cana" (p. 113). This metaphor, comparing the person to a stalk of sugar cane, seems to refer to the slenderness and perhaps the poor nutrition of the child, by using the term "canço," which is a particularly thin shoot, cane or reed. Furthermore, the poem states that the child, when thought of as cane, "é cana de soca [second harvest], / repetida e sem força" (p. 113). Here repetition is equated with depletion, both of soil or crops and of humanity. As with the Cuban essay, the Brazilian poem explores the opposition of Humanity/Commodity.

The same emphasis on depletion and emptiness carries to the description of the "cassaco" woman, who is "um saco / —De açúcar, mas sem ter açúcar ensacado" (p. 113). Paradoxically, this sugar-sack-woman, even when devoid of sugar, manages to remain standing: "—É um saco vazio / mas que se tem de pé" (p. 113). Again using concrete metaphors of the sugar plantation, the poem praises the resistance of the poor women who, even when empty or hungry, manage to stay on their feet. It also might refer to the opossum's pouch, and to the idea of the woman as a womb or sack, involved in a repetitive cycle of (re)productivity. Product and producer become fused in the poetic imagination. The choice of "cassaco" favors this reproductive suggestion, because the opossum's survival depends on its prodigious fertility. Female opossums give birth to many more young than can possibly find a place to nurse, a detail that adds a suggestion of overpopulation and expendability to the reality of the sugar cane worker.

In general, the objects of the sugar plantation provide metaphorical material for repeated descriptions of the opossum/worker. His dark color is like that of crude sugar. His slow-moving blood flows like viscous, reduced cane sap or "melaço" (p. 118). And ultimately, the body of the "cassaco" is like the mechanism of the sugar press itself, except that it doesn't chew, in the sense of ingesting for its own nourishment: "Que se [o cassaco] é engenho, é / de fogo frio ou morto: / —Engenho que não mói / que só fornece aos outros" (p. 122). The idea of not chewing for one's self but only to supply others resonates on both an individual level as a comment on a worker's alienation and poverty, and also on a regional level as a reference to the reality of an export economy. But it also elaborates on the same notion as Benítez Rojo's, that of sameness amid difference.

“MORTE E VIDA SEVERINA”

As has already been shown in some detail (Dixon 1981) “Morte e vida severina” is based on an extended metaphor uniting human anatomy and geography. Sugar cane occupies a crucial place within this “tropography.” The long narrative poem ponders the typically Caribbean theme of migration; it accompanies the drought-fleer Severino as he leaves the arid backlands, for lack of sustenance, and follows the Capibaribe River to the city of Recife. Severino acknowledges that both his name and his fate (severity) are so common among the people of the “nordeste” that he has no individual identity. In fact, at each stopping place on his voyage he encounters a dead man named “Severino,” each one being taken to the grave. Here we see the same notion of repeatability that is so prominent in the argument of Benítez Rojo. Just as the Cuban writer sees the Caribbean as a line of islands, playing out a rhythm of constancy and variation, João Cabral emphasizes the linear trajectory of his *per-nambucano* everyman, where each stage is different and yet the same. Severino’s stops along his migration are “repeating islands.”

Sugar cane becomes an important presence in the poem when Severino arrives at the “zona da mata,” the moist and fertile region along the coast. He encounters a group of plantation workers at a burial, lowering Severino, one of their own, into the ground. Members of the group acknowledge that finally he has his own piece of land: “Viverás, e para sempre / na terra que aqui aforas: / e terás enfim tua roça. . . . “Agora trabalharas / só para ti, não a meias, / como antes em terra alheia. Trabalharás uma terra / da qual, além de senhor, / serás homem de eito e trator” (p. 219). The passage is an ironic commentary on the plantation system, where the “homem de eito” has no claim to the land he works. Even the produce of his own garden must be shared “a meias” with the land holder. In death, however, he is owner, manager and worker (“senhor, homem de eito e trator”) of his tiny plantation. The poem comments on the same Inclusion/Exclusion dialectic found in Benítez Rojo, in this case exclusion or inclusion of the means of production. Ownership becomes absurd, however, because the poor man’s only holding is the spot of land where he is buried, and he becomes an owner only when he can no longer use the land for anything but decomposition.

As if to emphasize how the “vida severina” involves the fusion of geographic, economic and biographical factors, the poet figuratively unites the producer with elements of his product. “Não tens mais força contigo: / deixa-te semear ao comprido. / Já não levas semente viva: / teu corpo é a própria maniva. / Não levas rebolo de cana: / es o rebolo, e não de caiana” (p. 220-21). Severino’s death is incorporated into the overall economic enterprise. He is sown, like “maniva,” a kind of manioc. The

worker's body is commodified as one of the materials of production. He is the "rebolo," or the cylindrical cutting used to sprout new sugar cane. His burial is a planting; a worker is expended in order to assure sugar cane's future viability.

The poem is divided into a downward, negative trajectory followed by a rising, positive one. After the migrant Severino reaches the muddy slums of Recife, he questions the value of life and ponders suicide. When a child is born in a shack nearby (and here at last we find the Christmas theme mentioned in the subtitle), the mood changes entirely, and Severino is reconciled to his difficult existence. A neighbor helps him imagine a reverse migration; the child will eventually move out of the putrid slum at the mouth of the Capibaribe to a better, dryer one. The migration also involves labor; the youngest Severino will find work in a factory:

e não há melhor resposta
que o espetáculo da vida:
vê-la desfiar seu fio
que também se chama vida,
ver a fábrica que ela mesma,
temosamente, se fabrica (241)

The final imagery describes life as a weaving machine, with the raveling and unraveling of its threads, and as a stubborn factory, which produces and reproduces itself. Here is another aspect of Benítez Rojo's "máquina," an unstoppable vital force, cyclically repeating its own rising and falling vitality.

"O RIO"

In "O rio," the voice belongs to the Capibaribe River as it descends from its source to its outlet in Recife. The different sections of the long poem are essentially stops along the way, each one observing a reality of economic exploitation within an export-oriented system. The Capibaribe is João Cabral's archipelago, his line of repeating islands. Its trajectory is a parallel to that of the "retirante" Severino.

I will focus primarily on the part of the poem that regards the sugar cane region. This section places a definite emphasis on the transition from the "engenho" or family-owned plantation, which is already in a stage of decline ("fogo-morto") to the "usina" or larger, corporate-owned enterprise, which has taken over as a more efficient system. Probing the similarities in the differences is a trait the poem shares with the Cuban essay. The primary trope with which the poem treats the "usina" is one of personification. The usina is animated, and in particular is characterized as a mouth—a mouth that devours everything, including

the old “engenhos”: “que vai roendo os engenhos, / como toda já roeu / a casa-grande do Poço do Aleixo” (285).

The “usina as mouth” metaphor functions effectively on two different levels. In a narrow sense, the name “usina” refers to the mill or refinery, the machinery used to process the sugar cane. Essentially it chews the shafts of cane and extracts and processes their moisture. The poem makes a point of stating that this machinery is not native to the region: “A usina possui sempre / uma moenda de nome inglês” (285). This seems to be a comment on the involvement of foreign interests in the economic landscape, which is of course an enormous factor in understanding the Caribbean. In a broader sense, the word “usina” refers to the entire corporation, and it is a mouth that consumes the land, the human resources, the competition—all those factors that become involved in a thriving “latifúndio” enterprise. It is in that wider sense that the poem continues, “E o que não pode entrar / nas moendas de nomes inglês, / a usina vai moendo / com muitos outros meios de moer” (285).

The poetic particulars of this devouring process are poignant: “Vira usinas comer [. . .] matas e capoeiras, / pastos e cercados; / com que devoram a terra ; / onde um homem plantou seu roçado; / depois os poucos metros / onde ele plantou sua casa; / depois o pouco espaço / de que precisa um homem sentado; / depois os sete palmos / onde ele vai ser enterrado” (287). The installation of the economy of monoculture “eats” or competitively invalidates the more diversified agricultural economy, “a terra onde um homem plantou seu roçado,” including its personal side, and impinges upon the human domestic and leisure space, “o pouco espaço de que precisa um homem sentado.” Even the memorial traces of past human existence, the “sete palmos” of the burial ground, are disturbed by the famished “usina.” Implicit in this picture is the migration of those displaced by the hungry industrial machine.

Later the river observes a self-destructive cycle in the devouring “usina”: “Na vila da Usina / é que fui descobrir a gente / que as canas expulsaram / das ribanceiras e vazantes; / e que essa gente mesma / na boca da Usina são os dentes / que mistigam a cana / que a mastigou enquanto gente” (288). People become cogs in the wheels of the factory machine, but at the same time, as if in some grotesque accident, they are also the material being crushed and chewed by those very same wheels.

“A CANA DOS OUTROS”

As has been demonstrated elsewhere (Dixon 1992), the poem “A cana dos outros” combines a committed social criticism with a baroque-like richness involving multiple layers of meaning. The poem has four parts, each with two groups of four lines. Each part is dedicated to one

of the stages of sugar production—to planting, weeding, harvesting and processing, in that order—and each one expands metaphorically from the strict domain of the plantation to some other aspect of the culture of the colonized. As with Benítez Rojo, the “engenho” functions as a productive matrix and a figure for other levels of existence. The first stanza contrasts the sugar cane planter with the “Semeador que se sonetizou” (p. 51). First, by capitalizing the name of the Sower, the poet names Jesus. By qualifying this Sower as one who “sonetized himself” the text also seems to make reference to Brazilian literary history, to the first Brazilian writer, José de Anchieta, who was both a poet and a missionary. In the second part, the poem says the planter of other people’s cane does what he does less out of love than out of commerce, and that his planting is like discarding (“joga fora”). Here the text seems to refer to the antithetical impulses at the heart of Brazil’s colonizing enterprise. On the one hand, there was the push to Christianize natives, and on the other, the urge to extract profits by means of forced labor.

The next stanza, in representing the weeding of the “eito” or *cañaveral*, stresses the alienation of the laborer, the lack of understanding about which plants are cleaned away, and which ones are left to grow. The worker seems to strain under what he considers arbitrary distinctions: “porque limpar do mato, / não da cana, limpá-lo.” This is a curious passage that perhaps taxes our ability to place it in a comprehensible context. If it is true that the poem allegorizes Brazilian economic history, however, it might refer to the difficult logic behind an important early distinction that had huge economic consequences. I am referring to the doctrine espoused by Antônio Vieira (1945:264-267), who like Bartolomé de las Casas, defended the natives against slavery, but proposed importing Africans as an alternative. The poem suggests a rather absurd logic of exclusion and inclusion.

The third stanza, with its reference to the cane cutter as one who “derruba um bosque” and who “abre trilha no mato” continues the theme of the alienated worker, without personal investment, who strikes out violently. At the same time it seems to continue with the historical allegory, referring now to the *bandeirantes*, those explorers who opened the Brazilian interior to development, through their ruthless profiteering.

The final stanza returns to the motif of the “máquina,” in that the harvested cane is taken to the press. The section introduces the circularity that I already identified in “O rio.” The workers carry the bound sheaths of cane to the machine. But at the same time, the workers **are** the cane itself. The sugar cane is personified as a “finada” who is being taken to the grave, a “tumba-moenda.” The plantation economy, again in this text, is a circular and paradoxical system, which in its very dependence on cheap, compulsory labor, bites the hand that feeds it.

By taking the cane to the “prensa” the poem suggests a return to the literary context of the first stanza. Here the cane, tied in its “feixes de ossos,” suggests the pages that are taken to the press, and that are bound with string first into signatures, and then into books. But like the cane, submitted to the press mechanically and without commitment, the literary production lacks vitality. Perhaps this refers to the stage in Brazilian literary history where most agree that writing was not yet authentically national, but rather derivative of the values of the colonizers. The “other people’s cane” of the poem appears to make metaphorical reference to “other people’s literature” as a problematic moment in cultural development.

The sugar cane plantation is João Cabral de Melo Neto’s “repeating island.” Through this brief look at four poems, we can see that our *pernambucano* poet gives prominence to the plantation when he is seeking to explore the difficult social circumstances of his region. He finds in cane a propitious space for exploring metaphorically such matters as the profiteering of foreign powers, the paradoxical scarcity created by the overabundance of a single product, the commodification of human resources, the alienation of workers, their poverty, their obligatory migration, the cultural alienation of the colonized, and so on.

In all of this, he serves as a sort of anterior corroboration of Antonio Benítez Rojo’s thesis that the plantation is the crucial “máquina” underlying and giving commonality to the different spaces of the Antilles. Cabral’s sugar cane poems also provide evidence to support the Cuban author’s assertion that the southern end of the Caribbean extends all the way to the Brazilian northeast.

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