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On Reading South in the New World: Whitman, Martí, Glissant, and the Hegelian Dialectic

IT MIGHT NOT CONCERN US TO REALIZE that Hegel would not be pleased to know about efforts to explore literary commonalities in the Americas. This is because he believed the future belonged to the West, as the course of empire would go; the telos of the West was the New World, but its guiding hand would be the United States, because of its rejection of racial amalgamation.¹ He wrote: "America is . . . the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself—perhaps in a contest between North and South America" (p. 86). Presumably, then, one might be able to argue that seeking common ground in the Americas is counter-Hegelian, but, of course, such an assertion might only reaffirm his famous dialectic. Hegel, it should be remembered, believed that the end of history is the self-awareness of freedom. Self-awareness is the realization of the ways in which the present is informed by the past, or as Frederick Beiser puts it, an awareness that "what we are now . . . is what we have become, and the process of becoming is our history."² Self-consciousness, then, signifies freedom not because it stands independent of historical causation but because it understands the self's historicism. The paradox is that we are free only as we come to understand ever more deeply the historical determinism of the West; that is, we are free but only to the extent that we are able to imagine our rootedness and indebtedness to the processes of Western history. The key point, then, is that originality and revolution, both of which imply a return to origins, become impossible and thus history's dialectic and the priority of Western culture always preempt forms of resistance to it. It is for this reason that Hegel

¹Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), p. 81.

²Frederick Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 275.

demonstrated such difficulty in conceiving of any original differences in non-Western cultures. Historical movement itself is always self-contained, driven by its dialectical capacity to synthesize and regenerate its divergences, conflicts, and contradictions.

It is commonplace in the context of New World history, or any other context by which new cultures have emerged in the wake of Western colonialism, to celebrate originality prematurely. According to a Hegelian point of view, standing outside the determinacies of the Old World is nothing but a delusion, and while this Hegelian overreach is certainly frustrating, it is at least naïve not to be wary of the illusions of postcolonial exceptionalism and the persistence of historical determinism. What makes Hegel prophetic, I wish to argue, is not that he was correct about the lands and peoples who were supposedly without History, of course, but that he sensed that the concept of Western civilization's *telos* would face its greatest challenge in the interaction of and relationship between competing outcomes of Western civilization's advance in the Western hemisphere.

Perhaps we must reluctantly agree that any discussion of the relationship between Norths and Souths in the Americas is inevitably a question of understanding the dialectic of history by which Western civilization has moved westward and in which the freedom of self-consciousness has been realized. The reason for this is that the U.S. and its southern neighbors, as Octavio Paz once argued, are at least "two distinct versions of Western civilization" and in reconciling, or at least in coming to a historical understanding of their differences, we can obtain a measure of freedom from the illusions of exceptionalism that have driven so much of postcolonial thinking in the Americas.³ It is perhaps in reaction against the determinism of such Hegelian logic that New World creoles of the nineteenth century so frequently insisted, as did Walt Whitman and José Martí, that the natural environment and historical experience of the New World were new and that they would inevitably create an exceptional political culture of freedom from the tyrannies of Europe. I wish to emphasize how this creole belief in the abruption of Western civilization's

³"Mexico and the United States," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Philips Belash (New York: Grove, 1985), p. 357.

East/West continuity in its expansion into the Western hemisphere opens the possibility of articulating a New World commonality that stretches along a North/South axis. It may be obvious to us nowadays that nationalism in its various forms in the New World has replicated many of the Old World's colonial evils. Of course it was the Cuban poet and liberator José Martí, an exile in the United States for fifteen years, beginning in 1880, before his death in Cuba at the onset of the War of Independence, who witnessed how the growing imperial aims of the United States were carefully couched in the rhetoric of democracy and postcolonial nationalism. His rather prophetic warning that "the colony lives on in the republic" has had strong currency of late.⁴ That currency, however, is also evidence that it has not always been obvious, as I wish to argue, that expressions of hemispheric solidarity run similar risks, evidenced by then Secretary of State James Blaine's Pan-American Congress in 1889. In the proto-modernist era of the late nineteenth century, the idea of a hemispheric New World exceptionalism was particularly appealing to Whitman and Martí because it offered a North/South axis that promised liberation from Old World tyranny, a promise that has recently been resurrected within American Studies.

The alternative to this creole vision of North/South exceptionalism may be even less desirable. To stress the inevitable continuity of the West in the New World typically results in emphatic denials or at least subtle oclusions of commonalities in the Americas. A key example of this would be Frederick Jackson Turner, whose frontier thesis stresses the western motion of empire. Although this movement presumably creates an exceptional U.S. culture in Turner's view, the frontier creates a democratic space that only moves west, not south to other American spaces, and ignores Hispanics, Native Americans, African Americans, those who are apparently without history and therefore without legitimate claim in Turner's polity. In his important comparison of the two thinkers, Brook Thomas argues that Martí redirects Turner's famous frontier thesis along a north/south axis. Turner argued that the frontier facilitated the consolidation of the United States in the wake of the Civil War by turning our focus from the War's North/South conflict and arguing that "the slavery question is an incident"

⁴José Martí, *The America of José Martí: Selected Writings*, trans. Juan de Onís (New York: Minerva Press, 1954), p. 145.

but not formative of American character as was the Western frontier.⁵ Thomas insists that “Turner’s frontier creates a community of inclusiveness only through a subtle process of repression” of Native American and borderland peoples (p. 282). Martí, he argues, picks up where Turner left off and attempts to be more inclusive of those very subjects—the exiles, the displaced, the transplanted—who have been affected by the westward movement of empire. In so doing, he brings our focus back to a north/south axis by reminding his readers of the threat the U.S. poses to Cuban and other Latin American chances for democracy. “America,” argues Martí, is not necessarily an increasingly democratic space, but rather a fissured entity in which the gap between democratic rhetoric and the reality of social and racial divisions potentially widens as long as colonialism persists. This essay shares, however, Thomas’s recognition that Martí is nevertheless seduced by his own version of American exceptionalism and insists that the success of reconfigurations of American studies will depend on our ability to confront the blindspots incurred by his exceptionalism.

What I wish to suggest is that the two possibilities of understanding the New World’s relationship to the Old are vulnerable on the one hand to hemispheric neo-colonialism and on the other to national chauvinism. And perhaps the impossibility of avoiding either of these two rather Hegelian choices constitutes precisely the structure of the conflict that Hegel imagined between the North and South. Either we can choose to be inclusive of a greater diversity of American peoples in our view of American possibility but at the risk of producing a vision that is hierarchical, or we can exclude differences in an unmanageable heterogeneity so as to facilitate a more narrowly delimited equality. That is, we can simplify the Americas and thus risk a kind of cultural NAFTA that crushes fragile but vital differences or we can simply ignore other competing Americas for the sake of managing a less chaotic national identity. This is the very choice that Octavio Paz once argued exists in Mexico and the United States respectively, a choice that has led to a “history of a mutual and stubborn deceit” (p. 358) about our North/South kinship; such deceit, he suggests, leads to national exceptionalism and fails to reconcile equality with diversity. And thus, maybe Hegel would nod in approval of inter-American studies after all since

⁵Qtd. in Brook Thomas, “Frederick Jackson Turner, José Martí, and Finding a Home on the Range,” in *José Martí’s “Our America”*: *From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, p. 277.

he understood the inherent dilemma of such scholarship to be unavoidable symptoms of the Western hemisphere's extension of the dialectic of history.

But perhaps these choices, or these axes, are false. As I mentioned earlier, Hegel believed that the true bearer of Western civilization in the hemisphere would be the United States because of its rejection of racial amalgamation. Perhaps he foresaw how slavery would challenge the course of empire because of the violent transplantation and juxtaposition of races, and for this reason in his view only those American spaces that rejected the Latin American notion of a mestizo nationality (what the late nineteenth-century Louisiana writer and civil rights advocate George Washington Cable once called "the maxim of barbarous times and peoples"⁶) would become the bearers of Western history. Since slavery's history only proves that this rejection failed in its purifying aims, as I have more extensively argued in *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*,⁷ I would suggest that what links Whitman and Martí is their failure to acknowledge and accept slavery's legacies as "American," since their penchant for exceptionalism generally assigned blame for those legacies to the Old World. By "legacies," I am referring to the symptoms of slavery that survived abolition, such as segregation and other forms of racial discrimination and division that arose in the years following abolition in every slaveowning nation; the contradiction of democracy's rise within the context of nations who once defined some of its citizens as property; and the complexity of creolized cultures that emerged from the plantation and that defied facile racial or geopolitical categorization. Those legacies are the material witnesses of what Edouard Glissant calls the "concealed parallel of histories" in the Americas and yet they are also witnesses to the creolization of slavery itself; that is, they bear witness to the Americanization of fears of racial contamination, of racial injustice, and other one-time colonial sins.⁸ The challenge posed by postslavery legacies has always been one of how to accept

⁶*The Negro Question* (New York: Scribner's, 1890), p. 130.

⁷George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁸*Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 60.

the by-products of a reprehensible history without justifying that past. What facilitated Whitman and Martí's attribution of these legacies to the colonialism of the Old World was the fact that both essentially ignore the "American South" because it presents a space that challenges their belief in the potential autonomy of their postslavery nations. For Whitman, the postbellum U.S. South was unwanted evidence that slavery's legacies were as American as his robust Mannahatta; for Martí it was preferable to think of the U.S. South as evidence of the impending encroachment of the North on his own Cuban "south" since if he acknowledged the survival of a U.S. Southern difference to the North's imperial aggressions, it would mean he would have to try to imagine a postslavery Cuba as similarly embedded in a history of racial injustice and contradiction, regardless of the U.S. North's encroachments. Consequently, the U.S. South haunts their writings like an unwanted specter, much as it does Paz's theorization of Mexican/U.S. commonalities; Paz's helpful dichotomies between the inclusive and hierarchical tendencies of Mexican society and the exclusive and egalitarian traditions of the U.S. rely on a simplified Anglo-Protestant Northeast, a stereotype that was the sacred root of Whitman's analysis of the Americas that was so influential on Martí.

Only six years after the completion of the Civil War, a war that many critics have argued was U.S. imperialism's first victory in its hemispheric reach towards Latin America, Walt Whitman wrote *Democratic Vistas*, an essay intent on defining the parameters of a New World democratic community that would stretch from Canada to at least Cuba and Mexico, if not further to the south. Of course given the anxieties he witnessed and felt over the future of a nation violently divided by the War, he was intent on helping the nation heal, and he offers the larger hemisphere as the backdrop against which a nation divided by racial slavery and by its creolized cultural byproducts could be reconciled. But given the potential of racial chaos that this broader hemispheric context presented, he also hoped that America's democratic vistas could be shaped by the imaginative conditions of an American poetry, a vibrant, "athletic" poetry of New World originality that would enable Americans to balance their ever-important individualism with the need for an emerging "stock" personality. The paradox of Whitman's democratic vision is its complicity with elitism and an almost obviously naïve trust in U.S. imperialism. The expansion of the United States into the hemisphere did in fact fulfill his prophecy of the extension of this "stock"

personality, but an extension up against an unacknowledged background of real and profound racial and cultural differences wherever U.S. imperialism traveled. Whitman's naïve imperialism has its basis in his conception of poetry's role in shaping an imagined collectivity, a conception that found its way into the thinking of José Martí and later Octavio Paz. While I do not wish to argue categorically against the idea that poetry can and should play a central role in the formation of democratic communities, Whitman's notion, which Martí clearly adopts, contradicts the highest aims of a democratic impulse when it becomes compromised by drawing false or premature borders in the Americas. Hence their views of possibilities for solidarity across national lines are compromised in significant ways, not the least of which is the disappearance of the U.S. South and other such liminal spaces that challenge the racial, geographical, and national boundaries upon which such inter-American solidarity is premised. When a space such as the U.S. South is viewed with more focused attention, what Paz calls a "mutual and stubborn deceit" is no longer simply a refusal to recognize that Latin American nations and the United States represent "distinct versions of Western Civilization." Instead, we discover that these "distinctions" are in fact already compromised by a mutually complicit and shared history and that our mutual deceit regarding the ambiguity that results on the borders has rendered our commonality undeniable but paradoxically also unnameable.

In the context of U.S. debates about the direction of democracy in the wake of abolition, Whitman writes of his concern about the "appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States" and concludes that unless we can muster a cultural force equal to the task of shaping a national personality, "The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time."⁹ Of course one wonders how that history can be transcended without a totally open democratic system that would welcome without apology full and equal participation of white and black Southerners, men and women. But for Whitman, a crucial component of these "appalling dangers" of course was the presence of free and uneducated black men in the South who soon arrived in the North and the remaining resentment among white Southerners after the Civil War. As Ed Folsom has cogently argued,

⁹*Democratic Vistas* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1949), p. 2.

Whitman's democratic vistas are plagued by a "paralyzing ambivalence" regarding universal suffrage and racial amalgamation, the issues that were most heatedly debated during Reconstruction.¹⁰ Consequently, although he frequently expressed more direct antipathy toward the notion of a democracy that included free blacks in much of his unedited prose, he consistently excised these comments from his work. The result of this "working against himself" was that he was able to "keep his books—and the Walt Whitman that lived in them—more open to diversity than the old Walt Whitman who lived in Camden, New Jersey was" (p. 82). Since it was apparent after the Civil War and the Mexican American War that preceded it that the direction of American democracy was ultimately, in Whitman's words, to "dominate the world" by moving first southward into the rest of the New World, it was even more crucial to Whitman that America cohere as a national personality so that its expansion did not lead to chaos, the logical result of the expansion of a racially diverse and free community that failed to unite.

When Whitman speaks of feudalism in this essay, he means to refer us back to the European origins of American culture: "European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world over there" (p. 5). He does not appear to acknowledge the presence of a feudal system that was still kicking in the South after the Civil War and that was to play a major role in shaping the racial politics of segregation in the United States at least for the next eighty years. His version of democracy that opposes this dynastic world, nevertheless, evades the tough question of universal suffrage in its presentation of a rhetorically free but racially unmarked (but therefore white) society. As Folsom explains, "while he says that he will not 'gloss over' the issue of universal suffrage, in the final version of *Democratic Vistas* that is exactly what he does" (p. 79). Instead, what he celebrates is the rhetorically democratic openness and busyness of urban New York. He, of course, was aware that hierarchical traditions lingered in the United States, and it was for this reason he hoped his poetry and that of "poets to come" would provide a curative for a nation that was expanding "with little or no soul" (p. 11). But it is clear that he did not wish to demean the word "American" by

¹⁰"Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics Before the Civil War and After," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 65.

using it to denote any of the U.S. South's atrocities or its continuance on New World soil; he offered no admission of New World creole ownership or responsibility for such traditions. So even though he admits that what "continually haunts [him]" are "conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton knitting all close" (p. 8), those internal conflicts are only evidence that Americans have not yet realized their separation from the Old World and that the lessons of American nature have not yet been able to take root. That is to say, he draws an irrevocable line of demarcation between the Old and New Worlds but leaves an open door of possibility between the North and South of the U.S. and between the North and South Americas. The door, it might be more accurate to say, was only ajar since his knowledge and understanding of the diversity of cultures in the two souths was limited to only a few Spanish words, including *camerado*, *viva*, *libertad*, and *americanos*, but at least for Martí it was enough of an opening to make his entrance and claim on Whitman's democratic vision for all of Latin America. This is because, for Martí, Whitman's logic is not based on argument but, in Martí's words, on "the mystery of insinuation, the fervor of conviction, and the fiery turn of prophecy" (p. 257). Precisely because the Old World door has been shut, the North/South axis can provide increasing democratic vistas, and this will be because the literature that will emerge will reflect local realities and potentials.

If nature would nurture the American poetic imagination instead of the books of European tradition, then poetry would be natural and democratic; as he puts it in his famous opening to "Song of Myself": "creeds and schools in abeyance / . . . Nature without check with original energy."¹¹ For Whitman, literature is crucial to democracy because it both shapes and expresses the values of a society more effectively than anything else; it manages the appalling dangers of democracy by structuring the collective imagination. Reading too much European literature, then, can be a significant mistake since Europe's "songs, ballads, and poems" "permeat[ed] to the very marrow" its culture and taught the values of exclusion, hierarchy, and monarchy (*Democratic*, p. 6). Whitman's pen trumps the sword: literature has more power to "cause changes, growths, removals, greater than the longest and bloodiest war, or the most stupendous merely political, dynastic, or commercial overturn" (p. 6). Although he admits that the poet

¹¹Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), p. 25.

projects ideas “by curious removes, indirections” (pp. 61-62), this understanding of the rhetoric of fiction contradicts his paranoia about literature’s origin and seems absent in his overall argument for a democratic literature. His reasoning about literature’s power sounds anything but democratic: “The great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will” (p. 5).

Whitman is here responding to the great postslavery debate of his time between the radical aims of political liberalism and the notion of a collective rule. While some offered the “rule of law” as the way to manage the potential chaos of mob rule, Whitman offered instead a democratically oriented poetic imagination infused by nature as the means by which those tensions could be reconciled. The organic nature of this democratic possibility betrays Whitman’s exceptionalism since it is the ecology of American soil, what Bruce Piasecki calls Whitman’s “aesthetic of the earth,” that will enable democracy.¹² Kenneth Cmiel explains: “[t]he democratic soul invents itself not by discipline, as the liberals hoped. Nor is it given to simple selfishness or sensuality. Instead, the democratic soul is born through a wondrous receptivity to other people and things. Democratic egoism happens by respecting the whole universe.”¹³ The only hitch, however, is that this capacity to generate a liberalized and poeticized respect for the greater whole seems to deny the will of the reader since poetry “demolishes at will” any individual impulses that would be contrary to greater good. Literature, it would seem, is subtly despotic and indifferent to readers; were he Stanley Fish’s theoretical nemesis today, Whitman might have written a book entitled “Of course there is a text, but Are There *Readers* in This Class?” since it scarcely matters to Whitman who reads or where, but only which books are read. If American poetry obtains this naturalness, attuning itself to the ecology of place in the New World, this need not be a despotism to be feared, since mimesis makes literature a transparent medium through which nature benevolently shapes the democratic soul. At least until the

¹²“Whitman’s ‘Estimate’ of Nature in *Democratic Vistas*,” *Walt Whitman Review*, 27 (September 1981), 112.

¹³“Whitman the Democrat,” in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 222.

advent of his New World democracy, "literature, strictly considered, has never recognized the People"; for this reason he believes that American poetry has the unique opportunity and challenge to take advantage of literature's despotism so as to manage without diminishing America's increasing heterogeneity as it expands into the hemisphere.

It was precisely the specter of this expansion that inspired José Martí to write his now famous invective against U.S. imperialism, "Our America," an essay that many Americanists today celebrate for having opened the study of "America" from the point of view of the Latin Americans who wage their own struggles for autonomy and freedom against the grain of U.S. expansion into the hemisphere. However, what is rarely acknowledged is Martí's romance with American exceptionalism and his incapacity to accommodate racial difference in his own political vision, both of which are strongly apparent in his famous essay on Whitman, first published in Buenos Aires in 1887. Historically, it is undeniable that Martí's writings on Whitman, and on Emerson and Poe as well, had an enormous influence for years to come on Latin American thought; this was the moment that eventually brought Whitman into contact with Latin America's "poets to come" including Rubén Darío, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Luis Borges, among many others. And while critics celebrate this as a kind of "symbiosis that existed between the two poets"¹⁴ and was indicative of their kinship as "new American men who, although different in their ethnicities of origin, were yoked together in their vision of America and of the world."¹⁵ As Fernando Alegría astutely observed, "no one dared doubt [Martí's] word, and Whitman continued to be accepted by the various literary schools as the unquestioned Apostle and as the greatest poet of American democratic genius."¹⁶ But perhaps some doubt was called for since, as Mauricio González de la Garza somewhat polemically demonstrates in his 1971 study, *Walt Whitman: racista, imperialista, antimexicano* [*Racist, Imperialist, Anti-*

¹⁴Monique Doumont, "Notas para un estudio del 'Whitman' de José Martí," *Anuario de filología*, 8-9 (1969-1970), 207, translation mine.

¹⁵Enildo A. García, "José Martí and Walt Whitman: literatura, libertad y democracia," *Círculo: Revista de cultura*, 25 (1996), 83, translation mine.

¹⁶*Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* (Mexico, 1954), pp. 16-17, translation mine.

Mexican],¹⁷ Latin America's Whitman was a more a myth and a mirage than a reality, since his political views were not always in harmony with Latin American interests. But the important question is, might the Latin American myth of Whitman have just as much to do with Whitman's posturing as with those who [mis]read him?

In his essay, Martí argues that *Leaves of Grass* is a "natural work," not a "book," that provides the New World with an example of a "fresh and robust philosophy" (pp. 239, 240, 243). In a clear reference to Domingo Sarmiento's thesis regarding the need for Latin America to civilize itself through literature and thus conquer its own indigenous barbarism, Martí would later call this the struggle in the Americas "not between barbarity and civilization, but between false erudition and nature" ("Our America," p. 141).¹⁸ Despite its harsh judgment of European and other literatures after Europe's supposed anti-democratic mold, this philosophy at its root sees the work of imaginative writers as exercising an almost tyrannical power over the souls of readers, which is all the more reason for him to make the creole argument that New World democratic literature must replace that of Europe. That is to say, Martí seems to share Whitman's belief in the spiritually dead work of European writers, the inherent potential of organic American letters, and the possibility, despite his reservations about U.S. imperialism, of an inter-American democratic community. Like Whitman, he wishes to harness literature's despotic power over the imagination in order to do the seemingly impossible: create a literary world without schools and creeds, or even pedagogy; his new literature will be innocent of all ideology since it is merely a space whereby American possibility might see and realize itself in its purity. This was, according to Ramos, a significant move toward granting literature the power to bring "an enormous degree

¹⁷Mexico: Colección Málaga, S.A., 1971.

¹⁸Julio Ramos explains that Martí offers the "natural man" as an autochthonous alternative to Sarmiento's view of the lettered intellectual of the metropolis who "represents and legitimizes himself as a traveler and translator who acts as the mediator between the blank page of the desert and the plenitude of the European library" (*Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2001], p. 256). Ramos argues that he is also arguing with the positivism and social Darwinism of the Porfirian regime in Mexico (p. 258).

of social authority to areas of Latin American literature, even within the state" (p. 257). Martí writes:

as a pudding conforms itself to its mold, so men take their shape from the book, or the enthusiastic teacher who first introduced them to the fad or fashion of the moment. The philosophical, religious, and literary schools straiten men with their liveried confinement of the lackey; men allow themselves to be put to the iron like horses . . . so that in the presence of the naked, original, loving, sincere, potent man . . . of a Walt Whitman, they flee. (pp. 239-240)

Martí's *Leaves of Grass*, as Whitman would have wished, is not a book but a naked man. This is, again, a notion of literature as mimetically transparent; it is the Hegelian aesthetic ideal by which literature's form finds its appropriate dimensions, allowing the content to be transmitted as if without mediation or rhetoric.¹⁹ This seemingly advocates for literature as reproduction of the world.²⁰ The implication is disturbingly simple: just as he "defends the necessity of an unmediated, transparent form of knowledge" in literature, New World democracy will similarly render invisible, or at least benign, whatever rhetoric, institutions, and ideologies are necessary to forge it (Ramos, p. 262). The danger is that "this defense of 'being,' articulated from within the emergent sphere of literature, implied a new frame—hierarchical and subordinative—of the heterogenous American experience" (p. 264). This exceptionalism, or what Ramos calls "the 'truth' of being[,] . . . is the effect of a formidable will to power" (p. 264). Whitman, of course, urged this transparent conception of his own poetry upon his readers as he consistently argued that the lines of demarcation between the poet and his people are as transparent as they are between the poet and the reader. Whitman's words are not words but flesh.

¹⁹Angel Rama explains that this was, in part, due to Martí's fascination with the philosophy of the English physicist John Tyndall, who urged a more harmonious union between poetry and matter ("José Martí en el eje de la modernización poética: Whitman, Lautrémont, Rimbaud," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 32 [1983], 96-135). He also argues that this was an early modernist fascination with science's apparent capacity to make apprehension of the world verifiable. As Martí wrote: "Language should be mathematical, geometric, plastic. The idea should be captured exactly by the phrase, so exactly that what you might subtract from the phrase, you would subtract from the idea" (qtd. in Rama, p. 105, translation mine).

²⁰Rama, however, asserts that Martí's version of this realism eschewed the obsession with ugliness in European versions (p. 127).

Martí appears in agreement with Whitman that organic poetry, born of the soil and local reality of the Americas, can do more to shape democratic vistas in the Americas than anything else. In one rapturous moment in his praise of Whitman, he exclaims: "Every form of society brings its own expression to literature in such a way that a truer account of the history of nations can be drawn from the stages of literature than from the parchments and chronicles of history" (p. 245). Like Whitman's own avowed Hegelianism,²¹ for Martí this is because "there can be no contradiction in Nature" (p. 245), which is one reason why he also argues that a government inspired by nature and by local conditions will experience no racism because ultimately "there are no races" (p. 150). Literature drawn from nature brings contradictions into synthesis and proclaims a vision of "the oneness in a higher peace of the dogmas and rival passions that divide and bloody nations in their primitive states" (p. 150). As evidence of modernism's struggle to assert its authority in the wake of waning religiosity, he goes so far as to claim that poetry's vision should replace religion and the "hollowness and insufficiency of its ancient creeds" (p. 150). Ramos explains that "Literature, in the face of change, attends to the transformations and necessities of a modern life that invalidates all dogmas. . . . As we see in Martí, an avid reader of Whitman—literature reclaimed for itself the empty place in the secularized world left by the gods" (p. 228). Influenced by Whitman and Thomas Carlyle alike, Martí calls forth like a prophet in the wilderness: "Arise, for you are the priests. Liberty is the definitive religion and the poetry of liberty is the new cult" (p. 246).²²

²¹It is well known that although Whitman's direct contact with Hegel's writings may have been negligible, he was profoundly influenced by Joseph Gostwick's 1854 book, *German Literature*, which gave an account of Hegel, Schelling, Kant, Fichte, and others. Partly because he wrote in the context of the Civil War and its aftermath, Whitman was particularly attracted to the Hegelian dialectic as a way to argue that all contradictions and conflicts could be reconciled under some pantheistic and democratic notion of the absolute. See M. C. Boatright, "Whitman and Hegel," *Studies in English*, 9(1929) 134-150; W. B. Fulghum, Jr., "Whitman's Debt to Joseph Gostwick," *American Literature*, 12 (1941), 491-496; and Cai Zong-qi, "Hegel's Phenomenological Dialectic and the Structure of Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 16 (Summer 1987), 317-329, on the similarities between Hegelian dialecticism and Whitman's poetic vision.

²²Rama, p. 103. The religious rhetoric here signifies a modernist longing for pure apprehension which in the context of the postcolonial Americas is also a desire for independence from the mentality of Europe by means of marriage to the local environment.

As mentioned earlier, this myth of Whitman as an organic poet of American possibility influenced many poets in the Americas whose divergent assumptions of what Whitman had assumed have created various sects from the same sacred book. So perhaps Whitman is not such a demagogue after all, since whatever limitations he might have as a poet or as a visionary of democratic possibility in the Americas, he has been appropriated in enough different directions in the Americas to have rendered those limitations innocuous. Doris Sommer argues that this is because of the Menardian paradox once expressed by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" that all assumptions of the written word inevitably come from different geographies and chronologies and therefore will inevitably mistranslate the word's meaning and thus escape monotonous repetition: "[Whitman's] seduction depends in fact," writes Doris Sommer,

on our initiative, especially from our distance in time and from the spatial distance of readers, say, in Latin America. And this initiating willfulness on the part of his fans was an invitation to seduction that the idol had to accept; Whitman could not have dared to conquer that readerly will without losing all hope of his ultimate conquest.²³

Maybe he isn't the neo-imperialist we thought he was, despite himself, since literature may attempt to manage but can never control heterogeneity in the contact between the written word and millions of unpredictable readers who through the writerly imagination participate in a variety of imagined communities. Whitman's voice is the group therapist who says to one and all alike, "What I shall assume you shall assume" (*Leaves*, p. 25), and yet in such a moment he can never assume what the reader has assumed. Whitman understands the reading moment as the relationship between the "singleness of man" and "the mass" which, he writes, "for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weighed, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to

For Martí, there had to be in this mode of apprehension some Kantian guarantee that the individual subjectivity could unite with matter in such a way as to escape the idiosyncrasies of individuality; otherwise apprehension became mere narcissism. Rama argues that the possibility of transcendental unity "with all human beings" is precisely what made Whitman so attractive to Martí (p. 131).

²³"Martí, Author of Walt Whitman," in *José Martí's "Our America": From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, pp. 78-79, emphasis added.

reconcile them" (*Democratic*, p. 13). Whitman believes that poetry is better equipped for this task than ideologies, schools, and creeds. And what is to distinguish poetry's power over the democratic imagination from a belief in the benevolent democratizing influences of U.S. cultural and economic expansion into Latin America, for example? It is poetry's capacity to recognize and submit itself to the agency of readers who will in a variety of unpredictable ways amend, even cannibalize, the text.

It would seem, then, that there is really nothing dangerous about Whitman's naïve imperialism if we remember that it is the reader's agency that initiates Whitman's guidance; although poetry might engage in the rhetoric of prophecy and aspire to be beyond metaphor, it will nevertheless always rely on a suspension, but never an abdication, of disbelief in the act of reading. For this reason, Sommer insists that because translation is both inevitable and unpredictable in the Americas, Whitman's neocolonialism is excised in Martí's and even Neruda's paeans to the American bard because they are rewriting him in a new context. Sommer would have us believe that Martí is "winking" at us, knowing that he must praise the American bard if only to wrest from Whitman's grasp a workable vision of a hemispheric Hispanic solidarity and democracy. But we must ask, are we to concede that all writing is safe since all reading is autonomous? Is there nothing dangerous about a Latin American Whitman myth, so divorced from what Benjamin would call the "aura" of his work? If we are serious about the context of Martí's life, then what of Martí's own ambivalence about Latin America itself and the philosophy of Latinamericanism, so shrewdly documented by Enrico Mario Santí, for example?²⁴ What of his intolerance for racial difference within his conception of a Cuban democratic polity and its role in founding a political philosophy that resulted in Cuba's race war of 1912?²⁵ Were these not factors that also shaped his view of Whitman or must we assume the liberating misreading is automatic and inevitable? Must we disregard any relevance to the fact that Martí, although thirty-four years

²⁴"'Our America,' the Gilded Age, and the Crisis of Latinamericanism," in *José Martí's "Our America": From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, pp. 179-190.

²⁵For more on Martí's ambivalence about race, see Brenda Gayle Plummer, "Firmen and Martí at the Intersection of Pan-Americanism and Pan-Africanism," and Ada Ferrer, "The Silence of the Patriots: Race and Nationalism in Martí's Cuba," in *José Martí's "Our America": From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, pp. 210-227 and 228-249.

younger than Whitman, spent much of his time in the same part of the United States? Must we always assume that Martí is winking or would it be arguable that Whitman's naïve imperialism seduced Martí?

Or perhaps even more to the point, since we want to avoid the fallacy that literature is a transparent medium of mimesis of the world, is it possible that Whitman's contradictions were not always apparent in his words because of literature's inherent limitations or that Martí's readings were not always faithful to Whitman's words because of his own contradictions? Did Martí apprehend Whitman's potential (and fail to see Whitman's failings) because of his own New World contradictions developed in parallel New World contexts in his native Cuba and in exile within the United States? If we are intent on disagreeing with Whitman and Martí's conception of literature as benevolently despotic, we must be serious about not eliding Martí's own agency and the agency of the discourses out of which his reading of Whitman emerged. And if we are serious, we will be equally suspicious of any tendency to equate all acts of reading as acts of cannibalization and subversion. If we view literature, as do Frederick Jackson Turner, Whitman, and Martí (dare I say Hegel?), as always earth-bound and more conditioned by historical and geographical context than by the ethical choices of readers and writers, we cannot imagine Latin American writers as incapable of their own troubling ambivalence about significant social problems.

As critics of Borges's short story have pointed out, "the creative process is essentially a reading" and therefore "only through an act of interpretation can that which is postulated take on meaning."²⁶ This happens both at the moment of literary creation as well as in the moment of reading, according to Borges. Hence, "meaning develops from the twofold relation of the interpreter: to a literary dream world *and* to historical context" (p. 66, emphasis added). What I mean to propose is a notion of reading in which there is neither a denial of historical process nor of the agency of the creative imagination. This has been essentially important to Latin American authors' attempt to forge a unique Latin American cultural reality through literature. Their struggle has been to

²⁶Steven Matthews, "Jorge Luis Borges: Fiction and Reading," *Ariel*, 6 (Spring 1989), 63.

work against the notion of historical determinism without pretending to work against history. The result has been, as Enrique Pupo-Walker argues, a blurring of the distinction between history and literature.²⁷ To invoke Edmundo O’Gorman’s important New World thesis, Columbus first “invented” America by using its geography as evidence of ancient legends and since then “the lasting material of history has its deepest roots, not in facts and ideas, but in the perpetual flux of belief” (Pupo-Walker, p. 11, translation mine). Consequently, Latin American authors offer a historical philosophy that “enriches and enables a creative reading of the American past: a reading that, far from involving contemplative activity, induces us instead to remake and amplify our own cultural tradition” (p. 13). This is consistent with a Borgesian vision of the literary imagination, which unlike Whitman and Martí’s, stipulates that “there are no sacred works, no works that function as fetishes, because time and other works are forever modifying them”²⁸ (Juan Goytisolo, qtd. in del Río, p. 467). To fetishize or demonize literature because of its political, geographical, or historical origin is to miss altogether the playful power of fiction’s rhetoric, as does Martí when he praises Whitman’s fleshy words; it is to forget that we are reading fiction “and not seeing a life, not facing ‘life’ itself.”

We cannot assume that as long as one reads Whitman from the South, Whitman is innocuous, or even fruitful of new and improved democratic vistas. What is missing in such a belief is any evidence of parallels between a Southern reader’s colonialist politics and Whitman’s, and we end up with a new southward-leaning frontier thesis a la Turner. Such is the logic of the Hegelian dialectic; as the Western “text” is displaced, transplanted into the New World, it is inevitable that its new readings will simply be syntheses of former contradictions and a deeper and fuller realization of the freedom of self-consciousness will result. And Hegel’s imagined conflict between North and South America may very well be won by the North to the extent that Anglo-American writers bear intertextual fruit in the Americas to the south. If Martí winks, perhaps Whitman (and

²⁷“Borges, Carpentier y la lectura crítica de la historia,” *Insula: Revista de Letras y Ciencias Humanas*, 37 (June 1982), 11, 13.

²⁸Macedonio Fernández, qtd. in Carmen M. del Río, “Borges’ ‘Pierre Menard’ or Where Is the Text?,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 25 (1979), 467.

Hegel) have the last laugh and wink back because we cannot seem to see Latin American cultures on their own terms, riddled by the contradictions of their own historical experience and, most importantly, their writers capable of their own missteps of judgment.

In his reading of Faulkner in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, Edouard Glissant shows us an alternative between the extremes of readerly despotism and writerly liberation and an alternative consequently to the dichotomous choices outlined above between New World exceptionalism and national chauvinism. And instead of eliding the ambiguities the U.S. South presents to an understanding of the distinction between the United States and its southern neighbors, he confronts them head on. As he insisted in earlier works as well, Glissant believes that Western culture, like all atavistic cultures, seeks legitimacy and filiation in the sacred stories of creation that are their own; this in turn creates a culture of rhetorical purity, of indivisible unity and unassailable claims to place and to impermeable but ever-expandable borders. Composite cultures, like those of the American South and the Caribbean, must adopt myths from the fragments of atavistic cultures that have survived in the composite whole. Consequently, composite cultures make claims to place, to legitimacy, and to originality that are more tentative, ironic, and self-conflicted. Their stories are open-ended and express, as he argues Faulkner's works do, a "suspension of identity" in their refusal to accept facile closure or restoration of social wholeness. They are cultures whose writers, like Faulkner, "are situated on the frontier, on the border between two apparent or actual possibilities."²⁹ The danger is when a composite culture, such as the South (even its name as "the South" already seems to "represent an absolute, as though we other people of the south, to the south of this capitalized South, never existed" [p. 30]), denies its composite nature and tries instead to create itself and stake its claim to legitimacy through filiation (p. 115). The result is an unresolved suffering caused by the "torments of withdrawal into self and the damned solitude of a refusal that does not have to speak its name" (p. 31). For this reason, he can see in Faulkner's fiction the basis for embracing what has already characterized Caribbean experience: that is, the "unpredictability [of creolization] that terrifies those who refuse the very idea, if not the

²⁹ *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998) p. 4.

temptation, to mix, flow together, and share” (p. 30). Glissant does not argue that there is anything exceptional about Faulkner’s vision, since it already has parallels with a much longer history in the region (and much of Glissant’s philosophy expressed in this book has already been well developed in his own Caribbean experience prior to his approach to Faulkner’s fiction); his aim rather is to read the U.S. South from an even deeper south and thus disrupt the nationalist and imperial vectors that have isolated the U.S. South and elided its relevance to understanding the Americas.

What specifically does the South share with the Caribbean, or with the rest of the United States? For Glissant, underlying all American cultures to one degree of open recognition or another is the confounding structures of composite cultures that, once denied, create the psychosis of national exceptionalism, where we embrace the delusion of the singularity of our experience, rooted in and determined by our lands and histories. This lie of the ever-alluring sacred root of social identity must be replaced by the reality of transgressive rhizomes, natural histories that extend beyond geopolitical boundaries and common stories of suffering and displacement that characterize the New World. (Intent on avoiding another Turnerian frontier out of the South, Glissant goes so far as to argue that the settlement of the West “was of a much more abrupt violence than that which troubles Faulkner’s universe” [p. 112].) The South then remains unique within the United States only in its incapacity to successfully repress its composite identity, and therefore it is the site at which he can expose the “subsidiary roots from elsewhere—the innumerable relations with other places” that would situate the South between competing American possibilities (p. 53). That, at least, is his *reading* of Faulkner.

And it is this act of reading Faulkner that is most important to understand. The geography of this U.S. South is, after all, given by Faulkner’s literature and Glissant’s reading of it, as is apparent in Glissant’s choice to title the book after a space that is made hybrid by place as well as by the word; his *Faulkner, Mississippi* is a new space, parallel to Faulkner’s own Yoknapatawpha, forged between the writerly and readerly imaginations. He is not always willing, and rightfully so, to attribute to Faulkner the depth of vision of an inter-American collectivity that he describes. He is aware of Faulkner’s latent racism and admits that he doesn’t always know if

Faulkner's black characters demonstrate that Faulkner is "respecting the opacity of the Other or," he asks, "is it a beginning of a system of apartheid?" (p. 63). But I want to be careful to insist that the reader's change of historical or geographical context alone does not explain Faulkner's radically new meanings now that he is read by a black Martinican in the late twentieth century. It is also a self-conscious choice on the part of Glissant. The undecidedness of Faulkner's universe may very well be a function of Faulkner's ambivalence, but it doesn't matter in the end to Glissant. Even though Glissant admittedly seeks to rescue his Caribbean from the blinding reach of the North's appropriation of Faulkner, he simultaneously insists that Faulkner sowed the seeds of this possibility, even perhaps against his own intentions. Just as Glissant himself is not solely determined by his own Caribbean circumstances, or his resistance to European hegemony, he refuses to grant Faulkner a certain predictability simply by virtue of where and how he lived: "what a bias it is—inherited from the practice of the oppressors—to suppose that a work of art cannot arise from the house of the master just as easily as from the shack of the oppressed" (p. 16). He exercises his writerly imagination to expose a concealed parallel in the histories of the Americas that he simultaneously argues Faulkner accommodated in his fictional universe. Literature turns out to be less predictable, less determined by context than we had supposed.

While literature may seek to suture divided communities through the collective imagination and thus offer a possibility of democratic integration, literature also exposes rifts in communities that it does not always recognize. While it may be tempting for the reader to reduce the significance of these rifts to political limitations on the part of the author, Glissant suggests that such approaches are unfruitful; it would be far more useful to see these rifts as witnesses of a collective, almost Jungian, possibility that one writer, however flawed, brought within range of our perception, however imperfectly. While a writer may try to imitate the models provided by preceding generations or by dominant geographies, or for that matter to try to eschew those models and imitate a local reality, literature fails. But as Anthony J. Cascardi observes,

on such occasions, the articulation of the significant difference that "makes it new" comes about through what Adorno might call the process of a "second reflection" on the place of mimesis [and this] allows the work of art to reassert its claim to be

something more or other than a mimesis of the world, in part by reflecting on the impossibility of its ever being a full and complete mimesis of the world.³⁰

Reading in this sense is not merely Menardian by virtue of the reader's shift in geographical or chronological context; it is so because of the reader's generative capacity to identify *the gaps between* literature and its context. Such readings rewrite imagined worlds and become works of fiction in their own right without a single author; after all readings are, as Borges claims about Menard's text, palimpsests of previous writings and readings. Or as Guyanese author Wilson Harris believes, if we can avoid the temptation to allow our understanding of literary imagination to be overdetermined by obsessions with nationalism, we can begin to "assess a kind of seismic quality in a changing culture [of transplanted peoples], an epicentre that releases a suddenly fissured crack"³¹ on the global surface of human culture. That is, a given work of cultural imagination within one nation becomes an expression, or a "fissured crack," in a larger landscape shaped by subterranean, submarine cross-cultural forces. Harris envisions that literature, sometimes more radical and cross-cultural than even its own authors envision, is constantly drawn in and "conscripted by collective 'imperatives.'" Literature is "subtly enriched within and against other apparently alien imaginations," and reading cross-culturally reveals that "each work complexly and peculiarly revises another and is inwardly revised in turn in profound context" (p. 127).

Glissant states that Faulkner "needed to see whether he had been right to keep the county apart from the rest of the world in order for it to represent the world in its entirety" (p. 53). That is, in the end Faulkner's regionalism tells the story, now retold by Glissant, of the divisibility of the place, not its insular exceptionality. This divisibility does not present an "appalling danger" to the aims of collective social good, but quite the opposite. It opens a community to its submarine, subterranean parallels with the other Americas. And this, for Glissant, is the surrogate, composite creation story for the Americas. Rather than hopelessly and fruitlessly pining

³⁰"Mimesis and Modernism," in *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Rodolphe Gasché (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 116.

³¹*The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1983).

for the creation *ex nihilo* or even *ex occidente* of a whole and legitimate community, literature in the Americas teaches that “we can accept that the sacred ‘results’ not only from an ineffable experience of a creation story but also, from now on, *from the equally ineffable intuition of the relationship between cultures*” (p. 115). The origins of a culture, then, are not in the past but in a future possibility, in what is yet to be, when we ask ourselves to contemplate what is between and among the Americas. New World literature can express these possibilities if we refuse the temptations of atavism and embrace its relationality and if we understand that old familiar texts do not force themselves upon us as stories of other sacred origins for which we feel eternal nostalgia or even envy. Rather they are remade in the interrelational readings that become possible in the context of composite cultures. We begin to imagine, then, that literature’s force cannot be “mapped” according to geography by focusing on its lands of origin and reference and yet neither should we overstate its power to forge meta-geographical imagined communities; its power is that it can expose the fissures, the liminal spaces between communities. This means that we need not fear nor exoticize the West or the competing Americas of the North and the South, but rather that we should remain open and cautious about our perceptions of our own cultural singularity.

To expect literature to confirm the singularity and exceptionality of either “World” or of either “America” would be to succumb to Hegel’s a priori conception of Western Civilization and to create further conflict and division in the Americas. This would, of course, mean that literature of European origin, despite Whitman’s and Martí’s warnings, is not so toxic; indeed, their own literary careers reflect their fascination with and admiration for a number of European figures including, among others, Rimbaud and Carlyle for Martí and Coleridge and Hegel for Whitman. For this reason, Angel Rama goes so far as to argue that “the axis that links European aesthetic inventions with American contributions (from Poe and Whitman to Martí and Darío) does not prevent us from recognizing the existence of this other strictly American axis defined by poets from the United States and Latin America,” and thus opens a triangulated view of these literatures as participants in Atlantic cultures. But if we no longer read with the anticipation that literature will reveal something new to us, transmitted from the world of the writer, why read at all? As Cascardi insists,

forsaking the ambition to fashion anything radically new affords the possibility of an affective relationship to reality . . . [and] suggests that the weight of "novelty" . . . will fall most heavily on the adjectival moments of thought. . . . Such inflections establish differences and validate the artwork's claim to truth, marking it as being both *like* and *unlike* the world." (p. 122)

If we remain open to this dual possibility, we will not lock ourselves into polarizations that present false choices between Old and New Worlds or between North and South Americas and we will place more responsibility on our own writerly shoulders to imagine like and unlike relationships. While we become self-conscious in this schema, self-consciousness is passively given to us by our knowledge of historicity. There are simply too many gaps, ellipses, or what Scott Romine calls deferrals,³² that have generated present identities for various American communities. Origins are not found chronologically in the past or geographically elsewhere but remade in our contemplation of the relations and spaces between borders in the present; if we are *self*-conscious, we are also conscious of others and conscious of the fact that we face the chance to remake ourselves every time. If Martí opens Whitman's door of inter-American democratic possibility wider, in his own way he also narrows the opening. In any case, the door still remains ajar and it may yet serve as a gateway to broader democratic vistas in the hemisphere, if as readers of American literatures we can tolerate this ambiguity.

³²*The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).