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## Indelible Plantation Imprints in Trans-American Poetics

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## Indelible Plantation Imprints in Trans-American Poetics

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Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), 212 pp.

*The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* examines a diverse array of texts from the Spanish Caribbean (Cuba, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) and the United States. Each chapter takes a transnational approach, analyzing a text from Spanish America alongside a text from the U.S., exploring how cultural memories and historical legacies of the plantation or ingenio (sugarmill), as both a physical entity and an ideology, have shaped, influenced, transformed, and haunted communities, countries, and cultures. The differences between the two terms are important as “*ingenio* draws attention to the institution’s ‘split personality’ by highlighting the intimate relationship between its rural/agrarian and industrial/commercial nature” (7). Russ arranges the novels and essays she investigates chronologically, first analyzing early to mid twentieth-century literature that presents a critique of modernity and then juxtaposing contemporary (post-1970) texts that represent the postmodern plantation imagination. Russ’s overall objective is to offer “a model by which to evaluate the development, over the course of the twentieth century, of a trans-American poetic imaginary that has emerged from this brutal, dehumanizing past” (3). Her project thus offers fascinating transnational comparisons, often pairing unexpected texts (such as Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* with Mayra Santos-Febres’s *Sirena Selena*) and inviting readers to consider cross-cultural connections, openings, and ruptures with regards to how specific geographic locales and communities have been politically, economically, socio-culturally, and psychologically affected by slavery and its aftermaths. In her introduction and elsewhere, Russ draws on Edouard Glissant’s “open word” theory which proposes that the closed space of the plantation engenders an “open word” or discourse which, for Russ’s purposes, is helpful as it “disrupts the binary logic of the plantation by insisting that the open word is a product of both slave and master” (5). Russ argues that the paradoxes and transmutations of the plantation bring about “open word” poetics in various communities.

Russ’s first pairing is the Twelve Southerner’s *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) and Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpart: Tobacco and Sugar*, published a decade after. Russ notes that what primarily links these male writers is their aversion to industrialization, negative judgment of industrial capitalism, reaction to northern stereotypes about southern regions, and subsequent patriarchal and racial stereotyping of land and nation.

However, the chapter focuses on elucidating the explicit and subtle differences between the writings of the Twelve Southerners and Ortiz, namely their diametrically opposed conception of the plantation as an irrecoverable, static Eden for the former and a monstrous “super-central” machine for the latter (25). There are other blatant differences; as Russ writes, “[b]oth writers employ metaphors of roots, but to different ends” (23). Whereas Allen Tate of the Twelve Southerners romantically imagines the U.S. South as a metaphoric extension of Europe, Ortiz stresses how African and indigenous people were torn from their roots for the purpose of forced labor. Russ keenly discusses how the authors use racial and erotic imagery to describe southern spaces/places (though quite differently), highlighting how each region’s plantation inheritance is married to race and gender hierarchies.

The next two chapters explore novels written by women, each representing a different decade from the 1920-1950s. The female protagonists in all of these novels are directly or indirectly affected by the dark complexities of the plantation system. Russ states that though the plantation may not always be physically present in these narratives, its legacy of oppression is omnipresent in these women’s lives. Chapter Two provides close readings of Teresa de la Parra’s *Iphigenia* (1924) and Ellen Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life* (1932), examining the ways in which the protagonists attempt to resist societal definitions of womanhood in Venezuela and Virginia respectively. Russ contextualizes both novels in terms of each author’s life in which “upheavals [for Parra, a 30 year dictatorship in Venezuela and for Glasgow, U.S. Reconstruction] imposed by the processes of modernity, impacted people from all classes, races, and ethnic groups” (23). She argues that one striking difference between the two is that Glasgow ends up maintaining some of the very problematic conventions she critiques while Parra “utilizes language that actively undermines stable notions of gender and race so as to imagine an (ultimately failed) alternative to the old order of the patriarchal plantation” (41). Chapter Three focuses on the representation of landscape as intimately connected to the plantation past in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* (1946) and Dulce María Loynaz’s *Garden* (1951). Russ attends to how these novels feminize nature as encroached by modernity and masculine values, “attempt[ing] to reconfigure the topography of the plantation so as to imagine a still unimaginable order in which both women and men may find freedom as well as community” (94).

Russ returns to analyzing essay collections in Chapter Four where she juxtaposes Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* (1989) with Edouard Glissant’s *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1994). Expounding on scholars’ criticism of Benítez-Rojo’s evasion of U.S. South and Cuba plantation history comparisons, Russ then illustrates how Glissant draws on trans-American similarities as he recounts his travels to the U.S. South, discussing William Faulkner and his works. The final two chapters examine characters for whom the plantation legacy is

explicitly linked to trauma in Aída Cartagena Portalatín's *Stairway for Electra* (1970) and Gayl Jones's neoslave novel *Corregidora* (1975) and to various transnational crossings in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) and Mayra Santos-Febres's *Sirena Selena* (2000). Chapter Five demonstrates how women can "reclaim desire and begin to extricate their bodies, as well as their memories, from the close circle of the past," a past that includes the legacy of colonialism or, in the case of *Corregidora*, slavery (118).

Chapter Six is one of the most engaging chapters but is also the most far-removed from Russ's discussion of the plantation. Drawing on the trope of the Big House, Russ views the mansion in *Sirena Selena* as a funhouse and the Convent-mansion in *Paradise* as an open house. Each novel offers numerous narrative voices, "exploring the possibilities, and the limits, of multiple unofficial histories" (146). Russ points out the clear differences between Morrison and Santos-Febres: while characters in *Sirena Selena* are transient, characters in *Paradise* seek to establish residence and permanence. Yet Russ explains that in both narratives symbolic plantations loom large. Selena's transvestite performances take place in mansions and hotels which evoke the Big House and Benítez-Rojo's concept of plantation machine; in *Paradise*, the Convent's history signals power relations that cannot be divorced from the plantation tradition.

Russ's conclusion asks, "What are the roles of history and memory in this construction [of communities], and what is the role of art? How much should be remembered, how much forgotten? How, and where, do we find redemption in or from the past?" (172). Her questions bring to mind a controversial August 2012 cover of the magazine *Fuera de Serie*, a supplement to the Spanish newspaper, *Expansión*. The work of artist Karine Percheron-Daniels, who has reinterpreted famous historical and popular culture figures in the nude, appeared on the cover. Percheron-Daniels superimposed Michelle Obama's face onto Marie-Guillemine Benoist's infamous "Portrait d'une negresse" (1800) which features a topless black woman staring at the viewer. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes, "The obligatory headdress and partial nudity mark her as different from civilized white womanhood" (15). The unnamed "negresse" in the portrait was an African or Caribbean servant the artist's relative had brought from the French Caribbean to France (Pollock 297). What are viewers to make of a twenty-first century French-English postmodern artist's work that reinterprets a nineteenth-century French portrait of a black Caribbean servant by painting an African American First Lady's visage and partially topless body on the cover of a Spanish magazine? Although Russ focuses on literature, she provides tools with which to think about complex or problematic transnational artistic works, literary and otherwise, that reflect cross-cultural postslavery imaginations and literally or symbolically recall the plantation.

Works Cited

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