

*La Corriente del Golfo* (1920) by Juan Manuel Planas<sup>1</sup> retells with historical accuracy and through a heavily patriotic rhetoric, the history of the Cuban War of Independence of 1895 and, at the same time, fabricates it at will. Although not intending to “write a treatise of Cuba’s history”, the narrator deems “indispensable” to recall the “state Cuba was in, in the time [the] narration begins” (Planas, *La Corriente* 58).<sup>2</sup> A careful dating, the chronological enumeration of recognizable battles and historical events, as well as the constant reference to political actors, establish a referentiality connecting the fictional and ‘real’ worlds determining a realist and historical reading pact that will later be called into question by fictional intrusions that rewrite —through fantasy, science and cartography— the conditions of the conflict. Fusing the actions of Estrada Palma or Maceo with those of *profesor Duna* or *el ingeniero Hopkins*; or retelling events such as Martí’s death, and the sinking of the *Maine* alongside the supposed desertification of Spain, the construction of a dam between Key West and Cuba, or an oyster crisis in France; Juan Manuel Planas reinvents the origins of the Cuban Republic, inscribing Independence as a product not only of the struggle against tyranny —fought with machetes and rifles—, but as a geoengineered victory over nature itself. The other —and fantastic— Cuban army, that conducts its meetings in the small laboratory of a pharmacy in Havana, sets to defeat

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<sup>1</sup> Born in Cienfuegos in 1877, he left Cuba for Belgium precisely in 1895 to study electrical engineering. As Yoss documents, even though Planas was in Europe during Cuba’s Independence War, his sympathies were with the insurgents and the nation, which shows through his collaborations with the immigrant newspaper, “La República Cubana” or the magazine “Cuba y América” (1897-1906). After his return to Cuba in 1907, during the second U.S Occupation, he established the Sociedad Cubana de Ingenieros, worked as an auxiliary engineer in the complex dredging works of the port of Jagua and published scientific works, both specialized and of *divulgación científica* or popular science. He later participated in conferences about electrical telegraphy, won a torneo intelectual on theoretic geometry (1913), became a member of the Academia de las Ciencias Médicas, Físicas y Naturales de Cuba (1923), and published treatises such as “La explotación del mar”, “La fuerza del mar” or “Introducción a la oceanografía”. A man of his time, and a fervent Verne admirer, his involvement in science was always paralleled with fiction writing and, before *La Corriente del Golfo* he published “Las teorías del profesor Miliscenios” (1917), *Cuando la paz reinaba* (1918-19), “El fantasma del Cayo” (1919), “A Cienfuegos” (1919), and the poetic anthology *Rompiendo lanzas* (1920). A few years later, in 1938, he published as a *folletín* in the Havana newspaper *Avance*, *El Sargazo del oro (el vellochino verde)* also included in the entry for Cuba, in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (Redondo).

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, all quotations from Juan Manuel Planas, Arturo Amigó, Luis Marino Pérez, Ezequiel de Rosso, and Antonio Pedreira will be my translations. Also, unless stated otherwise, all quotations from Juan Manuel Planas will be from *La Corriente del Golfo*.

Spain by constructing a dam connecting the U.S. and Cuba and interrupting the natural flow of the Gulf Stream. Replicating inversely the construction of the Panama Canal—that excavates, disconnects and unites two oceans— Cubans reuse the residual material from the detonations of Panama’s Culebra Cut, to instead obstruct the Florida Strait, connecting territories but dividing seas. The plan is that, finding an obstacle in its path, the Gulf Stream would be rerouted southwards, depriving Spain from the humidity and coolness that its flow used to provide, transforming it into “a new desert, a new Sahara” (Planas 213). Through this reimagination the novel *elevates* the conditions of the war: soldiers become paid employees; high commands, foreign scientists; and the guerrilla warfare, an elegant geoengineering and industrial enterprise. Written in a scenario of global reordering and capital network reconfigurations amidst the consolidation of North American Imperialism (Ramos 238), *La Corriente del Golfo*, fantasizes with a re-cartographization of the modern world operated through science and labor. Attributing a “mythical solidity” (Schwarz 90) to the economic and political inequalities of the international order, the response that the novel proposes is phrased in terms of concreteness as well: tropical climate, ocean currents, land annexation, continentalization or desertification become the instruments that allow an articulation of sovereignty and nationalism. New topographic, climatic or nautical maps, become the backdrop for sovereignty, the reformation of the Cuban man into a disciplined worker, and for the tracing of new invisible arteries of wealth production, consumption and distribution, overcoming insularity and positioning Cuba—in the fashion of the Panama Canal—, as a new node in the global network. The complex emplotment of the novel—a fictional segment between two historical events— embeds the narrative into the super-sequence of history and smuggles Planas’ fantasies of Cuban technical agency into the dominant narratives of the independence process, revising the official account dominated by the American discourse of the Spanish-American War and thus *corrects* Cuba’s past.

The novel —stemming from the imperialist tradition of climatic determinism that has long destined the tropics to premodernity and moral degeneration<sup>3</sup>— fantasizes with a Cuba that revolts against the global (and natural) position of dependency and submission it has been forced to occupy. But as much as the novel fantasizes with environmental control, it manages to articulate its inverse as well, and climate appears as discourse and reality determining ways of life, economic possibilities, avenues of commerce, and in general, the Cuban disposition towards progress and modernity. Human domination over climate is as present as the dominance of climate over men. I argue that in Cuban, tropical or peripheral “climate fiction”<sup>4</sup>, the desire for environment control stems from its irremediable discursive oppression, rather than from a Westernized and industrial spirit of domination. Nature, then, understood here in terms of Moore’s “historical nature” is conceived not only as a resource, but as a matrix creating the historical and geographical configurations of opportunities and limits conditioning the formation of human material and symbolic power (Moore, ch.5). Against the spirit of modernity and its “mighty control project” (Moore, ch.4), Planas, historically conditioned to the awareness that nature indeed determines socio-economic and political configurations, embarks in an operation intending to restore what Moore terms the “Cartesian binary”, that is, the clear ontological separation of Nature and Society that codifies nature as “out there” and therefore as controllable (Moore, intro.). To put it in another way, the novel, through its fantasies of climate control, puts in motion a strategy designed to make nature *external* to Cubans. In this way, nature is transformed from historical agent, determinant of tropical belatedness, into resource whose manipulation positions Cuba as a modern global sovereign power. Sustained by the transportation of rocks, the halting of the ocean and the alteration of climate —that is, sustained by new forms of nature control—, new forms of social organization

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<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth Huntington’s 1915 *Civilization and Climate* is the main theory of climatic determinism used in this work, although in dialogue with early twentieth century Caribbean articles and essays addressing the issue of tropical climate as a national problem.

<sup>4</sup> The term is further discussed in the next section “A Secret Weapon: the Gulf Stream”

and nature emerge, inaugurating a different regime marked by the North American imperial reorganization of global power from which Cuba can now participate as a sovereign, modern and cosmopolitan nation.

Through its enlightened fantasies of nature domination, *La Corriente del Golfo* inverts Moore's proposed transition from the binary differentiation of Nature and Society towards the messily bundled double-internality of the "web of life" (Moore, intro.). This intersectional position allows for an articulation of an environmental conscience, aware of the agency of nature, and its dangerously fragile interdependence. Scarcely studied or even known<sup>5</sup>, a recovery of *La Corriente del Golfo*—with its transformation of the Cuban war of Independence into an environmental war—, is essential in its contribution to contemporary readings of a Latin American and Caribbean history of the Anthropocene. In fact, its non-canonical/sub-literary form of science fiction, allows for a modern articulation of what Amitav Ghosh understands as the cataclysmic "natural history" and of the violence and unpredictability of nature, that the canonical modern realist literature—through its verisimilitude pact—is unable to depict (23-24). Moreover, the unique articulation of national character and sovereignty through an environmental perspective, opens up a new approach revitalizing the study of nation-building narratives and contributing to the reading of the history of the human-and-capital-as-nature at the onset of the Caribbean twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> *La Corriente del Golfo* has only been mapped through the Latin American science fiction scholarship, that, through a retro-labeling effort, designed, in part, to legitimize the considered peripheral production of science fiction in Latin America; set to reconstruct, and in some aspects invent, the local tradition of the genre. But even so, mentions to Planas's novel never go beyond its mere mention or listing. The two founding chronologies of Latin American Science Fiction contemporary scholarship include *La Corriente del Golfo* in their recounts of the genre. One being the "Chronology" annex in Rachel Haywood Ferreira's *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*; and the other one, the "Chronology of Latin American Science Fiction, 1775-2005" by Yolanda Molina Gavilán, et al. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* recognizes it as 'scientific fiction' (Redondo), while the *Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana* identifies *La Corriente del Golfo* as "the first novel of scientific fiction wrote in Cuba" (García)

Other mentions to *La Corriente del Golfo*, appear scattered among Cuban blogs and online magazines devoted to fantasy and science fiction. Among the ones found are: "Pretextos para desviar la Corriente" by Maielis González; "Juan Manuel Planas y Sainz: pionero de la ciencia ficción cubana" by Miguel Bonera Miranda and Victoria Gallardo Rubí in *Guaicán Literario*; "Juan Manuel Planas un escritor de ciencia ficción poco valorado" (2011) by Yudith Madrazo Sosa or Rogelio Moya's "La primera novela cubana de ciencia ficción" published in 1969 in Granma. In 2005, Nelson Román discussed *La Corriente del Golfo* in *Universo de la ciencia ficción cubana*.

## A Secret Weapon: the Gulf Stream

The idea that the Gulf Stream operated as a thermostat regulating the world temperature was established by Matthew Fontaine Maury, Superintendent of the United States Naval Observatory and known as the Father of Modern Oceanography. In his 1855 *The Physical Geography of the Sea*— he proposed that the northwest of Europe enjoyed relatively mild winters, compared to the freezing temperatures reached in the same latitudes on the other side of the Atlantic —northeastern U.S. and Canada—, thanks to the heat that the Gulf Stream and its prolongation, the North Atlantic current, injected into the wind currents that crossed the ocean from west to east. The Gulf Stream seemed so crucial to the present global climatic configuration, that its first mapping in Maury's oceanographic climatology, contains, as well, a speculation of the consequences of its absence: "[if it were not for the Gulf Stream] the soft climates of both France and England would be as that of Labrador, severe in the extreme, and ice-bound" (Maury 45).

Planas was familiar with Maury's work<sup>6</sup>, but instead opens the novel with an epigraph quoting the cartographer and geologist, Julien Thoulet, who expands Maury's theory considering the effects —reported by Prince Albert of Monaco— of the splitting of the Gulf Stream in the northeastern Atlantic. Contemplating not only the branch that heads, in fact, towards Northern Europe, but also the other one, heading south and bathing the coasts of Spain, Portugal and Africa, Thoulet further hypothesized about the material obstruction of the Gulf Stream and its possible consequences in a broader area that includes Spain:

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<sup>6</sup> Maury is mentioned in the chapter "Modern Oceanography" (Planas 85) next to Georges Aimé and Maurice de Tastes, as examples of successful scientists that had laid the ground theoretically for Cuba's experiment. The textual function of these names is multiple: it helps build verisimilitude; supplements the practical authority of the theories presented, inscribing this fantasy as a legitimate heir of scientific scholarship and acts as a pedagogical tool.

Planas' purpose as a writer of fiction, as he stated in his conference "Los horizontes de Julio Verne" was "to make optimism reign in [my novels], unfolding the sails of my patriotic inspirations over a sea of philosophical, scientific and historical probabilities" (386). This inscribes *La Corriente del Golfo* as "scientific fiction" or as a "roman scientifique" (à la Verne), where, by extrapolating science and technology "to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action" (Nicholls), science serves a predominantly pedagogical function intended to address the "reasoning intellect" (Evans 82-3).

If, as nothing prevents to believe it, the continuous work of the corals intercepted the passage of the Gulf Stream in the Straits of Florida, and forced the mass of hot water to be poured into the south, preventing it from spreading randomly, the whole European equilibrium would be altered. Spain and Morocco would be transformed into furnaces like Senegal, while France would cool down, and England would become glacial, with a climate perhaps analogous to that of Kamtchatka. (Thoulet quoted by Planas 2017 45)

Stemming both from Maury and Thoulet, and an aficionado oceanographer himself, Planas further expands and decenters the speculation from Europe to include the Caribbean — and, most generally, the Americas—and goes on to imagine the disruption of the current as an artificial man-made event. Perceiving climate as a finite resource, Planas imagines a sort of *abduction* of good climate from Europe to America. So, while the halt of the Gulf Stream *desertifies* Spain —affecting negatively the rest of Europe as well—, it also transforms positively Cuba’s climate. As the plan announces: Cuba will “be free from the heat . . . and from the cyclones that devastate its countryside, destroying its crops, delivering misery annually to a large number of peasants and fishermen” (Planas 90).<sup>7</sup>

To read *La Corriente del Golfo* as a tale of an environmental and climatic war, leads us to the famous *Civilization and Climate*, written by the anthropogeographer Ellsworth Huntington —known for his controversial studies on climatic determinism and economic geography—, and published just five years before Planas’ novel.<sup>8</sup> As its title indicates, the study explores the relationship between the degree of civilization achieved by certain peoples

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<sup>7</sup> The new beneficial climate affects adjacent territories as well: Bermuda, Azores, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and the two Carolinas, all benefit from the ceasing of the hurricanes, while the Lucayan archipelago is said to become more and more inhabitable thanks to a descent of its temperatures. New temperate climate and the absence of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean coincide with U.S. imperialism, the emancipation of Spain’s last colonies, and the construction of the Panama Canal, as factors creating a new “technological zone” (Barry 38) and world order, where the climate alteration is clearly serving a shift in the organization of global hierarchies, signaling the end of Europe and the rise of the Americas.

<sup>8</sup> Although, the two documents may be chronologically closer, since, as Planas documents in a “Bibliografía Cronológica” he prepared as part of his candidacy to the Academia de Ciencias Médicas, Físicas y Naturales de La Habana “I wrote the first eight chapters in 1916 or 1917. The rest in August, September and October of 1919” (Amigó 650).

and the climatic conditions that ‘determined’ them. The conclusion —predictable in a discipline so heavily dominated by Lamarck— proposed that, in fact, elements such as barometric pressure, wind, or humidity determined the ability of people to successfully bear the “fruit of civilization” (Huntington 3). Unlike the racial thinking of his predecessors, Huntington interpreted the poverty and belatedness of the tropics as a consequence, “not of its racial inferiority, but of its climate” (Leary 45) and understood the ‘premodernity’ and ‘degeneration’ of the tropics “as scientific consequences of climatic factors” (Leary 45). For example, about the inhabitants of the torrid zone, Huntington claimed that they were “slow and backward, and we almost universally agree that this is connected with the damp, steady heat” (Huntington 2). In the Caribbean States and within certain intellectual elites, climate was also conceived as a socio-economic problem. Antonio Pedreira, trying to map the “essence” and “collective psychology” of Puerto Rico, explored how geography and climate affected the nation’s character: “The weather melts our will and causes rapid deterioration in our psychology. The heat ripens us before time, and before time, it decomposes us. From its unnerving pressure over men comes that national characteristic that we call *aplantanamiento*” (39), that is, indolence, docility, or a decrease in the capacity for activity. Once it was established that “the destiny of any society or economy could be predicted by mapping isotherms and humidity” (Frenkel 144), premodern forms of life became unavoidable cartographical traits of the nations and were “naturalized as part of the landscape” (Leary 46). Man, Huntington recognizes, “is far more limited than he has realized” (Huntington 285). Even though he has bragged that he is the master of the globe, that he has made the earth inhabitable, and risen over the fear of a chaotic and uncontrollable nature and subdued it, ending uncertainty and necessity he, Huntington argues, “cannot change the climate” (287), if he could, he dreams, “the whole world will become stronger and nobler” (294). He does, however, fear a sudden climatic alteration, and sees in this modification, the possibility of a “chaos far worse than that

of the Dark Ages” (286) in which “races of low mental caliber may be stimulated to most pernicious activity, while those of high capacity may not have energy to withstand their more barbarous neighbors” (286). Huntington’s fears reveal how tied up climate and power were perceived to be, where climate has the capacity to trigger worldwide anarchy and disintegrate the global hierarchical order. To engage with the theory of climatic determinism and climate fiction, then, directly situates us in the necessary confluence between climate and history.

In the Age of Empires, the climatically determined differences between the temperate and torrid zones were central to Western European or North American self-conceptions of natural superiority. Climatically destined, the inhabitants of the northern temperate zones were naturally “energetic, provident, serious, thoughtful rather than emotional, cautious rather than impulsive” (Frenkel 144). The belief of their superiority over the inhabitants of the torrid zones, offered them a scientific basis and a rhetorical device that legitimized their claim to ownership of colonial land, resources, and labor as well as affirmed their cultural supremacy. Amidst the dominance of environmental determinism, Cuba’s intellectual circles although acknowledging that climate was willingly unchangeable, nonetheless dreamed with the possibility of limiting its effects over the nervous system and national character: “it is necessary to fight intelligently against the climatic influences that act unfavorably on man in Cuba, and not harbor any longer the ancient belief that the physical environment is a factor whose harmful or beneficial action inexorably falls on man, without his being able to successfully wage a fight against it” (Pérez 291).

Taking a further step into the realms of scientific fiction, *La Corriente del Golfo*, imagines not only the possibility of climatic alteration, but conceives it as a scientific and technological enterprise and transforms it into a war weapon, affecting directly different nation’s economic well-being. In that vein, the novel falls into what Steve Asselin terms “climate fiction” (441), a genre of geoengineering utopian fantasies, that proliferated between



the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Asselin 441 and Fleming). Examples of the genre, for instance, are Feddei Bulgarin's *Plausible Fantasies* (1824), that imagined that Russia had managed to warm its Arctic coastline, transforming it into a vacation paradise; or closer to our case, Louis P. Gratacap's, *The Evacuation of England: The Twist in the Gulf Stream* (1908), based on the premise that, after the joining of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans —result of the construction of the Panama Canal— the Gulf Stream, turned away from the British Isles towards America, would bring about climatically the end of “the glory of England” (Asselin 443). This climate change is portrayed as not only affecting England's weather and therefore its economy but, more importantly, the character of its people “altering the ephemeral environmental qualities that supposedly made them natural rulers of the world” (Asselin 443). These fantasies not only confirmed the pervasiveness of the claim that climate *determined* peoples and nations' characters, but also reveal the utopian dreams of the period, that surged from the idea that “the arts of men can easily compensate for the material deficiencies inherent in the spontaneous providence of nature” (Leiss 8) furthering the argument that mastery over nature was the first step towards a more perfect human society (Leiss 14). As *The Evacuation of England* and *La Corriente del Golfo* show, good climate becomes monetized, and conceived as an industrial asset and consumer good (Asselin 440-41). To have good climate, then, means to possess a competitive advantage that “translates into political dominance on the world stage” (Asselin 442), positing climate as the key to achieve global political and economic power. In that sense, in *La Corriente del Golfo*, the war against Spanish tyranny is inevitably tied up, and interchangeable with, the anthropogenic war against nature. To “triumph in the name of freedom”, Cubans must both “defeat the oppressing enemy that takes possession of lives and haciendas” as “defeat nature by stealing its strength and its secrets” (Planas 160).

### **“Throwing stones at autonomy”**

In the following section we will explore the novel’s conflicting stance towards the binary separating Humanity and Nature. The equation traced between sovereignty and nature domination posits the binary as an ideal to be achieved, and the continuance of its solidity is associated with the achievement of freedom. However, besieged by an imperial discourse tying insolubly humanity and nature, the tropical experience intrudes and volatilizes the differences between the human and the natural, showing instead its interconnections and points of encounter. It is precisely the tropical sense of being a “natural human” what creates the need for the binary in the first place. To locate nature as external and controllable is to have a claim to modernity. In the end, however, as we will see, it is precisely the simultaneity of the binary what allows a rebalancing of the hegemonic power possession, remedying Cuba’s marginalization from the global order of modernity.

Two chapters of *La Corriente del Golfo* tell the history of the construction of the Panama Canal —although “the history of the destruction of the isthmus” could be more precise—: “The Panama Canal” and “Through Balboa’s Path”. The former consists of a historical account of the various attempts to find *el secreto del estrecho*: a navigable conduit for maritime trade and travel across the isthmus. The chapter traces a heroic and sacrificial genealogy of the numerous failed but brave attempts, of crossing, cutting or destroying the isthmus. Historization begins in 1513, when Balboa *discovered* and took possession of the Pacific Ocean, and reaches 1894, when the canal construction was well underway —although virtually halted due to a lack of resources, disease and local political struggles— under the concession of the *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama*. It is at this point in the chapter that the fictional narration intrudes and Planas’ fantasy begins to rewrite the history of the isthmus. The historical Compagnie Nouvelle burdened by a lack of resources but nonetheless operating to comply with the concession impositions, receives —through the mediation of the

fictional Gulf and East Coast Works Co.— a contingent of patriotic Cubans, soldiers volunteering to continue the fight for sovereignty by transforming themselves into labor, willing to excavate the canal at reduced wages in the name of freedom.

As runners in a relay race, the international succession of conquistadors, engineers and construction companies — Columbus, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Galisteo, Bolivar or Lesseps, and later Cuban engineers and workers— is conceived as unitary, as a lineage of men that refuse to let geography dictate the conditions of existence, transferring one another the torch of the conviction on human agency, ingenuity and technology. Historically acting in the name of one sense of freedom or another —scientific knowledge, wealth acquisition, commercial and maritime flow or national sovereignty—, the historical account of the fight against the isthmus and its elements —that is, against nature— appears as the inevitable supplement of the fight for freedom: “[Cubans were aware] of the service they were doing to their distant homeland by cutting stones, collapsing mountains, loading ships with the material they extracted, so that one day, defeating the forces of nature with their work, their beautiful island would be free and independent” (Planas 154). In that sense, Chakrabarty’s claim that “[i]n no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom” (208), does not hold against Planas’ premise in the novel. And, although Chakrabarty’s claim implies the necessity of a consciousness that humans *inadvertently*<sup>9</sup> acted as a geological force, that modern freedom was achieved through irreversible and destructive geological alterations, *La Corriente del Golfo* does indeed blur the lines that separated political freedom and geological agency as

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<sup>9</sup> The difference between the consciousness towards inadvertent or purposeful climate change is fundamental. As Asselin documents, most climate fiction deals with deliberate instead of unintentional climate change and explains that “[t]his is a testament to the skepticism that everyday human activity could affect global climate, an idea that would require both an imaginative leap and deeper scientific understanding of the interrelationships of global ecosystems” (441).

independent processes, and instead shows their deep interconnection. Perhaps this unthinkable connection stems, as Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*, from its condition as non-realist sub-literature (23-4) and its generic science fiction filiation that enables a more realist depiction of nature.

The key issues in this articulation are both labor and tropical climate. The dissimilar lineage traced by Planas acquires unity when one considers its participants as embodiments of “the highest end that man can aim for: work” (Planas 149). Work —understood as the transformation of the environment— is particularly desired in a territory in which climate was perceived as a negative influence that allowed for an effortless living and deterred labor, resourcefulness and ultimately, civilization. Here we are reminded of John Dewey’s maxim establishing that “the savage is merely habituated” while “the civilized man has habits which transform the environment” (Dewey cited by Sullivan 119). Going back to Huntington and Pedreira, one can see that the issue of climate is primarily associated with work and will. Huntington argued that the inhabitant of the tropics, suffered from a decreased will to work (“Until I came to the Bahamas, I never appreciated posts. Now I want to lean against every one that I see.” [Huntington 30]); from lessened mental activity (“The worst thing about this climate is the effect on the mind . . . one soon gets weary of hard mental effort [Huntington 32]), weakness of will, and lack of industry, among other moral defects. As we have seen before, Pedreira’s lament over Puerto Rico’s climate is mainly centered on the *aplatanamiento* or indolence that climate generated. The praise of work is then deeply connected to the discourse on climate. Not only because the work performed by Cubans leads to actual climate change, both in Europe and America, but because it is understood as a corrective measure to the easiness of life provided by tropical climates. From this rendition of tropical climate arises the idea that Felipe Martínez-Pinzón addresses, namely, that in the tropics, leisure is not only unproductive, but can be deadly, since not working means being subjugated by the elements of nature (69).

In *La Corriente del Golfo* then, climate-altering-labor becomes an element of control for potentially unruly characters and a multifaceted instrument for channeling the nation into the modernity to come. Sovereignty is not only political but climatic. From then on, the narration becomes an ecstatic recount of the administration and managing of labor in grandiose terms, where the work that Cubans are performing is depicted in terms of mastery and destruction of nature: “one after another, hills fell. The picks of the self-sacrificing workers shed the vesture of the giant. The concavities of its summits cracked in extensive perforations and rock after rock, piece by piece, the mountain range disappeared. The work of men reversed the work of nature” (Planas 156). The “work of nature” here conceived both as the land formations surmounted by the Cubans, as the nature informing their undisciplined characters.

After one year of operations, a new world configuration begins to unfold. The Pyrenees divided two climates: while temperatures drop on France and northern European countries; summer arrives to Spain and Portugal with an unprecedented strength. The rerouting of the Gulf stream begins to be felt everywhere. The initially mysterious and quiet consequences — the alteration of whale migration patterns, the disappearance of cod and oysters, the impediment of certain birds’ breeding season, or the nicer and cooler summers in Bermuda and Bahamas— are soon felt economically: oyster concessionaires go bankrupt, coastal hotels shut down, and entire towns are left without food. The issue quickly becomes one of survival for the southern territories. Through water resource depletion, desertification, and unprecedented temperature rises, Cuba has transformed Spain into a dystopian deserted nation, encumbered by massive apocalyptic migrations conformed by an exodus of a dying, thirsty and hungry mass of people, emaciated cattle and dying dogs (Planas 204). Descriptions of the Spanish territory alternate images of death, extreme heat, desolation, sterility and barbarity with those of stagnation, and abandonment of industry: “the chimneys no longer smoked”, “industry was paralyzed”, and “sailors steered away from its ports” (Planas 210). Spain’s former industry,

power and heroism, “were worth nothing in a present in which destiny was submitted to the new forces of nature” (Planas 213). In a narration so clearly influenced by climatic determinism, the transformation of Spain into a Saharan desert implies not only an environmental shift but, crucially, an alteration of its national character. After the country’s massive migrations, the only people left in Spain are the inhabitants of Batuecas y Las Hurdes, described as a “backward and routine population” (Planas 223), as “fanatics”, enveloped in a “cloud of obscurantism”, and “skeletal, emaciated and with the minimum of flesh on their bones” (Planas 227). The description of the only Spanish left in Spain is extensive and reveals a horrified fascination with their sick and deformed bodies: “they all have, under the ears, and in the neck, those tumors, the goiters. . . From their sick eyes, perennially tarnished by a curtain of rheum, emerge glances of anguish that only increase the horror of their broken bodies” (Planas 227). With the desertification and consequent depopulation of Spain, the uncivilized, sick and poor inhabitants from Batuecas and Las Hurdes, eventually demand, under the menace of attacking Madrid if denied, political participation. After only a couple of years of Cuban effort, the interruption of the Gulf Stream has, by transforming Spain into a dry and deserted furnace, broken its economy, industry, civilization, and corrupted its people’s character and political class. The mighty and powerful Spain of Antonio Canovas is now seen, even by himself, as an unable government “that, far from ending two colonial wars, was forced to confront an army of beggars led by a hunchback, and whose generals stood on their knees or walked staggering like drunks” (Planas 246). The desertification of Spain implies necessarily its barbarization. The detailed description of this process allows the narrator to occupy the discursive position aligned with civilization and articulate a rhetoric device enabling the fantasy of self-definition. In a way, *La Corriente del Golfo* is a vengeful fantasy of intellectual power, in which Cuba after attaining sovereignty and finding a dominating place on the

hierarchical global organization, becomes, in a reversal of tradition, the producer of the othering colonial discourse.

The porous limits between civilization, climate, industry and human character, and the thus the blurredness between natural and human histories, is better grasped in the second chapter devoted to the construction of the Panama Canal. “Through Balboa’s path” tells, in an exalted patriotic and scientific rapture, the story of *how* Cubans tackled the seemingly impossible enterprise. But what is perhaps more interesting, is that this chapter narrates, as well, the natural history of how the isthmus came to be in the first place.

That isthmus [Panama], probably did not exist in millenary times. The two continents, which today are two Americas, were separated by water, and the two oceans freely communicated with another. But over the centuries the work of the polyps emerged. The two neighboring continents lengthened until they touched. Later, they grew together, constituting the base that received the fertilizing germs from nearby lands. The mountain range spread and became populated with vegetables and animals. (Planas 156)

Planas is referencing the Central American Seaway that once —more than two million years ago— separated North and South America and allowed the natural encounter of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. And although the polyps are mistakenly perceived as agents of land formation, instead of the tension between tectonic plates that forced the elevation of the oceanic floor and caused volcanic eruptions; the passage shows how the origin of land is, in this novel, considered a natural process worthy of historization. The significance of this extract becomes more evident when considered in the light of Chakrabarty’s concern with the time-sanctioned distinction between natural and human history responsible for the binary nature/society that, as Jason Moore states, “is directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world” (intro.). Stemming from Giambattista Vico’s claim that humans could

only have knowledge of civil and political institutions because they had made them, while nature was inaccessible because it remained god's creation, Chakrabarty explores the subsequent borrowings, readings and misreadings by Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood that contributed to the contemporary gap between the history of the natural and that of the social or cultural. Unlike political history, nature, Collingwood remarked, has no "inside", no 'essence' to uncover, reveal or pursue, and is therefore not *historizeable*. Then, while nature is pure event, human acts, characterized by a distinction between their inside and outside, are open to interrogation, narration and historization (Chakrabarty 201-3). Seen in this light, *La Corriente del Golfo's* geological history of the isthmus opens a small window towards an understanding of a "deep history" (Chakrabarty 213), exceeding man's account on earth. And even though this million-year development of land formation, is inevitably anthropocentric, objectified and understood as a process destined to be undone by science and labor, proving the value of human organization, and the heroism poured into the domination of nature; there is, however, an awareness of the agency of nature, a sense of a minute, miniscule, quiet and invisible processes that men ought not only to dominate, but also emulate:

The work that we are now doing (the obstruction of the strait) has long been done by the corals, which have always threatened to obstruct the Florida Strait without worrying at all about Cuba's independence. Only, if we were to wait for the end of their work, we would have to suffer years and centuries of Spanish domination in this part of America. The tiny beings who do the work lifting islands and even continents from the bottom of the ocean are worthy of admiration. To them we owe several of the regions that man inhabits on the planet. The simple mounds that have emerged from the depths of the ocean have become —through the succession of secular work, and with the help of the waves and the wind that brought them germs of vegetal life— inhabitable centers where



man has placed his sole, nations their flags, and are today disputed, for military and domination purposes, by peoples and races. (Planas 144-6)

The passage permits the narrative articulation of a whole natural network of wind, water, polyps and vegetal life. This sense of interdependency paves the way for new understandings of climate and indeed constitutes an attempt to recognize the ontological entanglements of man and nature. The excerpt goes on to even suggest that the work of the polyps alone would bring about Cuba's Independence, establishing a clear political outcome as a direct causality of the microscopic life and death of millions of submarine creatures. And even though nature is conceived, on the one hand, as a place where man leaves his footprint, the polyps building land appear, as well, as part of the vast genealogy affecting the isthmus through work, and in that sense as equal with the historical lineage that attempted to find *el secreto del estrecho*: "The Cubans stole the work of the polyps from the continental soil to throw it into the ocean, as nourishment to new polyps; to *help them* in their construction work; to make, *like them*, an isthmus that unites two lands (Planas 158, emphasis mine). Through the parallel of the polyp and the Cuban, an equivalence between the natural and the human begins to be established, both through the human destruction of the accumulation of the polyps work, through its replication by making land surge from the ocean through the filling of the Florida Strait, but also as feeding to it, contributing to its growth elsewhere, echoing Moore's leit motif, that "species make environments, and environments make species" (intro.) The relationship between man and polyps is complex: at once destructive, collaborative, violent, imitative and harmonious. The issue here seems to be the blurring and constant interaction between the categories that Moore terms 'Nature' and 'nature', where the former is understood as external "and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development, or some other higher good" while the latter refers to a more horizontal and all encompassing "web of life", that comprises and affects man and its institutions (Moore, intro.). In the same

way these passages depict the polyps as part of the lineage whose labor affects the condition of the isthmus, they also place the human in a nonhuman world, making man just one link of a long chain of *geological work*.

The sense of nature as exploitable and profitable is challenged not only through the dismantling of the binary nature/society, but also through the fissures traversing the discourse of scientific domination and control of nature, stemming from the perception of nature as an entity no longer containing any secrets. We insist. Despite the anthropocentric view towards the nonhuman, the divinization of man through science, or the romanticization of labor and its control over nature; there is still room for the unexpected, for a resistance of nature, for an unanticipated turn of its secret movements and connections. After a few chapters describing the first effects that the disruption of the current has in the coast of France, Planas articulates a reflection of the unseen consequences of the patriotic enterprise.

And in his shelter in Key West, a sage [*el profesor Duna*], committed to an emancipation enterprise, did not foresee that by obstructing the passage of a hot current, he would prevent its collision—in the vicinity of Newfoundland—with a cold current, thus averting the death of millions of planktonic beings. With the encounter of the waters of two opposite temperatures, these beings found death in heaps, being then easy prey for the voracious inhabitants of the banks. And it is natural to think that a region without food drives away its inhabitants, as it is easy to foresee that a sea without abundant plankton will be a desolate region, from where cod will flee hungrily. (Planas 201)

The passage is revealing because it is perhaps the only point in the whole novel, where the team of scientists and engineers is not in complete control of their plan. Page after page the narrator confirms the correspondence between the blueprint and its materialization. Nothing seemed to escape Professor Duna's control. But here we see an emerging awareness regarding

the dangers of climate and geological alteration, of its miniscule and almost invisible ramifications, of its geological/biological interconnectedness affecting, ultimately, humans and industry: “If there are no more oysters because the sea is cooling, then there will be no more swimming either . . . And that’s how it happened: the oyster farming hecatomb was followed by the bankruptcy of coastal hotels. The French maritime population was going to perish because two of the great industries that made it live, had perished” (Planas 195-96). On a more positive note this can also be seen in the excerpt cited above, regarding the Gulf of Mexico’s territories as finally free from the hurricanes that devastated the countryside destroying crops and coastal settlements. This consciousness regarding the hidden implications of climate change is significant in 1920, when climate change theories, even the ones arguing for past climate changes, like ice ages, removed in time by millions of years, were met with skepticism (Fleming 4).

As we have seen, not only are the human, social and economic not separated from the natural, but are indeed posed as interchangeable. Planas’ Caribbean-based fantasy of climate alteration blurs the lines separating these sectors, structuring them instead as horizontal, equal, and even transposable: the fight for Cuban independence is achieved through labor; labor brings directly climate change; and, closing the circle, climate change is inseparable from sovereignty. The fight for Cuba’s freedom is very consciously a simultaneously economic, social, political, climatic and geological feat. What is fascinating is how these terms appear to be synchronized and identical, allowing for strange formulations that seem to bypass all causal relations, crystalizing in phrases like: “We are throwing stones to autonomy” (Planas 320), that responds to the Spanish Royal Decree that approved a Statute of Autonomy for Cuba and Puerto Rico, eliding the mentions of climate alteration, and instead posing a direct relationship between politics and geology. Going beyond the image of *blocking*, the phrase evidences a sense of exhaustion with the current world order signaled by the presence of colonial power in

Cuba. Instead, nature —here rocks—, appears as both the material and symbolic still untapped resource that would bring about what Moore terms an “ecological revolution” —understood as “a turning point in the prevailing organizational structures, scientific practices, and cultural norms of reproducing capital, power, and nature” (Moore, ch.5) —.Oceanographic and climatic determinism theories and the access to new technologies, as well as to a previously inaccessible nature, signal the beginning of a new world regime, reconfiguring the interplay between capital, power and nature, that allows an actual remapping of the region, an “organizational revolution” (Moore, ch.6) rebalancing the possession of hegemonic power and remedying Cuba’s marginalization from the global order of modernity.

The awareness of the simultaneity of nature, capital and power, is all the more clear in the Caribbean, on the peripheries of modernity and of the industrialized world, where nature, codified as a moral and national destiny, becomes an unavoidable political category. Likewise, politics become nature. To dream with climate change while being Cuban is different than fantasizing with it as a European. The latter —industrialized, modern, scientific and capitalist— tends to read nature as exterior and controllable, quantifiable. While the former, violently informed through a discourse of environmental determinism, dreams with climate control, but suffers its determinism. Nature is perceived as internal (Moore, intro.), and the intent to subordinate it, rationalize, and exploit it, are instead ways of externalizing it, dominating it of ending its determination over character and moral constitution. In a reversal of Moore’s reconfiguration of nature from resource to matrix (ch.1), *La Corriente del Golfo* enacts the desire for a reverse transition, from conditioning matrix, to controllable resource, rooting out nature from the tropical human.

***“La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes”<sup>10</sup>***

In a 1955 conference, “Los Horizontes de Julio Verne”, commemorating the one hundred years anniversary of Verne’s death, Planas lamented Cuba’s lack of a merchant marine: “In Cuba . . . [d]espite our insularity, of having large bays and natural ports, as other countries do not, we have not been able to establish a merchant marine to carry the Cuban flag to the farthest seas” (370). Cuba, Planas continues, is described as being at its infancy, examples of adulthood—Denmark, or even landlocked Switzerland—are described in terms of their fleet size, tonnage capacity, but mainly, reach: “even Switzerland, in the center of Europe *without seaports, without shores to the sea*, . . . has a maritime fleet that arrives on its incursions to the American banks” (370). A yearning for movement, a movement that necessarily implies commerce and, more precisely, an export economy supported by national infrastructure becomes an issue of national vitality and pride. The comparison revealing Cuba’s underdevelopment and the clear missed opportunities “increase[s] the pain felt by those who love our country” (370).

Insularity, then, begins to take center stage as a paradoxical image. It is indeed an asset: ports, shores, bays or the lack of land frontiers, all suppose connectivity, openness of the nation to the global. Surrounded by an ocean, crisscrossed with currents conceived as highways and commerce avenues, Cuba could be in an unparalleled position of mobility. However, lacking the necessary infrastructure these “highways of the sea” (Waters 434) become just water. A non-conductive element that instead of fostering movement and links; isolates and interrupts. Insularity, in fact, is one of the great discussions of the first decades of the Caribbean twentieth century. Again, we turn to Antonio Pedreira’s intervention, *Insularismo*, that sets to interrogate Puerto Rican essential identity. That the title of the book in quest of a definitive “collective

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<sup>10</sup> “The cursed condition of water on all sides” (27) if we follow Pablo Medina’s translation of “La isla en Peso” by Cuban Virgilio Piñera.

psychology” (21) makes reference to Puerto Rico’s condition as an island is by no means trivial. Insularity is perceived and literally described as a “cage” (41) that blockades growth and expansion: “we cannot advance towards the ocean to expand our territory . . . our wealth and therefore our culture are developed proportionally to our size” (43). Insularity then, becomes a trap (“la maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes” (33) as crystalized by Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera) that hinders development and condemns the island to being a “*rincón*” (Pedreira 43), a nook of the world. Smallness has, in fact, as C.G. Clarke indicates, led to a “paucity of natural resources, small domestic markets, open and monocultural economies, diseconomies of scale, and high transport costs incurred by the break of bulk at the seaports” as well as it has “condemned the islands to a history of tutelage and, in some cases, to microscopic versions of political dependence” (8). Engaging this Caribbean discussion, and echoing Pedreira’s lament, *La Corriente del Golfo*’s fantasy of actual geological continentalization imagines land formation as a process literally “stealing water’s space” (Planas 121), thus, opening at least symbolically the possibility of territorial growth and bridging the communication gap inherent to insularity.<sup>11</sup> Once this condition is overcome, and again we are taking Pedreira’s lead here, the possibility for the development of wealth and industry is inaugurated. Specifically in a time when the common fantasy was the establishment of a utopian international community (Mattelart 180), the campaign against insularity acquires a deeper significance. Therefore, more than a geographic stance against territorial constraints, the fantasy of continentalization is also a confrontation against the perception of insularity as ignorance of or indifference to cultures or peoples outside one’s own experience, and thus of insularity as provincial or parochial, “coded as a symptom of backwardness” (Siskind 129).

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<sup>11</sup> A brief 1909 article, “La Habana dentro de cincuenta años” published in the magazine *Cuba y América*, foregrounds Planas’ obsession with bridging the ocean. There, Planas dreams not only with ports, steamers and the yet uninaugurated Panama Canal, that would transform Havana into the second port of the world but, tellingly, with a five-meter tall *malecón* constructed over the coral reefs, as well as a with a submarine railway. The ocean as “disconnection” is delineated clearly through the multiple fictional attempts to make it traversable.

Reading Martí, Mariano Siskind identifies in the Latin American intellectual an “*ansia de salir de sí*” (108), that is a “need to escape one’s fixed place of belonging and the desire to be universal, to make the totality of the world one’s place of cultural residence” (124). Informed by this anxiety, the fantasies of connectivity are everywhere in the novel but let us just reference one of the few passages that envision Cuba’s republican future:

Cuba will be free and independent. Progress marches, advances without ceasing, and I see the not distant day in which republican Cuba will enter the concert of nations as a sovereign country. Progress can be slow, but it is safe. And it is a general progress coming: in customs, in liberties, in sciences, in arts. I foresee wireless telegraphy, improved underwater navigation, air navigation as a fact. (Planas 114)

The vision is, for the most part, vague, except for the technical speculation of its last sentence. The only concrete embodiment of the dream of progress —wireless telegraphy as well as air and underwater navigation— assumes the form of communication and commercial networks that function as recourses against insularity. Even more, when describing the colossal nature of Cuba’s geoengineering endeavor, *el ingeniero Acosta*, stated that a project of this magnificence could only be surpassed by something still unthinkable of, like “interplanetary relations [or] the travel between one planet and another” (Planas 103), again showing that the only concrete visions of future progress assume the form of interconnectivity. As Armand Mattelart shows, the emancipatory capacity of networks was usually celebrated in contrast to the “forces of obscurantism and centralizing tendencies of industrialization”, fostering horizontalization and decentralization (180-81) inaugurating a desire “of horizontal equality and flatness and the dismantling of hierarchies” (Siskind 138). One can definitely see how such a utopian technicist view of progress supposed an opportunity for the deemed peripheries of global modernity, where telegraphy is almost directly depicted as a ticket into the desired “concert of nations” (Planas 114), from which it echoes that Cuba is not yet part of.

In fact, the entire novel could be read as the enactment of the fantasy of efficient interaction and communication, where supplementing manual labor, we find ourselves following the comings and goings of an absurd number of ships. The complex manufacture of a 100-miles strip of land and rocks, required 120 two-hundred-ton capacity ships; 20 five-thousand-horsepower tugboats, 2 three-thousand-ton steamships and a steam yacht. Here again, machines assume a very concrete presence and, when in movement, become the main actors of Cuba's environmental war.

. . . The movement continued . . . and new trains arrived, and new torrents of stones were thrown into the large ships with bulging and open bellies. Again the tugs whistled, the command voices were heard, on each ship the crew took their positions, the moorings were untied, the hulls separated, and in rows —like battalions of a regiment— the maritime convoys departed, making for the place of the appointment. (Planas 309)

From the hungry and diseased guerrilla warfare, burning crops and blocking railway lines, to the vibrant and pressing choreography of labor, resources, trains, and ships; the fight for sovereignty is envisioned as a spectacle of industrial greatness from which men seem to be almost absent, and machines appear to move autonomously, swiftly and regularly.

Furthermore, *La Corriente del Golfo* imagines its entry into progress also through the establishment of new commercial and international relations. The strip of land connecting Cuba and the U.S. and halting the Gulf Stream, is also the foundation for a future railway: the Cuban and Peninsular Railroad Co.. Planas projected railway recalls the historical Florida Overseas Railroad, an extension of the Florida East Coast Railway that crossed 150 miles of ocean, estuaries and small islands, annexing Key West to the mainland (Scott 273-4). Its construction, visualized by Henry Flagler (one of the founders of Standard Oil) was completed in 1912, becoming the most obvious model for Planas' railroad. Key West was of interest because it was the U.S.' deepest-water port closest to the Panama Canal. This allowed to further trade



with Cuba and Latin America, but also, thanks to the Canal, with the West Coast. The railroad was an attempt to reach towards the Canal, and retrace new trading routes, bridging distances between previously unrelated territories, creating a parallel network and draining trade volume from neighboring ports<sup>12</sup>. Like the Key West extension, the projected Cuban and Peninsular Railroad Co. is primarily depicted in terms of commercial and communicational relationships. The scientific enterprise for sovereignty over which the whole plot revolves was devised by Professor Duna, a nationless scientist and employee of the Gulf and East Coast Works Co., a company constituted by southern North American capital-driven, agriculturalists and proprietors from Florida, Carolina, Virginia and Texas. The interest of the Gulf and East Coast Works Co. in Cuba's independence is traversed by a desire for capital expansion. Behind the American solidarity towards freedom, is the actuality of cheap Cuban labor building the foundations for a railway over which the company would have concession rights for over ninety years, allowing an increase of flow of North American exports to Cuban territory: "Over the land linking Cuba with the continent, one day, not far away, would run American railroad cars, to flood Cuba with Swiss condensed milk manufactured in the United States, and with Chicagoan canned food" (Planas 262). In *La Corriente del Golfo*, as in "Los Horizontes de Julio Verne" connectivity appears as a commercial yearning manifested in the import influx of processed or manufactured commodities. Mirroring inversely the European import of exotic, pristine and raw commodities; the products that the new network will bring to Cuba are instead technical, processed and multinational. Although far from Beckman's luxurious imports catalogues of modernism, condensed milk and canned foods, conceived as products far removed from the raw commodity, are nonetheless goods whose consumption, as Beckman

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<sup>12</sup> The Panama Canal also condensed Cuba's aspirations for heightened commercial activity. In "La Habana dentro de cincuenta años" Planas envisioned that "[t]he opening of the Panama Canal has made Havana the second commercial port in the world. It is a port of call, obligatory for all the new lines: New York to Australia, Japan, China, and Hindustan. . ." (28)

points out, was perceived as an “obligation for peripheral subjects in the quest for civilization” (Beckman 57).

The novel’s Vernian fabulations of nature domination participate from the ultimate liberal dream of overcoming all physical and natural barriers standing in the path of capital (Beckman vii). This idyllic uninterrupted flow of capital has been embodied, as Susan Zieger points out, through logistics: “the art and science of efficiently managing the mobility of things and people” (2018, 749). Zieger shows how, specifically during the nineteenth century, logistics represented and created the astonishing “annihilation of space and time” (2018, 749) that became the essence of globalization and liberal ideology. Conceived both as a science and an art, logistics —the whole industrial network of ships, railroads or telecommunication infrastructure— was infused with a strong aesthetic component —“the logistical sublime”, Zieger terms it (2020, 3)—, based primarily on the desire of continuity, regularity of motion and smoothness. In this vein, we could argue that Planas’ novel can be understood as structured through the binaries of mobility/immobility and flow/interruption. The dam embodies both of these terms, and at once introduces continuity, commerce, labor, infrastructure, good climate and sovereignty; as well as acts as a disruptor of flow and commerce: “The events continued their course. Work continued in the field of operations. The stones fell into the sea driven by the patriotism of a few ignored heroes. Then there was the first catastrophe: almost simultaneously, three large steamers ran aground in the Florida Strait” (Planas 271-2). The passage captures it perfectly: labor, associated with continuity, marked by the imperfect indicative (in the original in Spanish), highlights the sense of habitual repetition and steady movement. Then suddenly the chain of actions, as the time of the sentences, are interrupted by a halt of movement, crucially, the sinking of English ships, symbolizing the stop of European movement, and the beginning of the end of its commercial flow. While territorial continuity opens up new commercial opportunities, the same dam interrupts them. Products can now

swiftly traverse the Florida Strait, between the Caribbean and the U.S., but the ones traversing from Europe to the Americas find a sudden and violent end thanks to the yet unsuspected reef, forcing longer and impractical itineraries, thus handing maritime control of the area to Cuba.

Shipping companies complicated the situation demanding compensation for their losses. It was no longer just the shipwrecks that provoked their requests. It was the route changes, the itinerary modifications, that the Florida dam made indispensable. No sailor ventured to face the new reefs, and the ships bound to the Gulf ports had to circumnavigate southern Cuba and enter the Gulf of Mexico through the Yucatan channel. Thanks to a group of self-sacrificing patriots, the entire economy of a hemisphere had changed in a very brief period of time. (Planas 265)<sup>13</sup>

A new “technological zone” begins to develop. And the region begins to be transformed into a non-bounded, trans-territorial space, formed through the movement of materials, practices and persons (Barry 38) powering a continual flow and interconnectedness as well as the development of trans-national industry. The fight for sovereignty, then, is fought in the front of the invisible networks of capital flow. Revealing here, just once again, how histories of man-made geological and climate change are inseparable from the history of capital.

The Gulf Stream, a historically oceanic avenue and “major conduit to Europe” (Ulanski 144) facilitating colonial extraction from the Caribbean by swiftly transporting Spanish galleons, resonates with the colonial-Caribbean extractive “machine” (5) that Antonio Benítez-Rojo described in *The Repeating Island*. Imagined as a Deleuzian concatenation of machines (“... a naval machine, a military machine, a bureaucratic machine. . .” [Benítez-Rojo 5]), and even described as a “medieval vacuum cleaner” (Benítez-Rojo 5), its main purpose was the extraction of nature. Stemming from the historical conception of the Gulf Stream as path of

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<sup>13</sup> The sense of controlling the global market through the appropriation of the ocean pathways is emphasized through the Cuban-American plan of installing two locks in the dam, allowing a controlled and capitalized passage. (Planas 89)

extraction, its imaginal interruption, must be seen as actively dismantling the colonial network, impeding —symbolically at least—, the complete process of extraction that sustained it. With the desire of obliterating the Spanish machine comes the desire for a new regime. The “ecological revolution” (Merchant 2-3) drawn by *La Corriente del Golfo* through oceanography, climatology and geoengineering, coupled with access to new technologies of transportation, marks the rise of a new historical nature: from the galleon to the steamship, from the slave-based plantation system to global capitalism, from the violent tropical climate to a temperate one, and from insularity to continentalization.

### **Uchronic entrapments**

The future conceived by the novel, —the republican technological and patriotic future to which the characters sacrifice themselves— coincides, temporarily at least, with the present from which the novel is narrated. If the so obsessively invoked national sovereignty is already a fact, then, why is the narrative configured as a return?

The answer should be sought in the historical sense that the Independence struggles of the nineteenth century had for Cubans themselves. As Pérez proposes, the nearly fifty-years of independence wars was the process that finally crystallized the “cultural determinants by which Cubans arrived at a sense of themselves and by which successive generations of Cubans were socialized into the meaning of nationality” (*Structure* 3). However, the early republic was a time of “interruptions, reorientations, truncations, and inertia” (Palmer et al. 6) and much of what the united Cubans had proposed to change from colonial society, survived unchanged in the republic after two US occupations and the weight of the Platt amendment that, resonating with the British colonial practice of indirect government, allowed the United States to preserve the facade of Cuban independence and, at the same time, strip the island from its sovereignty (Sippial 126). For this reason, as Pérez points out, the Cubans “had succeeded in creating a

nation in which they controlled neither property nor production” (*Cuba* 84). Historian Irene Wright confirmed it already in 1910 after a trip to the island: “foreigners (resident or absentee) own, I am convinced, at least 75% of Cuba, —fully three-fourths of the very soil of the island” (Cited by Pérez, *Cuba* 140). The State was constituted by a mostly Cuban force; however, as Sippial points out, the pattern of appointments and style of government promoted by the U.S. Army, was designed to contain the Cuban revolutionary elements. The independence ideals seemed to have led to nothing and, seriously burdened by unemployment, the veterans went from the patriotic struggle against tyranny to the mere struggle for their own survival. The ideals over which the nation had been devised could not be fulfilled within the conditions through which the republic had been effectively formed (Pérez, *Structure* 12). From then on, a public “malaise”, “a sense of something gone awry” became —unescapably— part of the new national sentiment (Pérez, *Structure* 14).

The discrepancy between the ideal of the nation and the reality of the republic originated a persistent gaze towards the past where the ideal *cubanidad* so insistently sought during the first decades of the republic was more clearly and ideally defined. In this way, the rewriting of the separatist wars that *La Corriente del Golfo* performs, works, in Planas’ times as a reminder that the national struggle had remained essentially unchanged since the last century. Recovering as well as rewriting history, the novel enacts a contemporary search for a national identity and unity. On the one hand, it recovers the entire sacrificial catalog of patriotism and unity; on the other —“perfecting” the representation of the independence struggles— it fabricates a new Cuban identity that exacerbates the nation’s disciplined character, its power, material position or scientific disposition. In this way, the origin of the republic is rewritten, as if by attempting to alter symbolically the history of Cuba’s emancipation, new foundations for Cuban identity were made available, actualizing and modernizing what *lo cubano* englobed.

The end of *La Corriente del Golfo*, however, tempers down the fantasies of vengeance and world domination and ends up rechanneling the fabricated events into the course of the normalized narrative of history. The alternate past created that set to reformulate its own future, vanishes absolutely from the present from which Planas writes. That is, the history of Cuba and the world, even after the introduction of those powerful alternative events, follows the uncontested and real historical course, and the end of the novel still recounts how Spain was in fact “defeated by the elements and the *most powerful nation of America* (the U.S.)” (Planas 348, emphasis mine). Neither in the novel nor in reality, is Cuba agent of the final takeover of its independence. The epilogue goes on to emphasize the historically normalized outcome of the war, through which the Cuban war of liberation “was transformed into a North American war of conquest” (Pérez, *Cuba* 30): “[t]he United States, victors in the conflict, officially took possession of the island on January 1, 1899, and evacuated it on May 20, 1902, inaugurating the Republic in that auspicious day” (Planas 352). Even the dam built is tore down after the end of the war and, after two years “the climate of yesteryear reigned again in Europe; and the Gulf Stream, like an immense serpent, passed through the torn down walls, that science and work had raised” (Planas 352-53). The only thing that remains from the Gulf Stream enterprise are the Cuban sovereignty and the fillings over which, later, a railroad connecting Key West and Miami was built. Except for that, everything else has gone back to *normal* in the eyes of the contemporary readers. The fantasy is diluted and rechanneled into the course of Cuban history. The historical reading pact initially established is mandatory again, and Cuba ends up finding itself more than its fantasy.

In this sense, we could argue that we are dealing with an unusual uchronia or alternate history. Uchronia is a type of historical reconstruction that, that imagines different pasts, futures or presents as consequence of some hypothetical alteration in past history. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* identifies as the first alternative history, Louis Geoffroy's

*Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812-1832: Histoire de la monarchie universelle*, which imagines how Napoleon, after overcoming the 1812 Russian invasion, conquers the world. Other early titles include Edmund Lawrence's *It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte's Invasion of England* (1899), or Ernest Bramah's *What Might Have Been: The Story of a Social War* (1907) (Nicholls). Essentially, as their titles reveal, these texts, departing from an altered historical event, a “point of divergence” (7), as Singles calls it, logically and consequently elaborate a world that developed in a different direction than ours, as if, at some point, history would have bifurcated in a <Y> shape. The two possible outcomes —the real and the imaginary one— stemming from the same point of divergence coexist contemporaneously, but on different dimensions. Activated into dialogue by the reader, the alternative timeline becomes ever present, as a latent yet unrealized possibility. *La Corriente del Golfo*, although reimagining a war, does not branch history irreversibly. The history it alters, rather than forming a <Y> shape, could instead be sketched as a <P>, where historical alterations can be understood as detours — “diversions” Singles calls them (78) — that lead to the same historical outcome. The inevitable question is, if the fantasy in *La Corriente del Golfo* had gone as far as to imagine Cuba as a sovereign, omnipotent nation, why does the novel end up going back to a historical past that undoes the desires so clearly indulged through the interruption of the Gulf Stream? Why, if Cuba’s power was constructed as colossal, would the narration culminate with a two-year U.S. occupation, delaying the sovereignty so urgent and uncompromisingly sought throughout the entire novel? It should be noted that these questions do not arise from a sense of moral failure of the novel but, more precisely, from structural dissonance or even from the sense of a generic deviation. We are not asking how the story should have been written; but why, on a structural level, such a clearly liberating fictional path takes a sudden turn into the constrictions of the historical past.

In the end, despite the optimistic rewriting of the Cuban Independence War, despite the crazy dreams of climate control, and despite of the discursive inversion of the dominator-dominated discourse, *La Corriente del Golfo* turns back, somewhat unwillingly, to the historical past of U.S. intervention and to its inauspicious republican origin, as unavoidable circumstances that tainted even the wildest fantasies.<sup>14</sup> The sense of *cubanidad*, as Pérez points out, contained within its discourse the notion that, although the emancipation struggle had been honorably resolved, it had not fulfilled its purposes. In this way, the historical memory, after the occupation, becomes remorse, an “unrelenting reminder of unfulfilled aspirations” (Pérez, *Structure* 15). Nelson V. Roman argues, in that same line, that *La Corriente del Golfo*’s device of the dam portrays the U.S. as controlling the war, and therefore as “denying —implicitly— the effort and dedication of Cuban fighters and their decisive role in the liberating contest” (cited by de Rosso 279). Then, despite the optimistic rewriting of the Cuban War of Independence and despite the dreams of climate control, *La Corriente del Golfo* returns, reluctantly, to the historical past of the American intervention and its anti-democratic republican origin, as inevitable circumstances that clouded even the wildest fantasies.

As the novel’s ending, Planas own conception of his novel as “historic and scientific” (Amigó 650), seems to leave no space for fantasy. Science, however, as Pierre Macherey argues in his readings of Jules Verne (the main model for *La Corriente del Golfo*), opens a channel between the real and the imaginary, and functions as an “equal sign” between them (169). A look into Verne’s *The Castle in Transylvania*<sup>15</sup>—at first sight a fully-fledged supernatural gothic romance, but a *roman scientifique* after a closer look—, captures the spirit behind the interchangeability of the real and the imaginary:

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<sup>14</sup> In his 1909 article “La Habana dentro de cincuenta años” Planas comments bitterly on the futility of Cuban poetic revolutionary involvement, when the process would end invariably with U.S. intervention: “The new generation of Cubans is not that decadent generation of poets and writers who sang in all tones the glories of the Revolution, without understanding that independence would end by the work and grace of the American” (1909 25).

<sup>15</sup> Also translated as *The Castle of the Carpathians*.



This story is not fantastic; it is only romantic. Should we conclude that it isn't true, given its implausibility? That would be a mistake. We are living in a time when anything can happen—one can almost say, when everything has happened. If our tale is not very likely today, it can be so tomorrow, thanks to the scientific resources that are the lot of the future, so no one should take it into his head to rank it among legends.

(Verne 6)

Planas read Verne's work in these lines and understood his fantasies as the first step towards a technological transformation of reality: "And thus, many men of science, studying the horizons created by Jules Verne, have made them their own, expanding them until reaching the most marvelous effects; we could claim that if there are submarines, airships, airplanes, helicopters, radios, televisions, wireless telegraphy, etc ..., etc ..., all that was planned by him, studied and thought by him" (Planas, "Los horizontes" 386). Planas own conception of (scientific) fantasy marks it as the antecedent of reality and positions his own inspired dreams as the foundations for a different Cuba. Fueled by scientific theory, the unproblematic flow between the imaginary and the real, or the conception of latter as the precursor of the former, provides us with a key to read the novel's complex emplotment, distancing us from the dead-end reading of the novel as irremediably trapped and haunted by its history.

Coupling the equalizing function of science drawn from Verne, with Beckman's figure of the "export reverie" (4) understood as the "waking dream" of liberalism that preceded the expected materialization of wealth in the region" (Beckman 4-5) and through which the liberal project, set to "create that which [did] not yet exist" (Pardo cited by Beckman 19), *La Corriente del Golfo's* impossible historical alteration could be read as a dream founding reality.

The fantasy of climate change structuring *La Corriente del Golfo* tautologically imagined that an alteration of tropical climate would "perfect" Cubans, increasing their discipline and will; and at the same time, envisioned Cubans as an *already* perfected labor

corps. In the same way, in the greater scale of the cartographic alteration of the globe, the enterprise intending to alter Cuba's position in the global hierarchical organization and as a node of commerce and telecommunications is, in the process of its becoming, already a logistically developed and industrially mature nation. In the same way as the Latin American liberal intellectual perceived "industrialization [as] the product of industrialization" (Beckman 14), the novel's scientific fantasy annuls the process of becoming and impatiently installs *being* as a condition of becoming. The construction of a new sense of *cubanidad* mirrors the Independence process, that was in itself "the source of many of the cultural cues and moral codes from which the normative foundations of nationality developed" (Pérez, *Structure* 9). That is, the fight for Cuba, was what produced Cuba.<sup>16</sup> In this light, a reading of *La Corriente del Golfo* in terms of the prevention of the completion of fantasy does not hold. Instead, although constricted to history and the reality of U.S. occupation, we could read the novel as a discursive attempt to create a new founding idea of Cuba, one that, as Beckman argues lays the ground for the dream. In that way the novel would dodge the readings of failure and instead lay new grounds for Cuban identity as modern, sovereign and global.

Moreover, the obliteration of fantasy by history in their encounter towards the end of the novel, could also be understood in terms of convergence. Constrained by the past that precedes it as well as the future that awaits it, *La Corriente del Golfo* can be read as merely a *deformation* of the normalized narrative of the past instead of its negation. By 'bending back' the "deviating branch of history created by the counterfactual", the fiction rejoins real-world history (Dannenberg 202) and the alternative events end up converging with and being subsumed by the super-sequence of history (Singles 75). Constrained by both its past and future, the altered event over which *La Corriente del Golfo*, revolves, sparks a suspicion that it

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<sup>16</sup> ". . . it is in the revolutionary struggle itself that new social relationships and a new consciousness is developed" (Jameson 81)

is a secret history, unravelling *behind the scenes*. If we consider the globally dominant American discourse regarding the Cuban role in the Spanish-American war, one can clearly see how these accounts minimized the Cuban part in defeating the colonial power, and “encouraged the belief that Cubans had accomplished nothing in more than three years of war and that the U.S. arms alone determined the outcome” (Pérez, *Cuba* 31). After the American intervention, the Cuban war of independence was transformed into the Spanish-American war, negating, more than symbolically, Cuban participation (Pérez, *Cuba* 31). As Hugh Thomas argues “[in the Spanish-American War] Cuba was the cause of fighting, but in the moment of crisis the island was half forgotten. The Cubans themselves stood apart, almost neglected” (381). Even more, he documents:

“The sight . . . of the Cuban rebels under Calixto Garcia appears to have disillusioned the U.S. forces. The U.S. army was mostly white, the Cuban almost entirely negro. The U.S., even before their recent victory, felt more drawn to the chivalrous enemy rather than to their Cuban allies . . . Garcia was treated with contempt by Shafter who even suggested that, instead of battles, the guerrillas should work as labourers”. (Thomas 398)

Against this past, *La Corriente del Golfo* invents heroic battles and feats in which the Cubans are the main actors and harbingers of Independence. *La Corriente del Golfo*’s pages are full of heroic patriotic accounts such as the fictional battle of el Paso de los Vientos in which Cubans, massacred by Spanish ships died heroically in the last effort to build the dam; or the almost godly strategy through which the Cubans, without precedents, destroyed in only a few hours, the stubborn and mighty Lomas de la Culebra that had historically hindered the construction of the Panama Canal. Even more, in *La corriente del Golfo*, Americans are depicted as fighting alongside Cubans: “the Americans, together with the Cubans, pledged alliance to the battered, torn and dusty flag that adorned the place on top of a wild cane” (Planas 345), presenting the

last effort of the war as a unified and patriotic effort, in name of liberty, instead of as a battle between the two foreign powers of Spain and the U.S. from which Cubans were marginalized. Instead, when reaching the decisive events of the U.S. intervention and the definitive defeat of Spanish forces, the novel hurries past them, spending a mere two pages in the account of the Spanish-American war and its outcome, out of a total of 353.

By considering this alternative historical event as embedded or *smuggled*, instead of shattered by the super-sequence of history, the novel acquires a revolutionary character. By suggesting that the same historical outcome could have been reached through alternative causes, the novel contests the “causal links” (Hassig cited by Singles 80) of normalized history, calling for its revision and reinterpretation, specifically demanding a rereading of the process leading to Cuban independence. The case delineated above, one among many, shows how the rewriting of the struggles restores the Cuban agency silenced from official global accounts. Fantasy does not disappear, but blends in seamlessly into the account of Cuban past. If in regular *uchronias*, the revolutionary potential of the alternative historical outcome, questions the political dimension inhabited by the readers, but nonetheless stands in a never reachable parallel dimension; the confluence of history and fantasy performed by *La Corriente del Golfo* instead inscribes the latter forcibly into history. The actual world, as Plana’s readers know it, becomes populated by traces of a new past engendering a new present. And even though the dam project collapses, the Panama Canal and the Railroad connecting Key West to the mainland, still remain as testimonies of Cuban power, not in a parallel unreachable time, but instead forced into the same timeline, not as a mere ruin of the Cuban enterprise, but as proof of it.

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