

POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS AND THE CARIBBEAN DIASPORA:  
"ENCANCARANUBLADO" BY ANA LYDIA VEGA

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**Introduction: Colonial Encounter/Postcolonial Encounter**

Peter Hulme has suggested that the period of colonial encounters between Europeans and Native Americans constituted a privileged moment for European discourse (xiii). These representations of encounters with the Other were important not only because they established an ideological justification for the genocide and sacking of the Americas, but because they reaffirmed European identity through the use of a barbarous/civilization polarity. As examples of these encounters Peter Hulme cites the encounters between Columbus and the "cannibals", and the long series of representations that were derived from this meeting. Among these representations of the colonial encounter he includes the stories of Prospero and Caliban, John Smith and Pocahontas, Robinson Crusoe and Friday, and Inkle and Yariko.<sup>1</sup>

The encounter that I will here refer to as "postcolonial,"<sup>2</sup> and is characterized by an inversion of the colonial power relationship, constitutes a moment of extraordinary importance in the representation of Caribbean cultural identities. These postcolonial encounters take place within the framework of the Caribbean, as the diasporic community moves towards the United States. When Cuban, Haitian and Dominican *balseros*<sup>3</sup> reach the shores of the United States or are intercepted at sea, they have their first encounters with the North American Coast guard or immigration officials. In her story "Encancaranublado,"<sup>4</sup> Ana Lydia Vega uses this postcolonial encounter to reflect on the cultural identities of the Caribbean. In the story, a postcolonial situation is enacted through the interaction between three shipwrecked Caribbeans, a Puerto Rican and a North American Official. The maritime frontier of the Caribbean Sea continues to exist as an imperial border, not in the sense of Bosch, but rather, because it functions as a border between the United States and the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> In this article I will discuss the problems of Caribbean cultural identity as they are revealed in the postcolonial encounter of Ana Lydia Vega's story "Encancaranublado."

**Postcolonial Encounter**

In the story, Antenor, a Haitian man has been adrift on his raft for several days without any sight of land when he discovers and rescues two other castaways: a Dominican and a Cuban. It is the hope of finding better living conditions in the United States that leads the three castaways of the story to risk the uncertain adventure of a sea voyage. "Es como jugar al descubridor teniendo sus dudas de que la tierra es legalmente redonda. En cualquier momento se le aparece a uno el consabido precipicio de los monstruos" (It is like playing the explorer, filled with doubts about whether the world is actually round. At any moment one may be faced with the infamous precipice of the monsters) (13),<sup>6</sup> says the narrator in "Encancaranublado." In the second paragraph, Ana Lydia Vega plays with the idea of the "discovery" of America. In this sense, the allusions to the roundness of the world and the precipice of the monsters are very explicit. This play on discovery poses a sad parody: while the colonizers sacked the resources of the islands and exploited their peoples, Caribbean immigrants attempt to escape the conditions that were created by five centuries of colonialism and neocolonialism. North Americans, as neocolonizers, substitute Europeans in the postcolonial encounter.

At first, the three illegal immigrants of the story find solidarity with each other and lament, among other things "la jodienda de ser antillano, negro y pobre" (how fucked it is to be Antillan, black and poor) (14). But soon they enter into a discussion about the economic, racial and cultural differences between their three nations. The Cuban considers himself to be superior to the Dominican and the Haitian. The Dominican, for his part, considers himself to be superior to the Haitian. Each one of them resorts to cultural and historical stereotypes to denigrate the cultures of their respective rivals. The Cuban claims

that the city of Santo Domingo looks just the same before and after having suffered a hurricane. The Dominican, who disparagingly refers to the Haitian as "madamo," justifies the 1937 genocide of fifteen thousand Haitians by the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The story of Ana Lydia Vega uses a political allegory to represent the general conditions of the Caribbean. In his article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson claims that the allegory is one of the characteristics of third-world literature. He says "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories" (69). The raft, as an allegory, summarizes the most acute problems of Caribbean society: overpopulation, hunger and political violence. It is precisely these conditions that cause the men in "Encancaranublado" to move out towards the diaspora. The raft also represents the different racial, cultural and linguistic communities of Caribbean countries. To a certain extent, the destinies of the three immigrants reveal the situations that this community will have to contend with.

At the end of the story, the castaways are discovered by the coast guard and brought to Miami where the "imperious" postcolonial encounter takes place, between a North American official, the three balseros and a Puerto Rican. The official refers pejoratively to the Puerto Ricans as "spiks" and orders them to take care of the three "niggers", ie. the Cuban, the Haitian and the Dominican. Two important aspects of culture stand out in the discourse of this story; racial and linguistic. It is the captain of the coast guard ship, described as an "ario y apolineo lobo de mar de sonrojadas mejillas, áureos cabellos y azulísimos ojos" (Aryan and Apollonian sea wolf with ruddy cheeks, golden hair and intensely blue eyes). (20) who refers to the Caribbeans as "niggers," a word that is used in North America as a pejorative term for African Americans. It is clear from this that the disparaging captain, who equalizes African Americans and Caribbeans by conceiving of them in racially reductionist terms, fails to consider the racial and cultural differences of Caribbeans.

Anna Lydia Vega uses this postcolonial encounter to reflect upon Caribbean cultures. Despite their cultural, national, and linguistic differences, the Cuban, the Dominican and the Haitian find themselves equally affected by cultural and racial discrimination in their first confrontation with a representative of North American society. The identification that takes place between the refugees, which in the beginning of the story takes the form of solidarity when the Haitian rescues the Dominican, and later, when these two rescue the Cuban, is recovered at the end of the story when they together confront the North American official. Although the Puerto Rican who brings dry cloths to the castaways is also black (this is indicated by the narrator), in the eyes of the official he is relegated to the category of "spik", and as a neocolonial subject possessing the experience of the Puerto Rican diaspora, he becomes a mediator between the official and the castaways.

Language plays an important role in this text. First, the title "Encancaranublado" is a word that appears in a well known tongue twister:

El cielo está encancaranublado.  
 ¿Quién lo encancaranublaría?  
 El que lo encancaranubló  
 buen encancaranublador sería.

This tongue twister can be seen as a double allegory. First, it is used as a climatic allegory for economic and political conditions. This becomes clear when we remember that Vega's book of short stories is divided into three sections; "Nubosidad Variable" (Variable Cloud Cover), "Posibilidad de Lluvia" (Possibility of Rain), and "ñapa de Vientos" (Additional Winds and Thunderstorms). Moreover, the dedication states the following: "for the Caribbean confederation of the future, may it rain soon and then clear."

The second reading of the allegory relates to the multilingualism of the Caribbean, which is the result of the colonization of the Caribbean by different European countries. Not only do language differences create separations within the Caribbean, they also serve, at least among Spanish speakers, to distinguish between

North American and Latin American culture. This is why the narrator, after hearing the Puerto Rican, says:

Minutos después, el dominicano y el cubano tuvieron la grata experiencia de escuchar su lengua materna, algo maltratada pero siempre reconocible, cosa que hasta el haitiano celebró pues parecía haberla estado oyendo desde su más tierna infancia y empezaba a sospechar que la oiría durante el resto de sus días.

[Minutes later, the Dominican and the Cuban had the pleasant experience of hearing their maternal tongue, somewhat mangled but always recognizable, and even the Haitian rejoiced for it seemed to him as though he had been hearing it since earliest childhood, and he began to suspect that he would hear it for the rest of his days]. (20)

As a "spik" and an intermediary, the Puerto Rican speaks English to the detriment of his Spanish. It is because of this that the narrator refers to his language as "mangled." Because of the historical relations between Haiti and the neighboring Dominican Republic, the Haitian feels closer to Spanish, and in the United States he will come to form part of a linguistic minority within the larger linguistic minority of Latin Americans.

As a textual strategy, language is used to establish different levels of understanding between the characters in the story, and between readers. Here lies the effectiveness of this postcolonial encounter. While the mention, in English, of the "pursuit of happiness" (to refer to the lives of immigrants in the United States), without speech marks or italics seems unexpected and impertinent to the monolingual reader, even more surprising are the words spoken by the North American official during the encounter: "Get those niggers down there and let the spiks take care of 'em." (20) It is important to point out that this declaration constitutes what Hulme refers to as a "monological encounter". That is to say that the official makes a judgmental statement in his own language, English in this case, in which he both commands and denigrates. In another language, even in Spanish, this sentence could not be answered given the power imbalance between the official and the castaways.

Immediately after this scene, as we were told by the narrator, the three "uneducated" castaways could not understand what the bilingual reader can. The castaways are told by the Puerto Rican that the "gringos" (he uses this denigrating word as a response to "spik") not only speak another language, a fact that the "uneducated" castaways might very well have inferred on their own, but that they are known to be greedy and compassionless even with their own mothers. This constitutes a second blow to Anglo Saxon culture. The different level of understanding between the "uneducated" characters and the "bilingual" reader leads to an unresolved ending, one without closure.

The story is directed to Latinos who reside in the United States, and Puerto Ricans who reside in the United States or Puerto Rico, that is to say, to readers that are implicated in the immigration problems, and the racial and cultural discrimination of the United States. Read by a monolingual reader, who is unaware of these problems, the story is not as effective. The Puerto Rican character is presented as equivalent to the narrative voice, in the sense that both are bilingual. As an author, the multilinguism of Ana Lydia Vega allows her to situate herself in the different linguistic and cultural perspectives of the four Caribbean characters and the North American official. She expresses herself in the Cuban and Dominican dialects of Spanish, in Haitian Creole, in the "mangled" Spanish of the Puerto Rican, and in the insulting English of the Coast Guard official.

Thanks to the declaration of the coast guard official, the postcolonial encounter in Ana Lydia Vega's story is left without a resolution. There are many possible consequences that can be inferred by this declaration. In her article "We are (not) in This Together" *The Caribbean Imaginary in 'Encancaranublado'* by Ana Lydia Vega," Diana Vélez poses the following questions about the future status of the three immigrants in the United States:

Speaking extratextually, does the racism they will face in the U.S. operate as a unifying factor as it does in the story? If we read beyond the ending, are all three men going to face the same kind of prejudice once on land? Won't the Haitian be the most likely to be sent back given his "economic refugee" status and the definition of him as "black" rather than Hispanic or better still, as Cuban? (832)

These questions are of crucial importance, in so far as they reflect upon the political and cultural conditions of Caribbean societies. I would like to add a couple of observations. First, the official discriminates equally against the Caribbeans because he is completely ignorant of the cultural and racial differences between Caribbean countries. Even if the characters in the story seem unaware of this fact, the Latin American reader, who is well aware of these differences, is hit hard by the officer's insensitivity. Second, although we are not told what the fates of these characters will be, we can assume that given the racism and the convenient immigration policies of the United States, the Haitian and the Dominican will be deported whereas the Cuban will be granted political asylum. These immigration practices were in effect until President Clinton signed a bill that forces all *balseros*, without exception, to return to their countries of origin.

For the bilingual Latino reader in the United States and for the three immigrants in the story (given a scenario in which they reside permanently in the United States), this encounter has an important impact on the development of cultural identity. Being considered as the Other from the North American perspective forces the characters and the reader alike to "discover" their Caribbeanness from the outside and in opposition to Anglo Saxon subjectivity. As Angel Rama suggests, a unified cultural space is formed in opposition to the Other:

[L]a unidad implica un sistema de diferenciaciones con las culturas externas (incluso las progenitoras) y sobre todo con el sector anglosajón (Estados Unidos y Canadá) que fue el primero que sirvió de término opuesto para la autodefinición de quienes, entonces, resolvieron llamarse latinoamericanos.

[Unity implies a system of differentiating between one's culture, and other cultures (including the engendering cultures), and even more important, that which forms part of the Anglo Saxon sector (United States and Canada) which first served as an oppositional term for the self definition of those who came to call themselves Latin Americans.] (59)

While Latin America defines itself in relationship to its Anglo Saxon neighbors, the Caribbean exists as a cultural space that defines itself in relation to both Latin American and the United States. According to some anthropologists,<sup>7</sup> the unity of the Caribbean as a differentiated cultural space is undeniable, given its historical, racial and economic development. The process of differentiation, which Rama has called macroregionalism, is related to a certain exteriority, or an external perspective that is used as a means of handling a specific cultural space that is both diverse and dispersed.

Conversely, microregionalism, which is the process of differentiation within a cultural region, necessarily implies an internal perspective. It is this type of cultural difference that is discussed by the characters in the story. Using other words, Stuart Hall also comments on this when he says:

Visiting the French Caribbean for the first time, I also saw at once how different Martinique is from, say Jamaica: and this is not mere difference of topography or climate. It is a profound difference of culture and history. And the difference matters. It positions Martiniquains and Jamaicans as both the same and different. (396, italics taken from the original)

The Dominican, the Haitian, and the Cuban are the same, but different. Despite this, the Anglo Saxon official in the story cannot perceive the cultural differences between the Caribbeans. Instead, he can only

see them in racially reductionist terms, which is why he is able to refer to them disparagingly as three "niggers." The North American official uses a racial polarization to erase cultural diversity, a common practice in the United States which does not recognize the diverse racial blendings of Mestizo immigrants. Through their experience with exteriority and in the face of Anglo Saxon rejection, the characters in the story, with all of their differences, will discover their identities as Caribbeans. The affirmation by the Puerto Rican that the "gringos no le dan na gratis ni a su mai" (that the gringos don't give anything for free, even to their mothers) functions to establish a basis of cultural difference between Caribbeans and Anglo Saxons. This gesture strengthens the Latino perception that the mainstays of Anglo Saxon culture are stinginess, individualism and familial disfunction.

The mother, becomes a code that exposes the opposite culture values of Anglos and Latinos. It is not accidental that in the story the castaways express their joy at hearing their "mother" tongue. The "maternal" functions simultaneously as a bond of cultural identity between the Caribbean (as their mutual symbol of home), in order to caricature North American culture. This is also why we are told that "los antillanos fueron cargados sin ternura hasta la cala del barco" (the Antillans were roughly loaded into the boats hull) (20), which suggests a dichotomy between the mother tongue (familiar) and English (commercial). The reference to the North American as an ungrateful son, to the absence of the mother tongue, and to the absence of the mother tongue and tenderness, constitute an image of exile and the cold personal relationships facing poor Caribbean immigrants in the United States.

### Conclusion

Unlike the colonial encounters between Europeans and Native Americans that I referred to in the beginning of this paper, the postcolonial encounter between North Americans and Caribbean in Ana Lydia Vega story provokes reflection upon the Caribbean diaspora and its cultural identities. This postcolonial encounter, as a textual correlative to the colonial encounter, traces an arch that spans centuries of colonialism. The postcolonial encounter reveals power relations between North Americans (as substitutes for European colonizers) and Caribbean immigrants, since it is the same conditions that are created by colonialism and neocolonialism alike that cast them into the sea in search of a better life. Ultimately, they are forbidden the riches that they create. "The infamous precipice of the monsters" that the narrator refers to in the story is an allegory for the profound differences and for the dangers that are implied in crossing the imperial border.

Translated by Shanna Lorenz

### Notes

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1. Each chapter of Peter Hulme's book *Colonial Encounters* deals with one of these encounters.
2. I base my notion of "Post-colonial encounters" on the ideas in Peter Hulme's book. The "Post-colonial encounter" takes place in a post-colonial context. The power relationship inversion that I refer to involves the ironic representation of the Caribbean balseros as conquerors by the narrator, when in fact they have none of the power that is usually ascribed to conquerors.
3. The Spanish term balseros, which literally translate as "rafters," is used to refer to refugees who come to the United States in makeshift sea vessels such as home made rafts.
4. Ana Lydia Vega's second book, which takes its name from the short story "Encancaranublado," won First Prize in the Casa de las Américas in 1982.

5. Juan Bosch calls the Caribbean an "Imperial Frontier" because the Caribbean was the space where the European Empires struggled for four centuries for the control of the colonies. The United States entered into the struggle during the Spanish-American War at the end of the last century. As the result of this war, Spain lost its last two colonies in the continent: Cuba and Puerto Rico.
6. All translations of Vega's short story were made by the translator of this article.
7. In his book, *Transculturación Narrativa en America Latina*, Angel Rama includes Charles Wagley's and Darcy Ribeiro's classifications of Latin America in cultural regions. According to Wagley, the Caribbean belongs to a region called Afro-America. This region is characterized by plantation economy, slavery, African cultural heritage, and the wide spread genocide of Indigenous communities. In Ribeiro's classification, the Caribbean belongs to a region called Pueblos-nuevos, which is a melting pot of European, African and Indigenous cultures.

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