Panel: Labour Migration and the Caribbean Literary Imagination

The Viejo and the Congo: The Haitian Migrant Cane Worker in some Haitian fictions

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Until the turn of the twentieth century, labour migration was something unknown to Haitians. The experience of ‘migration’ was known only to the upper class through the experience of ‘exile’ at worst or at best, the formative journey abroad (Lahens, 1990). This experience had shaped the narrative of travel in Haitian literature in a way that could not account for the peasant migration abroad. In this chapter, I would like to analyse the literary representation of the sugar cane workers by Haitian novelists against the historical background of this migration.

Three major events surrounding this migration contributed to shape what I will call the Haitian ‘sugar cane narrative.’ Though most historians present Haitian labour migration as the consequence of the American Occupation of Haiti (1915), some documents indicate an earlier date (end of the nineteenth century, Laville, 1933) as mentioned in our introduction. Because the prevailing ideology always wanted to prevent the Haitian peasants from leaving the countryside, their migration toward a foreign country was considered a disaster and a tragedy. The circumstances leading to this migration, i.e., the policies of the American Occupation Authorities, offered a propitious ground to the Haitian intellectuals to express their nationalism and resistance to the occupants. After the Occupation ended another tragic event, the slaughter of the sugar cane workers ordered in October 1937 by the Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-61), marked deeply the Haitian imagination and gave its final shape to the narrative of Haitian sugar cane migration as well as contributing to the criticism of the post-Occupation governments (Vincent, 1934-1940; Lescot, 1940-1946). The third event to impact on the Haitian cane narrative happened in 1978 when the Dominican (on behalf of the Sugar Authority) and Haitian governments signed a labour contract authorizing the annual recruitment of seasonal Haitian labourers for the cane harvest (the zafra), when the news broke that Haitian cane cutters where treated like slaves in the Dominican ‘bateys,’ memories of the 1937 slaughter and, far back, memories of the colonial slavery were revived. The Haitian government was accused of ‘selling’ its own citizens and more attention was paid on the Haitian side, to anti-Haitian propaganda and racism emanating from Dominican intellectual and official circles.¹

We have been able to identify three key elements in the representation of the sugar cane migrants’ experience: first, the ‘Viejo’, then the account of the 1937 slaughter and finally, the government organized labour migration and ‘new slavery’ of Haitians in the late seventies.
1. The ‘Viejo’

The term ‘viejo’ appeared in Haitian vocabulary to name the migrants returning from Cuba in the late 20s after the Cuban government put a stop to Haitian labour migration. These returnees spoke in a creole mixed with Spanish and had spent a long time in Cuba thus the name ‘viejo’ meaning ‘old [man].’ The term was then extended to the those returning from the Dominican Republic. In Haitian fiction, the name ‘Viejo’ and the character portrayed as such, is first associated with Maurice Casséus’ novel published in 1935. However, we must mentioned its first occurrence in the 1930 novel of Jean-Baptiste Cineas, in which is portrayed a Haitian peasant, Ti Monsieur Similus, who travelled widely in the Caribbean and even in Europe and then returned to live in the countryside. Unable to till the soil, he has become a ‘simidor’ i.e. a story-teller, using his knowledge of the outside world to enhance the body of his stories (Le drame de la terre, p. 16). Similus is described as a bohemian type and his experience belongs to the category of the ‘Travel’ narrative identified by Jean-Claude Fignolé in Vœu de voyage et intention romanesque (19.).

Though he had to work as a stevedore to pay his passage, his experience as a migrant labourer is not evoked. It is rather the knowledge gathered during his travels that gives him a special status in his community as the one who knows the larger world.

Maurice Casséus’ Viejo sets the tone and model for the representation of the returning migrant labourer in Haitian literature. The ideological influence of Marxism on the writers of the period can be recognized in the discourse of the ‘Viejo.’ Through the experience gained ‘elsewhere,’ the ‘Viejo’ is able to draw comparisons between his host and home countries and therefore takes some critical distance with his home country and fellow citizens. He is therefore able to identify what is not working properly and develop a discourse of social criticism.
(becoming the novelist’s mouthpiece). In Casséus’ novel, Mario, the main protagonist is particularly sensitive to the changes that took place in Haiti during the American Occupation. Through the experience of his lover, Olive, he feels that the country prostituted itself in order to carry on during the Occupation years. As a migrant worker, he feels that he was “pushed out” from his country by forces he could not control nor resist. He remembers quite vividly discrimination and exploitation experienced in Cuba. Though he was a mechanics on the plantation, he shared the anger and frustration of his fellow Haitians when they were humiliated by the Cuban overseers. The Cuban experience is one of mixed feelings and bittersweet memories. On the one hand, there was the extenuating work on the plantation and the daily humiliation. On the other hand, there was the Cuban culture (music and dance/night life). Through the latter, he feels bound to the country. Once he is back in Haiti, he cannot help but associate the Cuban music with his migrant experience, hence the contradictory feelings of nostalgia and anger.

Casséus’ novel establishes the characteristics of the ‘viejo.’ As a peasant or a worker, the ‘viejo’ comes back with money, and two typical fashion features, the ‘gold’ tooth and the Cuban/Dominican cigar. In addition, he speaks a “baragouin” (Alexis, 155) since he mixes Creole and Spanish. In all texts (Casséus, Roumain and Alexis) Spanish words are introduced in the text as ‘exotic’ markers of the migrant experience. Psychologically, the ‘returnee’ has become more mature and full of (political) wisdom. In Haitian writing from the first half of the 20th century, the truism “les voyages forment la jeunesse” holds true as part of the migrant experience whether he from the working class and uneducated. These features established by Casséus in 1935 reappear in 1955 in Jacques Stéphen Alexis’ Compère Général Soleil. Hilarion and Claire Heureuse receive a visit from a ‘viejo’ who brings news from Hilarion’s brother who migrated in the Dominican Republic because he killed a rural military officer. This viejo is presented as a “true” one (“un véritable viejo,” 155) and is described in the following terms:

C'était un gaillard dans la cinquantaine, vêtu d'un costume gros bleu, des sandales de cuir au 4eds, un grand chapeau sur la tête, un véritable viejo. Hilarion l'avait reconnu tout de suite [...]

Il raconta dans un jargon où les mots espagnols se mêlaient au créole, qu'il
venait de Macoris, République Dominicaine, et qu’il apportait une lettre et une commission de la part d’un travailleur nommé Josaphat, [...] (155)

His itinerary is exemplary of the Haitian migrant cane worker and Alexis takes this opportunity to denounce the part played by Haitian bourgeoisie (les frères Bonnefil) in the Haitian labor migration, a new form of slave trade (comme du bois d’érable):

Il était originaire des Cayes. Ça faisait dix ans au moins qu’il n’avait mis le pied sur la terre d’Haiti. Il était parti sur un volier de cabotage qui transportait les travailleurs pour les plantations de canne de Cuba : du temps que les frères Bonnefil faisaient de l’or en jetant des cargaisons de nègres haïtiens, comme du bois d’érable sur les rives de Cuba. Il avait passé des années et des années à Cuba, puis bourlingué dans toute l’Amérique Centrale. Il y avait cinq ans, il était parti travailler en République Dominicaine. (156)

Even in Alexis’ account of the labor migrant’s experience, labor migration is articulated in terms of travel experience: “bourlinguer,” (cf. Lahens, 1990). However, in many texts, the workers condition is paralleled with the experience of slavery. When Manuel describes the condition in the cane plantation, he stresses the status of the cane cutters as paid workers (in contrast with farmers owning and working on their own land):

... seulement des travailleurs pour couper la canne à tant et tant. Ils n’ont rien que le courage de leurs bras, pas une poignée de terre, pas une goutte d’eau, sinon leur propre sueur. (49)

Another aspect of the migrant experience is the sense of pride and honour developed on the plantation despite constant humiliation. The ‘viejo’ is also someone who fights back when he cannot ignore provocation anymore. Through this act of resistance, he becomes a hero (Casséus, 1935). In Roumain, Manuel got involved in a clandestine movement for a workers union. He
fought the rural police, killing one of them in the night (50). Alexis in *Compère Général Soleil* offers a variation on this theme by having his Haitians fighting the soldiers (157).

In both cases, there is a sense of pride in having fought the ‘enemy.’ Manuel sighs with satisfaction as he remembers how he killed a rural policeman in Cuba (*Gouverneurs de la roses*, 50), Mario feels that killing the American overseer in Cuba was not a murder but a part of the struggle against oppression: “... la lutte cent pour cent pour la défense de la race crucifiée (*Viejo*, 32)

A consistent pattern in all these novels is the racism faced by Haitians in these neighbouring countries. For instance, in *Gouverneurs de la roses*, Manuel recalls the hardship of his fellow countrymen as well as the racism of the police in the following terms:

- J’ai laissé des milles et des milles d’Haitiens du côté d’Antilla. Ils vivent et
In the neighbour’s canefields, the Haitian migrant acquires a political awareness that helps him to become an agent of change once he is back in his community. Manuel in *Gouverneur de la rosée* is the perfect example of this function. Jacques Roumain portrayed in his novel a peasant enlightened by the discovery of political and union organization. Manuel’s Cuban experience gives him the knowledge and the strength to refuse the conditions in Fonds-rouge and attempt to change them. He has gained an awareness of the alienation in the peasant life and seeks to raise their consciousness. It is interesting to compare Casséus’ Mario and Roumain’s Manuel from the viewpoint of Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972). If we read the two novels as part of a same discourse of social criticism, we could say that they represent the second and third stages of consciousness among the oppressed. Mario is able to denounce the exploitation of the people and the social inequality and injustice existing in Cuba and Haiti. Yet, he is unable to offer a solution or to implement any political change. On the contrary, he is entangled in his jealousy and emotions concerning his lover Olive. He ends up committing a second crime because of jealousy. Casséus’ novel, while offering to his characters the opportunity to criticize the society, does not go as far as making them agent of changes. Mario and his intellectual marxist friends do not have a revolutionary project. Casséus presents what Freire calls the ‘revolted consciousness,’ a stage in which the oppressed is able to identify what is wrong in his society but is not yet able to correct it. On the other hand, Roumain’s Manuel not only tries to raise the political consciousness of his fellow countrymen, but also tries to mobilize them in order to carry on change. From this point of view, it can be said that Manuel’s story illustrate Freire’s third stage of consciousness, the revolutionary consciousness. Manuel’s purpose is to unite the peasants so they can bring water to the village. He explains to Annaïse the need for reconciliation and the importance of solidarity (98-100).

2. “El corte de los Congos”: The 1937 slaughter of Haitians in the Dominican Republic.
Haunting the Haitian literary imagination is the slaughter of Haitian cane workers in 1937, by the Dominican army and militia. This tragic event has marked the Haitian intellectuals' imagination for various reasons. A reading of Anthony Lespès’s novel, *Les semences de la colère* (1949) gives an insight into possible reasons. Progressist intellectuals particularly resented the conciliatory attitude of the Vincent government who accepted the payment of an indemnity as a compensation for the death of the Haitian peasants.

– Mais où sont donc les 500.000 dollars? demanda brusquement Philippe.

Les autres le regardèrent surpris.

– Peut-être finis, dit Lebas. 500.000 divisés par 20.000 tués égale 25,25 dollars par tête de bétail.

– Un bon cochon coûte 150 gourdes, remarqua simplement Philippe. (155)

In addition, Haitian intellectuals were discovering socialist and Marxist ideology and had a feeling that they had a duty towards the peasants as expressed by one of the agronomist in *Les semences de la colère*:

– Le paysan haïtien vit dans la servilité, dans l’exploitation la plus ignoble, intervint André. Il le sent mais il ne le sait pas. La morale la plus rudimentaire exigerait qu’on le défende. (71)

They also resented the lack of interest of the bourgeoisie for the plight of the peasant. Lespès portrays the attitude of the bourgeois vis-à-vis the refugees from the slaughter:

C’était dimanche. Des gens étaient venus en auto de Port-au-Prince pour les voir et se rendre compte, un peu comme on irait voir des bêtes au Jardin d’Acclimatation. De beaux messieurs bien propres, corrects avec des élégances dans les paroles. Il y avait aussi des dames de la société avec des ombrelles multicolores pour se protéger du vif de l’air, et dont le rire parfois fusait au milieu des propos, heureuses qu’elles étaient, belles et fraîches, et tout à l’aise dans leurs
The contrast between the refugees and the visitors is articulated in terms of the curiosity for wild animals (Jardin d’acclimatation). Lespès uses double-edged irony to convey his critic of Haitian bourgeois class, and insinuates (by reporting the inner thoughts of a mulatto journalist) that Haitian bourgeois shared the view of Trujillo concerning the black Haitian peasants:

Au fond et malgré le persiflage, il pensait comme le Généralissime, le petit journaliste. Pas dans les 100% évidemment mais quelque chose comme dans les 90. Lui aussi, il était supérieur, quoi! [...] Tout bien considéré, la thèse du Généralissime, elle était défendable, en somme. Question de point de vue. Un patriote, quoi! qui assure la sécurité de son pays, et qui ne va pas par quatre chemins, et qui a de la poigne! Pas plus. Et il ne donnait pas tout à fait tort au Généralissime. (28)

When recounting the 1937 genocide of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, Haitian writers stress the suddenness of the slaughter and try to convey the terror of the Haitian migrants trying to escape.

Et ils avient fui, abandonné leurs biens, leurs cases, les champs, le bétail. Et même pour plusieurs, ils avaient dû laisser la femme et les enfants, vu que c’était arrivé sur le bref, ces choses, comme un ouragan par tout le pays et qu’on avait pas eu le temps. (Les semences de la colère, 23)

Lespès, one of the first writers to evoke the massacre, offers testimonies by survivors in his novel. Different versions tell about the violent destruction of lives and the lost of goods and property that had taken years of hard work,

[...] une terre que l’on avait prise à nue et sans vie, et qu’on avait faite de ses bras, jour après jour, engraissee de son courage, puis la case que l’on avait montée, [...],
tout ça perdu bel et bien, d’un coup, du travail de dix ans emporté, peine perdue...

(24)

In *Les semences de la colère*, Lespès let the horror speak for itself. The survivors’ stories contrast with their present conditions as they try to re-settle in their home country. Lespès does not hide their contradictions: some of the refugees decide to go back to the Dominican Republic in spite of the genocide (60-66; 102-109).

The first fictional account (re-writing of the historical event) of the slaughter appears in Stéphen Alexis’ *Compère Général Soleil* (1955). In the last chapters of the novel, Alexis has his main character, Hilarion, migrating in the Dominican Republic in search of work. Hilarion’s itinerary is characteristic of the Haitian labor migration of the time: first the rural migration to the city, then external migration to the Dominican Republic. Hilarion’s experience in the batey is associated with worker’s struggle (unionization and strike). He is introduced to two Dominican marxists and trade unionists and befriends them. This gives Alexis the opportunity to celebrate the solidarity of workers and to exonerate the Dominican working class from the responsibility of the slaughter (271-273) and pay a tribute to a Dominican unionist, Paco Torres (272, 283-289) who died while trying to mobilize the cane workers. This tribute in the true tradition of the ‘international’ of the working class (289).

Longtemps après, les travailleurs du sucre parleraient aux enfants à naître de Paco Torres. [...] De bouche à oreille sa simple et merveilleuse histoire se transmettrait, le vent emporterait la légende aux quatre coins de la terre dominicaine, elle traverserait les frontières avec les hommes. Elle irait fertiliser la poussée libéatrice dans les plateaux et les plaines d’Haïti. Les travailleurs, portés par le flux et le reflux de la misère jusqu’aux plantations de Cuba, l’amèneraient avec eux. Les mots de la légende atteindraient Porto-Rico, la Jamaïque, les îles Turques, Panama, le Venezuela, le Mexique...

**Conclusion**
The Haitian sugar cane narrative is strongly marked by the authors’ ideology and the tradition of social criticism and political commitment, which characterizes Haitian fiction. It is also informed by the tradition of the formative value of travel. The Haitian worker acquire a revolutionary consciousness in the neighbouring cane fields. He discovers the importance of workers’ solidarity and resistance to oppression. More importantly in the writer’s discourse of social criticism, the migrant worker becomes an agent of change once he returns in his community. This vision of the returning migrant as agent of change has marked the Haitian literary production until the nineties. Only recent fiction by a younger generation of writers from the diaspora (Danticat, Dusseck, Dalembert) has abandoned this optimistic vision of the returning migrant. However, if the function of the migrant cane worker has changed in Haitian novels, the memory of the 1937 slaughter has not stopped haunting the writers’ imagination and it is possible to follow the evolution of the 1937 narrative from 1949 to date. It is true that the condition of the Haitian workers in the Dominican bateys has not evolved much and more recently the deportation of thousands of Haitian-Dominicans by the Dominican authorities has contributed to revive the horror of the corte. As the Haitian proverb says, bay kou blye, pote mak sonje. There has been recent publications about the 1937 massacre of Haitians that shows that children survivors of the massacre still remember how it happened, in spite of official efforts on both sides of the frontier to silence this tragic episode of the shared history of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The repressed memory seems have worked better in the Dominican Republic since only one narrative published in 1973, but apparently written shortly after the events, gives a Dominican perspective on the slaughter (El massacre se pasa a pie by Freddy Prestol Castillo).
Bibliography

Texts


References