

Travelers and Littérateurs at the Banks of the San Juan River: Intertextual Fluxion and the Desire for Universality (in Texts by Ephraim G. Squier, Mark Twain)

Copy the San Juan River
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Oh, happy land, *Mahoma's paradise!*
Nicaragua, grand, divine the plan,
To link two oceans with a ship canal;
Grand, immortal will be thy future fate,
Thy name well known to every state.
[...]
The British flunkies may rave and sputter
About Kinney, Walker--"filibuster"--
But Yankee pluck and Yankee enterprise
Will soon possess *Mahoma's paradise*"
(Patrick Cudmore 1892, cited in Brannstrom
61)

There exists a river in Nicaragua where all the stories meet: The San Juan River, roughly 200 kilometers long, part of the border with Costa Rica, once at the center of colonial power struggles in the Caribbean, passage to the Californian gold fields, national, history-laden symbol in Nicaragua and one of the remotest and least populated areas of the country; the place where the 'geographic destiny' (IHNCA 5) of the nation – an interoceanic canal – was supposed to come true but never did. The great national desire for universality is, in a way, buried here.

This space primarily came into being through literary texts. There are huge amounts of texts that have imagined, described and thus created this space: The first known texts about the river stem from the conquistadors, but the 'boom' of literature about the San Juan River took place in the 19th century: European and U.S.-American diplomats, engineers, scientists, littérateurs and adventurers traveled along the river for transit purposes or for canal surveys and wrote about it. These texts triggered a powerful narrative which was taken up by the Nicaraguan elites: These strips of land were chosen to be the route for the world trade; an interoceanic canal would boost world trade and bring progress, civilization and prosperity to Nicaragua (see Kinloch; J. L. Rocha).

Against all hopes, the Nicaragua transit route became obsolete due to the transcontinental railways in the US, and the interoceanic canal was built in Panama. The Nicaragua Canal turned into a ghost haunting Nicaraguan politics and society ([1](#)), but the literature fell silent until a (so conceived) national Nicaraguan literature would enter the stage and start to reclaim and particularly to re-signify the space of the San Juan River for the nation.

One of the first texts to break the silence is *Rápido tránsito. Al ritmo de Norte América* ([1953] 1959), autobiographical essays/travelogues by José Coronel Urtecho, leader of the Vanguardia movement and a very important figure in the literary scene in Nicaragua in general. He, who is one of the few Nicaraguans who actually lived at the river, sees to it that the river space reenters the literature and starts to weave it into a net of different intertextual relations in his essay. For this purpose he engages especially those texts which at their moment brought the space into being and thus put the river onto the (literary) world stage: the travelogues of the 19th century. Coronel puts special emphasis on both the text *Nicaragua, its People, Scenery, Monuments, and the Proposed Interoceanic Canal with Numerous Original Maps and Illustrations* (1852) by Ephraim G. Squier ([2](#)), U.S. diplomat and researcher, who came to Nicaragua around 1849 on a canal mission, as well as the travel diary of Mark Twain, who passed the San Juan on transit in 1866. This maneuver is then taken up again 43 years later by Gioconda Belli, probably the internationally best known contemporary Nicaraguan author, in her novel *Waslala. Memorial del Futuro* (1996), which is in part a homage to her mentor Coronel and also a search for the utopias of the nation.

Now, the purpose of this article is to show how Coronel's and Belli's texts, in their intertextual interaction with Squier's and Twain's, not only revise the powerful narrative of the canal (as one of progress) but moreover re-signify the space of the river for the nation by depicting and construing it as a literary space. In a final step I shall then discuss how this constitution aims at the Nicaraguan desire for universality.

A Narrative of Progress Revised

The hybrid text *Rápido tránsito* deals with the strange U.S. and European travelers at the San Juan River, with the travels of the narrator to the USA and with his encounters with U.S. literature. Rivers are the leitmotif that connects the seven chapters, which could also be read as separate essays (3): the San Juan, the Mississippi, the stream of people in New York, and the Concord River.

Somewhat surprising, the first chapter "Viajeros en el río" – the one about the San Juan River – hardly mentions the canal at all. Still, I would argue that the whole book – through a critique of progress – is drafted against the idea of the canal.

Defending his "soledad casi sagrada" (3), which he found at the San Juan River, the narrator starts an ambivalent dialog with Squier's text and shows a skeptical attitude towards the canal. While Squier had concluded his first chapter about San Juan del Norte with the following remark:

The habits of the natives were unchanged in the space of three hundred years; [...] They little thought that the party of strangers, gliding silently before them, were there to prepare the way for the clanging steamer, and that the great world without was meditating the titanic enterprise of laying open their primeval solitude, grading down their hills, and opening from one great ocean to the other, a gigantic canal. upon which the navies of the world might pass, laden with the treasures of two hemispheres! (Squier 70).

Coronel now finishes his first chapter with the following thoughts, which can be read as an answer to Squier:

La soledad es cada vez mayor y más bella en el río. Tal vez el río se pueble un día, como pensaba Squier; naveguen barcos y gasolinas; pasten caballos y ganados de raza en sus llanos y en los gramales de las lomas; se miren en sus orillas hermosas casas tropicales y en muchas de ellas libros americanos y retratos de poetas. Tal vez la soledad y la belleza primitiva queden sólo en los libros. Tal vez la selva vuelva a cubrirlo todo. Todo depende (Coronel 24).

Maintaining still a certain ambivalence here, one can encounter more and more explicit critiques of a certain economic-technical form of progress throughout the book: the shock about the industrialized Mississippi, the unbearable rush in New York. In all this, the San Juan River turns out to be a holy refuge – possible only because the canal has not been built as Squier had expected it. This sublime critique surfaces most palpably at the end of the whole book, when the narrator declares the San Juan to be his personal Walden: "Todos los hombres tienen, aunque lo ignoren, su propio Walden. El de Thoreau puede ayudarnos a descubrirlo. Yo vuelvo ahora al mío, donde – en un pequeño estante de libros – el de Thoreau me espera" (Coronel 225). With Coronel's recurrent reference to the famous transcendentalist and his treasured text, the simple life in unison with nature becomes the new utopia, one which certainly would have been destroyed through the canal.

Coronel pulled away from politics and in some way took refuge at his wife's finca by the San Juan River. In this sense, the river also plays a particular role in *Rápido tránsito*. According to the literary scholar Leonel Delgado, "el río le sirve [a Coronel] como espacio, precisamente, para echar las bases de una utopía social en la que se articule de manera diferente el progreso y la identidad" (Interview, March 2008). Hence, *Rápido tránsito* aims at showing that the Nicaraguan nation can also build itself differently; it does not need the canal and the U.S. paradigm of progress to become a nation. One only has to read between lines to conceive the other possible meanings of the San Juan River. Based on the literary autonomy which the river renders possible due to its distance to the centers of power in the country (León, Managua, Granada) one can think differently and keep on searching for the utopias of the nation.

The critique of progress becomes even more evident in *Waslala*, which does not only reincorporate Coronel's ambivalent answer to Squier into the novel but also takes an even more negative stand on the issue of the canal.

The novel takes place in the future, where there is still no interoceanic canal, but only one from the Pacific to the lake, and its only – quite allegoric – function is to bring the waste of the world to the war-torn country Faguas (4). The whole novel is full of such obvious allegories and morals, which all hint at a shared message: the promises of progress will not come true in a country like Faguas/Nicaragua; in the novel's 'dependency theory for dummies', the not-even-interoceanic canal brings only the world's leftovers and even deadly (radioactive) cargo. Objects of these outside modernities – although creatively adapted – remain strange, exotic artifacts in Faguas, e.g. in the museum of Mr. Platt (Belli 117).

The critique of progress is also voiced through the two U.S.-American figures of the novel, the journalist Raphael and the scientist

Morris, both of whom enter into a crisis in the light of the heavy contrasts between 'their world' and the one of Faguas: Their only function in the novel is to name and recognize the non-fulfillment and/or the negative consequences of progress in Faguas. The novel also formulates a critique of progress on yet another level: While Coronel reinforces his anti-progress-argument through direct reference to the transcendentalist Thoreau, Belli draws upon genres related to romanticism and plays with the science fiction genre to state her point. Belli uses elements of science fiction without pulling through with it (Mackenbach "Unbewohnte Utopie" 500). From my perspective, she does so to insinuate that science fiction is an impossibility in a country like Nicaragua because it is only possible in a framework of "Western" progress. Rather, the novel works with the structure of German romanticist novels, as the literary scholar Werner Mackenbach has already convincingly demonstrated ("Die blaue Blume im tropischen Urwald" 319-321). Furthermore I would argue that the novel has an even more basic structure related to romanticism: the fairytale, in which a princess (Melisandra) goes on a quest (the search for the utopian place Waslala) and is helped by a prince (Raphael) and even a magical animal (the parrot). It seems that, in the "postmodern hell" (Mackenbach "Unbewohnte Utopie" 499) depicted in the novel, the fairytale is the only possible structuring element and possible bridge to the international solidarity movement (5). Thus, the references to genres in *Waslala* not only serve as a critique of progress and the development paradigm, but open up a broader context. The idea that the nation can fulfill its 'destiny' only through the construction of the canal is denied just as it is in *Rápido tránsito*. Rather, both authors make use of different literary strategies to write against the narrative of the canal and try to suggest other readings and writings of the San Juan River, which we shall see in the following.

The San Juan River as Literary Space

As already mentioned, it is greatly due to travelogues that the (inter)national narrative around the canal came into being. However, travelers not only construed the San Juan as a canal route, but they also wrote down their impressions of nature, of people and of travel modalities. Interestingly, Coronel and Belli not only engage with the canal narrative but rather try to re-signify the river through the selective adoption, appropriation and sometimes hyperbolic inflation of the travel accounts, thus converting the river into a magical and enchanted paradise and into a literary space.

I employ the term 'literary space' in order to conceptualize a very interesting dynamic: namely, that in these texts the periphery and marginalized San Juan region is turned into a space of literature.

This dynamic occurs on various levels: the literature construes and depicts the San Juan River as a space which is created by literature and which generates literature, a place where literature happens and meets intertextually, and as a hoard of literature, as to say a place where literature belongs, or as Leonel Delgado puts it, "el río como espacio fundado por la escritura y a la vez productor de escritura inagotable" (Interview, March 2008).

The Enchantment of the Tropics: Coronel's Dialogs with Traveling Littérateurs

In the first chapter of *Rápido tránsito*, "Viajeros en el río", Squier and Twain have a prominent role: Coronel lets them speak about the beauty of the San Juan. The narrator uses Squier's amazed gaze to depict the river as a beautiful and idyllic nature-space. Between the lines one seems to be able to decipher a hidden message to the Nicaraguan reader: If this U S-American traveler thought this river to be so entrancing, we Nicaraguans should do so as well – even though the canal has not been built. We should rather rejoice, because this is exactly why this space is still so beautiful:

[S]u admiración [Squier's] era la selva tropical y el vasto río, por la invariable majestad de su carácter (*majestic character*). No se cansaba nunca de contemplar la densa masa de follaje que literalmente, según aseguraba, cubría el río y que en la luz oblicua producía efectos mágicos de sombra sobre el agua [...] soñaba con ver un día la tierra cultivada, [...]; pero un siglo después de su viaje el río sigue tan bello y despoblado como entonces (7, italics in the original). (6)

Whereas the "según aseguraba" mainly insinuates the process of translation, there are other moments when the narrator comments on certain statements of Squier and even doubts them. Squier, an arduous promoter of the *manifest destiny* of the USA (7), recounts, quite

pleased, an anecdote during his farewell at San Carlos: “the old man insisted upon a parting embrace. Like the prophets of old, he said he was now ready to die, for he knew that his country was safe beneath the guardianship of the Republic of the North” (Squier 122). The narrator comments upon this episode with irony: “Su patriotismo se vió colmado cuando un anciano [...] le dijo, al parecer realmente conmovido: Puedo morir tranquilo porque mi patria está segura bajo la protección de la República del Norte” (Coronel 8). Along with the phrase “al parecer realmente conmovido”, Coronel inserts a little doubt about the credibility of the happenings. The narrator happily accepts the descriptions of nature, but questions the overtly political content of Squier’s text.

Since Squier himself is quite associated with the canal idea, Coronel introduces another traveler, who does not even mention the canal in his texts and who is a world famous writer: Mark Twain. Twain got to know the country in transit while traveling from San Francisco to New York – experiences he jotted down in his travel diary and published in an enhanced and revised version in the newspaper *Alta California* (8).

Although the narrator writes that one would hardly dare to change Twain’s notes (Coronel 10), he sure does so and hence depoliticizes the travel notes. Mark Twain wrote in a poetic-humorous way about the arrival at San Juan del Sur (on the Pacific coast) and the journey to the lake:

Left San Juan [del Sur] in carriages – native drivers armed with long knives – native soldiers barefooted, with muskets. Threatened war between 2 candidates for Presidency of Republic of Nicaragua – case of a contested election – present president to hold his polish and whip both parties. Long procession of horsemen and hacks – beautiful road and cool, rainy atmosphere. All on lookout for wild monkeys. Orange, banana, aguardiente, coffee, hot corn, carved cups – stands, pretty native women, ruffles around bottom and dress. Snake cactus clasping trees. Calabas trees. One hack broke down. Threatened bloodshed between passengers and drivers (38).

Coronel now translates parts of this description, leaving out the remarks on the impending civil war in Nicaragua and about the impending bloodshed between the passengers – the ironic link of the whole passage. In *Rápido tránsito*, one can only read the following paragraph:

Los cocheros nativos iban armados de machetes. Los soldados nativos descalzos, con mosquetas. Procesión de jinetes y jamelgos. Bello camino, y la atmósfera fresca, lloviznosa. Naranjas. Bananos. Aguardiente. Café. Tortillas calientes. Jícaras labradas. Bonitas mujeres nativas. Vuelos alrededor del ruedo de sus faldas (11).

Politics, violence or anything negative is not translated; nothing shall destroy the enchanted idyll, which is especially emphasized in Twain’s descriptions of the trip along the river. The narrator notes surprised that Twain, who had been a steamboat pilot, does not take much notice of the rapids at El Castillo, but he finds the explanation in him being stunned by the nature: “El mismo paraíso, en realidad. El dominio imperial de la belleza. Era evidente que Mark Twain estaba entusiasmado, ebrio de formas y colores” (12). Coronel’s translation of Twain’s text stresses primarily the enchanting atmosphere: “Eran aquellas las señales del trópico. El hechizo del río se apoderaba de los pasajeros [...]” and further on “en el río San Juan, con el encantamiento en torno de ellos” (13).

However, Coronel also points to some ironic undertones in Mark Twain’s notes (at least those which are not related to Nicaragua): “Pero en medio de ese delirio vegetal despertaba de pronto el humorista y escribía: ‘Maldito sea el bárbaro del calañes maltrecho que está mirando sobre mi hombro mientras tomo estas notas en el puente de las máquinas.’ Una sorpresa, sin duda alguna, para el mirón” (13) (9). The

writer Coronel likes this ironic disruption. Likewise, his whole book *Rápido tránsito* is itself pervaded by fine irony: Grandiloquent thoughts about the function of literature are broken with descriptions of day-to-day encounters and portraits, dashed with an ironic tone of the narrator towards himself. There is a constant intent of undercutting; landscapes are created linguistically and disintegrated right away; thoughts are built up argumentatively only to end up in a sudden shift or to ebb away in a gesture of doubt.

Hence Coronel, after having talked about one representative of world literature, comes to speak of Míster Kennedy: one of the few US-Americans who actually settled at the San Juan River and who is “una especie de diario hablado con todas las pequeñas noticias personales del puertecito de San Carlos” (14). The narrator describes him as an aging adventurer, “al que le bastaba para divertirse el

espectáculo tragicómico de la vida humana en el más apartado rincón de la tierra” (16). Through this figure, a different idea of literature is introduced in the text: the idea of orality and conversation as literature. This talking diary transforms the San Juan River into a literary space as well, filling it with little stories and jokes.

Another (nameless) traveler wakens the interest of the narrator because he happens to notice two special books in his hut: selected works of Thoreau and a biography about the transcendentalist, two texts which, according to the narrator, belong here: “dos libros en perfecta armonía con el paraje” (17). The last traveler, the young biology student Douglas, brings with him not only his fascination for the fauna of the area, but also long conversations about U.S. literature to the San Juan River. His conduct as a researcher is commented between laughs and fascination by Coronel, e.g. he recounts Douglas's happiness when he finds a turtle at the San Juan which was to contradict his professor's thesis that this species only existed in North America: “Jamás he visto un entusiasmo igual al suyo cuando se apoderó de una pequeña tortuga de tierra, que declaró – bailando con alegría – ser algo inapreciable” (20). Here, the gaze of the other on the nature-space San Juan does not only manifest itself in the amazement of Squier and Twain, but moreover gets authorized scientifically (10).

From Positivism to Magic and the River as a Memory Space

Waslala also works with the gaze of the traveler to revalue the space of the San Juan River using first and foremost Ephraim G. Squier's text. However, the intertextual reference does not adopt the form of a translation and a commentary as with Coronel, but rather Squier's experiences become part of the setting and the plot of the novel. At some point, the novel figure Raphael seems to turn into Squier:

La multitud de pájaros de brillante plumaje que se lanzaban sorpresivamente de las altas ramas, cual flores que se echaron a volar, provocaba las exclamaciones de Raphael, quien [...] no cesaba de asombrarse ante la belleza de aquel paraje que envuelto en la luz rojiza del sol poniente, era la visión más poética que él jamás recordara haber tenido en su retina (Belli 90).

This passage paraphrases the already cited paragraph by Squier (see endnote 6) and Coronel's translation of it, only that now it is Raphael who never wearies to look at the all-surrounding beauty and that Belli's description is even more saturated with kitsch than Squier's.

Even more interesting is the fact that Belli not only incorporates Squier's text into *Waslala*, but also reinterprets it. Belli uses Squier's text to depict the San Juan River as a magical space – something which does not lack a certain irony since Squier was a scientist fully committed to positivism (see Rodríguez 131-162). Squier had noted with amazement how Pedro, the captain of the boat, had used a conch as a trumpet, as well as other actions of the oarsmen, and had commented upon this with a certain ignorance and arrogance: “We had become accustomed to all sorts of fantastic freaks, and contented ourselves with looking on without asking questions” (113). These “fantastic freaks” now become part of the magic of the river in *Waslala*: In the future, Pedro is back with his conch, that had annoyed Squier so much – “Pedro blew another nerve-cracking blast on his conch - that awful conch” (Squier 122) – and his crew prays and chants. Squier had also briefly mentioned that at some point the San Juan River became “purple with vegetable infusions” (93) because of an affluent. These infusions also appear in *Waslala*, but there they have magical power: They transform the river in *Waslala* into a red river, which provokes that all travelers start seeing their memories floating in the water. The travelers are flooded with nostalgia and melancholy, and the river turns into a collective-national and individual space of memory (Belli 100). In *Waslala*, literature and history flow together, overlap each other and become blurred.

This becomes even more evident in the depiction of the so called Remolino Grande, about which Squier wrote the following: “This name is given to a whirlpool caused by the abrupt turning of the stream, which is here somewhat confined by its unyielding banks” (103). This swirl becomes a magical one in *Waslala*, seemingly encompassing the sirens of the *Ulysses*, *El Aleph* and the myths around the sinking of the Titanic:

[E]l negro tornasol, todos los colores por efímeros instantes, disolviéndose en arcoiris sucesivos; [...] Vio cofres y barcos y sillas, puentes de mando de barcos fantasmas con sus capitanes en la pose digna con que se hundirían sin hacer alarde, ni quejarse; vio una orquesta entera inmóvil [...] vio mapas de regiones perdidas [...]; vio miles de relojes de arena hacerse y deshacerse en círculos infinitos y contempló finalmente

The San Juan River is depicted as a space that harbors innumerable spaces. The non-place of the canal turns into a river which is exuberant with stories. The San Juan River thus becomes a history-laden space where past, present and future exist simultaneously. This image is already evoked at the beginning of the novel when it is said that the river contains the memory of Melisandra - "el río era su memoria" (Belli 11), and the river is put in relation to indigenous mythology. The river becomes the plumed serpent, a mythical creature inhabited by myths and legends, fantastic stories of the seamen such as the one about the spirit of Horatio Nelson hiding at the river from the ghost of Napoleon which torments him (Belli 91-94) as well as by stories of foreign travelers and Coronel's texts.

Even though Belli reinterprets Squier's experiences, the question remains whether in this way she subversively undercuts the gaze of the other or if she thus rather fortifies the exoticizing gaze. In *Waslala* the literary space San Juan becomes also a (national) memory space: The memories flow and whirl in the form of narratives, myths, legends and stories. How these ought to be read or deciphered is up to the eye of the beholder. Maybe Squier simply could not read the San Juan River correctly and thus failed to notice the real magic of the colored river and the *Remolino Grande*?

Through the incorporation and reinterpretation of these texts the river space is first of all construed as a (magical) idyllic nature spot and through the reinterpretation of the texts the gaze of the other is appropriated. Coronel and Belli also draw upon oral elements and thus fix and locate the (for Nicaragua very important) oral tradition at the banks of the San Juan. In addition, the San Juan becomes the literary memory space of the nation, where diverse narrations are stored.

Coronel as *hombre letrado* amidst 'the Jungle'

In this section, I want to demonstrate how both authors further construe the San Juan River as a literary space by means of depicting José Coronel Urtecho as a *hombre letrado* – an educated and erudite man – living at the riverside. It is also through his person that Coronel and Belli bring the literature to the river. For this purpose, it is necessary to first discuss to what extent *Rápido tránsito* can be read autobiographically.

Rápido tránsito is always read autobiographically by literary scholars, which seems surprising because the paratextual references are conflicting at least. Furthermore, an autobiographical pact in the sense of Philippe Lejeune (1989) is only possible at two moments in the whole book and – interestingly enough – there the name always appears distorted due to processes of translation: At one point the narrator recounts that a U.S.-American girl names a wallet in form of a dog after his name: "le puso al perrito mi nombre, que pronunciaba *Oséy*." (Coronel 47, italics in the original); he similarly reproduces the distorted pronunciation when he talks about how Ernesto Cardenal and himself are presented as "míster Cardinal y míster Cornell" (131) in the USA. Hence, the narrator is called *Oséy Cornell*, which only phonetically reminds of José Coronel – a rather weak offer for an autobiographical pact with the reader.

However, as Leonel Delgado details, the text is shaped by another characteristic of autobiographical texts: the one of confession and apology for deeds which one committed – in this regard Coronel "confesses" indirectly, talking about Ezra Pound to excuse his own proximity to fascist ideas in his youth and using Henry David Thoreau to defend his own retreat into solitude/nature (Delgado 218-225). Still, I think – even taking into consideration the autobiographical dimension of essays in Latin America – that this is not proof enough to explain the unquestioned reading of *Rápido tránsito* as an autobiographical text. I think the explanation rather lies in the Nicaraguan literary life. At the time when *Rápido tránsito* was published, Coronel was already a myth thanks to both his role as a translating intermediary of U.S.-American literature and his life at the San Juan River. In this sense, the first chapter is the first autobiographical marker because the whole book starts with the location at the San Juan: "A la casa de la hacienda, San Francisco del Río, donde escribía estos recuerdos" (3) – it is José Coronel, the famous poet at the river, who writes his memories here.

The second marker is the reference to U.S. literature. At a time when Coronel had already played his crucial role introducing the *New Poetry* into Nicaragua, he recounts how he himself got to know this poetry and at one point refers to his role as intermediary:

Si alguna parte tuve yo mismo en orientar en un sentido a ciertos poetas jóvenes de nuestro país, fue solamente en darles a conocer, hace veinte años, la poesía norteamericana propiamente moderna que iniciara Ezra Pound y que tenía nombres tan raros, nuevos y poco familiares, como T.S. Eliot, Marianne

Thus, although perhaps only for those familiar with Nicaraguan literary life, an autobiographical reading is definitely possible.

Rápido tránsito deals with so many different literary texts that the narrator is primarily perceived as very erudite and as a literary critic. The self-construction as *hombre letrado* happens initially in the first chapter “Viajeros en el río”, where the image of the “estante de libros norteamericanos” (Coronel 8, 22), which the narrator harbors in his home at the San Juan, appears repeatedly, as well as the reference to his portrait of Walt Whitman. Through the reference to the status symbol bookshelf, Oséy Cornell depicts himself as a very educated man, and further on as such a lover of books that he even hangs up posters of writers on the wall. Furthermore, not only does he locate the literature on the text level – the texts by Squier and Twain – at the San Juan, but the literature also materializes in the form of books, which are stored at the riverside.

According to the narrator, the bookshelf irritates travelers who do not expect such a thing amidst “the jungle”. This is exemplified through the episode with the biology student Douglas:

[D]isimuló su extrañeza, pero le vi en los ojos que le sorprendía tanto como encontrarse un caimán en Beacon Street [...]. Nunca pensé – decía, como hablando consigo mismo – encontrar aquí, en la orilla de la jungla – *the jungle* era su palabra – un libro de Elliot o de ningún otro escritor americano (Coronel 22f, italics in the original).

The literature at the San Juan means something exotic and unexpected to Douglas, and the *hombre letrado* plays coquettishly with his own exotic status by the river, whereby he seems to squint with one eye at the USA and with the other towards Nicaragua: ‘Look, civilization also exists in the alleged jungle’.

The view of the U.S. travelers who do not expect any literature or civilization at the San Juan is also evoked at another point. However, the narrator has already depicted himself so many times as *hombre letrado* – and hence *civilizado* – that his mere presence blurs the stereotypes:

Muy pocos norteamericanos de los que pasan por el río he podido tratar, porque generalmente son reservados con los nativos y van de prisa, envueltos en su propia esquividad, sintiéndose aventureros solitarios en la jungla, donde no hay teóricamente hombres civilizados, y pensando nada más en lo que llevarán o contarán cuando regresen a la civilización, a su país, cuando vuelvan a América (Coronel 16).

At this point, the question remains, if in this way the narrator depicts all the other river inhabitants as uncivilized people. Leonel Delgado comments about this paragraph: “Aquí el concepto de civilización es invocado [...] en razón de la deducción más evidente—esto es, subrayar que Coronel es un civilizado entre nativos”; however, Delgado also writes that this reference is meant ironically, since the USA represent the civilization in the literary formation of Coronel (Delgado 213).

With this U.S. civilization, which Coronel admires for its literature but fears because of its political and quotidian culture, he maintains a strained dialog throughout the book.

It is precisely because this alleged U.S. civilization sometimes turns out to be not so civilized: Coronel narrates an episode with a U.S. politician who is quite astonished about his poster of Walt Whitman, explaining that Whitman was not that popular in the U.S. and that he himself considers him boring and monotonous and that people in the U.S. would prefer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (Coronel 8f). Coronel does not comment on this in this chapter, but in the last chapter he talks about *Hiawatha* in such a depreciatory manner as he did not about any other text in the whole book: “el poema es ingenuo, infantil, sin relación viviente con el tema” (203). Civilization lies in the eyes of the beholder, but no reader will have failed to notice the permanent self-construction of Coronel as *hombre letrado* in *Rápido tránsito*.

Through this construction Coronel does not only bring the literature, which materializes in his person, to the San Juan River, but also relates himself to the river. Quite telling in this sense is once again the last chapter, in which Coronel writes about Thoreau “Thoreau, a quien el río Concord le pertenece con el mismo derecho que la laguna de Walden. El trasladó ambos lugares al territorio universal de la literatura” (Coronel 214). If one transfers this strikingly spatial thought onto Coronel himself, it becomes obvious what function this construction has: By writing about the San Juan River, Coronel procures it a spot in the universal territory of literature and this

construed-through-text place thus “belongs” to its creator. Through *Rápido tránsito*, Coronel not only construes the San Juan River in a new manner, but he himself becomes a constituting element of this literary space.

He seemingly succeeded in doing so. For example, the Nicaraguan poet Luis Rocha said in his opening speech of a poet reunion in homage to José Coronel Urtecho, which took place in San José in 2001: “Para mí el Río San Juan corre, vital y literariamente, en José Coronel Urtecho. Si pensaba en uno necesariamente pensaba en el otro, hasta que se hicieron uno sólo” (9). In Nicaragua – in elite circles – the San Juan River is nearly automatically associated with José Coronel Urtecho.

Whatsoever, this particular perception of the space has not only been continued in speeches at poetry festivals but also within novels such as *Waslala* by Gioconda Belli, who through the figure of Don José continues the construction of José Coronel as *hombre letrado* and poet: “[E]n el río [Don José] leía, escribía poesía, honraba a los clásicos. Hasta tenía un retrato de Whitman en su estudio, y predicaba el amor a la belleza, al arte, a la filosofía” (Belli 19). Not only does she take up certain elements of Coronel's self-construction as *hombre letrado* like the poster of Walt Whitman and cites and paraphrases parts of his texts (see Belli 14, 17, 22, 86f), but she also tries to include the mental crisis that Coronel had in the 1950s by letting him recount how he spoke with literary figures:

Pensadores, escritores, personajes de la literatura me han acompañado tan sólidamente como si estuvieran a mi lado en carne y hueso. [...] Sufrí de alucinaciones en las que hablaba con Mrs. Dolloway y Mrs. Ramsey. Pasaba noches conversando con Cervantes y Borges sobre la posibilidad de que alguien reescribiera el *Quijote* sin jamás haberlo leído. (Belli 60).

The interesting thing here is not so much the reference to his nervous breakdown, but rather that through this the San Juan is even more filled with literature, stories, literary figures and writers, with García Márquez's landscapes and with Heathcliff and Cathy from *Wuthering Heights* (61).

In the section “Citas y reconocimientos” at the end of the book, it is explicitly said that certain parts of the novel are taken from *Rápido tránsito* and from Coronel's poem “Pequeña biografía de mi mujer” (Belli 383). Thus not only do the intertextual references show a great deal of self-reflexivity and communicativity, but Belli also acquaints a greater German speaking audience with these two texts by Coronel – which according to my research have never been translated into any other language (11). This way, Coronel's figure roams and circulates; the San Juan River is a literary space because a poet lived and wrote there - with this novel this idea is transported beyond the borders of Nicaragua.

Werner Mackenbach criticizes that Belli draws a too harmonious and non-critical image of Coronel and that she shields the political contradictions of his life (“Unbewohnte Utopie” 179, footnote 46). This is a quite valid objection because Coronel's radical political shifts are in no way treated through the figure of Don José. He is merely wrapped into a deep nostalgia because he cannot find his way back to Waslala, the utopian place which he once founded with other poets. Just a slight critique shines through, when Melisandra ponders that the retirement to a river cannot be the only solution: “En el río al menos se podía conservar el orgullo. Hacerse la ilusión de un mundo donde cualquier atardecer podía justificar la existencia; [...]. Pero no podía ser esa la única existencia posible. No podía aceptar que el único recurso de la felicidad fuese la reclusión ».(Belli 255)

Maybe this is also the reason why Waslala is not located near the San Juan in the novel. In its conception, the utopian place Waslala shows great similarity to the religious-revolutionary community of farmers and artists which Ernesto Cardenal once created in the 1960s on the Solentiname archipelago in the San Juan region. This is also the motive why one would assume that the literary Waslala would be nearby as well. However, in the imaginary topography of Faguas, Waslala is not located close to the river but in the north of the country (just as the “actual” Waslala is in the north of Nicaragua, in the *Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte*). From my reading this means an attempt to expand the myth of Solentiname and the myth of the Sandinista revolution to the whole Nicaraguan territory (12). The retirement to a paradisiac place can not be the only solution: Rather, one has to fight for the paradise on earth as the Sandinista guerrillero/as once did.

The Desire for Universality and the Meaning of Literature in Nicaragua

In both texts, the San Juan River is re-signified and depicted as a literary space following two strategies: on the one hand through

intertextual references to travel literature from the 19th century and through the appropriation of the gaze of the other; on the other hand, through the construction of José Coronel Urtecho as *hombre letrado*.

Now one could ask: What is so special about the San Juan River being constituted as a literary space in *Rápido tránsito* and *Waslala*? And what has that to do with the Nicaraguan nation? - Quite a lot. For, apart from the canal, another important Nicaraguan imaginary is the one of the republic of poets (Beverley/Zimmermann 48, 52; Mackenbach "Unbewohnte Utopie" 502). Since Rubén Darío the idea that Nicaragua is a country of poets has been quite persistent, and if one sees poetry as a *pars pro toto* for literature, then it becomes evident how this particular constitution of space is directed towards the nation.

Pursuant to my reading, this constitution tries to show that part of the narrative on the canal was actually fulfilled, namely the one about Nicaragua becoming a cosmopolitan nation through the canal and the small country playing an important role at the international level. Thus, the reference to all the traveling *littérateurs* aims at showing that part of the imaginary has already been accomplished, or as Leonel Delgado puts it:

También se podría ver, dado el contenido histórico del río, el río como sitio cosmopolita. A pesar de estar aislado, ese es otro elemento importante, *Rápido tránsito* está lleno de eso, está lleno de gente extranjera que pasa por el río y que de alguna manera conecta al río con la universalidad, o con la globalidad (Interview, March 2008).

In her novel, Belli points not only to the travelers of the 19th century but also to the international solidarity movement with Nicaragua in the 1980s by letting a group of U.S.-Americans, Germans, Argentinians and Dutch travel on the river (Dröscher 162). All of whom turn out to be important figures for Melisandra in order to find the utopian place.

The function of the constitution as literary space goes even deeper, though. In his article "Introducción al tema de la universalidad nicaragüense" (1966), Coronel tries to trace back the Nicaraguan desire for universality. He suggests that this desire originates in the exceptional geographical position of Nicaragua – as to say the narrative around the canal – and concludes that Nicaragua has solely achieved universality through Ruben Darío, through poetry, through literature:

[L]a poesía es hasta ahora el único producto nicaragüense de valor universal [...] y que si alguna admiración despierta Nicaragua fuera de sus fronteras, no lo debe a otra cosa. Es solamente en la poesía donde hasta aquí hemos alcanzado nuestra propia universalidad (Coronel "Introducción a la universalidad nicaragüense" 7).

As such, the constitution as literary space implies a revaluation of the peripheral region for the nation, in which the literature has such a high standing. Thus, the space is newly appropriated for the nation – through literature and not through the traumatic narrative on the canal.

A similar idea of universality through literature appears in *Waslala*, e.g. when a minor character suggests about Don José: "Sus prosas, sus poemas, los engrandecían a todos, demostraban que, aun en su miseria, Faguas albergaba belleza, grandes pensamientos" (Belli 249).

And the literature has still another meaning: The (U.S.) paradigm of progress is contrasted with that of civilization. According to Coronel, literature has a civilizing power, or so he writes in *Rápido tránsito*:

...cumpliendo así una función civilizadora, influyendo con obras bellas en la vida de los otros, afinándoles las percepciones de sus sentidos, las reacciones de su sensibilidad, haciéndolos con eso capaces de placeres superiores más refinados y, por lo mismo, de una vida más alta y más profunda (Coronel 155).

Hence, not only the idea of the canal is declined through a critique of progress, but rather a different model for the nation is drawn: not technical-economic progress, but the idea of civilization. This is of course quite close to the paradigm of progress, since civilization can be seen as a form of social progress. But in Coronel's literary world those are somewhat opposed, and the discussion is closer to a Latin American constant in identity politics: the dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism. The San Juan River, the supposed periphery, "the jungle" as a literary space, becomes part of the civilization and so seems, at least, to disturb the dichotomy.

This acts out quite differently in *Waslala* because it was published many years after *Rápido tránsito* and at a time when Nicaragua had

already obtained world-wide fame for a different reason: the Sandinista Revolution. Henceforth, the idea of the republic of the poets starts to destabilize as well. Despite all the admiration for poetry and the talk of Waslala as the “república de los sabios apasionados” (Belli 249), Waslala turns out to be a failed project: Its inhabitants cannot reproduce in this spatial-temporal crack, and the poets cannot handle the power and wither away. The only thing which keeps Waslala alive is the attempt to project the idea of utopia to the outside: the idea that the world needs a utopia to pursue. Thus, it is not only literature anymore but rather imagination in general which can have a society-changing effect, as the literary scholar Susanna Layh puts it: “With the failure of the construction of Waslala, Belli deconstructs and destroys utopia but she also reconstructs the utopian imagination and revives utopia as an idea”(57).

In this sense, it is also quite revealing to turn to the third citation which precedes the novel, a passage of the poem *Ulysses* by Lord Alfred Tennyson. If one thinks of the intermediary position that Belli takes up (Dröscher 137) and about the moment of publication (six years after the Sandinistas lost the elections), it is possible to read the monologue of the aging Ulysses as a call to national and international *compañera/os*: “Tis not too late to seek a newer world” and further on:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now the strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield
(Belli: quotation at the beginning)

This call is continued in the book, which foremost deals with the necessity to keep on searching the utopia. Imagination – literary or otherwise – is the key: imagination can change society, such is the idealistic message of the novel. In this regard, it is quite revealing to bring to mind again the romantic references both texts use. The romantic period (esp. the “German” one) was not only characterized by ideas about the blending of literature and politics but also by ideas of the power of literature and that one could encounter “truth” only in literature. This idea is also present in both texts: With Belli, the fairytale becomes the ordering and sense-conceiving structure, and with Coronel the non-literary “reality” is often disappointing in comparison to literature: The Mississippi is more beautiful with Mark Twain than the river which he sees with his own eyes in New Orleans, and the Concord is disillusioningly small: “El río Concord. De pocos ríos he leído tanto como de éste. En prosa y verso, o simplemente en prosa. escribieron acerca de él Emerson, Thoreau y Hawthorne. Tanta literatura ha corrido en su cauce que me lo imaginaba más ancho” (214).

As one could see throughout this article, a lot of literary texts have flown down the riverbed of the San Juan. This literary and intertextual fluxion has created the space which it nowadays is: The San Juan River is multilayer and heterogeneous, sheltering many spaces which exist simultaneously. Canal ghosts and poets haunt its banks, expanding and constricting the riverbed in a multidimensional space-time.

Notes

- (1). I am not the first to use this image of the ghost: For example, the sociologist José Luis Rocha writes: “Antes, durante y después de la temporada de los piratas, el fantasma del canal interoceánico ha estado obsesivamente presente en la historia de Nicaragua” (online); and Belli writes in her autobiography *El país bajo mi piel. Memorias de amor y guerra*. ([2001] 2003) about the “fantasma del canal aquel” (22f).
- (2). Squier's text was not translated into Spanish until over a hundred years later (and without the canal study) Squier, Ephraim George 1970: *Nicaragua, sus gentes y paisajes*. San José: EDUCA.
- (3). “Viajeros en el río” has been published separately in *Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano* (1964) and in Ernesto Cardenal's anthology about the San Juan: *El Río San Juan: Estrecho Dudoso en el centro de América. Selección de Textos por Ernesto Cardenal*. San Carlos, Managua: Alcaldía Municipal de San Carlos, Latino Editores, 1993.
- (4). Though no time data is given in the novel itself, the back cover reads that the novel takes place in the 3rd century of the third millennium. Due to some geographical and political particularities, Belli's Faguas can be read as representing Nicaragua.
- (5). For the issue of how *Waslala* is directed towards internationalists, see Dröscher 2004.
- (6). Squier's original reads: “I never wearied in gazing upon the dense masses of foliage that literally embowered the river, and which, in

the slanting light, produced magical effects of shadow on water" (103).

(7). The idea of *manifest destiny* appears explicitly in the prologue, when Squier explains his intention as to "awaken a true sympathy in the hearts of the American people, for their simple, but unfortunate friends and allies in Central America; or contribute, however slightly, to impress the great truth upon this nation, that the United States is the natural head of the great American family, and that it is a duty which it owes, alike to God and man, to extend its advice, its encouragement, and its support to the oppressed and struggling Republics of Central America" (xvii, xviii).

(8). It seems that Coronel did not know about these revised texts (published in *Alta California* and later on in form of the book *Travels with Mr. Brown. Being Heretofore Uncollected Sketches*) because Coronel only refers to Twain's diary.

(9). Twain's original reads: "damn the blackguard with the damaged plug hat on who is looking over my shoulder as I make these notes on the boiler deck" (40).

(10). The appearance of the scientist could put in danger the critique of progress which appears throughout the text, because a sympathetic scientist does not go very well with the critique of progress. Hence, firstly Douglas' sensitive and poetic character is emphasized and the argumentation seems to follow this pattern: He is a scientist, but he loves "una vida simple en contacto con la Naturaleza" (Coronel 20), writes poems and is erudite. On the intertextual level of literary material, Douglas becomes the reincarnation of Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, whereby closing a circle of the San Juan River as a possible *Walden*, and thus as a literary space.

(11). *Waslala* was even published in German before it was published in Spanish (although it has not been translated into English or other languages so far).

(12). The use of *Waslala* as the place of utopia is quite problematic, since the North has suffered a lot in the Contra war and the actions of the Sandinistas in the Caribbean region are quite controversial (see Dröscher 161; Mackenbach 392).

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Twain's masterpiece, which appeared in 1884, is set in the Mississippi River village of St. Petersburg. The son of an alcoholic bum, Huck has just been adopted by a respectable family when his father, in a drunken stupor, threatens to kill him. Fearing for his life, Huck escapes, feigning his own death. The novel also dramatizes Twain's ideal of the harmonious community: "What you want, above all things, on a raft is for everybody to be satisfied and feel right and kind toward the others." Like Melville's ship the Pequod, the raft sinks, and with it that special community. The pure, simple world of the raft is ultimately overwhelmed by progress -- the steamboat -- but the mythic image of the river remains, as vast and changing as life itself. Mark Twain views on once what he had on the river which was romance and beauty was now all gone. Mark Twain helps us by informing us to never see something from only one point of view. Everything has to sides to it. A coin has two sides to it, A story has two sides to it, and the river has two sides to it too. For one the river can be the source of life, may hold beautiful colors, have breath taking scenaries and holds beauty within everyinch of it, but on the other hand the river can lead to a life diaseter by being dangerous and posseing the power to kill passengers on the steam boat. Mark T...