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Visions of Cuba: Mary Peabody Mann's *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago*

Julia C. Paulk

Marquette University, julia.paulk@marquette.edu

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*Foreign Languages and Literatures, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

Mary Peabody Mann began to take the notes for her novel, *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago*, during a visit to Cuba in the 1830s, although the work was not published until the author died in 1887. Censuring the practice of chattel slavery in the Americas by way of a critique of Cuban slavery, *Juanita* describes life on Cuban coffee and sugar plantations in the 1830s and narrates the tragic love story of the Moorish slave, Juanita, and the slave-owner's son, Ludovico. Although the novel was not published early enough to have an impact on the debates over slavery in either the United States or Cuba, where slavery was abolished in 1865 and 1886, respectively, Mann's narrative provides a useful point of entry into the ongoing scholarly exploration of the nature of American and inter-American studies and of nineteenth-century "foundational fictions". *Juanita* has compelling similarities to other antislavery and foundational novels but stands out because the author chose to write about a country other

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than her own native land. Through its creation of a national allegory that idealizes Protestant New England while demonizing colonial Cuba, the novel's expressed desire to condemn the practice of slavery is ultimately compromised by the author's inability to abandon her hierarchical view of the position of the U.S. in the Americas. Out of print until the year 2000, Mann's contribution to nineteenth-century literature has been understudied, and I hope to address that situation by analyzing more notable aspects of the text that have yet to receive sufficient critical attention, particularly the work's function as a national allegory and its relation to other antislavery texts.

I would like to begin by commenting on the current state of U.S. American studies with an eye to later contextualizing *Juanita* within it. In the wake of New Historicism and postcolonial theory, a number of scholars who study literature written in the United States became interested in expanding the definition of what has traditionally been called American studies, meaning the study of literature authored by writers from the United States. In the past, this area of specialization generally focused on literature written in English by authors born or living for long periods in the U.S. In recent decades, however, U.S. American studies scholars have become increasingly more concerned with literature that explores, in a variety of ways, the relationship between the United States and its nearest neighbors.¹ Such studies engage with a number of ideas that suggest that, just as cultural borders are not fixed, U.S. literature is not a national but an international phenomenon in dialogue with multiple cultural and linguistic traditions. These studies demonstrate an increasing desire to question assumptions that have guided U.S. American studies since its Cold War era foundations, particularly with regard to what is called "American exceptionalism" and often express a desire to "decenter" the United States as the primary site of focus in a more internationally-conceived American studies and to question the view that the United States is an essentially homogeneous nation. As Anna Brickhouse puts it, U.S. literary history has long been defined by its critics "as part of a discrete national story rather than an international anthology of conversing and competing contributions" (2). Brickhouse and a number of Americanist scholars have sought to engage with Spanish-language literature produced in the U.S. and in neighboring

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areas in their efforts to demonstrate the dialogic and pluralistic nature of U.S. literary history.

Janice Radway's "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998" in many ways typifies the concerns of scholars of U.S. literature who aim to reconceptualize and expand the purview of U.S. American Studies. Speaking of the history of the American Studies Association, Radway begins by referring to the association's Cold War era founding in 1951.ⁱⁱ One strain of literary practice among the members of the association can thus be considered complicit with imperialist political doctrines of the U.S. government that date from the nineteenth century, such as the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny, yet still held sway in the U.S. after World War II. In other words, such critics have sought to demonstrate U.S. exceptionalism and have promoted a canon of generally white, male authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau, as eminent examples of the "American mind" (Radway 4). At the same time, Radway argues, U.S. American studies also has a long tradition of radical critical practices that question the presentation of the U.S. as a uniform, hegemonic, consensus-led culture (4-5); examples of radical critics include those who explore issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and national identity in literary and cultural production. Given both the long history of critical questioning and the trends of the last several decades to interrogate the notion of borders, the concept of the nation, the construction of identity, and imperialist practices within and beyond the political and geographic borders of the U.S., Radway proposes reconceiving U.S. American studies along more comparative and more broadly conceived lines.

I have referred briefly here to the works of only two scholars of U.S. American literary and culture studies who are representative of those proposing new directions in this area of specialty, although there are a number of other scholars involved in this field. Such works are in many ways thought-provoking, scholarly undertakings that attempt to question assumptions that have guided not only the formation of research agendas, area studies programs, and curriculum development in U.S. universities but also governmental and social policies that have had a real impact within and well beyond the geographic borders of

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the U.S. However, I would like to turn now to the ways in which these developments in U.S. American studies have raised red flags for a number of Latin Americanists and comparatists.ⁱⁱⁱ

To begin with, as Earl E. Fitz declares, a hemispheric American context for the study of literature is not a new development: "An inter-American reconfiguration of literary and cultural study may seem a strange and unsettling new field for some students and scholars in departments of English, it is old (and, because of a history of racism, military intervention, and economic exploitation, sometimes painful) news to Latin Americanists" (Fitz 7). As Sophia A. McClennen further remarks, "This new era, the 'age of multiculturalism', where work is more global in perspective and more contextual in method, is, as I will argue, not new for many Latin Americanists. What is new, though, is the fact that the former margins now occupy a more visibly central space in the field" (McClennen "Comparative Literature" 5). Writers and critics from Latin America have long been aware of U.S. cultural, political, and economic influence in Latin America and vice versa, and this interchange is often reflected in the literary and scholarly works produced by Latin Americans and Latin Americanists. For such writers and scholars, the "New American Studies", with its international and comparative focus, does not necessarily look new.

Not only is this, then, not a new area of inquiry outside of U.S. American studies, but, as Fitz, McClennen, Robert McKee Irwin, Roberto González Echevarría, Doris Sommer, and others argue, at times those undertaking hemispheric American studies have not been fully prepared to do so. Scholars who are not trained in or who have not had extensive contact with Latin American or comparative studies may not know the methodology, literature or literary history, have the language skills, or possess the cultural knowledge required to fully engage with texts authored and produced in languages and cultures other than those of Anglo-America (McClennen 10; Irwin 307).^{iv} As Irwin argues,

[I]t is most urgent that American Studies learn to deal more effectively with the history and culture of the rapidly growing Spanish-speaking population of the USA and with the history of political and cultural relations between the USA and its nearest neighbors, many of which are Spanish-speaking countries [... in

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order to improve] their inevitable incursions into Latin America and their collisions with the Spanish language. (304)

Beyond the study of language, a thorough knowledge of the cultures and history of Latin America are necessary to carry out inter-American studies. For example, Roberto González Echevarría criticizes errors and oversights in the works of influential theorists Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, and Fredric Jameson regarding Latin America and Spain: "It seems to me that boldness of this kind, which I am sure my truly admired friends Ed and Fred would not dare display when dealing with the French or the English, reveals an overseer mentality that is much more that of the colonizer than of the would-be decolonizer" (3). Likewise, Doris Sommer adds, "[Walt] Whitman's embraces also predict the flattering and troubling attention that some American studies teachers are beginning to lavish on Latin American texts. To read texts out of context, in translation, against their apparently original assumptions is, as we know from [Borges' Pierre] Menard's lesson, the inevitable (mis)adventure of reading" ("José Martí" 80-81), although Sommer optimistically adds that even misreadings can be productive.

Additionally, specialists in Latin American literature and culture warn against repeating or reinforcing the hierarchies and tensions that are already in place within Latin American Studies and between scholars residing in Latin America and those living in the U.S.^v Since the institutionalization of Latin American Studies in U.S. universities following the Cuban Revolution, also in a Cold War context, academics residing in the U.S. have dominated the field. These intellectuals have been criticized for failing to engage fully with their counterparts in Latin America and for recreating the same hierarchies that characterize political, economic, and cultural interactions between the U.S. and the countries of Latin America. Irwin cites concerns raised by prominent Latin American scholars, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Nelly Richard, Néstor García Canclini, Julio Ramos, Walter Mignolo, and Alberto Moreiras, related to the unequal balance of power and distribution of resources in the international field of Latin American Studies (308-310). Scholars participating in various fields within the U.S. academy must seek to engage with Latin American studies in ways that are not "blatantly imperialistic", to borrow Irwin's term (311), if they wish to avoid past mistakes.^{vi}

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Mary Peabody Mann's novel, *Juanita*, offers an interesting point of entry into the debate over the internationalization of U.S. American studies because of its content and also the treatment it has received from literary critics. Among the unresolved issues facing scholars who would venture into inter-American studies are the questions of how to define the field and how to approach the literary works. In the introduction to the anthology *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, Gustavo Pérez-Firmat identifies four approaches to the study of New World literature: these are the "generic, genetic, appositional, and mediative" (original emphasis, 3). While these categories overlap, the terms help to identify different ways that scholars have undertaken the study of literature produced in the Americas. In a nutshell, the generic approach intends to define a hemispheric context by relying on "a broad, abstract notion of wide applicability" (3). The genetic studies connections, links, and/or influences shared by authors (3). The appositional approach places works side by side without seeking to establish shared influences yet examining "formal or thematic continuities" (4). The fourth approach, the mediative, focuses on texts that "already embed an inter-American or comparative dimension (4). The study of Mann's *Juanita* particularly benefits from both generic and mediative approaches. As an antislavery novel, *Juanita* joins the ranks of such texts as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (Cuba, 1841), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (US, 1852), and Bernardo Guimarães' *A Escrava Isaura* (Brazil, 1875) in opposing the practice of slavery and in projecting an idealized image of the author's home nation. Written by a woman from New England who takes Cuban slavery as her topic, *Juanita* reveals the ways in which nineteenth-century U.S. Americans typically perceived colonial Cuba and the role of the U.S. in the American hemisphere.

Mary Mann was born Mary Tyler Peabody in 1806 in Salem, Massachusetts. Although the Peabodys struggled financially, their familial and social connections and education allowed Mary and her sisters to form important connections to highly influential participants in the American Renaissance.^{vii} The eldest sister, Elizabeth, was a schoolteacher and bookstore owner who played a key role in the implementation of the kindergarten movement in the US and also

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befriended a number of intellectuals and writers, such as William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, the youngest of the three, was a respected painter in her own right but has been more widely known as the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In addition to her career as a teacher and writer, Mary was married to the politician and education reformer Horace Mann. Because of his political career, Horace Mann was often away from home, and one scholar suggests that this allowed Mary to have greater freedom to carry on her own career as a writer and reformer than she might otherwise have had (Lott 91). In addition to *Juanita*, Mann was also the author and co-author of several educational texts and a biography of her husband, the editor of Sarah Winnemucca's *Life Among the Piutes*, and a translator of *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845), the work of her long-time friend, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento.^{viii}

Mann's novel, *Juanita*, has its origin in a long visit to a plantation in Cuba undertaken by Mary and Sophia from 1833 to 1835 in order to provide a rest cure for the sickly Sophia. To pay for the trip, Mary signed on as the governess for the Morrell family, who were the owners of several plantations: one sugar, one coffee, and one tobacco. The Peabody sisters stayed at the family's coffee plantation, La Recompensa. During this time, Sophia wrote a series of letters home, later collected as *The Cuba Journal*, that was read by family and friends, including Nathaniel Hawthorne.^{ix} Mary also wrote letters and took notes that would later be used to write her novel. Patricia Ard states that much of Mann's novel was completed by 1858 (Ard xvi) but it was not published until the year of Mary Mann's death in 1887 at Elizabeth Peabody's behest. As Elizabeth explains in the afterword to the novel, Mann did not wish to publish while the members of the Morrell family were still alive in order to save them from public embarrassment. While Mann may be open to criticism for not having published sooner, the experiences of other writers demonstrates that openly criticizing slavery in the 1830s in either the U.S. or Cuba was dangerous, and Mann's Cuban hosts could have been subject to arrest or exile if they were seen to be critical of slavery or other colonial practices.

Like so many other nineteenth-century antislavery novels, *Juanita* is ultimately a tragic love story. Told from the perspective of

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Helen Wentworth, a Unitarian from New England who visits her old school friend in Cuba, Mann's novel not only describes life on Cuba's sugar and coffee plantations but also follows the curtailed romance between the Moorish slave, Juanita, and the eldest son of the slave-owning Rodriguez family, Ludovico. The young lovers' story is suggestive of the nineteenth-century national allegories as described by Doris Sommer in her seminal text, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Studying works such as José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851), Jorge Isaacs' *María* (1867), Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841), José de Alencar's *O Guarani* (1857) and *Iracema* (1865), and Manuel de Jesús Galván's *Enriquillo* (1882), Sommer analyzes the ways in which the romances in these novels project a means by which divided nations could come together. In this way, an idealized and often interracial future could be imagined. Like other lovers in nineteenth-century national allegories, Juanita and Ludovico are initially separated by race and class. Their differences suggest those dividing much of the Cuban population during centuries of slavery and colonial rule. Near the conclusion of the novel, Ludovico at last understands that he really loves Juanita, and, to quote Helen Wentworth, finally "conquer[s] the prejudice of caste" (213) by asking Juanita to marry him. Conforming to the model of the "tragic mulatta", Juanita refuses to "ruin" Ludovico's life by marrying him. Rather, she agrees to take care of his child and return with him as a servant to Cuba, where he feels a duty to try to make improvements. Although Juanita is killed prematurely in a fire meant to annihilate rebelling slaves, the union suggested by her love for Ludovico projects a possible future for Cuba.

The obvious difference between this and the foundational fictions Sommer studies is, of course, the national identity of the novel's author and of her protagonist, Helen Wentworth. *Juanita* is narrated from the perspective of a Protestant woman from nineteenth-century Massachusetts. Both Helen and the novel's narrator are utterly convinced of the moral and political superiority of the free states of the northern U.S. over Cuba. The novel almost always uses the term "Spanish" rather than "Cuban" to refer to Cuban society,^x and repeatedly characterizes colonial Cuban society as corrupt and inferior. Speaking of General Miguel Tacón's governorship, the narrator remarks, "[Tacón] had a large standing army at his beck, and

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exercised his despotic power without regard even to the remonstrances of his nobility, which had hitherto been lawless" (Mann *Juanita* 16). To the Protestant narrator, Catholic Cuba appears to be a place without religion: "[L]ike all other religious observances, the vesper prayer ceased at the time when the revolutions in Spain produced anarchy [. . .] in the colonies. The Sunday morning mass would probably have followed, but the custom of going from that to the cock-fight kept up the observance. [. . .] [N]ational religion was at an end" (17).^{xi} Of particular concern to Helen and the narrator are the care of children and attitudes towards marriage. The narrator strongly criticizes the custom of assigning slaves and "negro nurses" to care for children and notes appreciatively that Helen's hostess does not follow that tradition: "The Marchioness had not followed the usual Spanish custom of assigning to each child a little slave to be its servant, so fruitful a source of corruption in a slave community" (51). As for the institution of marriage, the narrator believes it is treated as "a nominal thing" among Cuba's elite classes and that slavery worsens the problem: "[W]here married women are obliged to reconcile themselves to the facts of concubinage, prevalent in all slave communities, and this, of course, even without the excuse or sanction of affection, perverted though it may be, the fountains of all virtue are poisoned" (55). For Helen Wentworth, "all distinction between good and evil seemed to be obliterated" (14) in slaveholding Cuba.

When comparing the Spanish colony to the U.S. in the novel, the latter is without fail found to be superior to the former. Helen Wentworth considers her Massachusetts home to be "in the freest nation of the earth, and in the most advanced portion of that nation" (14). The narrator characterizes Spaniards as lacking in innovation (157), inner resources, and honor (49?). The comparison with the island colony makes the higher character of the US all the more clear: "The general elevation of society in the northern and middle states of America, which allows great freedom to young people, can only be rightly estimated when compared with an opposite state of things, where public morals are so corrupt that no one can be trusted" (127).

The narrator does not forget that slavery was also practiced in the southern states of the U.S. in the 1830s, and that the debate over slavery in the northern country was gaining strength. Helen decides to

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stay in Cuba despite her horror of slavery because her own country is infected by the same "plague-spot" (14); she feels a duty to observe and comment on Cuban slavery in order to critique slavery in her own country (14). In this way, the novel establishes Cuba as a substitute for the southern states of the U.S. and thereby opens the door for a more allegorical reading of the novel. At the same time, however, she also claims that slavery in Cuba is harsher than that practiced in the U.S. When Fanchon, an African-American woman from the U.S., is brought to visit, she is horrified that Cuban slaves have to sleep on a board on the ground: "[M]y own mother was a slave, but she had a bed to sleep on, and here these poor souls have not even that comfort" (100). Near the conclusion of the novel the narrator blames the colonial administration for the terrible nature of Cuban slavery in comparison to the U.S. version: "The confusion created by a succession of rulers each following the policy his own self-interest suggests, gives rise to many evils that are not found in United States slavery" (209). The narrator appears unable to fully equate Cuban with U.S. slavery, thereby weakening the novel's stated goal of opposing chattel slavery in the northern country. Furthermore, Cuba becomes a sliding signifier in the novel, at times representing the problematic South but in other instances representing the morally and politically inferior Latin American other.

I would like to turn briefly now to the treatment that Mann's novel has received in recent literary criticism. I have noted two general trends in the scant attention that the work has received; these tendencies serve as reminders of the concerns raised by Latin Americanists and comparatists when discussing the New American studies. The first is that the critics discussing it have typically failed to engage in a thorough understanding of Cuban antislavery literature, particularly with regard to the developing sense of Cuban identity in that body of works.^{xii} For example, Patricia Ard's introduction to *Juanita* makes an unfortunate comparison between the spoiled, white plantation mistress Carolina Rodriguez and the famous Cuban *mulata* character, Cecilia Valdés, without commenting upon the reception of Cecilia Valdés as the "national novel" of Cuba and its exploration of the effects of racism on a character like Cecilia.^{xiii} An additional tendency in the criticism is the habit of taking the novel's subtitle, "A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago", at face value. That is to say, U.S.

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Americanist critics have underemphasized Mann's perspective as a New Englander predisposed to view a Spanish colony as a den of sin. A notable exception, however, is Rodrigo Lazo's "Against the Cuba Guide: The "Cuba Journal," *Juanita*, and Travel Writing". Lazo reminds us to read both Sophia's journal and Mann's novel "as texts that imagine Cuba" (180) and points out similarities between *Juanita* and nineteenth-century travel guides written by U.S. Americans about Cuba (189-192).^{xiv} More work needs to be done to place *Juanita* in the context of the history of colonial Cuba and of the complex relations between the island and its northern neighbor.

Although she is in a few instances able to admit to the problem of the "plague spot" infesting her own country, including the fact that a number of northerners benefitted financially from slavery, Mann's narrator consistently idealizes institutions in the United States by way of its contrast to the purportedly decadent island colony. Seen as a national allegory projecting an idealized Protestant and democratic way of life in the northern U.S., Cuba not only becomes a substitute for the southern slaveholding states but also helps to define the U.S. by way of its undesirable otherness. In the context of U.S. relations with Cuba in the nineteenth century, *Juanita* reflects beliefs about the northern country's moral and political superiority that have repeatedly been used to justify military and economic domination of Latin American countries. More "romance" than "real life", Mann's antislavery novel imagines the United States for its reader just as it does Cuba.

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Notes

- ⁱ From this point forward, I have inserted "U.S." before "American studies" to indicate that I refer to studies that take the U.S. as their primary focus, even when the intent is to trouble the traditional boundaries of "American studies". Considering that many parts of this hemisphere can be referred to as "America," I do not conceive of U.S. studies and American studies as interchangeable terms.
- ⁱⁱ The group first met in 1951 (Radway 3).
- ⁱⁱⁱ My position on these issues is informed by both my graduate training and current employment. I received a Dual PhD in Comparative Literature and Spanish American Literature and am a faculty member in a foreign language and literature department.
- ^{iv} My investigation into recent inter-American Studies texts authored by scholars who are not thoroughly trained in Spanish and Portuguese languages and cultures bears out these assertions. I have observed in some texts grammar errors, misplaced accents, incorrect translations from Spanish to English, and, at times, a failure to contextualize Latin American works or concepts in their original cultural and/or historic frame. This is certainly not the case for every scholar, but the concerns expressed by McClennen and Irwin should be heeded.
- ^v See, for example, Juan Poblete's *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, for a critical history of Latin American studies and discussion of challenges facing Latin American and Latino Studies.
- ^{vi} Concerns about U.S. academics's interactions with their Latin American research subjects run deep. The angry responses by Guatemalan journalists to David Stoll's controversial investigation of Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* indicate something of the scale of this problem (cite: "We need a North American anthropologist to tell us what our lives are about" "Stoll says hamburgers better than black beans" in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*; add to works cited)
- ^{vii} Biographical information comes from Marshall's biography, Ard's introduction, and Rodier's *Reinventing the Peabody Sisters*.
- ^{viii} Mann translated Facundo into English, although David Haberly writes that Mann relied heavily on the French translation while making her own translation into English (see Haberly, "Reopening Facundo"). See also Barry L. Velleman's *My Dear Sir: Mary Mann's Letters to Sarmiento*.

- ^{ix} *The Cuba Journal* appears to have influenced several of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories (source).
- ^x The term "Spanish" is used most of the time in the novel. Cuba was a Spanish colony until 1898. *Juanita* does not demonstrate the nascent sense of "cubanidad" seen in Cuban antislavery novels.
- ^{xi} This reminds me of Flora Tristan's commentary on the Sunday cockfight in Arequipa.
- ^{xii} Ivan Schulman argues that the first works of what can be considered Cuban national literature are the antislavery works of the nineteenth century (need source)
- ^{xiii} Cecilia's race and class position make her quite different from Carolina. Cecilia is not "marriage material" for Leonardo but becomes his mistress instead. A more apt comparison would be between Juanita and Sab, who is described by Gómez de Avellaneda's narrator as being "typically Cuban". The title of Villaverde's novel is unfortunately misspelled several times in Ard's introduction.
- ^{xiv} Lazo mentions a number of elements that are shared by travel literature about Cuba and Mann's novel: "the association of Spaniards or Creoles with pleasure, a distancing of the New England countryside from Cuba, discussions of cockfighting, brief thoughts on government, and an analysis of annexation" (Lazo 189).