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Racial Violence and Visual Media in *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*

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**ABSTRACT:** What is the relationship between visuality, racial violence, and political hegemony in Cuba? In *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* (1974), Guillermo Cabrera Infante tries to answer this question by focusing on visual media and its manipulation over half a millennium. My analysis of the novel as a parody of a Latin American *álbum de vistas*—a book with idealized etchings, engravings, maps, and/or photos of places and people—uncovers the connection of engravings and photography to Cuba’s racialized political projects. *Vista del amanecer* underscores continuities in racist ideologies and policies that undermine indigenous people and Afro-Cubans, despite revolutions and changes in political configurations. My thematic and structural study of the novel’s engagement with engravings and photographs demonstrates how Cabrera Infante criticizes state actors who promote race-based violence through the production and dissemination of those two distinct media.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, Race, Cuba, Visual Studies, Photography, Engravings

What is the relationship between visuality, racial violence, and political hegemony in Cuba? In *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* (1974), Guillermo Cabrera Infante tries to answer this question by focusing on visual media and its manipulation over half a millennium. My analysis of the novel as a parody of a Latin American *álbum de vistas*—a book with idealized etchings, engravings, maps, and/or photos of places and people—uncovers the connection of engravings and photography to Cuba’s racialized political projects. *Vista del amanecer* underscores continuities in racist ideologies and policies that undermine indigenous people and Afro-Cubans, despite revolutions and changes in political configurations. My thematic and structural study of the novel’s engagement with engravings and photographs demonstrates how Cabrera Infante criticizes state actors who promote race-based violence through the production and dissemination of those two distinct media.

Cabrera Infante published *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* in 1974, with Seix Barral in Spain, while in exile. By the time of publication, his relationship with, and optimism towards, the revolutionary government had soured, the likely reason *Vista del amanecer* is so often studied as a condemnation of the Cuban Revolution. The book consists of 101 vignettes, and many are concerned with visual technologies of representation like engravings and photography. While some vignettes employ ekphrasis and claim to describe engravings or photographs, others unpack themes related to each visual medium through story lines shaped by that medium. Cabrera Infante’s political project and attention to visual media thus determine the book’s form.

As a filmmaker who worked on scripts such as *Wonderwall* (1967) and *Vanishing Point* (1971), Cabrera Infante had the capacity to produce a photographic album or film about visual media and race in Cuba. In fact, a short film he co-directed, *P.M.* (1961), deals with similar topics. Yet, his choice to create an ekphrastic parody of an *álbum de vistas* reveals a concern with the limits of photography and film and their inadequacies as representational media to produce art objects critical of those visual media. *Vista del amanecer* values writing over visual representations and echoes Cabrera Infante’s work as a novelist, film critic, and experimental poet who uses textual projects to reflect on visuality.

About half of the vignettes in *Vista del amanecer* are interpretations of images and texts from Fernando Portuondo’s *Historia de Cuba* (1964), a seminal history book used for many decades in Cuban high schools (Ghezzani 71). In this article, I analyze why Cabrera Infante chose those specific images to represent moments in a timeline of Cuban history. Most importantly, I explore how his textual descriptions of images emphasize the connection between race and visual media manipulation, a topic that has gone unnoticed in many other studies of the novel. This approach situates it within a broader corpus of Latin American experiments about race and visual media from the sixties and seventies, like Beatriz González’s drawings of journalistic photographs and Nelson Perreira dos Santos’ film *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (1971). In fact, as I demonstrate later in the article, Cabrera Infante and Perreira dos Santos pull from the same imperial visual archive and parody similar topics like nudity.

Despite *Vista del amanecer*’s chronological orientation, names and dates are omitted, which produces two distinct categories of readers. For those familiar with Cuban or Latin American history, it is not difficult to identify many characters and events, including Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and even to recognize
some of the images described (Castañeda 142; Ghezzani 71). For others, the book may resonate as a broader representation of Latin American or Global South history. While never mentioned by name, the easily identifiable Cuban revolution has drawn critical attention away from the larger historical debate about visual media and hegemony in Cuba in the novel. *Vista del amanecer* has often been read either for its formal photographic features (Kutasy), through photography’s relationship to the Cuban revolution (Venegas), or more broadly as a text about Cuba’s violent history and those left out of historical narratives (Alvarez Borland; Castañeda; Chacon; Ghezzani; Montenegro).

My investigation of *Vista del amanecer* as a parody of an álbum de vistas expands these studies by analyzing the text from a blended perspective that recognizes the interplay between visuality and historical violence as principal themes contributing to its form. This approach shines light on how racism and racial violence are discussed in the book. By analyzing the role of visuality in the novel, I identify a central argument about how political elites have used visual media to construct racial imaginaries and justify racial violence in Cuba. Further, this article’s section on photography offers new insights in an area which has already received some critical interest by analyzing Cabrera Infante’s criticism of the medium of photography through his conceit of a camera as a weapon. This approach uncovers a shrewd criticism of Cuban Revolutionary racial policies and suggests a continuity in racial violence from colonial times to the post-revolution.

Álbum de vistas and form

*Vista del amanecer* parodies a Latin American álbum de vistas, on which the title is based. The álbum de vistas began to gain popularity in the nineteenth century, before the invention of photography, but has roots in imperial travel books and illustrations dating back to the sixteenth century, which many vignettes in *Vista del amanecer* reference. It typically included panoramas of natural environments and images of people, monuments, maps, and cities accompanied by captions and articles that reinforced the album’s picturesque qualities and the perspective of the traveler’s eye. Sixteenth through nineteenth-century albums contained wood-cut etchings, copper engravings, and lithographs, while photographs were only more widely introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century. *Vista del amanecer*’s structure and content unpack controversies about the maps, engravings, and photographs that might appear in an álbum de vistas. White space surrounds the vignettes in the book, much like the layout of images in an album. From this perspective, the book engages with visual media on a macro level, where letters and words serve a visual function beyond their semantic one. Many vignettes are also ekphrastic descriptions of engravings and photographs or detail situations in which those visual media are crucial to plot constructions and character development.

*Vista del amanecer* is sometimes understood as reflecting the “layout of a picture book” or parodying a photo album (Venegas 119). This characterization gives more weight to the book’s second half, where photography displaces engraving as the visual medium that Cabrera Infante textually investigates. Photography is still an important part of Cabrera Infante’s literary project, especially with how it relates to Cuba’s post-revolutionary government and his own political exile. However, his book offers a much broader criticism of Latin American and Cuban political hegemony rooted in practices of visual manipulation and oppression, which his parodying of an álbum de vistas illustrates. *Vista del amanecer* constructs a genealogy of visual culture—and its violent dimension—through vignettes that chronologically move from descriptions of colonial maps and engravings to more contemporary photographs and film. The medium of visual reproduction changes but the political hegemony it supports is consistent. Through this broad, chronological analysis, I identify new topics like racial violence and its relationship to visual media.

Cabrera Infante’s choice to explore the álbum de vistas is pointed and political, despite receiving little critical attention. The álbum de vistas is a complex visual-textual form that served various political functions. European, and later North American, colonizers and travelers produced often-exoticized albums with images of people and places in Latin America and sold them through a blended market of touristic curiosities and imperial exploration. The production and circulation of the álbum de vistas strongly shaped the ways in which global empires with stakes in Latin America understood and debated topics such as race and extractivism (Stepan 29). A vignette in *Vista del amanecer*, based on a sixteenth century Theodore de Bry engraving, is one of many examples that points to the racialized dimension of imperial visual production that has continental resonances. Latin American governments later also funded their own drawing and photographic expeditions in conjunction with mapping, scientific, racial, and territorial exploration campaigns (Andermann 130, Cortés-Rocca 139). Images of landscapes and social groups became tools for nation building that considered race relations (Ortega 143). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these Latin American albums, now populated at least partially with photographs, informed national biopolitical policies, such as indigenous extermination campaigns, across the continent (Cortés-Rocca 139-158). The racial dimension of the álbum de vistas is not lost on Cabrera Infante, but in fact is one of the book’s primary themes.

Violence is another central theme in the book. Many vignettes depict visual media like photography as deadly, and gory textual descriptions are commonplace. This overarching violence should be read in relation to the book’s form as a textual interpretation of an álbum de vistas, which, as noted above, is closely associated with hegemonic political projects and race. Almost every vignette, which I interpret as an entry in an álbum de vistas, is deeply violent. The overall effect is a parody of a multi-media album where death and violence are the throughlines. Unlike the idealized images of an im-
Engraving’s caption. Without the caption, the scene itself could ironically portrays scenes of violence and decay. This approach reveals that *Vista del amanecer* is specifically concerned with the engagement between visual media of reproduction, such as photography and engravings, and governmental violence. My analysis builds on studies of *Vista del amanecer* that focus on the violent history of Cuba in the broadest sense or the violence in the daily lives of Cubans by also considering how form and structure connect to the literary content (Castañeda; Ghezzani).

**Engravings and racial imaginaries**

Many vignettes in the book employ ekphrasis and claim to describe visual media such as etchings, engravings, photographs, and maps. While there are no dates in the book, the way Cabrera Infante moves chronologically from etchings to photographs constructs a genealogy of visual media and their links to hegemonic politics. Engravings, from early in the book, are situated within the colonial period and deal with topics such as slavery, indigeneity, racism, and the manipulation of visual media. This section considers these vignettes more granularly, while remaining attentive to their role in the book’s broader criticism of how European and Latin American political elites have historically used visual media to promote race-based violence. Ultimately, the vignettes about engravings from early in the book set the stage for later analyses about photography by explicitly discussing the construction of racial imaginaries in Cuba. They offer cues for reading later vignettes in which the theme of racial violence is less overt.

One vignette from early in the book describes an engraving in which a fugitive slave is attacked by bloodhounds sent by his slaveowners. The entry before it explains how slaveowners across the Americas used Cuban hounds, as they came to be known in the United States, to track down and discipline fugitives. This vignette then depicts a violent scene where Cuban hounds find the fugitive slave at his camp. It reads:

> En el grabado se ve a un esclavo fugitivo, arrinconado por dos sabuesos. Sus ropas raídas y descalzo, el cimarrón, perros no media más que sus mandobles surcando el aire. En medio del grabado se ve una cazuela y un fuego apagado. Hay también un sombrero de guano, yarey o paja del país. Entre el fugitivo y los perros no media más que sus mandobles surcando el aire. El pie del grabado dice: “El cimarrón, sorprendido por los perros, se defiende de ellos como fiera acosada” (Cabrera Infante 23).

The vignette’s importance to the criticism of visual media’s hegemony in the book is rooted in its last sentence, a description of the engraving’s caption. Without the caption, the scene itself could almost garner sympathy for the fugitive slave, the *cimarrón*, for it represents someone trying to set up a new life without direct hostility towards slaveowners or their plantations. The fugitive with worn out clothes has a stewpan over an extinguished fire and he holds a machete, tools necessary to survive outside of the plantation. He defends himself and his new home from the aggressive bloodhounds.

The caption, however, creates the opposite effect by comparing the fugitive slave to a harassed beast. It animalizes and thus dehumanizes the slave through a process in which the image itself gains meaning from its caption. The textual manipulation of the visual medium is politically motivated, racially inclined, and works beyond the image itself. The engraving and caption together represent a criticism of how colonial authorities in Cuba used visual media such as engravings and etchings to construct negative images of blackness while supporting an economy based on the violence and exploitation of slaves. The description of this engraving uses differences between the image, as portrayed verbally in the vignette, and the caption to highlight the book’s broader theme of visual media and their hegemonic uses towards racialized goals.

In Cuba, the threat of *cimarronaje* represented a threat to the institution of slavery itself, especially in the wake of the Haitian Revolution and the foundation of an independent nation of former slaves that would grant citizenship to runaway slaves from other colonies. Sibylle Fischer proposes that in Cuba, a contradictory message attempted to uphold the slave system: the slave “is at once submissive and a deadly threat, at once unthinking and forever plotting” (111). The vignette represents this very notion through a runaway slave who is depicted as dangerous, plotting, and yet also unthinking. He is dangerous and plotting by wielding a machete, fighting off a vicious hound, and building a home outside of the slave economy. However, his portrayal as unintelligent is rooted in his comparison to a wild animal who lacks the consciousness to understand his actions. The vignette criticizes how elites in Cuba used engravings to shape complicated conceptions of blackness, slavery, and *cimarronaje*.

This engraving also points to a colonial surveillance apparatus, constructed around race-based ideas, that precedes photography. It can be read as a warning to other runaway slaves. The engraving suggests that, like the runaway slave represented, others also risk being caught, attacked, and publicly humiliated, both through violent bloodhound surveillance and degrading visual representations and captions. By including this vignette in his broader parody of the *álbum de vistas*, Cabrera Infante condemns the colonial government’s use of engravings as a visual medium through which to instill fear, promote violence, and construct and reproduce racist tropes.

Another vignette describes an engraving of the execution of an indigenous chief, Hatuey, who is burned at the stake as part of an attempted conversion ritual. From one side of the engraving, armed conquistadors watch while in the background a conquistador army on horseback chases a group of semi-naked indigenous people who
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try to escape. This vignette portrays a sixteenth century engraving made by the Flemish publisher, typographer, and engraver Tho-
dore de Bry that appeared in a German edition of Bartolomé de las
Casas’ *Brevisíssima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. However,
as Ghezzani notes, Cabrera Infante likely found the image in Portu-
ondo’s *Historia de Cuba* (78).

The choice to use a de Bry engraving is telling, for during the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his engravings were some of
the first images of indigenous Americans to reach Europe. Thus,
copper engravings like the one Cabrera Infante references strongly
shaped European ideas of indigeneity. In fact, another set of de Bry’s
engravings about Brazil reinforced myths about indigenous canni-
balism and also impacted European perception of indigeneity. Like
in *Vista del amanecer*, in Brazil in the 60s and 70s critical parodies
and revisions of those images emerged, such as Nelson Pereira dos
Santos’ movie *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (1971). While the
specific engraving on which Cabrera Infante chose to write a vignette
is about Cuba, his decision to pull from an archive of colonial travel
engravings that depicted many parts of the continent—and to criti-
cize the exoticized depiction of indigenous Americans in it—points
to a broader argument about racial violence and visual media across
Latin America. Like in other vignettes, including the one about the
fugitive slave, Cabrera Infante underscores topics with continental
relevance.

By mentioning the “india semidesnuda” in the engraving,
Cabrera Infante emphasizes the manipulation of images and the
misrepresentation of indigenous groups in the sixteenth century
(15). Michiel Van Groesen explains:

> If adding elements to the original compositions was a
regular trait of the De Bry collection, so was the oppo-
site. Nowhere does the omission of iconographic details
become more obvious than for the topic of clothing. The
publishers regularly suggested nakedness when the origi-
nal narratives provided no such insinuation (195).

Many early modern Europeans considered public nudity a sign of
barbarism and wildness or sexual immorality (Groesen 198). When
the vignette accentuates the seminude representation of an indig-
igenous group, it underscores the racialized moral insinuations that
visually manipulated engravings produce and the political violence
that emerges from them, represented by the conquistadors on
horseback. This engraving thus level a broad criticism against co-
lonial governments who used moral and religious justifications to
support their violent voyages, just like Perreira do Santos’ film. Cru-
cially, it does so by deconstructing the ways illustrators and their
engravings created these race-based stereotypes.

The last sentence of the vignette of Chief Hatuey’s execution
connects the colonial engraving, imbued with violence, to contem-
porary visual representations on beer bottle labels. It reads, “el indio
elevó su alta cabeza de cacique, el largo pelo negro grasiento
atado detrás de las orejas, su perfil aguilino todavía visible en las
etiquetas de las botellas de cerveza que llevan su nombre” (Cabrera
Infante 16). This movement from past to present underscores the
significant impact that visual media such as engravings have played
in constructing racial imaginaries in Cuba. While colonizers essen-
tially exterminated indigenous groups from the island, the images
of indigenous people still promote an authenticity rooted in racial-
ized violence. De Bry’s illustrations helped construct a narrative
in which Spanish conquistadors were aligned with evil and indigenous
people with innocence and good, sometimes known as the Black
Legend. However, the engravings also linked indigenous victim-
hood with fragility and helplessness, which, as Karen-Margrethe
Simonsen argues, produced a voyeuristic pleasure for European
audiences (35). That pleasure persists in beer bottle labels of the
celebrated but exoticized indigenous chief. It is thus crucial to read
this vignette through a lens of visual political hegemony, and in re-
lation to other representations of racial violence produced by, and
reproduced in, distinct visual media such as engravings and photog-
raphy. In this case, an engraving that seemingly denounces Spanish
colonial violence instead becomes a meditation on representational
violence of indigenous Americans when the piece about beer bottle
labels is added. The vignette contributes to Cabrera Infante’s broad
criticism of historic visual hegemonic practices that span half a mil-
lennium.

A third vignette describes an engraving in which a group of
slaves is transported while receiving disciplinary whips. They are
barefoot and restrained by wooden cuffs. Like with many of the
vignettes in the book, the last sentence provides the key through
which to read it: “Detrás del grupo se puede ver una palmera y vari-
os bananeros que dan al resto del grabado una nota exótica, casi
bucólica” (Cabrera Infante 31). The palm and banana trees draw
attention away from the violent aspects of the scene and instead
emphasize the pleasantness of the natural environment, which
the term bucolic suggests. Like with the de Bry engraving, racial
violence in this vignette also produces a voyeuristic pleasure for a
European audience and thereby distracts from the abusive scene.
Instead of focusing on the whipping and herding of slaves, Cabrera
Infante highlights the aspects of the engraving that might desensi-
tize a foreign viewer to the violent institution of slavery.

His choice to emphasize the palm tree directly references a
way that illustrators manipulated engravings to create picturesque
and exoticized images of the Americas. As Richard Kagan explains,
starting in the seventeenth century, Dutch illustrators included
palm trees in engravings in order to “market” America to Europe
at large in a more exotic way (ch. 4). Sometimes, publishers even
added illustrations of palm trees to images that had already been
printed, such as John Ogilby’s engravings of Cuzco and Potosí in
*America* (London 1671) (Kagan ch. 4). Potosí’s ecology did not sup-
pport palm trees, but Ogilby saw representations of them in Frans
Post’s drawings of Brazil and decided to include them to make Po-
tosi seem more tropical and exotic, and thus more appealing to an
audience curious about geographic novelties and their extractive potential (Kagan ch. 4). In fact, the title Vista del amanecer en el trópico emphasizes that very exotification of tropical climates by referencing the tropics, as opposed to Cuba, the Caribbean, or Latin America. The title thus suggests that the book is concerned with how outsiders—namely Europeans and North Americans—manipulate, sell, and construct images of Latin America. The palm tree reference further underscores the easy manipulation of visual media like engravings and the more abstract violence it produces when it collides with racial representations.

Photographic violence

This section focuses on the frequency with which Cabrera Infante symbolically alludes to photographic violence by comparing cameras to weapons. While critics have elaborated on the violent and gory textual descriptions in Vista del amanecer, they have overlooked this aspect of the text. Like with Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and other photographic theorists of the 1960s and 70s, the camera-as-weapon metaphor for Cabrera Infante serves as a criticism of photography as both a visual medium of limited veridical representation and as a technology closely linked with government-backed violence. The connection between violence and photography in Vista del amanecer reveals that Cabrera Infante’s project focuses specifically on the ways in which visual media become tools of oppression and hegemony, a perspective with both a theoretical and political dimension. It goes beyond criticizing everyday violence in Cuba, as Ghezzi argues, or “a complete view of the violent history of the island of Cuba,” as Castañeda suggests (142).

On one level, Cabrera Infante’s concern with photography is rooted in the political moment in which he worked and can be read against the backdrop of post-revolutionary Cuba’s cultural policies. As José Luis Venegas notes, during and after the Cuban revolution, the photographic image epitomized “the socialist goal to make art represent reality truthfully” (109). He elaborates that “socialist realism, the aesthetic norm of post-revolutionary Cuba, finds in the transparency of photographic reproduction the prevalence of matter over form (or denotation over connotation) that it demands from other modes of representation” (109). Thus, a project like Vista del amanecer threatens the post-revolutionary government’s cultural program by destabilizing the notion that photography, as a medium, is capable of representing reality. Instead, a portion of the book is constructed around photographic distortions in which the supposedly ekphrastic descriptions of photos emphasize what the photos did not manage to capture. This approach thereby delineates the limitations of photography as a documentary tool, in direct confrontation with Cuba’s official post-revolutionary cultural policies surrounding photography.

Theoretical discussions of photographic violence often hinge on a criticism of the medium’s inability to capture and represent reality. Cabrera Infante, in an interview with Isabel Alvarez Borland about his artistic use of photography in Vista del amanecer, underscores this very issue. He says, “la misma fotografía que parece captar la realidad verazmente crea por medio de luces y sombras una apariencia, una irrealidad, una imagen. Trató de imitar esa condición de la fotografía” (qtd. in Alvarez Borland 33). A fundamental way in which he tries to sever the bond between photography and representations of reality is through an overarching metaphor that a camera is a weapon. His approach aligns with other visual theorists of the time, like Barthes and Sontag, and later critics like Eduardo Cadava, Natalia Brizuela, and Jodi Roberts, who all draw connections between photographic cameras and weapons, violence, or death in order to question the medium’s reputation as a realistic or documentary form of representation.

Barthes, for example, proposes a theory of photographic violence in Camera Lucida that argues that photographers who travel the world are agents of death, pulling the camera’s trigger that so closely resembles that of the gun (92). He identifies a violence inherent in the process of taking a photo, which Cadava echoes in Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History (11). They both argue that snapshots kill the subjects of photos by converting their dynamic lives into simple instants of light imprinted on film. Barthes further proposes that “death is the eidos of the photograph” and elaborates, reflecting on his own experience as a photographer, “what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the intention according to which I look at it) is death” (19). For Sontag, like Barthes and Cadava, taking a picture also amounts to a form of theoretical murder because “it turns people into objects,” and thus takes away their lives (10).

By identifying and analyzing the moments that conflate cameras and weapons in Vista del amanecer, I uncover a new, subtle criticism of post-revolutionary Cuba’s cultural policies linked to photographic realism and totalitarianism. I also analyze the relationship between photography and racial representations in twentieth-century Cuba. In one vignette where a camera becomes a weapon, Cabrera Infante depicts a group of Jamaican and Haitian agricultural laborers trying to resolve a strike with their boss. The text explains:

Todo pareció ir de lo mejor y el hacendado propuso hacer una foto del grupo para conmemorar el acuerdo. Los delegados haitianos y jamaicanos se colocaron en fila en frente de la máquina, cubierta con una tela negra. El hacendado salió del grupo para dar una orden a su mayoral. El mayoral destapó la máquina y tranquilamente fusiló con la ametralladora al grupo de delegados. No hubo más quejas de los cortadores de caña en esa zafra y en muchas más por venir (Cabrera Infante 95).

This vignette’s porous language creates a play on words in which the photographic camera and the machine gun merge. The word “máquina” refers to both the gun and the camera, or perhaps an Infantian hybrid of the two. The black fabric covering the machine...
also serves a dual function. On the one hand, it covers the camera to filter out extra light, thereby giving the impression that it will produce a better photograph through the process of chemically inscribing light onto film. On the other hand, the black fabric's darker function is to conceal what lies beneath it, a machine gun preparing to murder the striking laborers. The play with light and darkness directly captures Cabrera Infante's approach to decoupling reality from photography that he mentions in the interview with Alvarez Borland.

The vignette also has a strong racial component and symbolic resonances because the foreman uses the camera-machine gun hybrid to murder Afro-Caribbean workers on strike. As Deborah Poole explains:

> By the beginning of the 20th century, rural indigenous families, Afro-Latino peasants, new immigrant workers, miners, union leaders, anarchists, maids, and street vendors were posing for their own portraits. As a counterpoint to this popular embrace of photography as a democratizing technology, Latin American states were quick to embrace the camera as a tool through which they could further deepen their surveillance of the bandits, criminals, vagrants, itinerant vendors, miners, union leaders, and unruly African and indigenous subjects who dared to challenge official, state-driven ideologies of capitalist economic growth and cultural homogeneity.

The weapon-camera is a metaphor for the violence photography posed towards Afro-Latin Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in the early twentieth century, around the time when the vignette is situated. More specifically, it illustrates how increased access to photography and portraiture also resulted in state surveillance apparatuses that upheld racial hierarchies and targeted protesting immigrant workers who risked destabilizing the economic systems in place. Cabrera Infante's vignette specifically references the increase in immigrant workers from Haiti and Jamaica caused by the sugar industry's boom in the 1920s, which led to strong racist and antiblack discourses propagated by the regimes of Gerardo Machado y Morales and Ramón Grau San Martín (Carr 83-4).

While the black laborers in the vignette think that they are participating in a celebratory portrait and engaging with an increasingly available technology, they instead suffer an attack of race-based violence that reveals little change in racialized societal hierarchies. This vignette also links social movements and labor rights to race and visual media. It illustrates how photography served as an important tool to reinforce racial oppression by the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus, when read in relation to the earlier engravings about slavery, this vignette suggests a continuation in economic systems from slavery to state-driven capitalist projects. It uses the medium of photography to demonstrate similarities in racist discourses between Cuba's republican and colonial governments.

Another vignette in which a camera is depicted as a weapon is an ekphrastic description of a photograph of a bloody battle scene littered with cadavers. Amidst the bodies, there is "un objeto que está cerca—una granada, el casquillo de una bala de cañón de alto calibre, ¿una cámara de cine? —se ve negro, como un hueco en la foto" (Cabrera Infante 133). While this vignette does not have the same gun-camera wordplay as the one above, the object of focus is still undefined and inhabits a similarly ambiguous space between weapon and camera. That the object could be a grenade, the shell of a high caliber canon, or a video camera suggests an equivalence, where all three objects share an intrinsic violence.

This vignette, like the earlier one describing the execution of the striking laborers, plays with the relationship between photography and light. Light represents the unique indexicality of cameras and their capacity to inscribe it onto film. Yet, darkness goes hand in hand with the light, a necessity for revealing film, but also symbolically an indication of the violence the camera produces in its supposed indexicality that falsely represents reality. Cabrera Infante, like in the vignette about the Haitian and Jamaican laborers, underscores darkness and light to emphasize the processes through which photographs are taken and revealed. By drawing attention to photography as a mechanical process that depends on—and manipulates—light to inscribe an image onto film, both vignettes essentially reveal a crucial way in which photographs do not represent reality, but only limited reflections of light. Alvarez Borland astutely notes how combinations of light and shadow in the vignette above make "a parallel between truth and perception" (35). I expand on this analysis by also bringing in a political dimension. By questioning photography's ability to capture and represent reality, Cabrera Infante also questions, as noted earlier, Cuba's post-revolutionary cultural policies that promote photographic realism.

Crucially, both vignettes point to photography's inability to depict reality by underscoring an essence of doubt linked to the camera. The undefined nature of the camera, as a machine gun in the first vignette and a grenade or bullet shell in the second, produces a general narratorial uncertainty within the text rooted in photographic practices. Unlike for Cuba's post-revolutionary government, for whom the camera served as a metaphor for a totalizing government by capturing and "leaving no room for the formation of alternative versions of reality," in Cabrera Infante's book the camera deconstructs ideals of totalization and certainty (Venegas 110). Alternative versions of reality are built into the undefined camera—weapon and the darkness that often conceals it.

The intersection of race, violence, and visuality is fundamental to the book's message, for it suggests that visual media are not only theoretical technologies of analysis, but also objects that strongly impact politics. While earlier elaborations of photography are clearly linked to racial violence, in the vignettes that deal with the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, discussions of race seem to disappear in the novel. This racial invisibility is part of a broader criticism of how Castro engaged with questions of race in post-revolutionary
Cuba. On the one hand, he “went great lengths to accommodate racial difference within a Marxist discourse and represent Afro-Cuban culture and politics as an integral part of the national revolutionary consciousness” (Venegas 121). On the other, Richard Gott identifies a continuity in racial thought in Cuba which the Revolution only masked. Black Cubans continued to pose a threat to the ideological unity and “the revolution remained as hostile to black separatism as the white government of the early years of the century had been” (qtd. in Venegas 121).

The apparent lack of a discussion of race in the sections about the Revolution is an Infantian misdirection when read in the broader context of the book as a parody of an álbum de vistas and as a meditation on visual media and hegemony. The topic of racial violence rooted in visual technologies begins with engravings and etchings, like the ones of the fugitive slave and Chief Hatuey, and moves to photography in the early twentieth century, during Cuba’s Republican period, with the vignette about the Haitian and Jamaican laborers. It’s a sudden dissipation later in the book mimics, and criticizes, the Cuban Revolution for purportedly improving racial dynamics while just below the surface reproducing similarities to previous centuries. A focus on visual media permits this novel analysis about racial violence.

To conclude, my analysis of Vista del amanecer as a parody of an álbum de vistas reveals the similarities between engravings and photography as tools of elite hegemony. Yet I also underscore the novel’s argument that distinct visual media promoted racial violence at different periods of Cuban history. The persistent racism the book depicts through engravings and photography up until the Cuban Revolution, and then its sudden disappearance, are part of a subtle strategy to criticize the Revolution’s treatment of Afro-Cubans while linking its policies to earlier periods. Ultimately, this analysis of the role visual media play in promoting oppression and violence in Cuba demonstrates Cabrera Infante’s highly critical position towards the way elites construct and disseminate historical narratives using visual tools, dating back to the colonial period.

WORKS CITED


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