little-known documents

# Notes on the Trip to the Great Savannah

ALEJO CARPENTIER

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY CHARLOTTE ROGERS

## Introduction

IN JULY 1947, THE CUBAN AUTHOR ALEJO CARPENTIER TRAVELED FROM HIS HOME IN CARACAS TO THE SPARSELY INHABITED INTERIOR OF VENEzuela, visiting the country's tropical forests and its great plains. At the time, Carpentier was known principally as a music critic and newspaper columnist for *El Nacional* in Venezuela and *Carteles* in Cuba; he had yet to publish *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*; 1949), which would launch his career as a novelist and earn him international renown. Carpentier later wrote a novel about a trip much like the one he took in 1947. In the now-canonical *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*; 1953), a failed composer finds inspiration by traveling from a cosmopolitan city to the tropical forests of South America. Carpentier's creativity was similarly sparked by his trip to the Venezuelan wilderness, as his travel diary *Notas del viaje a la Gran Sabana* (*Notes on the Trip to the Great Savannah*) makes clear. *Notas* is the only contemporary account of the journey written by Carpentier, who later made contradictory statements about the details and even the number of trips he took.[1] Beyond its documentary value, the travel diary reveals that Carpentier's experience was deeply enmeshed with his readings, a characteristic that also marks the narrator-protagonist of *Los pasos perdidos*. Moreover, *Notas* is of broad ecocritical and historical significance because it makes clear the extent to which the forests and plains of South America were changing during Venezuela's boom in oil drilling and gold mining in the 1940s. Inspired by what he witnessed in Venezuela, Carpentier created the central drama of *Los pasos perdidos* out of his protagonist's desire to inhabit what the author called the "mundo del Génesis" ("world of Genesis") at a time when extractive industries were rapidly transforming the economies, ecologies, and societies of the region ("La Gran Sabana" 32).

*Notas* allows us to trace Carpentier's journey with remarkable precision; the diary is divided into increments, some as brief as ten minutes, and provides meticulous details about his activities, interlocutors, and readings.[2] The diary describes Carpentier's first sightings of the Orinoco River, the dense tropical forest, the tabletop summit of Mount Roraima, and the massive rock formations of the Great Savannah. More than just a catalog of places and names, however, the travel diary sheds light on the author's intertextual ar-

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tistic process: Carpentier transcribed passages from books he was reading during the trip, all of which deal with historical and fictional travelers in the South American tropics. These books include Voltaire's *Candide*, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and the Venezuelan author Rómulo Gallegos's jungle novel *Canaima*. The travel diary also reveals an interest in the absence of a uniform style in Latin American architecture, which Carpentier would later identify as the region's principal aesthetic trait.

Carpentier returns several times in *Notas* to El Dorado, the legendary city of gold thought to lie in the South American wilderness. El Dorado is emblematic of the many places inaccessible by car that Carpentier fantasized could now be reached thanks to the expansion of air travel in South America in the 1940s: as he flew over the jungle he wrote, "Estamos entrando en Eldorado" ("We are entering El Dorado"; *Notas* [typescript]). This vision fired Carpentier's imagination: in *Los pasos perdidos*, the author draws a parallel between the colonial-era seekers of El Dorado and the contemporary gold miners who were settling the Great Savannah. As *Notas* shows, Carpentier interviewed a former gold miner named Lucás Fernández Peña, who had founded the town of Santa Elena de Uairén several years earlier. Santa Elena de Uairén became the model for the town of Santa Mónica de los Venados in *Los pasos perdidos*.

What Carpentier did not find in his readings was the landscape of massive oil fields that he saw on his flight to the Great Savannah. Oil drilling had begun in what is known as the Orinoco Oil Belt in 1936, contributing to the petroleum boom that revolutionized Venezuela's economy, environment, and society in the 1940s and 1950s. Looking through the window of the plane, Carpentier was aesthetically inspired by the sight of gases escaping from the oil rigs, calling them "un ballet de gigantescos fuegos fatuos" ("a ballet of gigantic fatuous fires"; *Notas* [typescript]). He would later expand on this image in *Los pasos perdidos*, dedicating an entire page to describing a "vasto bailar de llamaradas" ("vast dancing of flames"; 166) near the rigs. This first lyrical description of the oil wells in the diary would be recast in the novel as an ominous passage depicting an extractive economy that threatens to destroy the protagonist's wilderness idyll.

*Notas* shows an author and an environment in transition. *Los pasos perdidos* would soon reflect the shifts in the physical landscape and in Carpentier's literary vision of the American tropics, from the world of Genesis to an industrial waypoint in the global flow of peoples and raw materials. *Notas* is the origin of Carpentier's elegiac evocation of the grandeur of the continent's landscape as it changes before his eyes.

## Notes

I thank the Fundación Alejo Carpentier in Havana for permission to reproduce *Notas*, which I discovered in the author's personal library there in March 2016.

1. Until now, the details of Carpentier's travel in the Venezuelan interior in 1947 have been difficult to ascertain. In correspondence, Carpentier mentions two trips in 1947 and 1948 (González Echevarría, *Cartas* 55–57), while Acosta argues that there was a total of three trips (128). For more on the conflicting reports on Carpentier's travels, see González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier* 170–71.

2. The diary has two parts: the first is a handwritten document composed on sheets of paper folded to form a seventeen-page notebook. This manuscript details the events of 12 and 13 July 1947. The second part is a typescript version of the diary that covers only 12 July, but it presents and expands on some of the information in the manuscript using lyrical literary language. The fact that the typescript does not reproduce the manuscript completely leads me to believe that it once included additional pages that have since been lost. That Carpentier calls the typed version of the diary an "aide mémoire" (*Notas* [typescript]) indicates he intended it as a record of the journey that he could use in later projects.

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NOTAS DEL VIAJE A LA GRAN SABANA.
(aide-memoire).

Sabado 12 de Julio.

7 y 30 - Despegue en La Carlota. Tiempo nublado. Techo bajo.

8 —— Estamos volando sobre Barlovento. A la izquierda: la Laguna de Tacarigua.

8 y 35 —— Volamos sobre Anzoategui ——mas precisamente: sobre el pueblo petrolero de San Joaquin. Paisaje de taladros. Carreteras negras, petrolizadas. Pasamos sobre el Campo El Roble No. 1. Hay pozos con penachos de llamas, como antorchas. (Me explican el sistema de quema de gases. Pero en ciertos casos se reinyectan los gases para mantener la presion en los pozos)
Varios pozos encendidos en la niebla, como antorchas lejanas. Un ballet de gigantescos fuegos fatuos.

8 y 45 —— La Mesa de Guanipa. Meseta a perdida de vista. Esta cubierta de grandes cebraduras pardas. Se pierde hacia el este como un desierto. Me dicen que esta totalmente deshabitada. En ella suele cazarse el venado en automovil.

9 y 15 —— Primera vision del Orinoco. Todavia mucha bruma demora sobre la tierra. El orinoco cierra el area de vision, gris, inmenso, no como un rio, sino como un brazo de mar; como si en su orilla se terminara la tierra.

9 y 30 —— A terrizaje en Ciudad Bolivar.

10 —— Llegamos a la catedral por calles cuyas casas observan la arquitectura de Trinidad y Santiago de Cuba. Pero en la parte añeja y autentica de la ciudad, no hay edificios nuevos. La iglesia tiene poco caracter; pero es de esa ya interesante "ausencia de estilo" que, con el tiempo, acabará por integrarse dentro de los estilos americanos. El cielo raso, con sus vigueterias un tanto vascas. Hay un pulpo curiosamente revestido de calcedonias en medallones. El eterno angel con coturnos a lo tragico de Racine, vagamente barroco y siglo XVIII.
Al lado derecho del altar, la lapida funeraria del Segundo Obispo de Guayana. Inscripcion:

Jose A. Mohedano.
Muerto en 1804.
Introductor del Café en Venezuela.

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# Notes on the Trip to the Great Savannah

Saturday, 12 July

7:30 a.m.—Takeoff from La Carlota. Cloudy weather. Low ceiling.

8:00 a.m.—We fly over Anzoátegui—more precisely, over the oil town of San Joaquín. A landscape of drills. Black, oil-covered highways. We pass over the Roble number one oil field. There are wells with plumes of flames, like torches. (They explain the system of burning gases to me. But in certain cases they reinject the gases to maintain pressure in the wells.)

Several wells lit up in the fog, like distant torches. A ballet of gigantic fatuous fires.

8:45 a.m.—The Guanipa Mesa. A meseta at the end of the horizon. It is covered with large brown cracks. It vanishes in the east like a desert. They tell me that it is completely uninhabited. On the mesa it is customary to hunt deer from a car.

9:15 a.m.—First sighting of the Orinoco. A lot of haze still lingers over the earth. The Orinoco takes up the entire view, gray, immense, not like a river, but rather like a branch of the sea, as if the world ended on its shore.

9:30 a.m.—Landing in Ciudad Bolívar.

10:00 a.m.—We arrive at the cathedral via streets whose homes display the architectural styles of Trinidad and Santiago, Cuba. But in the old and authentic part of the city, there are no new buildings. The church is of little character, but it already shows this interesting "absence of style" that, in time, will end up integrating itself into the styles of the Americas. The flat ceiling, with its slightly Basque rafters. There is an octopus strangely covered with quartz medallions. The eternal angel wearing a buskin in the tragic style of Racine, vaguely baroque and eighteenth-century.

On the right side of the altar, the funeral stone of the second bishop of Guyana. Inscription:

Jose A. Mohedano.
Died in 1804.
Introducer of coffee to Venezuela.

In the choir stall there is a rough organ, with twenty tubes, like those that are not made anymore. The kind of organs made in the Americas, with a fortune, and that could add to Furlong's treatise.

10:30 a.m.—We are in the room where the delegates to the Congress of Angostura met on 15 February 1819. Nothing changed. A pulpit. The presidential table. A gallery of curious portraits of the delegates. The acetic face of Zea. Roscio. The cumbersome suits of the delegates.

10:45 a.m.—The old warehouses of the port, described by Rómulo Gallegos, with their strange mix of homespun industries, sale counters, banks, exchange markets, where one can make cassava bread, buy gold, sell beans, or outfit a boat. These warehouses have vaulted doors, like some houses on the cape, or, rather, wide vestibules, where there are sacks, barrels, etc. Certain old residences have entrance halls with the kind of decorative lace that can be seen in the old houses of the Cerro (Havana), but completely made out of thick wood.

In one corner, a corner store, painted pink: Canta Claro Bodega.

11:00 a.m.—Back in the new floating harbor, I watch the departure of the *Meta*, which will take seven days to reach Puerto Ayacucho. (Tomorrow we will meet it on the river.)

11:30 a.m.—Descent to the place known as Las Lajas. (See the first chapter of *Canaima*.)

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It's one of those millions of blocks of pink granite that alternates with the black blocks, all the way up to Puerto Ayacucho. At the foot of the block, several women, almost naked, with their breasts exposed and their long shirts stuck to their buttocks, wash their clothes. Surprising them greatly, I go down to the shore of the Orinoco, thrust my arms in the river's water, and splash some water on my face. (The gesture seems to me a bit rhetorical; but I catch the Chilean Armando Zegri doing the exact same thing a few minutes later.)

Don't forget the large house with marvelous ornamental grilles, transformed by some Corsicans into a macaroni factory. (The macaroni hang like curtains in rooms that long ago were used for soirees.)

12:30 p.m.—We take off, headed for the mission of Santa Elena. Cloudy weather. Low ceiling. I'm afraid that the clouds will obscure the view. I think that no one should come to Ciudad Bolívar to see the Orinoco. For good reason this city is called Angostura ["narrowness"]. Here, what the river loses in breadth it makes up for in depth. But nobody here has a sounding line at hand. The so-called middle rock is only valuable because it can be used to measure floods. It is of no sculptural interest whatsoever. And here the river seems slow, turbid, as if it were uneasy. At the end of the day, it must be confessed, in Ciudad Bolívar, the Orinoco looks like any other mighty river in Europe or the United States.

12:40 p.m.—The Orinoco is a finished landscape at our backs. Now the Caroní River appears. As we get close to it, the Caroní seems stranger, more interesting. It is an anarchic, scattered, broken river, full of rapids, rocks, and accidents. In its backwaters great black mountains seem to rise up, planted in the dark water.

1:00 p.m.—Always the Caroní, with its disorder.

1:10 p.m.—The river, increasingly anarchic and scattered.

Little by little the vegetation has begun clinging to the rather arid land. Now we are flying over a truly closed-off jungle. A gigantic field of green sponges, pressed up against each other.

1:12 p.m.—The clouds lift . . . in the distance, the mountains of the Cuyuní River begin to shake off their clouds. We are entering El Dorado.

1:20 p.m.—We are flying at twelve thousand feet above the jungle. Now there is virgin jungle as far as the eye can see. Its rough green mass of trees perched on trees is broken only by the sinuous course of the Cuyuní River, a river that seems to turn over on itself, it tangles itself up, it spirals back on itself, it crosses itself. A more sinuous route is impossible to imagine.

1:30 p.m.—Jungle . . . jungle . . . jungle . . . nothing but jungle. The unending expanse: green, brown, mossy. It is becoming very difficult to breathe, since we are flying at a great height.

1:40 p.m.—The first buttresses of the geological system that make up Roraima and the Great Savannah. The jungle hoists itself up on outcroppings that form steps. The entire landscape is rising up.

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