

## REORIENTING THE METROPOLIS: Caribbean Letters and the Autonomist Thrust

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*CARIBBEAN POETICS: TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF WEST INDIAN LITERATURE.* By Silvio Torres-Saillant. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. 353. \$64.95 cloth.)

*PRESENCIA CRIOLLA EN EL CARIBE Y AMERICA LATINA/CREOLE PRESENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA.* Edited by Ineke Phaf. (Frankfurt, Germany: Verveurt, 1996. Pp. 129. Paper.)

*HAITI AND THE UNITED STATES: NATIONAL STEREOTYPES AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION.* By J. Michael Dash. Second edition. (New York: St. Martin's, 1997. Pp. 182. \$16.95 paper.)

Recent theoretical and ideological shifts consonant with the post-modern and the postcolonial perspectives have been just as evident in the study of the literature of the Caribbean and Latin America as in the rest of the hemisphere and beyond. The desire for democratization that has come with subaltern studies or cultural studies has included a move toward what used to be the margins of the canon, even as traditional notions of canonicity have been reevaluated. Women's literature, gay and lesbian literature, and the literature of ethnic minorities are all advancing in their struggle for visibility and recognition. They now form a significant part of an even wider array of texts that have attracted critical attention, even if corresponding changes in undergraduate reading lists or departmental hires have lagged behind. In this context, the three books under review acquire greater relevance because they are all efforts to place the marginal and colonized in focus and describe a world from their viewpoint.

Silvio Torres-Saillant's *Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature* is the reworked version of his 1991 doctoral dissertation, "Caribbean Poetics: Aesthetics of Marginality in West Indian Literature." The author, who is currently on the faculty of the English Department at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York and Director of CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at City College, has published several articles on Caribbean literature. Torres-Saillant also coordinated a collection of essays commissioned by the OLLANTAY Center for the Arts,

*New Voices in Latin American Literature/Nuevas voces en la literatura latinoamericana* (1993).

*Caribbean Poetics* examines “recurrent thematic motifs and formal devices” evident in writing in the region over the past six decades. It proposes that notwithstanding the linguistic diversity, Caribbean literature constitutes “a unified and coherent socioaesthetic corpus with its own identity” (p. xi). The study purports to be the first to go beyond race, nationality, and language in analyzing the area’s literature. Torres-Saillant finds earlier efforts like those of G. R. Coulthard in *Raza y color en la literatura antillana* (1958) and O. R. Dathorne in *Dark Ancestor: The Literature of the Black Man in the Caribbean* (1981) to be insufficiently representative of Caribbean diversity, and he therefore calls for a wider ethnic base when considering Caribbean literature. Torres-Saillant also takes issue with metropolitan critics who fall prey to what he calls “the imperial imagination” in their approach to the Caribbean. He insists on the validity and even the primacy of the region’s own thinkers in relation to their reality—its “metadiscourse”—and makes a final plea for a decentered literary world order that abandons the hierarchies arising from colonialism and its legacies.

Torres-Saillant presents a sound postulate in envisioning the Caribbean as a cognitive whole despite the insularity produced by colonial rule under various European metropolises. He prefers to stress instead those historical and cultural commonalities that have shaped and identified the Caribbean. Equally laudable is Torres-Saillant’s effort to provide a historiographic literary picture of the area as well as his promotion of the primacy of native interpreters over often reductive and or paternalistic foreign critics. The impressive bibliographic foundation of *Caribbean Poetics* has been praised as “totally admirable.”<sup>1</sup> It might be observed, however, that a project purporting to address all of Caribbean literature may well face the charge of being overly ambitious because in reality its focus does not go beyond a sixty-year period in the twentieth century. The lack of attention to the region’s literary antecedents leaves unanswered the question of what is the perceived role of previous writing in the colonial period, relative to the formation of what came to be the Caribbean countries as they exist today. In this regard, the case of the nineteenth-century Cuban novel and its engagement with slavery, independence, and the contradictions of the plantation economy appears to be as relevant a paradigm of the region’s collective experience as any other potential example.<sup>2</sup>

*Caribbean Poetics* focuses on the work of three writers, Edward Kamau Brathwaite of Barbados, Haitian René Depestre, and Pedro Mir of

1. See the review by Harold Waters in *World Literature Today* 72, no. 2 (1998):436–37.

2. See, for example, William Luis, *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

the Dominican Republic. Torres-Saillant discusses their work in terms of language in Brathwaite, religion in Depestre, and history in Mir. Torres-Saillant dedicates three of the six chapters to the individual writers, after using the first two to set forth the conceptual assumptions on which the monograph is based. The final chapter makes the call for literary democracy and a de-centered model of world literature. In apparent accordance with the objective of giving a chronological account of each writer's works, the chapters are subdivided into sections whose titles reflect the theme of the particular work under study. The result of this procedural strategy is that the treatment of novels or collections of poetry is necessarily brief and tends to overlap. The desire to address the totality of the writers' production also gets in the way of a more focused exegesis, with paraphrasing and citations from other studies often presented in place of engagement with the writing itself.

Despite Torres-Saillant's reservations about the lack of diversity in earlier attempts to detail a pan-Caribbean literary ethos, none of the writers he has singled out for detailed discussion is a woman. Nor are the writers of Asian ancestry (like V. S. Naipaul or Samuel Selvon) or those of European ancestry (like Alejo Carpentier and Manuel del Cabral) studied in a way that would illustrate the complexity of Caribbean realities that have emerged from what the author calls "the colonial transaction." If anything, Torres-Saillant's effort highlights some of the difficulties inherent to the Caribbeanist challenge. For one thing, notwithstanding the area's historical commonalities, the challenge of elucidating complex localized cultural processes found in the regional vernaculars and in the folk seems to require more than just the ability to get past the linguistic barriers posed by the European strata of Caribbean languages.

A case in point is Torres-Saillant's discussion of Kamau Brathwaite's oeuvre, which he has opted to approach from the standpoint of language. While Brathwaite's opinions on such issues as "Nation Language" and the cultural agency of the Caribbean underclass are expressed in standard academic discourse, his creative writing is much more adventurous, employing registers ranging across the entire linguistic continuum of the Anglophone Caribbean. *Caribbean Poetics*, for all its intended focus on the interplay between sound and sense in Brathwaite's poetry, does not get far in sharing with the reader the workings of his aesthetic. One gets the impression that the poet's use of irony, pathos, and anger, his adoption of multiple tones and voices, his deployment of rhyme, neologism, nuance, and regional idiom may well have proven too taxing for this critic. An example might be seen in the somewhat bland response to a particularly evocative contemporary Anglo-Caribbean term, "dub," used to mean "money" (p. 116). Here Torres-Saillant sought recourse in a local dictionary, when both the vernacular and the poetic context strongly favor the word's association with an aspect of the aggressive creativity of reggae

music in Jamaica in the 1970s, which functioned as both industry and a site for social intercourse.<sup>3</sup>

The politics of race and representation in the region's literature are also a slippery issue in *Caribbean Poetics*. For example, Torres-Saillant finds it an uncomplicated matter to decry the purported essentialism of early Caribbean ideologues of Negritude like Aimé Césaire and Leon Damas (after decades of similar critiques). Yet the role of Haitian poet René Depestre as privileged guest of the Cuban state and champion of communism and the official rhetoric of anti-racism for a regime in which Afro-Cuban ethnic expression was subject to rigid protocols go largely unexplored in the book.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the easy imputation of interracial solidarity to white writers like Luis Palés Matos and Manuel del Cabral in the Hispano-Caribbean vanguard movement known as Negrismo makes for a surprisingly uncritical reading of the way these poets represented black subjects in their verse.

Torres-Saillant's discussion of Depestre's and Pedro Mir's work follows the same chronological method observed in his writing about Brathwaite. In both cases, valuable contextual information is offered that supports the book's Caribbeanist premise, particularly in relation to the ideological commitment of both writers to social justice and their subjection to exile by hostile dictatorships. The Voodoo cosmology as an integral part of Depestre's literary worldview is appropriately highlighted, and deserved attention is given to the multifaceted writing of Pedro Mir. The chapter on this writer is especially worthwhile on the Dominican poet's marginalization from the wider Latin American canon and in terms of the book's objective of integrating the Dominican Republic into the regional literary landscape. Torres-Saillant's vindication of Pedro Mir adds to an ambitious and praiseworthy attempt at a monograph on comparative Caribbean literature from a sympathetic (native) perspective. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, *Caribbean Poetics* will serve as an important antecedent for future studies.

Ineke Phaf's *Presencia criolla en el Caribe y América Latina/Creole Presence in the Caribbean and Latin America* resulted from an initiative in 1980 to mount symposia on Caribbean culture in Bremen, Germany. The first one-

3. Island Records recently released a three-CD anthology of the work of Lee "Scratch" Perry, a talented Jamaican arranger and mixer. *Lee Scratch Perry: Arkology* contains an illustrative sampling of popular tunes of the late 1970s as well as the numerous "dub versions" they generated. An important early aspect of making dub versions was to allow for improvised DJ monologues on the flip side of single releases.

4. See, for example, William Luis, "Race, Poetry, and Revolution in the Works of Nancy Morejón," *Hispanic Journal* 14, no. 2 (1993):83–103. See also Conrad James, "Patterns of Resistance in Afro-Cuban Women's Writing: Nancy Morejón's 'Amo a mi amo,'" in *Framing the Word: Gender and Genre in Caribbean Women's Writing*, edited by Joan Anim-Addo (London: Whiling and Birch, 1996), 159–68; and Linda Howe, "Nancy Morejón's 'Negrismo' in the Revolutionary Era: The Question of Gender and Race in Cuba," *Explicación de textos literarios* 24, nos. 1–2 (1995–1996):91–111.

week event was followed by a second in 1984, which was expanded to include Latin America. The Society for Caribbean Research was founded a few years later in 1988. The editor of the volume was instrumental in exploration by the University of Maryland's Department of Spanish and Portuguese of the concept of creolization in the Caribbean and Latin America in the early 1990s. Some of the writers invited to speak to the department between 1991 and 1994 are represented in this volume. So is the work of academics like Phyllis Peres, a specialist in Angolan and Luso-Brazilian literature at the University of Maryland, and Helmtrud Rumpf and Gerhard Poppenberg, both of the Free University of Berlin.

Phaf's bilingual title is somewhat enigmatic in not providing a clear idea of the book's area of inquiry. The preface is not much more helpful in stating that the book's aim is "to illustrate the transformation of the role of the Middle Passage, the commercial traject from Africa to the Americas since 1492, in the Caribbean and in Latin America" (p. 13). Assuming that the reference to the Middle Passage has to do with the Atlantic trade in captive Africans, this phenomenon did not start in 1492. Moreover, it is hard to imagine the Middle Passage, a specific and finite historical referent, as having a role that is still subject to transformation. The actual content of *Presencia criolla*, however, represents the Creole factor in the sense of its Francophone and U.S. reference to the vernacular and its designation of the social group of European origin in the Hispanophone region. Both as social group and as a broader concept pertaining to Caribbean identity, "Creoleness" has emerged as a significant point of reference for New World culture and creativity.

*Presencia criolla* is divided into two sections. The first records a discussion between Caribbean poets Kamau Brathwaite of Barbados and Edouard Glissant of Martinique entitled "Nation Language and the Poetics of Creolization." An essay follows by Surinamese writer Astrid Roemer, "Writing Back in the Diaspora: Surinamese Ethnic Novels." The second section consists of four essays by academics, including one by editor Phaf, "Adyosi versus Sunrise Inn: El paisaje alternativo del Caribe no-hispánico." Their topics cover the main geographical blocs represented by the dominant colonial languages in the region—English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch. Three of the essays are in English, the other three are in Spanish.

Glissant's and Brathwaite's dialogue discusses interpretations of Caribbean culture for which the two writers have gained renown. It centers around Brathwaite's articulation of his theory of the cultural valence of what he calls "Nation Language," meaning the Anglophone Caribbean vernacular registers containing vital elements of the ancestral ontology (mainly African) that still carry a social stigma despite their appearance in mass media and Caribbean literary practice. Glissant's comments express his thinking on contemporary Francophone Caribbean culture as explained in his 1981 publication *Le discours antillais*. He also mentions the analogous

phenomenon of Creole, the lingua franca that emerged in former and current French colonies from the contact among French colonizers and Africans from various ethnic groups who were subjected to forced labor. A positive feature of this first public meeting of the two Caribbean intellectuals is that their respective positions vis-à-vis Caribbean cultural identity are shown to complement each other. Whereas Brathwaite's position tends to be anchored in and vindicate the creativity of the enslaved African forebears and their legacy, Glissant embraces a concept of creolization that is open, diffuse, and forward-looking.

Astrid Roemer, another writer, also discusses the colonial past and the trauma of forced labor and cultural dispossession in highlighting the concept of *winti*, Afro-Surinamese strategies of survival that she uses as source material in her work. Also mentioned are contemporary migration from Surinam, the former Dutch colony, to the Netherlands and the attendant social problems facing these migrants. Phaf's essay draws attention to the writing of Frank Martinus Arion of Surinam and to Albert Helman of Curaçao in the context of several contemporary novels of the Dutch Antilles. Once again the debate surrounding use of the vernacular is mentioned—*sranan* in Surinam and *papiamentu* in Curaçao. Helmtrud Rumph revisits the ongoing dialogue on cultural independence in the Francophone Caribbean between Glissant and a younger generation of writers and intellectuals. Gerhard Poppenberg discusses José Lezama Lima's application of baroque style and technique in *La expresión americana*.

Finally, Phyllis Peres contributes a coherent exposition on Domingo Caldas Barbosa, the eighteenth-century Afro-Brazilian poet who introduced two popular lyrical forms, the *lundu* and the *modinha*, to the Portuguese court. Barbosa can thus be seen as a relevant example of Creole cultural agency in a metropolitan setting, especially in incorporating the language and worldview of New World plantations into his verse. The major strength of *Presencia criolla* lies in its bringing the Dutch Antilles into the ambit of Caribbean literature. An important aspect of the region's quest for cultural and literary self-definition is also highlighted in the book's recurring references to the continuing tension between dominant and subordinate forms of linguistic expression. Linguistic dichotomy in the region and the corresponding anticolonial drive for the autochthonous thereby emerge as a constant in the twentieth century, as in the case of Brazil's Modernista ideologues in the 1920s and later initiatives of a similar nature in French-, English-, and Dutch-speaking areas of the hemisphere. It is unfortunate that the text is marred by typographical errors and distracting lapses in both the English and Spanish portions of the book.

J. Michael Dash, an outstanding scholar of Francophone Caribbean and African literatures, has brought his years of research and expertise to bear on a powerful analysis of the literary dialogue between the two earliest republics in the hemisphere, the United States and Haiti. The author of



*Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 1915–1961* (1981) and *Edouard Glissant* (1995), Dash is currently on the faculty at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies and has also taught at the University of Amadu Bello in Kano, Nigeria.

In this updated edition of *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (1988), Dash examines the relationships among power, prejudice, and foreign policy in representations of the republic of Haiti in the U.S. imaginary and Haitian literary responses to this discourse. The book covers the historical span from the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804 to the era after the Duvalier dynasty fell in February 1986, as well as the 1915 and 1994 military occupations of the Caribbean republic by the U.S. Marines. The aim of the volume is to expose “the grid of stereotypes through which Haiti is filtered into the American consciousness” (p. 137). Dash points out that while “images of the rebellious body, the repulsive body, the seductive body and the sick body constitute a constant discourse that has fixed Haiti in the Western imagination,” Haitians have written back in an often therapeutic gesture that involves images of the “aloof patrician, precocious ‘nègre,’ unencumbered dandy or vengeful Eros” (p. 137).

Dash has followed Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) in depicting the way that hegemonic Western writing creates a reductive image of an antithetical Other to justify psychological notions of superiority as well as political and economic subjugation. Dash’s selection of texts from journalism, travel writing, ethnography, and creative writing also follows Foucaultian precepts that link power to discourse and demystify the literary of its artistic premise. Application of these principles to analysis of the Haitian-U.S. dialogue heightens the immediacy of international relations as they unfold on a day-to-day basis and the imbalance of power between the two states that they reflect.

The U.S. writers analyzed in *Haiti and the United States* range from blatant antagonists to mild or even enthusiastic supporters of Haiti. In this “discursive othering” of Haiti, race turns out to be an important factor. It underlay resistance by the Southern states to formal U.S. recognition of Haitian independence in the nineteenth century; and in the guise of Darwinist determinism, notions of white racial superiority undergirded official and extra-official rationalizations for U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1934. With the appropriate discursive and ideological modifications of the moment, a latter-day version of the civilizing mission appeared once more in policy and media reports surrounding the more recent intervention of 1994. Dash’s point is that Haitian subjectivity is represented across genres and across the decades mainly by alarmist tropes of barbarity and primitivism, unrestrained sexuality, and bizarre and atavistic religiosity. This trend has been evinced in fictional and nonfictional works such as Spencer St. John’s *Haiti or the Black Republic* (1884), Faustin Wirkus’s *The White King of La Gonave*

(1931), Graham Greene's *The Comedians* (1966), and Wade Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985). Along with others, these works created a negative discursive reality that took on a life of its own, even to the point of affecting U.S. foreign policy.

An important dimension of U.S. discourse on Haiti can be found in accounts of the island and its natives that were more liberal, although notably less influential. Here Dash points to novelistic interpretations of the 1915 invasion, such as "The Last Haitian Revolution" by U.S. naval official Edward Beach. Dash points out that this novel was never published because it was not sensationalistic enough. He also mentions the work of ethnographer Melville Herskovits, whose *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937) and *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1958) countered prevailing hypotheses of black inferiority and promoted principles of cultural relativity.

Dash's analysis of the response of African American writers to the island nation is also important in presenting Haitian concerns that often differed radically from those of the mainstream. Dash brings up such U.S. black expressions of solidarity with Haiti as Frederick Douglass's defense of the sovereignty of Haiti (where he served as U.S. consul) and the strenuous objections of leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson to U.S. occupation. References to notable personalities of the Harlem Renaissance include Claude McKay, who perceived in Haiti an important center for black cultural authenticity, and writer Langston Hughes, whose advocacy of racial pride and leftist orientation later helped shape younger Haitian writers.

The evolving responses from Haitian writers to its powerful northern neighbor are also detailed in *Haiti and the United States*. They included an aloof response from nineteenth-century elite writers to negative U.S. propaganda about the Haitian Revolution. Haitian poets again invoked a haughty (Francophile) intellectuality and ornate versification in reaction to the national humiliation brought on by the 1915 invasion, seeking thereby to distinguish themselves from an adversary they often depicted as uncouth and bullying. By the end of the 1920s, Haiti's frustrated attempts at military self-defense via the so-called Caco rebellion made way for the broader Indigenist movement, which celebrated the African cultural legacy and found common ground with the ideologues of the Harlem Renaissance. On the middle years of the twentieth century, Dash also stresses the Marxist leanings of writers like Jacques Roumain, Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre.

Current directions in Haitian writing, Dash points out, are associated with heightened national destitution and increased Haitian migration to the United States. Here exile and immigration have changed the conception of personal and national identity evident in current trends in what should more properly be called Haitian American writing, given that it takes place in the United States. The traditional concept of identity has moved beyond binary parameters of home and exile. A significant example of the changing situa-



tion is a writer like Danny Laferrière, whose wandering hero in the United States undertakes a satirical reversal of the white anthropologist's journey through the Caribbean in *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993). Edwidge Danticat also exemplifies new orientations. Her *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) tells a story of three generations of women that celebrates the liberating anonymity of U.S. cities and challenges restricting patriarchal traditions.

Dash's *Haiti and the United States* presents an engaging account of an unequal and conflictive relationship as reflected in literary and nonliterary texts. The study achieves its objectives admirably. Its major value lies in the number of writers Dash analyzes, from both sides of the discussion, and the balance and coherence that he maintains in his presentation. Dash's analysis of over a hundred years of writing offers insights into an international issue understudied despite its relevance to full understanding of U.S. involvement with Haiti (and other weak countries in the region). Dash's optimism about the future of the relationship is based on new possibilities for democracy in Haiti and a salutary increase in information in the United States about the country. The ever more visible and audible community of Haitians in the United States also feeds his hope that the distance to U.S. comprehension of this particular "Other" will be shortened, even as the awareness of increasing globalization tempers Haitian cultural defensiveness.

Taken together, the three books reviewed here attest to the importance of the panoptic approach to Caribbean literature. Its virtues have traditionally been overlooked because of the tendency to treat the writing of the various linguistic blocs as extensions of the literature of their respective metropolises. Current democratizing trends in literary theory and criticism are also contributing in no small measure to evaluation of this writing on its own terms, not as appendages of European literatures. The growing number of critics and academics from the region whose interest lies in vindicating the autonomous will undoubtedly continue to identify and contradict outside assessments still influenced by the Manichaeism of the colonial perspective while complementing the more balanced outside readings of Caribbean culture. In this regard, the hope expressed by the editors of the recent *History of Literature in the Caribbean* that future studies will continue to forge an interpretive paradigm that will encompass the entire Caribbean seems well on its way to fulfillment.<sup>5</sup>

5. See *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Volume 1, Hispanic and Francophone Regions*, edited by A. James Arnold et al. (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994).