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A History of Literature in the Caribbean, Volume 3: Cross-Cultural Studies. JAMES A. ARNOLD (ed.). Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997. xvii + 399 pp. (Cloth US\$ 120.00)

The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context. J. MICHAEL DASH. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998. xii + 197 pp. (Cloth US\$ 42.50, Paper US\$ 18.50)

In his most recent theoretical work, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Édouard Glissant stresses the virtues of what he calls "archipelagic thinking." "The entire world is becoming an archipelago," he asserts (1997:194), and for this reason we need to distance ourselves from both insular and continental ways of thinking if we are to register the complexities of that global creolization process. The archipelago is situated between the solitary confines of the islands that constitute it and the expansive territory of the mainland toward which it points, relating the one to the other while retaining its own indeterminately distinct identity. For Glissant, actual archipelagos such as the Caribbean are exemplary sites for understanding the complex new relations that ambivalently and chaotically join together all the hitherto unconnected parts of the world. As a consequence of this, the need for understanding the Caribbean *as* an archipelago becomes ever more pressing: the Caribbean must be considered in its archipelagic totality, as a *region* that can only be adequately understood through comparative, cross-cultural analysis focusing less on its discrete parts than on the way these parts exist in relation with and to one another.

Glissant's emphasis on the (liminal) centrality of the archipelago, and his related insistence on understanding the Caribbean in regional terms, comes at a time when insular models for understanding the Caribbean (nationalism, Afrocentrism) have lost much of their formerly sacrosanct authority,

while other globalizing narratives (postcolonialism, postmodernism) have gained an ascendancy that puts into question the integrity of any and all arguments that were founded on exclusionary, identitarian appeals to such "essential" categories as nation and race. Glissant's work attempts both to mediate between these two models and to direct us beyond them, and it is fair to say that the cutting edge of Caribbean literary and cultural studies is increasingly to be found in work that has followed him into this medial zone of understanding. Both of the books under review here make the case for reading the Caribbean first and foremost in regional terms; they urge a commitment to cross-cultural studies in which the various locations of the archipelago are treated as part of a larger totality that has managed to retain a specific if elusive identity of its own while becoming ever more implicated in a globally creolizing world. At the very least, *Cross-Cultural Studies*, the third volume of *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, succeeds in affirming the importance of this comparatist perspective, while J. Michael Dash's *The Other America* will provide both novices and experts in the field of Caribbean studies with a crucial introduction to this perspective for many years to come.

Putting together the final volume of the *History* undoubtedly posed vastly greater problems for its editor than did the first two volumes (Volume One was devoted to the Hispanic and Francophone regions while Volume Two – still forthcoming – will focus on the English and Dutch regions), and one sympathizes with the difficulty of A. James Arnold's task. If providing a comprehensive set of essays about, say, Anglophone literature from the Caribbean is a daunting but nonetheless manageable task, can one ever hope to produce an equally comprehensive, authoritative "history" of the interactions of all the region's diverse literatures? The short answer to that question is, of course, that one cannot, so it is hardly surprising that this collection ultimately fails to tell a coherent (hi)story about Caribbean literature as a whole; however, I would venture that one could, in Samuel Beckett's words, "fail better" than does this collection, the excessive diffuseness of which ultimately defeats its praiseworthy intentions.

What unity this collection of essays does have derives mostly from the second of its nine sections, "Literary Creoleness and Chaos Theory," which features two useful essays that establish what is at stake in approaching the Caribbean from a cross-cultural perspective by comparing theoretical accounts of the Caribbean by Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Glissant. (Román de la Campa's consideration of these theorists is especially thought-provoking.) This section is preceded by one entitled "Preliminary Approaches," which includes a derivative essay on Columbus, cannibalism, and early mappings of the Caribbean, as well as a very informative overview of Creoles by George Lang, who stresses that

Papiamentu is “the most successful Creole literature in the Caribbean” (p. 45). (The collection’s unprecedented emphasis on the Dutch Caribbean as a full-fledged player in the literary history of the region is, incidentally, one of its major strengths.)

These two introductory sections are followed by seven more, each containing two or three essays: given limitations of space, the titles of these sections must serve to convey the “organizing” principles of the *History*: “Problematics of Literary Historiography”; “Literature and Popular Culture”; “Carnival and Carnivalization”; “Gender and Identity”; “The Caliban Complex”; “Genre and Postcoloniality”; and, last and decidedly least, “Cross-Cultural Currents and Conundrums,” the grab bag of insignificant and meandering essays with which the collection comes to an emphatically unclimactic close.

The Carnival section is quite possibly the strongest unit in the collection, featuring sharp and engaging analyses of that “paradoxical practice” by Benítez-Rojo and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert; the Genre section, with useful essays on autobiography and the Caribbean sublime, is also quite satisfying. By contrast, the sections on Popular Culture and on Gender are surprisingly weak. As far as individual essays go, Vera Kutzinski’s “The Cult of Caliban: Collaboration and Revisionism in Contemporary Caribbean Narrative” deserves singling out as a professional and helpfully polemical piece, which reads Wilson Harris’s *Carnival* as “a hermaphroditic text” and contrasts it favorably with the “dialogic gesturing that amounts to little more than fetishism” that one finds in a number of Cuban texts such as Fernández Retamar’s *Calibán* (p. 300); as far as this reviewer is concerned, the collection’s single most noxious contribution would have to be Iris M. Zavala’s “When the Popular Sings the Self: Heterology, Popular Songs, and Caribbean Writing,” an intolerably self-indulgent and jargon-laden reading of “popular songs used in literature as cultural signs and vernacular tropes” (p. 197).

In short, what would certainly have been greeted as a satisfactory if uneven group of essays were it to have been published as a special issue of a journal such as *Callaloo* comes as a distinct disappointment when presented as part of an ambitious, multi-volume *History of Caribbean Literature* (to which is attached, moreover, a discouragingly astronomical price tag).

Working the same comparatist ground as the *History* to much better effect, Dash’s book also attempts to provide a preliminary mapping of the whole of Caribbean literature; adopting a “New World approach” (p. 3), he attempts to go beyond the “obsessive nativism or nationalist selfaffirmation” that bedevils so much of Caribbean criticism (p. 9), and against which he has so eloquently argued in his previous books and articles. Attempting “to deal with the region from a Pan-Caribbean perspective,”

Dash breaks down the barriers separating the various national and language traditions in the region while resisting the urge to situate Caribbean literature and culture in the context of postcolonialism or postmodernism, which he polemically but usefully associates with “the current intellectual *Zeitgeist* of the romance of otherness” (p. x).

Caribbean literature, for Dash, is inseparable from the experience of modernity, and it is “the Caribbean’s experience of the modern as a vital part of its New World context” with which he is especially concerned in this book (p. 17). Following upon the Introduction, the book’s second chapter (which is its weakest) examines “the creation of the notion of the Tropics within Europe’s experience of the crisis of modernization” (p. 17); in a broad overview of “tropicalist discourse,” Dash outlines the various exoticizing stereotypes that have fed into colonial representations of the Caribbean, beginning with Columbus and moving through *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Rousseau’s noble savage, Sartre’s romanticization of black culture, all the way to the post-culturalist anthropology of James Clifford, who “may well be no less guilty than Breton, Lévi-Strauss, or Sartre of succumbing to a romantic fantasy of liberation derived from an exotic notion of other cultures” (p. 41). While one appreciates Dash’s reasons for including this overview of the Western discourse against which Caribbean literature works but with which it also inevitably colludes, as well as his consistent willingness to make politically difficult arguments that might make some “radical” readers uncomfortable (e.g., “the championing of Caribbean radicalism by European intellectuals may itself be a compensatory fantasy” [p. 27]), the overview of “tropicalist discourse” in this chapter feels rather perfunctory and is, curiously, somewhat too preoccupied with summarizing the work of other critics as opposed to developing an original thesis.

The remaining chapters of the book, which examine the various phases of modern Caribbean literature from the Haitian Revolution onward, are extremely strong and will be of immense use both to tyros looking for a readable introduction to Caribbean literature and to specialists in search of an insightful take on it. For those unfamiliar with Dash’s writings on Haiti, Chapter 3 on nineteenth-century Haitian writing will be a revelation, breaking as it does with the conventional wisdom that nineteenth-century Haiti was the site of a “collective bovaryism,” and asserting by contrast that the ostensibly assimilationist position of these writers with regard to European civilization was “a vital aspect of their attraction to modernity” (p. 44). The post-revolutionary project of founding Haiti as a modern state is inseparable from a literary modernism that Dash already finds at work in that country in the early decades of the nineteenth century (whereas, he argues, such modernism only emerges in the Hispanic Caribbean in the 1880s and in the Anglophone Caribbean in the 1930s [p. 47]). A fine read-

ing of Oswald Durand's "Choucouné" is followed by a daringly revisionist account of the supposedly "apolitical formalism" of the Haitian fin de siècle poets associated with *La Ronde*: the "cosmopolitanism" that he identifies in these poets "has its imaginative roots in the spirit of errancy and nomadism generated by a sense of groundlessness," and Dash sings the praises of this nomadic spirit, which recognizes the impossibility, and signals the collapse, of a "foundational poetics in Haitian literature" (p. 57).

Dash's idiosyncratic championing of these "cosmopolitan, nomadic, and plural" writers is bound to be irritating to self-styled "politicized" critics; even more irritating to them, one suspects, will be his persistent critique in Chapter 4 of Aimé Césaire – or, rather, of the primacy accorded to Césaire by historians of Caribbean literature, for whom the Martiniquan poet's work stands as the founding moment of Caribbean modernism. In Césaire, the cosmopolitan impulse of fin de siècle Haitian modernism gives way to the ostensibly revolutionary but in fact reactionary idea of the Caribbean as a "heterocosm." In the 1930s, Dash argues, "Caribbean modernism invented a radical poetics based on an integration with a lost organic totality" (p. 62); this poetics is most spectacularly embodied by Césaire's Adamic "poetics of origination" (p. 63), "a poetics based not on diversity but invariance" (p. 67), which in political terms cashes out as Fanon's cult of violence, a cult for which Dash clearly has little sympathy (indeed, he chastizes Edward Said for attempting to promote a "sanitized version of Fanon" in *Culture and Imperialism* [p. 68]). One finds this myth of the Caribbean heterocosm in a variety of writers: it underlies the Africanist poetics of Kamau Brathwaite (who is interestingly paralleled to T. S. Eliot), as well as the indigenist (indeed, fascist) politics of Haiti's Carl Brouard or its mirror image, the Marxist vision of Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew*, a novel that "aims for a new, truth-bearing discourse on which a new beginning can be based" and that Dash reads as a version of the Latin American "dictator" novel (p. 78). Dash's polemical examination of the "poetics of closure and authority" in writers whom we have been schooled to adulate, such as Césaire and Roumain, is extremely salutary and this chapter alone makes the book required reading for Caribbeanists.

The second half of *The Other America* consists of three chapters that examine the aftermath of the myth of the Caribbean heterocosm, charting the re-entry of Caribbean literature into a compromised and compromising modernity and its "bewildering plurality of signs" – a plurality that the "logocentric poetics" of Césaire and Roumain and its "appealing symmetries" repeatedly attempted to erase from view (p. 87). In Chapter 4, we follow Alejo Carpentier as he abandons his early fascination with "marvelous reality," which still reeks of primitivism and heterocosmic fantasies,

and instead works toward a “poetics of infinite translation” in his later novels, notably through his creolizing interest in a polyglossic New World Mediterranean that is also central to the poetry of Derek Walcott, whose “creative crepuscularity” Dash lauds (p. 104). In Chapter 5, we are introduced to the “fields of play” made possible by parodic and postmodern Caribbean texts: for instance, the “female grotesque” of Marie Chauvet’s *Amour, Colère, Folie* (itself a subset of an “aesthetic of the grotesque” that Dash finds in writers as diverse as Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, and Dany Laferrière), the “street plays” of erotic writers like René Depestre, or the carnivalized texts of contemporary Trinidadian writers. Finally, in Chapter 6, we land up in contemporary Martinique, where the “secularizing, desanctifying process that is an essential aspect of modernization” has been perhaps most forcefully experienced in the Caribbean (p. 137): “as fragile, liminal space,” Dash argues, “Martinique is the point where the Caribbean, perhaps most intensely, confronts, in its most disruptive manifestation, the overwhelming form of modernity” (p. 158). In this final chapter’s analyses of “liminal urban culture” in Patrick Chamoiseau’s novels and the “poetics of liminality” in Glissant’s theoretical books, Dash insists on the possibilities opened up by this modernization process, and thus opposes the gloomy assessments of contemporary Martinique that are such a predictable feature of so many accounts (including Glissant’s) of this far-flung French *département*.

The chapter on Martinique leads into a brief conclusion in which Dash stresses that island space can be “privileged in a foundational discourse” but that it can also be “favored in terms of a transversal creole space” (p. 162). Recognizing and exploring the “field of relations” that constitutes this creole space is what Dash urges us to do: we should not long after the “imperishable rock” on which an “heroic, modernist practice” attempted to found itself; rather, we should embrace the island as “threshold,” as “liminal space, the confluence of innumerable conjunctions and disjunctions” (p. 163), a place in which all “fixed and absolute meaning” is mercifully displaced (p. 164). Dash’s mapping of this threshold zone, and his championing of “a cross-cultural ideal that privileges neither ossified sovereignty nor the uniformity of universalizing sameness” (p. 163), is an extremely important contribution to Caribbean literary studies.

The Other America certainly has its faults: the rather too cursory overview of “tropicalist discourse” in Chapter 2 is matched (inevitably, given the ambitiously overarching nature of this short book) by the occasional underdeveloped analysis of individual texts in subsequent chapters; and the book is sloppily proofread, to say the least (typos abound: St. Domingue is referred to as St. Dominique [p. 43]; Césairean is often rendered as Césarean; the accents on French words are frequently left out ... and so on, and on). These minor irritants aside, however, one is ultimately

left with a great sense of admiration for Dash's book and its provocative comparatist overview of Caribbean literature.

As Glissant puts it in the *Traité*, in his typically evocative if elusive language, "all archipelagic thinking is a trembling thought, a non-presumptuous thought, but also a thinking that opens out, that shares itself out" (1997:231; "*toute pensée archipélique est pensée du tremblement, de la non-présomption, mais aussi de l'ouverture et du partage*"). It is this opening and sharing out that both books under review, with differing degrees of success, direct us toward, forecasting the never complete confluence of the islands of the Caribbean into an archipelagic whole that presumes nothing but that can nonetheless, for precisely this reason, be counterpoised as a fragile, trembling alternative to the "imperishable rock" of the solitary island or the comforting certainties of the totalizing "continents, these masses of intolerance inflexibly directed towards a Truth" (1997:181) – a Truth that, we must be thankful, it has become increasingly hard to read into the creative polyphony of the Caribbean and its richly ambivalent literature.

REFERENCE

GLISSANT, ÉDOUARD, 1997. *Traité du Tout-Monde*. Paris: Gallimard.

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