Haiti and Trans-Caribbean Literary Identity / Haiti y la transcaribenidad literaria. Emilio Jorge Rodríguez. Philipsburg, St. Martin: House of Nehisi, 2011. xii + 258 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.00)

Emilio Rodríguez's *Haiti and Trans-Caribbean Literary Identity* is a small book on a big subject. Indeed, since the book is made up of five original essays in Spanish and their (somewhat stilted) English translation, it is only half as long as it appears to be. Furthermore, the essays, of uneven length and critical interest, on Haitian subjects, range from the nineteenth-century novelist Fernand Hibbert to his twentieth-century Marxist counterpart Jacques Stephen Alexis, and Cuban subjects, from Alejo Carpentier to Nicolás Guillén both of whom made memorable visits to Haiti in the 1940s. The geographical reach of these essays can hardly be called "trans-Caribbean" when the real focus appears to be literary contacts between Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean. There is certainly important work to be done on Haiti's trans-Caribbean impact. After all, Haiti's first novel, *Stella*, was written in Saint Thomas as were Anténor Firmin's last major essays. The Haitian Revolution has also been the source of major literary and theoretical works from Trinidad to Martinique. Rodríguez prefers, however, as much for ideological as for linguistic reasons, to restrict himself to the interaction between Haiti and its Hispanophone neighbors.

Broadly speaking, critics writing on Caribbean literatures tend to fall into two categories—those who approach the region as a discrete, self-contained entity and those who view it as a zone of cultural migrations and global connectedness. A balanced approach would ideally both address the Caribbean's uniqueness in terms of an all-embracing wholeness and recognize it as creolizing space in which writers are engaged in a cross-cultural process that continuously destabilizes notions of inside and outside, authentic and foreign. Rodríguez rejects the nativist model of ontological coherence for a trans-Caribbean approach based on "the expansion of cultures beyond national administrative boundaries" (p. 134), but he wants the emphasis to remain resolutely "intra-regional" with the Caribbean Sea as a matrix which "has to a great extent shaped the flow and interaction between [Caribbean] cultures" (p. 172). In so doing, he can be both an enthusiastic proponent of inter-connectedness and a fierce defender of Caribbean specificity. His particular interest in Haiti echoes Alejo Carpentier's view of Haiti as the epicenter of New World identity. As he declares in his introduction, "today

we can assert that in any attempt to define the cultural geography of the Caribbean and Latin America, the trans-Caribbean links emerging since the Haitian Revolution are one of the pillars that gave rise to our hemispheric specificity" (p. 134).

What he calls his "endless undying passion for Haiti" (p. 129) is tied to two Haitian writers in particular who had close connections to Cuba, René Depestre and Jacques Stephen Alexis. Rodríguez apparently met Depestre during his years of exile in Cuba after he had fled the Duvalier regime. He steers clear of the Depestre who later disavowed Marxism and devoted himself to risqué evocations of female sexuality in the Parisian years. Rodríguez was also "fascinated by the discovery of Jacques Stephen Alexis," whose novel, *L'espace d'un cillement*, with its Cuban protagonists, provokes breathless admiration from the Cuban critic. He pronounces Alexis "a Caribbean man" in whom "the revolutionary and the artist merged" (p. 254). Invariably, the only writers who meet Rodríguez's approval are those in whom the "revolutionary and the artist" merge. Consequently, the founder of the Haitian Communist party, Jacques Roumain, is predictably praiseworthy and much time is spent justifying Roumain's collaboration with the pro-American Lescot regime in Haiti in the 1940s. Whenever ideological issues become too complicated, Rodríguez simply ignores them. For instance, in his discussion of the early Haitian novelist Fernand Hibbert, he mentions the generation of *la Ronde* at the turn of the century in Haiti only to describe them as artists who "eagerly searched for elements of a national culture" (p. 137). If anything, the writers of *La Ronde*, Etzer Vilaire, Edmond Laforest, and Georges Sylvain, were singlemindedly cosmopolitan and reacted strongly against an uncreatively parochial national literature. Rodríguez's treatment of Hibbert is ultimately patronizing because Hibbert is no Alexis. Hibbert, despite his narrative skills, is deemed a flawed writer because he "does not understand that society is governed by historic laws in constant movement . . . [and] remains stagnated in petty bourgeois liberalism" (p. 147).

Rodríguez is not so much a literary critic as a literary historian. As a critic he not only limits himself to realist fiction but his discussion of various novels is heavily plot-based. At times more commissar than critic, his ultimate approval or disapproval depends on whether the novelist does or does not "understand class struggle" (p. 146). Literature is read literally and literariness gets short shrift. His lengthy essay on Haiti and the Dominican

Republic, "Creole Transgression in Quisqueyan Written/Oral Discourse," is proof of his gifts as a researcher, as are his richly documented pieces on Carpentier and Guillén. His illustration of Carpentier's credentials as a staunch Caribbeanist through his "journalistic writings" and his account of the reaction by the Haitian press of Guillén's visit to Haiti in 1942 both illuminate the prevalent theme of "cultural fraternity" between Cuba and Haiti. The 1940s in Haiti was a time of complicated racial politics and ideological maneuvering and the lecture on race in the Caribbean that Guillén gave at the Ethnology Bureau is an example of failed cultural interaction. Despite Guillén's questioning of racial essentialism, Haitian ideologues heard what they wanted to hear. The Cuban poet received high praise from one of the founding members of Haitian noirisme, Lorimer Denis, who lauded his contribution to "a new doctrine based on racial and continental solidarity" (p. 234). Price-Mars, the director of the School of Ethnography, who was present, did not say a word. In another two decades the regime that traced its origins to Price-Mars's ideas would execute Jacques Stephen Alexis. Trans-Caribbean cultural fraternity pales in the face of the horrors that would be perpetrated by those who were more interested in Guillén's race than what he had to say.

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