José Manuel Cruz Rodriguez


This is a remarkable study for several reasons. First, it will strike readers of French or Francophone Caribbean studies as a relic of a bygone era of French or French-influenced literary criticism, more specifically the era of High Structuralism. Secondly, it singles out for study a restricted but particularly pertinent and rich topos, namely the world of the plantation as constructed in two “plantation novels”—Édouard Glissant’s _La Case du commandeur_ and Raphaël Confiant’s _Commandeur du sucre_.

The book’s critical methodology is unapologetically anachronistic, and the rather strange order in which the inauspiciously grandiose and inaccurately general title upstages the far more interesting and apposite subtitle bears witness to the pretensions of an earlier era of literary criticism. Moreover, the methodology appears at first sight to be more reminiscent of the self-parodying “scientificism” of the “isotopie”-wielding certainties of the Greimas School of reading than of the more restrained, less technically showy approach practiced by other structuralist or formalist critics such as Tzvetan Todorov or Roland Barthes. It is perhaps no accident that the Greimas School has enjoyed little or no afterlife or posterity, whereas the work of Todorov (and of Barthes to a lesser extent only because of his untimely death) evolved in a multiplicity of poststructuralist directions, bringing to the fore the (de-)construction of the writing, and reading, subject.

The methodology used here to explore the Martinican plantation novel—the “SISAD tool” (_Système Informatique de Support à l’Analyse du Discours_)—is explained in the study’s jargon-heavy introduction and illustrated in the voluminous appendices. Readers who have no direct experience of the Structuralist “Terreur” of the 1970s may be either more or less skeptical about the value of this methodology than those who do. Most readers, however, will surely wonder whether they are being asked to use an axe to crack open a chestnut. Yet it does become clear as one advances through the book that the pertinence of the topos overrides most, if not all, of one’s impatience with the scientific jargon and paraphernalia such as grids, pie-charts, graphs, etc.

In fact, the meticulous reading that allows Cruz Rodriguez to present an exhaustive, statistical lexical and semantic survey of the literary “construction” or “representation” of a world system, of its operations and its values, its appearance, its forms, and its structures and their interrelations, is fascinating in its attention to detail. It builds up a thorough and suggestive literary “cadastre”
of the two plantation novels, underwritten as they are by the historical and cultural visions and values of antillanité and créolité respectively. The painstaking survey is based on the identification, classification, and analysis of what are termed “GN [Groupes nominaux] en force du Nommer, de l’Espace et du Temps” (vocabulary items concerning naming, space and time).

Édouard Glissant is the writer who (in his particularly seminal 1981 collection of essays, Le Discours antillais) most trenchantly identified the plantation as the cultural heartland not just of the Caribbean, but of what he called the autre Amérique—that belt extending from the U.S. “deep South” down into South America, via Central America and the Caribbean. In other words, he distinguished as “other” or “apart” that vast area of the so-called New World that was centered on the economy of plantation slavery—the crucible in which creole culture developed its most potent or intense manifestations. The world of the plantation is arguably more central to Glissant’s novels than to those of the next generation of Martinican and Guadeloupean novelists, including writers of the créolité generation who were so obviously inspired by his work, but whose primary concern seems to be rather with the Caribbean urban scene.

Cruz Rodriguez chooses a significant corpus. If La Case du commandeur is the obvious choice from Glissant’s novels for his study, a novel by Raphaël Confiant, equally appropriate in that its title echoes Glissant’s, is nonetheless striking. First, it confirms that, although Patrick Chamoiseau (the object of far more study in the English-speaking world than Confiant) is a writer whose work is more like that of Glissant from the perspective of its language (its layering, its depth, and its poetic quality), it is a novel by Confiant that provides the clearer focus on the plantation universe specifically. This in turn raises another question: is Cruz Rodriguez’s reading or methodology able to discern differences in the specifically literary or poetic quality of the language of Glissant and Confiant respectively? Perhaps not. But it is able to signal significant similarities and differences in the “identity discourse” or in the “world view” presented in the two novels. Moreover, the book’s conclusions are not, perhaps, as interesting as the revealing emphases and nuances turned up as “results” of the minute, statistical lexico-semantic analysis. In that respect, the book is a valuable tool for literary critics—not only a useful contribution to the field of Caribbean Studies, but also a generous one.

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