Myriam J.A. Chancy


The devastating Haitian earthquake of January 12, 2010 reminded the world of the existence of a country that, despite the central role it played in revealing both the emancipatory potential and the intrinsic limitations of the Enlightenment project, has long been side-lined or, as Myriam Chancy puts it, relegated to “the margin of the margins” (p. xviii). In fact, it was distressing but not entirely surprising that some newspapers (for example, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*) reporting on the catastrophe referred to Haiti as an “island” or as an “island nation,” clearly ignoring the fact that Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic.

In the introduction to her engaging study, Chancy forcefully urges scholars to stop approaching Haiti as a country severed from the rest of Hispaniola and from the Caribbean and Latin America as a whole. A reframing of Caribbean studies that has Haiti as a starting point and that foregrounds the experience of Afro-Caribbean women is crucial, Chancy insists, for the pursuit of “a new consciousness” that could redraw the entire region in more positive and less distorted and distorting ways (p. xxx).

*From Sugar to Revolution* brings to the fore deep connections and collaborative linkages between Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic dating back to colonial times while revisiting, in a stimulating way, national discourses from the perspective of women writers and artists. Elegantly written and passionately argued, the book puts female writers and artists from these nations in energetic, transnational, interdisciplinary dialogue with one another and with their contexts. For example, Chancy offers an astute reading of the Dominican artist Dorandy Mercado’s *Mujeres: Dominican Men’s Favorite Sport* (2010) where old, unstitched baseballs spread over a female mannequin to form the “skin” of a sculpture, denouncing a *macho* culture where women are still (mis)treated as a game to be played by men. Her analysis, however, acquires further poignancy when she informs us that the baseballs used by Mercado were in fact sown by disenfranchised Haitian women who, during the Duvaliers’ regime, were exploited in the name of “American” sport (p. 230).

Chancy organizes her dynamic argument in three parts. Part 1, “Sugar: Haiti,” focuses on the Dominican American writers Julia Alvarez and Angie Cruz and on the Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat. Using as her springboard the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans orchestrated by Trujillo, she investigates the ways in which the writing of the three authors, countering
or reproducing racist, xenophobic, and sexist dominant discourses, negotiate both the geographical border and the historical trauma from the perspective of their particular nation and their diasporic position. At the same time, she underlines both the revelations and the omissions that are inherent in these accounts and deeply affect both the recovery of a tragic past and the construction of a better future.

In Part II, “Sovereignty: Cuba,” the writers Zoé Valdés and Nancy Moréjon are put in a productive transgenerational dialogue in which they assess, in different ways, the effects of the Cuban Revolution on racial exclusion and sexualized exploitation. Part II is further enriched by a sustained discussion of the “restorative art” of the expatriate Maria Magdalena Compos-Pons, who gives primacy to the experience of Afro-Cuban women (p. 174).

Part III, “Revolution: the Dominican Republic,” features fiction by the Dominican American Loida Maritza Pérez, but also short stories by the Cuban writer Marilyn Bobes and the Cuban American Achy Obejas. The “subversive sexualities” (p. 227) explored by these writers are read against Cuban and Dominican landscapes but also against the U.S. landscape where some of their “queer” subjects relocate by choice or by force. Chancy persuasively argues for the inclusion of lesbian and bisexual voices in Caribbean discourse, whether they produce hopeful tales of liberation or distressing stories of patriarchal oppression and compulsive heterosexuality. Either way, paying attention to the life and experience of what she calls “the most liminal individuals within Dominican and Cuban society,” she explains, “may shed light on the inner workings of power relations in each society” and on the triangular relationship between Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic since what Bobes, Obejas, and Pérez highlight, is also applicable to Haitian society (p. 235).

Each of the book’s three parts is followed by a long and informative interview with, respectively, Danticat, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Pérez. Chancy, herself an acclaimed creative writer with roots in the Caribbean (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and “displaced” in a North American context, declares that she entered in conversation with these women primarily because of their status as expatriates (p. xxxi). Engaging in redefinitions of national, regional, and transnational identities that have race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality at their core, Chancy and her interviewees try to imagine, together, a “new world” and a “new way of being” where ongoing inter-national, inter-racial and inter-generational conflicts can begin to heal (p. 300).

Maria Cristina Fumagalli
Department of Literature, University of Essex
Colchester CO4 3SQ, U.K.
mcfuma@essex.ac.uk