Kristian Van Haesendonck & Theo D’haen (eds.)


The call for a more amply comparative lens of genuinely pan-Caribbean scope and critical perception than our habitually “orbital,” mutually isolating linguistic or culturally sectoral approaches to Caribbean Studies has gained steady momentum since the late 1970s and 1980s. More integratively comparative interinsular and transnational considerations of matters Caribbean remain, for all that, still far too few and far between. Fewer still are those that bring this pan-Caribbean sweep and cross-cultural outlook to their engagement with the area’s literary and broadly creative practice, its micro-macro effect and reverberations. All the more reason to welcome a collection like this one that so enthusiastically embraces the challenges and promise of just this kind of conscientiously comparative involvement with the archipelago’s multidimensionality, processes of creolization, distinctive (post)modernity, and otherwise emblematic contemporary dramas of unfolding, self-affirmative becoming, directly “to tackle the question of how far [its] literatures and cultures reflect the search for a common regional identity, ‘Caribbeanness’” (p. 1).

Following on Kristian Van Haesendonck’s edited collection, Going Caribbean: New Perspectives on Caribbean Literature and Art,1 this new compilation of twenty essays (originally contributed to an identically titled international conference at the Centre for Comparative Studies at the University of Lisbon) offers an impressively rich and wide-ranging panorama. The editors offer a judicious combination of an overarching survey of the area as a whole with more precisely located and focused comparative readings of texts, issues, and authors from its Dutch, French, Anglophone, and Hispanophone cultural zones and territories and their respective overseas diasporas. This provides readers with an amply textured, immediate, and well-informed appreciation for the simultaneously local, regional, and global dimensions of the field, its vital themes and, above all, the region’s defining trans-territorial linkages and contradictions, and the shifting emphases of its contemporary cultural-historical development, creative inventiveness, ambition, and achievements. Its attentiveness to the often neglected Dutch historical legacy in both the New World and the African Atlantic and to the often overlooked Creole authors and émigrés from the Netherlands Antilles, such as lyricist Izaline Calister and novelist Albert Helman, further enhances its abundant scope and depth.

Ever more universally “Going Caribbean, Going Global,” as the title of Theo D’Haen’s opening essay puts it, this collection’s exploration of contemporary Caribbean fiction’s narrative strategies, major motifs, and signature sensibility, as well as its meditations on the archipelago’s sociocultural dynamics and (re)inflections of established critical and cultural theory, all testify to a shared aspiration to effect a radical shift in the axial pivot of world literature, a vital “re-drawing of the world literary map ... this time with the Caribbean at the center” (p. 40). Eschewing the enduring fables of imperial (and more recent metropolitan) conceit, the traditionally hierarchical and no longer apposite homogenizing tales of patriarchic nationalist romance, and the too categorically set dichotomies of immediately precursory postcolonial “writing back” to the empire postures and modalities, its texts offer more densely woven, regularly border-crossing depictions of Antillean America, its conflicting and evolving notions of nation, citizenship, and identity. The centrality of area (im)migrations and the diasporas they have given rise to on the topographies of that redrawn map and this corpus’s rearticulating aims, storylines, and overall accomplishment can hardly be overstated. Like the editors’ championing of that revitalized Comparative Literature they argue these have encouraged and its contributors’ persuasive demonstrations of its revelatory merits, their on-going multilateral impact emerges as one of this collection’s recurring core themes and foci.

The analytic caliber and originality of the collection’s essays is, with few exceptions, uniformly high—from Luis Pulido Ritter’s examination of Guyana’s Eric Waldron, Panama’s novela canalera, and Erica L. Johnson’s canny revelations of Caribbean New York’s uncanny urban spaces, to Giulia de Sarlo’s provocative scrutiny of Ramón Marrero Aristy’s metaphorical appropriation of the novela de la caña’s conventions to what is argued is his covert anti-Trujillista purpose and Wendy McMahon’s finely honed evaluation of Caribbean literary representations of masculinity and various critics’ deconstructions of diverse feminist discourses ... and from Gary Mullins’s discerning analysis of fictional responses to local structures of political violence and its “Atrocity, Recollected” to Claire Bisdorff’s critical translating of the poetics of Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott. Essays on the thematics of the Caribbean’s environment, urban cartographies, a changing cityscape and art are, likewise, informatively complementary. The consistent reference to Esmeralda Santiago’s memoirs as novels in an otherwise revealing commentary or one critic’s undue reliance on the formulas of therapeutic psychology and psychopathological explications with a suspiciously antique, vaguely colonial air can, in consequence, be regarded as pardonable slips or rare lapses.

An important contribution to our area’s rewarding study, the Caribbean this collection argues for and reveals is, nonetheless, finally a region beyond geogra-
phy or specific location. Against the backdrop of its postmodernist theoretical
accents and inflections—and as the titular neologism, Caribbeing, succinctly
announces—it both denotes and betokens rather an existential condition or
generic experience transcending the limits and confines of any locale. Classic
crucible and emblem of a totally globalized universe, it similarly emerges as
contemporary archetype and metaphor for that “caribbeanization of identities
and spaces around the globe [which] has indeed become a reality” (p. 11). If
this Caribbean's emblematic function, as larger metaphor and prototype con-
cept, everywhere pertinent yet situated in no-one-place, can at times appear as
at once visionary perception and its most exposed analytical vulnerability, the
lucid framing and cogent disentanglement of its current bearing, its reconfigur-
ing paradoxes and protean variations, are this compilation's most undeniably
commanding strengths.

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