Véronique Maisier

Violence in Caribbean Literature: Stories of Stones and Blood. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2014. xxviii + 140 pp. (Cloth US\$ 80.00)

For all their cultural, historical, and social commonalities, the literatures of the Caribbean region are rarely examined in connection with each other. One notable exception is the work of Belgian scholar Kathleen Gyssels, who has repeatedly commented on this general reluctance to address the various Caribbean literary traditions comparatively. Whereas the lack of enthusiasm for literary pan-Caribbeanism can certainly be linked to the language barriers established by the former colonizers, she argues, it remains paradoxical as it contradicts the concept of creolization for which the region is so famous.¹ In *Violence in Caribbean Literature*, Véronique Maisier clearly subscribes to the “comparative transnational approach” (p. xvi) championed by Gyssels, bringing together five Francophone and Anglophone writers: Jean Rhys from Dominica, Merle Hodge from Trinidad, Gisèle Pineau from Guadeloupe, Patrick Chamoiseau from Martinique, and Michelle Cliff from Jamaica.

In her rich if occasionally loose introduction to the volume Maisier starts from the need to “find a balance between comparative generalizations and an understanding of local specificities” (p. xii). She describes her undertaking as “substituting a gaze that privileges exchanges between the Caribbean and Europe with an analysis of Caribbean conversations” (p. xvii) and problematizing the ambiguous positioning of displaced Caribbean writers and their potential for resistance. The volume generally lives up to these worthy ambitions by examining how the writers at its heart represent violence in their respective fictions. Each of its five clearly structured chapters focuses on an individual novelist and starts from a concrete but highly original element: a scene involving stone throwing. These instances of violence may look anecdotal in the novels from which they are extracted, namely Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Pineau’s *The Drifting of Spirits*, Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, and Cliff’s *Abeng*. Thanks to Maisier’s close-reading skills, however, the stone-throwing scenes serve as fruitful points of comparison between different fictions and are made to shed interesting light on five essential features of Caribbean societies: their close and indefectible link with history, the part played by colonial education in individual and collective development, the specific gender dynamics they inherited from the past, their intricate political systems, and the complex identity issues resulting from the violence that, in the New World, pervades not

1 Kathleen Gyssels, *Passes et impasses dans le comparatisme postcolonial caribéen* (2010), p. 21.

only human relationships but also nature. In addition to these major themes, the book deals transversally with recurring motifs present in the corpus, such as the question of naming, the pervasiveness of intertextuality, or the perpetuation in the present of palimpsestic models of oppression dating back to slavery (see, for example, p. 119).

On several occasions the form of the examined texts is commented upon, especially in relation to their postmodern tendency to fragmentation and non-linearity, which is unsurprisingly construed as a means of resisting European discursive hegemony and rejecting “the Western frameworks of a universal history” (p. 22). However, it would have been worthwhile to delve deeper into the form of the novels under study as they display what Maisier views as another form of violence, at once generic and textual (p. 88). This is an area where Francophone and Anglophone writers from the Caribbean seem to diverge more clearly—the former being in general regarded as linguistically and structurally more daring and innovative than their English-speaking counterparts, although, interestingly, this does not always hold true in the case of Maisier’s chosen corpus.

It is, of course, impossible to be thorough when one covers so much ground in less than 180 pages. One of the effects of such a panoramic coverage is that the background information provided can sometimes read as overly general, as is the case, for example, when Maisier discusses historical fictions (pp. 15–21). That said, she compensates for this occasional impression of superficiality by repeatedly building bridges between the novels and the writers in her corpus and by discussing other texts by them. As illustrated in the last chapter—which establishes thought-provoking comparisons between Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Cliff’s *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*—this accretive approach confers a welcome sense of solidity to the whole, even if the wealth of information entailed by such a methodology tends to make the text impressionistic in places. Overall, however, *Violence in Caribbean Literature* successfully combines original textual analysis with well-documented contextual explanations. As such, it is likely to appeal to specialists of Caribbean literature as well as to newcomers to the field and will most certainly enhance or facilitate their understanding of a cultural area whose foundational ambivalence can render it elusive.

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