Sheri-Marie Harrison

_Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects: Negotiating Sovereignty in Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Criticism._ Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014. xi + 192 pp. (Cloth US$ 59.95)

Jamaica’s difficult subjects: for this Jamaican reader, the first subject that came to mind on seeing those words was homosexuality, followed, shortly thereafter, by race—two subjects that are significantly discomfiting to many Jamaicans.

Sheri-Marie Harrison’s book includes both. Her work is an “inquiry into the problems of sovereignty in the postemancipation, preindependence, postindependence, and postindependence present contexts as they are portrayed in Jamaican novels, creative nonfiction, and films from the 1960s to the present” (p. 1). For her, reading Marlon James’s 2005 novel _John Crow’s Devil_ and witnessing the events leading to the 2010 extradition of community leader and alleged drug kingpin Christopher “Dudus” Coke to the United States identified the “confusion and dissonance that [have] illuminated both the lingering problems of sovereignty in the Caribbean’s postcolonial present and the limitations in our critical ability to fully interpret and understand these problems” (p. 1). _John Crow’s Devil_, Harrison states, in its discarding of the allegory of community, “forced [her] to reflect on the limitations of [her] critical practices” (p. 3). This revelation encouraged her to revisit classic Caribbean narratives, and to suggest that Caribbean literature since the mid-twentieth century has occurred in four identifiable waves, each one “marked by distinct moments in the region’s history … when specific politics governing the race, gender or sexuality of citizen-subjects are put in the service of solving the problems of sovereignty” (p. 5). Meanwhile, the incidents culminating in Coke’s extradition “raise concerns about sovereign citizenship in and out of Jamaica” (p. 13) and lead Harrison to ask, “What do literary texts offer us for understanding this incident and the actions of all involved, locally and internationally?” (p. 15). (Interestingly, James’s 2014 novel _A Brief History of Seven Killings_, a difficult and disturbing work, grapples with that very issue.)

Harrison’s next chapters then explore “sex and sovereignty,” “postcolonial sovereignty and gendered self-actualization,” “race, gender, nation, and criticism,” and finally, “the queering [of] twenty-first-century Caribbean literature” in specific literary works, mostly Jamaican. First-wave writing, she suggests, is “preoccupied with finding and articulating an authentic West Indian consciousness to negotiate the colonials’ relationship to their island homes and their spaces as colonial subjects” (p. 8). In second-wave writing, “canon formation shifts and is complicated by the politics of decolonization … as well as regional civil unrest associated with dissatisfaction with the realities of political
independence” (p. 8). “Third-wave writing discards narrative sublimations to make more explicit critiques of the role of sexuality and sexualization in modern concepts of the nation, its foundations, and its tools for shaping sovereign citizenship” (p. 148). Fourth-wave writing “overturns institutions of traditional order” (p. 152) and “undermine[s] old notions of community” (p. 167) without suggesting new ones; “the absence of possibilities for new, more plural orders should lead us to question how we think about order and sovereignty in the postcolonial present” (p. 180). Harrison concludes that “where Caribbean writers in the first half of the twentieth century assumed the political imperative of articulating visions of politically independent citizens and nations, this imperative does not necessarily continue to hold for writing in the twenty-first century” (p. 179). Furthermore, “such writing compels Caribbean literary critics to redefine the priorities of critical practices in ways that are more consistent with the political imperatives of the postcolonial present” (p. 180).

This assertion may be self-evident: literary criticism must be dynamic, not static, and an integral component of the process must be a periodic self-examination and revisiting of paradigms and assumptions, so that critical practices of fifty, thirty, or even ten years ago would surely be (over)due for reassessment. I found the book’s conclusion weak, and the ending abrupt. I am also unsure whether Harrison provides enough evidence to justify her claim that her model for thinking about Jamaican literature is “ultimately generalizable” (p. 24) to the Caribbean overall. On the other hand, the concept of the four waves provides a helpful way of viewing the literature of Jamaica (and the Caribbean?) produced since the 1960s; even if her overall vision is not always groundbreaking in its details, it does add perspective and clarity. Furthermore, Harrison’s readings of individual works are sensitive and insightful, she writes lucidly, and her scholarship is thorough. Her diligent effort to incorporate a wide representation of recent and contemporary criticism, especially that of her peer group of North-America-based Caribbean scholars, was evident. I particularly enjoyed Chapters 3 and 4, which explore the nuances and contradictions of socio/political relationships and divisions based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, and disrupt notions of “monolithic national identities” (p. 179). Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects, then, is quietly thought-provoking, making us approach old as well as new work in a new way. So, notwithstanding my above comment about the need for new critical practices being self-evident, perhaps Harrison has the last word.

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