Fabienne Viala

The Post-Columbus Syndrome: Identities, Cultural Nationalism, and Commemorations in the Caribbean. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. x + 282 pp. (Cloth US\$100.00)

That Columbus's 1492 "discovery" of the Caribbean was a decisive and ominous caesura in the history of the region is an enormous cliché, but a fact nonetheless. Any general study of Caribbean history departs from the distinction between the pre- and post-Columbian period, the latter summarized as a series of appalling phenomena: the decimation of the indigenous populations, European colonization, the Atlantic slave trade, and plantation agriculture based on the exploitation of enslaved Africans and, much later, indentured Asians.

Not surprisingly, throughout Latin America the 1992 quincentennial was a matter of protest and critical commemorations, rather than celebrations. But surely "1492" did not pass unnoticed anywhere on the continent. This was less the case in the Caribbean, partly because early Spain ceased to be the only colonial power in the region. For states and nonsovereign territories subsequently colonized by the British, the French, the Dutch, or the Danes, or later by the Americans, Columbus's landing may have been the start of it all, but debates on national identity have centered on what came after the Spanish.

Nonetheless, in *The Post-Columbus Syndrome* Fabienne Viala sets out to trace the role of Columbus in contemporary Caribbean debates on local and regional identities and cultural nationalism. The resulting study is at once stimulating and a bit disappointing. It offers erudite discussions of the work of leading Caribbean thinkers and artists, and this is clearly the field where Viala, a specialist in comparative literature, cultural analysis, and Hispanic and Caribbean studies, is at her best. Her discussion of recent debates about national identity in various parts of the Caribbean—former Spanish, French, and British possessions, but not Dutch or Danish colonies—is also highly interesting, but does not really demonstrate if and how the work of the intellectuals and artists she analyzes are representative of the societies they inhabit.

In the introduction, Viala discusses her central concept of *anamnesis caribensis*: "a self-cognitive method produced by cultural nationalisms in the 1990's" (p. 6). She argues that during the 1990s intellectual debates in the Caribbean were not only reflective of a long history of colonial exploitation, but grew just as much out of contemporary frustrations about geopolitical and economic disempowerment.

The first of the book's two main parts, "Post-Columbus Systems of Memory: Recycling Heritage," offers four chapters on the work of Fernando Ortiz, Edward

Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo. In a way, they stand on their own as learned introductions to the work of these Caribbean intellectuals, but Viala also makes a strong point for the linkages between them. She specifically discusses the place of Columbus in their writings. While this choice provides some interesting insights, one could question whether it reflects the core of their work.

The second part of the book is on the 1990s, and hence the focus on Columbus becomes more obvious. In four chapters, Viala discusses commemorations in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Jamaica, Guadeloupe and Martinique, and Haiti. Each chapter provides a general discussion of the context of national memory-making that deals with a painful past as well as a contemporary predicament (hence the choice for “anamnesis”), followed by a detailed analysis of specific intellectual or artistic expressions. Hence we learn of a Cuban re-enactment of *conquistador* sailings, national identity in the work of the Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka, theatrical persecutions of Columbus in Martinique, and “writing the zombie nation” by Haitian novelists. All of this is very interesting in itself, though I couldn’t help asking myself every now and then whether Viala’s choices really represented the way most people in Martinique, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, or Haiti think about the colonial past or contemporary identities.

In a short conclusion, “Toward an Archipelagic Memory,” Viala returns to the central questions she formulated in the introduction, notably the problem of “dysfunctional national memories” (p. 3) and fragmentation (“the 1990s Post-Columbus syndrome was pan-Caribbean but composed of multiple national commemorations” [p. 7]). Throughout her book, she advocates a pan-Caribbean rather than national celebration of cultures of resistance. In the closing pages, she points to the recent Commonwealth Caribbean mobilization for reparations as a step in the right direction. In addition, she urges a rejuvenation of Caribbean studies as a multilinguistic and interdisciplinary field, inspired by the concepts of transculturation and cultural hybridity. In the end, though, her argument might have been more convincing—and perhaps would even have led to different conclusions—if she had incorporated more anthropological fieldwork in her research.

Gert Oostindie

KITLV & Leiden University, 2300 RA Leiden, the Netherlands

oostindie@kitlv.nl