John W. Lowe

Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. xx + 443 pp. (Paper US\$39.95)

In his preface to this monumental book, John Lowe notes that while scholars of U.S. southern literature have become increasingly interested in examining the region within a transnational frame, many scholars of Caribbean, inter-American, and Latin American literatures have shown more “resistance” to including the South in their work (p. xi). This resistance stems partly from legitimate concerns that turning a northward gaze to even the most tropical parts of the South could implicitly reassert U.S. hegemony over the hemisphere. Also, as the astonishing historical and geographical reach of *Calypso Magnolia* demonstrates, remapping the circum-Caribbean to include the U.S. South is a substantial enterprise. This book ranges from the 1840s to the immediate present while also lingering in great detail in the spaces of the U.S. Gulf Coast, Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, and other parts of the Caribbean. However, by offering such an expansive scope, it also gives scholars a blueprint for mapping further crosscurrents between U.S. Southern and other circum-Caribbean literatures.

First, by adapting the theories of Édouard Glissant, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and others, Lowe usefully defines the circum-Caribbean as a rhizomatic space united by the symbolic and material flows of the sea whose crosscurrents shape and connect cultures “particularly in terms of folklore and myth” (p. 13). Acknowledging the rhizomatic structure reconfigures this part of North America as a component *within* the transnational region instead of giving it a place of renewed dominance. Secondly, as Lowe states without apology, explicating the myriad commonalities of circum-Caribbean texts demands a good deal of “plot summary” and close reading (p. 19). Indeed, navigating the circum-Caribbean requires a wider and deeper consideration of texts we normally treat as marginal to literary canons in addition to those we already deem central and important. As *Calypso Magnolia* demonstrates, the texts that reveal these circum-Caribbean crosscurrents are surprisingly accessible even if some may be unfamiliar to us—we just need to be willing to sit down and read them.

Lowe begins with a discussion of the U.S.-Mexican War in the fiction of Raphael Semmes, Arthur Manigault, and William Clark Falkner (William Faulkner’s great-grandfather). Chapter 1 shows how real and imagined encounters with the racial, religious, and cultural peculiarities of Mexico “unsettled notions of [U.S.] exceptionalism and nationalism alike” while “paradoxically” fostering a greater sense of the South as its own incipient nation, whose similarities to its circum-Caribbean neighbors thus helped inspire dreams of a

“new Southern empire” (p. 22). Chapter 2 extends this consideration of imperial designs by turning to the 1850s proslavery literature of Lucy Holcombe Pickens and the radical abolitionist literature of Martin Delany. Despite their opposing political agendas, Lowe argues, both authors ironically cast the same kind of colonial gaze southward toward Cuba. Chapter 3 begins with a useful survey of U.S. and Caribbean literary representations (and erasures) of the Haitian Revolution from the late nineteenth century onward, and it then shows how Madison Smartt Bell’s *All Souls Rising* (1995) participates in the larger circum-Caribbean project of finding “individual and communal identity” across racial, class, and national boundaries (p. 142). Chapter 4 explores how attempts to represent the “tropical sublime” (p. 145) by Constance Fenimore Woolson and Lafcadio Hearn were “part of a new approach to the circum-Caribbean” in the late nineteenth century that foregrounded ecological and cultural links between the U.S. South and “the wider basin, its islands, and its southern rims” (p. 146). Chapter 5 offers a rich reconceptualization of how Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay imagined the “ascent” of both the individual artist and a “hybrid ... healthy, conjoined, racial culture” through a paradoxical “immersion” in the humblest, most basic foundations of black “folk culture” (p. 204). Chapter 6 similarly reexamines the canonical works of Richard Wright and George Lamming to chart “the many similarities between Southern and West Indian rural life, diasporic commonalities, and multiple instances of literary invention that stem from racial oppression” (p. 248). And finally, Chapter 7 turns to contemporary works of the Cuban diaspora in Miami to show not only the similarities between myths of “the South” and of a “lost” Cuban homeland, but also the need to find new ways of representing the “new people” of this constantly evolving circum-Caribbean region.

All the way through, Lowe draws on theories and histories of the circum-Caribbean to show how the nominally “southern” texts he studies must be understood within this transnational frame. And while his microscopic close readings may sometimes get vertiginous, those details are essential for changing our deepest assumptions about the boundaries of national literatures. Though not the first book to connect the U.S. South to its southern neighbors, *Calypso Magnolia* is a rich and definitive study that will change how scholars read, think about, and teach the transnational literatures of this region for generations to come.

Michael P. Bibler

English Department, Louisiana State University
mbibler@lsu.edu