Barbara Lalla, Jean D’Costa & Velma Pollard


In their introduction to *Caribbean Literary Discourse*, Barbara Lalla, Jean D’Costa, and Velma Pollard point out that Caribbean linguistics has thus far paid limited attention to linguistics as a critical feature of Anglophone Caribbean literature. They attempt to redress the imbalance in this book, arguing that such a focus also serves to enhance the discipline of Caribbean linguistics by expanding the study of “literary linguistics, stylistics, and narrative theory” (p. 2). Early in the introduction they establish the stakes of the linguistic approach, highlighting the oral-scribal continuum as one of the identifying features of Anglophone Caribbean discourse. They define their use of the term “discourse” in the context of linguistic structure, as well as narrative function with reference to Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978) and David Herman’s *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (2002), but the nature of the textual analyses they present also suggests Michel Foucault’s characterization of the term, since all of the essays in the collection carefully ground linguistic and literary analysis in the sociohistorical context of the Caribbean’s own power/knowledge nexus.

Some of the essays appeared previously in other scholarly venues such as journals devoted to linguistic analysis or literary critique, so one advantage of publishing them here, in concert with new ones, is that readers are able to more readily discern the analytical continuities across the three authors’ treatment of their respective topics. Additionally, reading each of their approaches to the subject of Caribbean literary discourse in the same venue allows for comparative readings that would otherwise be less immediately accessible. The book’s chapters (four by Jean D’Costa, six by Barbara Lalla, and five by Velma Pollard) are divided into two parts: “Fusing Forms and Languages: The Jamaican Experience” (five chapters) and “Language and Discourse in Caribbean Literary Texts” (ten chapters). Together, they give readers a sense of each scholar’s critical approach and style and this, in turn, facilitates ready appreciation of the analytical similarities and differences among them.

Each of the three is a trained linguist as well as a published writer of prose fiction. This fact is part of the analytical strength of *Caribbean Literary Discourse* because each one is able to demonstrate her practice of discourse analysis not only by drawing on disciplinary training in linguistics, but also by examining the ways in which linguistic concerns influence her own creative writing. In “The Caribbean Novelist and Language: The Search for a Literary Medium,” for
example, Jean D’Costa discusses the challenges encountered at the linguistic level as she crafted Sprat Morrison, a work of fiction first published in 1972 and intended for school-age children in Jamaica. She reports that in order to gain the approval of the Jamaican Ministry of Education, she had to forego the overt use of Creole. At the same time, because she wanted her intended audience, children between the ages of ten and twelve, to experience the world of the protagonist as part of their own discursive familiar, she needed to draw on the cultural resources of Standard Jamaican English. She details her integration of common Jamaican and Anglo-Creole cultural experiences into the narrative of Sprat Morrison, experiences that would normally be “cued to Creole usage in Jamaican language behavior” (p. 78), in order to respect the Ministry’s requirement and yet place the narrative within Jamaican vernacular culture. The point she highlights here, by means of discourse analysis, is the importance of the “creole language situation in the development of a vernacular literature” in the region (p. 2). What her analysis also reveals is the way in which particular linguistic requirements and restrictions can determine aspects of a story’s plot and characterization. In deciding that the protagonist in Sprat Morrison had to be male in order to pique the reading interest of the average Jamaican boy of the day, he had to be rendered as an only child, used to solitude, to realistically account for his more standardized oral style, a style less given to the basilectal or mesoelectal style of most Jamaican boys of his age and social experience.

Velma Pollard’s contributions include an analysis of Lorna Goodison’s expert handling of lexicon and syntax, concluding that such “deft manipulation … is Goodison’s major contribution to Caribbean literature” (p. 95). And Barbara Lalla analyzes Martin Carter’s “University of Hunger,” in terms of its linguistic and literary dexterity in countering “traditional poetic discourse by intercepting standard structures in a number of ways” (p. 191).

As both linguists and accomplished creative writers, the three authors of Caribbean Literary Discourse have produced rich and sophisticated analyses, making a satisfying, intellectually challenging book which I recommend highly.

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