Jak Peake, *Between the Bocas: A Literary Geography of Western Trinidad*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. xi + 326 pp. (Cloth US\$120.00)

Between the Bocas is a regional sub-project within a larger intellectual project, “American Tropics,” promoting a geographical approach to the writing of American literary history. Jak Peake holds that the shape of West Indian literary history and its evaluations are determined by nationalist constructs that have led to exclusions, misrepresentations, and repressions of certain texts, writers, and social groups. He focuses challengingly on Western Trinidad, knowing full well that this is a part of an island, and is neither a political entity nor a geographical subregion.

Peake claims that the bulk of Trinidadian literature is situated in the Western terrain which “spans the Gulf of Paria north to south” (p. 16). Since the writers of Western Trinidad are the same writers we normally think of as Trinidadian writers, readers must work out for themselves whether situating the writers of Trinidad in this western terrain helps us: (1) to see the known writers differently; (2) to discover neglected writers; (3) to envision Trinidad literary history differently; (4) to liberate Trinidad from a colonially imposed mentality; (5) to be wary as readers of nationalist agendas; or (6) to see the island in a new way.

There are no parallels in West Indian literary criticism to Elsa Goveia's *A Study of the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1956) or B.W. Higman's *Writing West Indian Histories* (1999). The agitations in *Between the Bocas* suggest at the very least that interview-based studies on the practice of the earlier literary historians might be due. The book makes the case that a geographical approach to writing literary history and literary criticism can release them from toeing the nationalist storyline. In keeping with this stance perhaps, Yseult Bridges's *Questing Heart* (1934) and *Creole Enchantment* (1936) are inserted into Trinidadian literary discourse. Bridges was the daughter of Trinidad's adopted son and environmentalist Lechmere Guppy. Her novels feel the tug of the Trinidad landscape in the way only native texts can. But in a prefatory note she declares herself a White Creole “in its true sense, meaning a person born in the West Indies of pure European descent.” She identified consciously with the English or expatriate class, an identification that neither Jean Rhys (*Voyage in the Dark*, 1934) nor Phyllis Allfrey (*The Orchid House*, 1953) subscribed to. Peake affirms that West Indian literary history has a sinister tendency to exclude writers and writings that do not fit a nationalist or other “approved” agenda. But Bridges's fictions were not neglected or suppressed because she was a woman, or white, or too racist to be acceptable. They were neglected because they were published a long time ago under the name Tristram Hill and few people knew about them.

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© KENNETH RAMCHAND, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09401030

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:21:35AM
via free access

The six chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order. Peake discusses or refers to fictional works by writers in Trinidad all of whom were either born in the island or spent a significant part of their life there, and in each chapter a particular topic is highlighted. However much Peake wants to decouple the literary from the national and political, the chronological sequencing of his chapters and his choice of topics allow the national story to bounce back in.

Chapter 1 looks at material relating to the period 1783–1907 with eventual concentration on “neglected” or “excluded” Trinidadian writers of the nineteenth century. Charles Kingsley, James Anthony Froude, and Anthony Trollope here represent a colonial discourse that advertises its control and at the same time visualizes a landscape and a social order after Emancipation that is liable to fall into disorder. A number of recently republished nineteenth-century texts by long-term and immersed island residents are introduced: E.L. Joseph (*Warner Arundell, Adventures of a Creole*, 1838); Dublin-born resident Marcella Wilkins (*The Slave Son*, 1854); the anonymous author of *Adolphus* (published serially in a local magazine in 1853); and the decidedly anticolonial and anticapitalist Colored Creole Michel Maxwell Philip (*Emmanuel Appadoca or Blighted Life*, 1854). Philip’s book is impressive for its expression of personal hurt and the angry denunciations of the capitalist project. More important in it are sea-consciousness, and the idea of odyssey that shapes its form and reflects Philip’s sense of being without a place, a feeling elaborated in the work of major figures like Kamau Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, and Derek Walcott.

The local nineteenth-century texts and authors are found to be in a “para-colonial” space between colonial discourse and the discourse that writes back, but the authors show “nascent signs in their literature, however conflicted, of anticolonialism and nationalism” (p. 98). This is less true of Stephen Cobham’s *Rupert Gray*, an unambiguously nationalist text that encourages black consciousness and shows the violence, inhumanity, and self-destruction of white racism. If the father of Gray’s lover is deranged by his daughter’s intimacy with an Othello figure, the resolution highlights the respect and support that other white characters give to Gray. Gray’s commitment to being a member of an Empire that unites many races and countries is an idealistic corollary of the early nationalist argument that saw no contradiction between home rule and being part of the Empire. As late as 1936, Uriah Butler’s political party was registered as The British Empire Citizens’ and Workers’ Home Rule Party.

Chapter 2 is centered on the literature of the yard. For Peake, the yard is a Port of Spain reality that contrasts with its seeming opposite, the Colonial House discussed in Chapter 3. The contrast is new and interesting. The yard existed in all the islands in the 1930s and 1940s. When the literature of the yard was first discussed in a literary history of 1970, it was described as marking the deci-

sive establishment of social realism and native language expression in all West Indian literature. Peake concentrates on the nonyard “Colonial House” in his discussion of *Questing Heart* and Alfred Mendes’s *Pitch Lake*, both published (like Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*) in 1934. *Questing Heart* is an avant-garde prefeminist work and a kind of dialectical novel of ideas and feelings. It is a satire on a narrow-minded, hedonistic, and gossip-ridden white creole society in response to whose ruling male chauvinism women are unwilling or afraid to think of their own reality. Bridges gives expression to contending points of view as her English protagonist explores her nature as a female, and considers the options available to a woman who wants to be independent, to have intellectual and spiritual oneness with a man, and to enjoy sexual satisfaction with him. Peake’s application of his theory to Bridges’s *Questing Heart* is inhibited by his opinion that it is racist, but it is well-conducted and helps to explain “literary geography” much better than his direct explications, although he doesn’t explain how “literary geography” differs from “sense of place.”

Chapter 4, “Challenge from the South 1935–1945,” is built on Bridges’s *Creole Enchantment* (1936) and Ralph de Boissiere’s classic novel *Crown Jewel* (1952), still the best fictional recognition of Trinidad oil. One of the main characters is based on the labor leader Uriah Butler, and the novel describes the accumulated social and political consequences for working people of the exploitation of Trinidad oil. It also describes at first hand the immediate circumstances that provoked the oilfield workers’ action that began in Fyzabad in 1937 and spread to include workers at the port, in the city, and on the sugar estates. Bridges’s novel is valuable for its picture of pioneer mining operations in the 1930s and before, and for its moving and natural evocation of a landscape whose degradation began with these explorations. The novel comes to a tragic climax with a representation of the horrific fire that actually took place on Bunsee Partap’s land at The Fyzabad Dome Oilfields in 1928 when 16 people perished (Fr A. De Verteuil, *Eight East Indian Immigrants* [1989]). There are already formidable economic and technical writings on the petroleum industry like Higgins’s *A History of Trinidad Oil* (1996); *Creole Enchantment* and *Crown Jewel* add important dimensions to this literature.

Chapter 5 “The Sub-Urban Expansion (1940s–1950s)” turns to Port of Spain, the East-West corridor, and San Fernando, looking at literary representations of the port, the city, and the countryside. and the complex exchanges between them. Peake alludes to “a binary paradigm of the corrupt city and the rural ideal,” and then partly disassociates himself from it by recognizing that “the relationship between urban and rural areas often operates in more complex or subtle ways in literary texts than such a polarized representation permits” (p. 216). It is more than that, and it does not need traveling theory to describe

it. In Trinidad, the synergies between East and West, country and city, native and foreign are deep and lived. In this fusion society, they visibly and invisibly inform everything including the literature produced by almost all Trinidad writers, wherever they come from and whatever the setting of their works.

Between the Bocas recognizes the fusions as well as the stratifications in the city and is fascinated by the notion of Port of Spain as port harbor and commercial and industrial gateway. The disposition of settlement in Port of Spain on which sugar-cane plantations once existed, the coexistence of the yards, the lower-class dwellings, the sinister streets, the raw night life around port, harbor, and market, the big stores, the encampments of derelicts, the posh residences and colonial houses—all of these make Port of Spain a microcosm in which the synergies of the whole island generate a contagious energy. Would the literary geography have been different if Stephen Stuempfle's monumental *Port of Spain: The Construction of a City* (2018) had been published before the writing of *Between the Bocas*?

The final (and least satisfactory) chapter covers the period from Independence (1962) to 2010, including the Black Power movement of 1970 but not the Muslimeen disturbance of 1990. It has little to say about the ethnic bases of the two political parties since 1956 and the rise of African-Indian political conflicts in the 1960s, and it spends only a few words on the futuristic *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Instead, it makes use of Monique Roffey's novel *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle*, which begins in 1956, the year of the advent of Eric Williams and the PNM, to access the anxiety of Whites as a black-majority party takes power.

Peake argues that although the whole western coastline is washed by the Gulf of Paria, it was of seminal importance to the historical development of Port of Spain, San Fernando, and Chaguanas. The importance of the Gulf is further emphasized by reminders of the geological connections and of the long-standing commercial intercourse between Venezuela and Trinidad (see Kelvin Singh, *British-Controlled Trinidad and Venezuela* [2010]). Peake notes that it was a base and a haven for Venezuelan revolutionaries in the early twentieth century. Since then, illegal Trinidadian migration, contraband, fishing disputes, the activities of Boysie Singh ("the pirate of the Gulf"), and the present flood of refugees have kept the countries very much in each other's consciousness. The nineteenth-century writers dealt in the connection. Twentieth-century Trinidadian writers register the penetration in calypsos, short stories, and novels but few works are wholly given over to exploring the interactions. More tellingly perhaps, Trinidad's Parang and La Divina Pastora are annual reminders of rich linguistic, religious, culinary, and domestic influences. (See Sylvia Moodie Kublalsingh, *The Cocoa Panyols of Trinidad* [2004].)

The case for the Gulf and the significance of Venezuela and for the revival of an orientation first projected by the British is well made, but is it perhaps only a part of a more extensive scenario? Sahara dust is a regular reminder that the Atlantic has as much claim as the Gulf on cultural theory and on the Trinidadian imagination. "Literary geography" invites us to inhabit more expansive spheres than specific geography, particular landscapes, and nation states. How does Peake's Gulf-oriented literary geography accommodate Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, which identifies a culture and a space that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once?

Kenneth Ramchand

Department of West Indian Literature,
University of the West Indies, St. Augustine
ramchandkenneth@gmail.com