FROM THE FRENCH ANTILLES TO THE CARIBBEAN:
“TRANSLATION” WITHIN THE FRANCOPHONE REALM

LIEVEN D’HULST

Introduction: historiographical issues
In a 2003 article, Romuald Fonkoua identified three models within the literary historiography of the French Antilles.¹ The first consists of an interpretation by Jack Corzani² of literary evolution with respect to the political and social histories of the islands; it is based on combined geopolitical and linguistic parameters. In this history: “[Corzani] retient ce qui est commun à ces espaces géopolitiques (Antilles et Guyane): le français comme langue de production littéraire; la nature des rapports politiques de ces territoires – quel que soit leur statut particulier – à la France métropolitaine.” (“[Corzani] retains what is common to geopolitical spaces (the Antilles and Guyana): French as literary language; the nature of the political relationship between these territories – whatever their specific status – and metropolitan France.”)³ Consequently, the concept of French Antilles does not include other French speaking areas of the region, such as Haiti, Saint Lucia, or French Guyana.

As for James Arnold’s approach, it aims to map out all of the literatures from within the Caribbean Basin as a single “literary region”:

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² Jack Corzani, La littérature des Antilles-Guyane françaises, Fort-de-France: Désormeaux, 1978, 6 vols.
³ Fonkoua, “Historiographie de la littérature antillaise”, 245.
… a comprehensive attempt to chart the Greater and Lesser Antilles and the Caribbean rimlands as one literary region. Heretofore all literary histories covering the Caribbean have focused on one linguistic and cultural region in relation to its former metropole.⁴ Fonkoua is referring to the idea of “really attempting a literary history of the Caribbean by insisting on the endogenous character of the evolution of facts” (“entreprendre véritablement une histoire littéraire des Caraïbes en insistant sur le caractère endogène de l’évolution des faits”).⁵ The semantic extension of the concept of literary region remains yet to be seen.

Maximin, finally, demonstrates the expansion of Caribbean literature and culture. She deals with concepts such as the fantastic, the carnivalesque, the initiatory, the picaresque, each understood from a generic and interdisciplinary perspective, while bringing together, “in space and time”, “relevant work for a specific content” (“dans le temps et dans l’espace”, “les œuvres pertinentes pour tel ou tel propos”).⁶ In spite of the broad vision, hers would be rather selective in method.

Of the three models examined by Fonkoua (Corzani’s, Arnold’s and Maximin’s) – others could undoubtedly be highlighted as well – only the first seems to focus more specifically on the parameter of language, which is the main reference point for the institutional discourse regarding the French-speaking world.⁷ Further, the connection between language and literature often changes from one model to another: either literature is associated with a given language,

⁵ Fonkoua, “Historiographie de la littérature antillaise”, 246.
⁷ Cf. the preamble in the Charte de la Francophonie approved by the Conférence Ministérielle de la Francophonie on 23 November 2005: “La langue française constitue aujourd’hui un précieux héritage commun qui fonde le socle de la Francophonie, ensemble pluriel et divers. Elle est aussi un moyen d’accès à la modernité, un outil de communication, de réflexion et de création qui favorise l’échange d’expériences.” (“The French language today represents a precious common heritage that establishes a common basis for the French-speaking world, which is diverse and has multiple representations. French is also a means of access to modernity, a tool for communication, reflection and creation, all of which that foster an exchange of experiences.”): http://www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/charte_francophonie.pdf (accessed 11 August 2010).