
It is one of those nicely ambiguous words: asylum offers protection to the persecuted, but it’s also an institution where people get locked away. Refugees seek asylum, although in the present day not many Caribbean refugees find it in the United States, unless they are fleeing from Cuba. Some end up locked away, or returned home—which might be worse. Asylum Speakers, though, is concerned less with the actual experiences of Caribbean refugees than with their testimonies, real and fictional, read within the context of a carefully articulated poetics of hospitality. April Shemak’s approach makes for an original and interesting book which places the figure of the “refugee” firmly at the center of contemporary Caribbean Studies.

There are five chapters framed by a lengthy introduction and a short epilogue. The introduction mostly discusses the book’s key terms: hospitality, refugee, migrant, testimony. All are used with an appropriate degree of looseness. This isn’t a work of political science or of international human rights, so “refugee” is taken to apply widely to those seeking escape from repression or from poverty, often into the United States but sometimes across other borders, such as Haitians entering the Dominican Republic. The term “testimony” uses Latin American testimonio as its point of anchorage, but Shemak allows it to refer to other kinds of bearing witness. “Hospitality” is the most important of the nontitular terms, with Shemak managing to draw tactfully on Jacques Derrida’s work in this area. Other theoretical ideas by Caribbean writers such as Wilson Harris and Édouard Glissant help supply the book’s framework, and Shemak makes her own contribution with a neat consideration of the U.S. Coast Guard term “interdiction,” which proves ripe for troping into the new critical term “inter-diction.”

Three of the chapters have a mainly Haitian focus. The first takes as its subject matter the narratives of boat refugees, using the texts from asylum interviews alongside the stories and essays of Nikol Pàyen and Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poem “Dream Haiti.” The second analyzes the archive of photographs held by the U.S. Coast Guard. The third looks at the 1991 U.S. congressional hearings about the plight of Haitian cane cutters in the
Dominican Republic—hearings to which no actual Haitian cane cutters were invited, a silence which Shemak fills by a long and detailed analysis of Edwidge Danticat’s powerful 1998 novel, *The Farming of Bones*. The fourth chapter then looks at the particular and understudied case of refugee seafarers, an important category for the extended Caribbean which constitutes the implicit geography of *Asylum Speakers*. Here the discussion is grounded by a reading of Francisco Goldman’s 1997 novel, *The Ordinary Seaman*, set in the northern Caribbean outpost of Brooklyn. The final chapter focuses on Dominican and Cuban refugee narratives, the latter in particular—unlike those considered in the rest of the book—offering stories of settlement in a new land. Here Julia Alvarez, Ivonne Lamazares, and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés are the main writers discussed.

Although one of the strengths of *Asylum Speakers* is its range of textual reference, Edwidge Danticat’s name is threaded through Shemak’s story, above and beyond the long and impressive analysis of *The Farming of Bones*. The book begins with Danticat’s terrifying account in her 2007 memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, of the death of Joseph Dantica, her 81-year-old uncle, after his interrogation by U.S. immigration authorities at Miami International Airport in 2004. Chapter 1 includes analysis of her story, “Children of the Sea,” and the epilogue—written just weeks after the 2010 earthquake—notes Danticat’s *New Yorker* piece on the death in that earthquake of her cousin Maxo, Joseph Dantica’s son.

Issues of representation, witnessing, testimony, narrative authority, translation, and native information are all raised and discussed with intelligence throughout *Asylum Speakers*. There are a few pedestrian signs of the book’s origins as a dissertation, and the analysis of visual material is less convincing than that of the novels. Overall, however, this is a well-framed book in the sense that it draws its boundaries in an unusually interesting manner, bringing fictional and nonfictional texts into dialogue with each other and extending the usual range of Caribbean criticism in order to introduce understudied novels like *The Ordinary Seaman*. Following in the wake of such scholars as Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, 2010) and Steven Mentz (2009), the end product offers a fine Caribbean contribution to the developing field of “blue cultural studies.”

As Édouard Glissant noted in *Poetics of Relation*: “We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (quoted p. 45).