

## WORKS CITED

- Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Eden, Kathy. *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame UP, 1981.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

~

Chris Bongie. *Islands and Exiles. The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, Pp vi, 543. \$65, \$24.95 pb.

The scope of this book is enormously impressive: centred on the French Caribbean, it also considers the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, pre- and post-revolutionary France, Faulkner and Keri Hulme, while ranging from the famous (Goethe, Conrad) to the obscure (Bissette, Maynard). The main axis is a juxtaposition of the beginning of modern colonialism in the late-eighteenth century with decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, to illustrate Bongie's concept of the "post/colonial": decolonization is not a clean break with the past, and Bongie inserts the slash mark into "postcolonial" to indicate an ambiguous separation/complicity of the chronologically postcolonial with the colonial period. But the book covers far more ground than this, partly because Bongie is unashamedly eclectic and digressive. It is, therefore, hard work to read (and the digressions occasionally lead to slippage in the argument). Its "central theoretical point of reference" is Edouard Glissant's concept of creolization: the basis for a postmodern theorization of identity as mixed, fluid, "chaotic," non-originary and relational. This creolized identity forms one pole of a "creole continuum," whose opposite pole is the essentialist conception of identity that Bongie associates with modernism, particularly with primitivism, racism and belief in a revolutionary future. He argues that neither pole can be fully attained, and analyses texts to show how they are inevitably drawn back, from one end or the other, into the "creole" middle ground; naive essentialism is no longer possible, but nor is a whole-heartedly postmodern ditching of essentialist identitarian discourse.

This is not to say that both poles have equal status. Bongie's position is unambiguously post-modernist and, for all he recognizes the necessity of the modernist pole, he is rather patronizing in regard to its proponents. And, since postmodernism is positive and modernism is negative, the reasons why neither is a tenable stable position are very different. Given the centrality of the concept of the continuum, an explicit discussion of these differences would have been useful. Thus, it appears that what destabilizes the modernist, essentialist pole

is a kind of *realism* — the “perplexity of the living,” in a phrase of Homi Bhabha’s that Bongie quotes several times — as it exposes the inadequacies of essentialist assumptions; for instance, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s “creole openness” (93) and “acute sensitivity to the historical changes wrought by revolution” (84) mean that “the abstract philosophical vision that characterized Enlightenment thinking about the exotic begins to give way to an historical insight, traceable in great part to *Bernardin’s own lived encounter with the colonies*, that destabilizes such generalizations without fully abolishing them” (85, my italics). Similar arguments are made concerning Louis Maynard (303, 309) and Hugo (260). These writers are thus forced some way towards recognizing the heterogeneity, historicity and constructedness of identity — *because this is how it really is*.

Obviously the same argument cannot apply to the other end of the continuum, to define the force that pulls postmodernists back from a complete realization of their creolizing projects. What, exactly, is the “necessity” of reinscribing, ambivalently and relatively, fixed identities? Bongie usually explains this necessity in deconstructivist terms, as the general impossibility of breaking free of one way of thinking and moving on to a completely different one; contradictory traces of an old ideology will always remain in the new one, and so a lingering modernism is inevitable. This generalized discursive inertia is frequently invoked: a concept “will always fall short of what it points toward” (10); “we cannot simply do away with . . . exclusionary thinking” (11); “we incessantly fall back upon the ‘tragic’ structures and constructs that we are attempting to disarticulate” (50).

At other points in the book, however, he rather tentatively puts forward a different, *political* argument for the necessary (as distinct from inevitable) survival of essentialist identities: a strategic, intentional, qualified use of collective identity to facilitate political struggle. Thus, “provisional affirmations of identity are often politically necessary, notwithstanding the fact that they are theoretically ‘unviable’ (to echo Gayatri Spivak)” (11); Kwame Appiah is cited approvingly for “[telling us] not simply to go ‘beyond identity,’ but to recuperate its language carefully, ‘strategically,’ in light of the fact that ‘the label works despite the absence of an essence’” (51), and Paul Gilroy’s “anti-anti-essentialism” (*ibid*) is similarly commended. But this second, political argument for the necessity of identity is curiously inconclusive. Returning to it in his final chapter, he admits that he feels uncomfortable with it (414-5), and would like to ask such “heretical” questions as: “why are communities ‘obliged’ to survive . . . why do ethnic groups ‘need’ to be different?”

This is very revealing, because it implies that Bongie does not conceive of political conflict as being about anything *except* identity: all politics is identity politics. One rather obvious answer to his heretical

questions would be: in order to mobilize people for a campaign to improve their living conditions (cf Glissant's remark, dismissively and incomprehendingly quoted on Bongie's last page, that "blacks in the United States naturally need Afrocentrism in order to struggle against their condition" 434). Bongie cannot see that identity might be a means to a different end, because for him it is the only issue at stake, and so he cannot carry the argument to its conclusion.

This inability to see beyond identity politics has implications for his critique of modernism, and ultimately for his discussion of identity itself. Thus decolonization, which he sees as a major manifestation of modernism's belief in revolution, operated with an essentialist conception of identity: the pure, originary difference of the colonized from the colonizers. But colonialism, too, legitimized itself through essentialist assumptions about identity (civilized/savage, etc.). On the basis of these two perfectly accurate observations, Bongie concludes that there is no difference *at all* between "the colonial project and its anti-colonial double" (13). This would only be true if decolonization were solely or primarily about identity. In reality, the main objectives for the vast majority of the colonized were economic; as Fanon — whose account of decolonization Bongie uses heavily — writes, it is "a battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger" (224). Only by excluding socio-economic factors can Bongie see colonialism and decolonization as identical. The exclusion of socio-economic factors also prevents him from conceiving of different social groups with conflicting economic interests. Conflict and struggle are merely "ideological," and therefore groundless in the face of "our awareness of the fact that we *are* all living in the same creolized and creolizing 'community-world'" (43). This in turn impacts on his theorization of identity, in which there are only two possibilities: essentialist or creolized (or a mixture of both). He cannot engage with a third, influential postcolonial conception of identity as socially constructed, e.g., Spivak's notion of the subaltern excluded from hegemonic discourse by his or her socio-economic position.

Reducing decolonization to a purely ideological battle over identity makes it equally difficult for him to see how Glissant can both promote creolized identity and remain committed to anti-colonial resistance. For Bongie this is a contradiction, and as such evidence of the inevitable, unwilling, persistence of modernist elements in postmodern thinking: Glissant's "vision of creolization" is "inextricably tangled up with other ideological commitments" (137). He alternately tries to play down Glissant's commitment to anti-colonial resistance, and to present it as valuable evidence of the inescapably ambivalent "creole middle ground" that he posits; both attitudes lead him into what I would argue are misreadings of Glissant's texts. In the first case, for instance, while on the one hand demonstrating that

*Le discours antillais* is (regrettably) full of decolonizing fervour, Bongie also claims that the pessimistic tone of the roughly contemporaneous *Malemort* is due as much to Glissant's disillusionment with decolonization as to his "local anguish" at the situation in Martinique (149-50), and even that the "unviability" of "the newly decolonized nation states" is more apparent in Martinique because it has not been decolonized (155). Elsewhere Bongie translates a sentence from *Poétique de la relation*: "if the imagination of totality helps no one organize resistance, one can at least believe that it might enable all of us to protect ourselves from so many of the mistakes [*errements*] that resulted from the old ideological ways of thinking" (142). Bongie treats this as a "double-edged claim" which asserts simultaneously that although the necessity of organizing resistance shows up the limitations of the creolizing imagination of totality, conversely, organizing resistance will inevitably fall prey to ideological "mistakes" because it is not protected by the imagination of totality: "The above sentence thus situates us *between* an open totality that, in its complexity, cannot be read in any univocal way and the simple act of structuring resistance that still depends upon the very *errements* away from which Glissant is apparently directing us" (142). But Glissant is not equating "organizing resistance" *per se* with "the old ideological ways of thinking," and hence "mistakes." The sentence preceding the one Bongie quotes (page 217 of *Poétique*) says that power now operates on a global level and so it is futile to try to resist it solely on a local level; later on the same page Glissant adds that the "imagination of totality" cannot provide specific guidelines for particular conflicts, but conversely "no solution put into practice can afford to ignore or underestimate the movement of this totality."

I have concentrated on Bongie's presentation of Glissant because it is especially on the subject of decolonization that I find him unconvincing. His accounts of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century texts, and of Daniel Maximin, whom he sees as an exemplary postmodern writer, are cogent and illuminating, despite the careless argumentation that crops up occasionally throughout the book, and that is an understandable consequence of the sheer number of novelists, critics and theorists with which Bongie is so ambitiously juggling.

CELIA BRITTON

#### WORKS CITED

- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skins, White Masks*. London, Pluto Press, 1986.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Le discours antillais*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981. Trans. J. Michael Dash as *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989).
- . *L'intention poétique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969.
- . *Malemort*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.