

Book Reviews

Caribbean Romances: The Politics of Regional Representation. Ed. Belinda J. Edmondson. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999. Pp. ix, 228. \$18.50 pb.

Belinda J. Edmondson's recent collection of essays by a variety of Caribbean scholars on the topic of "romance" in Caribbean literature offers a refreshing perspective on the Caribbean region and the work of its *litterati* in the midst of current discourses on the inclusion of Caribbean works as modernist or post-modernist. The collection seeks to highlight "the conflict between the desire for modernity — modernity in the sense of that phase of modernization associated with Western culture and 'progress' in the region" — and the paradoxical nostalgia for the old or 'backward' cultures that modernity is meant to erase" (4). The essays also seek answers to some of the conundrums raised by the constant migrations which are part of the Caribbean consciousness. Writes Edmondson:

Part of the "romance" of Caribbean studies is the belief that attends so much work on so-called Third World societies: that is, that you must live it to theorize it. The question of what "living it" really means (Precisely *which* experience of Caribbean life "speaks" for that society? The immigrant from America who sends money back to the family at "home"? The family who receives money from the immigrant?) is never really settled (5).

This lack of "settling" makes for interesting reading; these essays reveal conclusively the multivocality of the Caribbean. None agree, even tacitly, over what constitutes the Caribbean space(s). Furthermore, each reveals aspects of the Caribbean often left out of more dominant discourses (those presented by Brathwaite, Harris, Lamming, Glissant *et al.*): Indo-Caribbean discourse, folklore, "new" nationalisms (as dictatorships, for example, in Haiti, have dissolved and new governments have taken their place), gender, and a revisitation of the very concept of *négritude* which acknowledges that race is differently "read" (and thus constructed) from one island space to another.

Significantly, a number of the essays included in *Caribbean Romances* are meditations on racial disharmonies in the Caribbean in that they discuss the ways in which "race" remains a disputed and disputable identity, especially within the Latin Caribbean. In "All That Is Black Melts into Air: *Negritud* and Nation in Puerto Rico," Catherine Den Tandt confronts what she terms, with reference to Luis Lloréns Torres's poem "Copla mulata," "a kind of schizophrenic consciousness, a black and African presence that consistently undermines a white discourse always, in the end, under siege" (77). The essay reflects on expressions of *negritud* both in literary and visual art. Responses to a May 1996 exhibition by self-proclaimed Afro-Puerto Rican artists provide the author with an opportunity to explore further the schisms around race which exist in the nation. Den Tandt elaborates:

On the one hand there is the veiled and not so veiled accusation that calling yourself black in Puerto Rico is unpatriotic, that it invokes a United States model of racial politics (segregationist) that does not correspond to Puerto Rico as a *mestizo* space. On the other hand is the artists' insistence that the discourse of *mestizaje* in Puerto Rico is just that, a discursive construct that reifies black culture in folkloristic celebrations of Afro-Caribbeanness and hybridity while obscuring the inequalities experienced by black Puerto Ricans (79).

A nationalistic impulse to identify the "real" Puerto Rican as a *mestizo/a*, in contradistinction from bi-polarized (and as fictional) racial categories formed in the United States, prevents the emergence of a national conversation on the issue of Black disenfranchisement, that is, it ignores the fact that Black Puerto Ricans remain at the lower echelons of the society (as is also the case in other Latin Caribbean countries, such as the Dominican Republic and Cuba). Den Tandt points out, however, that "Blackness" is not a fixed category in Puerto Rico; it too is under constant revision, even by those who occupy that category by force or by will. Contemporary artists and cultural critics (such as Juan Flores and Teresa Hernández), without abandoning racial constructs, also "call for models of identity that take into account migration patterns to and from the United States and within the Caribbean itself." Hybridity in this context "is a more postmodern version of hybridity, one that foregrounds movement and discontinuity rather than race" (80). Yet, one aspect of this model left unexplored in Den Tandt's essay is the various ways in which migration necessarily plays a part in how individuals construct or deconstruct racial identities. The *mestizo/a* Puerto Rican who is able to dis-identify with Blackness in Puerto Rico may not be able to escape Black identity in the bi-polarized racial context of the United States; such a confrontation with alterity in the U.S. context would necessarily bring about a different consciousness of how race works in differential spatial realities. Den

Tandt's all too brief essay does, however, make us confront how popular art forms have been racialized and de-racialized according to migratory movements. Her discussion of salsa is a case in point:

But salsa, like race in Puerto Rico, is difficult to grab onto. Critics such as Juan Flores and Isabelle Leymarie insist on stressing its hybridity in ways that take us beyond the Caribbean proper, back to the barrios of New York and to processes of cultural exchange that occurred there, including exchange with African American culture. (85)

In initiating a discussion on the limitations of a discourse of hybridity which purports to be inclusive yet denies Africanness (especially beyond art forms associated with the popular), the essay makes clear that the Caribbean, even when interpreted as postmodern or postcolonial, is primarily a *political* space.

This strand of thought is elaborated upon in Kevin Meehan's "Titid ak pèp la se marasa': Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the New National Romance in Haiti." Here, Meehan argues that former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide has made use of national tropes of romance (configured in the literary male tradition) to establish a dialogical relationship with the Haitian people. In so doing, Meehan claims, Aristide has also altered the national discourse on romance by removing women from romanticized and/or eroticized roles in that discourse, and placing them in central roles. Meehan's essay is thus both a study of Aristide's polemics and the ways in which a national literature which is essentially political in nature (combating, for example, the censorship of the Duvalier years and commenting on the years of the dictatorship itself, often while authors were in exile) has provided the foundation for a political discourse which allows for a relationship with the people of the nation which is neither elitist (given that the rate of illiteracy in Haiti is high and that access to the works of Haitian writers is thus minimal), nor romantic. Meehan foregrounds his discussion in saying that "romance is one of the primary narrative forms through which Haitian writers and politicians have chosen to tell their stories of national identity" (106). Although Meehan traces this tradition back to Emeric Bergeaud's 1859 novel *Stella*, it might well be said to have been popularized in Oswald Durand's 1883 poem "Choucounè," which provided the lyrics for the song of the same name (a song renamed "Yellow Bird" and supplied with different lyrics in the Anglophone Caribbean). Durand's "Choucounè" is the story of a Haitian woman who forsakes marriage to her Haitian betrothed in favor of marrying a white male. The character of Choucounè is positioned as a betrayer of the Nation (her Haitian betrothed) in favor of the colonizing forces (the white male whom she marries). The female sex thus becomes the responsible party for a hybridity otherwise understood to be detrimental for the

stability and integrity of the nation-state. Meehan's assessment of Aristide's rhetoric speaks to the changing character of the national romance in Haiti which is beginning to recognize women's roles in the formation of the state. Writes Meehan:

Whereas gender elitism . . . remains unresolved in the canonical version of the national romance, liberation theology sustains Aristide's attempts to modify the status of women within the national romance . . . his depiction of women as subjects of historical change draws directly from the daily world of Haiti's popular church (113).

Aristide's style, notes the author, is in keeping with Haitian women authors' efforts at re-representing the Haitian woman more realistically and in more empowering ways. Although un-mentioned, it is also clear that Aristide's rhetoric owes a debt to the model of dialogism articulated by Paulo Freire in his 1973 treatise, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. "In the new national romance," concludes Meehan, "one might say, the Haitian *polis* is built upon *agape* rather than *eros*" (118). It is for these reasons, then, that he finds that Haiti, by way of its transformations, culturally as well as politically through historical time to the present, has much to offer the global community. (It is worth mentioning here that at a conference held in the Spring of 1999 at the Claremont Colleges in California, Yannick Lahens referred to Haiti's "chaos" as productive, as a site which scholars throughout the Americas ought to study further in order to better understand chasms of race, gender, colonial as well as slave history.)

Other essays in the collection offer diverse viewpoints on the issue of "romance" and identity in the Caribbean. A number focus on music as a mode of communication and identity formation. For instance, in "Canonized Hybridities, Resistant Hybridities: Chutney Soca, Carnival, and the Politics of Nationalism," Shalini Puri analyzes the role of "soca" in the racial wars between Indian and Afro-Trinidadians. Puri finds that it is in the persona of the "dougla" (a person of mixed Indian and African heritage) that bipolarizations of identity might be mystified and challenged. Puri's essay ends where it might well begin, with the question, "what general claims might one make for the political possibilities of a dougla poetics?" (30). Her preliminary answer is that the "dougla" is a figure whose "potential disruption of dominant racial stereotypes could provide an opportunity for specifically *feminist* contestations of dominant gender and race imagery" (33).

Puri's essay, like Mike Alleyne's on Bob Marley's impact on cultural politics, Supriya Nair's study of migration in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Faith Smith's sardonically witty investigation of an actual romance novel, Valerie Belgrave's *Ti Marie* (1988), provides fodder for further contemplation of what exactly is meant when we consider the Caribbean as a multicultural space, or as a nexus of

hybridity. What each of the essays in the collection points out is that the Caribbean offers no easy answers to issues of nationhood, race, class and gender. For these critics, the Caribbean remains a space of contest: it is this contest which is instructive and deserving of further study.

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Anthony Julian Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1998. Pp. xii, 176. \$56.50, \$18.95 pb.

A Semiotic of Ethnicity, by Anthony Julian Tamburri, is a book that had to be written. Ethnic literature needs tools of analysis, and the fact that many scholars are attempting to produce such analytical works is a sign of intellectual health and curiosity. However, I am not sure that Tamburri has succeeded in what he set out to do. If the use of a slash in the title was inspired (Tamburri refuses to hyphenate Italian-American, preferring to divide-unite these entities with a slash mark: Italian/American), his reference to "a semiotic" is not. To fit writers and their works into tidy critical compartments is to belittle both the seriousness of the critic's work and the importance of the author's freedom. In short, I am not sure that this book is about semiotics. If you remove all the convoluted sentence structure and the excessive quoting that burden these pages, the reader will find himself with a few good but poorly developed ideas.

Tamburri's position is ambiguous: he does not seem to have written this book to encourage the reader to rush out and buy the literature he discusses; nor does he want to providing new approaches to understanding ethnicity. It is as though he decided to proselytize for a cause he did not fully understand. Semiotics and semiology have their origins in what Roland Barthes referred to as *jouissance*, which is not "bliss," as it has been translated in America, but profound sexual-intellectual pleasure. Tamburri shares with us his enthusiasm for ethnicity and semiotics, but by his intellectual posturing, diminishes our pleasure in the works analyzed.

Tamburri starts from the dubious premise that ethnicity in literature is a matter of content. He seems not to realize that if ethnicity is reducible to content, then ethnicity is imitable, and anyone can be an ethnic writer. The problem here is that not everyone wants to play (or inherit) the ethnic role, and those who are not ethnics but pretend to be, usually do so for ulterior motives. Ethnicity is not a position one embraces half-heartedly. It is a prison into which "foreigners" are pushed by others. To embrace the cause of ethnicity, one must first fully comprehend the implications of this ideology, and though