
Michael Niblett. *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2012. Pp. 260. \$60 US.

A history and analysis of francophone, anglophone, and hispanophone Caribbean novels written since the 1940s, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945* is impressive in its literary and theoretical range and in its illumination of the development of a regional aesthetics. It is unquestionably a significant contribution to a field that has been chronically and acutely divided by linguistic and national tradition. Michael Niblett's near comprehensive approach reflects his theoretical foundation in world-systems theory, which views the local, regional, and national as "systematically related at a global level as specific social formations registering differential articulations of a capitalist modernity as itself a worldwide, singular, and simultaneous yet everywhere uneven and heterogeneous phenomenon" (14). His goal is to illustrate that during this period, novels written across the Caribbean have translated developments in the global system of capitalism and the closely related national histories of the Caribbean into specific literary formal characteristics. The book begins with the 1940s and 1950s when, Niblett argues, magical realism and the trope of the martyred hero emerged as refractions of the region's uneven development (a result of the region's being thrust into Western modernity by Europe's conquest and the subsequent imposition of underdevelopment). In the midcentury, novels were influenced in particular by the simultaneous hope for structural change at the national level (imminent independence in the British West Indies, for instance) and intensified pressures of capital which brought large-scale urbanization and migration. Niblett presents Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (*Masters of the*

Dew) (1944) as a key influence on the development of the novel, even as he criticizes Roumain's investment in a heroic figure set apart from the community, his masculinist representation of gender, and his limited engagement with the powerful forces external to the Haitian village featured in his novel.

Niblett sees two further historical transformations as significantly influencing the Caribbean novel: the shortcomings of new nation-states and the shift from direct colonial oppression to the "insidious menace of commercialization" (97) in the 1960s and 1970s and, following the 1970s, the development of globalization, neoliberalism, and the perpetual crises of violence and poverty. Niblett examines an impressive array of novels—including the works of Jacques-Stéphen Alexis, Sam Selvon, Wilson Harris, Patrick Chamoiseau, Luis Rafael Sanchez, Earl Lovelace, Shani Mootoo, Michelle Cliff, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Erna Brodber, Oonya Kempadoo, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, Maurice Virassamy, and Ernest Moutoussamy—to illustrate that the novel engaged these national and global developments by improving on Roumain's model. Novels refashioned the modern subject, rescuing her from the alienation of capitalist production and returning her to a dialectic relationship with the community; women and queer characters took center stage; and multi-layered, open-ended narratives pointed toward utopian fashionings of the future, an inclusive process of creolization, an empowering relationship between working and elite classes, and the abandonment of heteronormative and patriarchal nationalist practices. While Niblett shifts swiftly and frequently between authors, texts, and national contexts, he provides depth and continuity by returning, in multiple chapters, to the work of Chamoiseau, Harris, and Lovelace.

Niblett's key concepts are the body, the self, and creole folk religion. He argues effectively that the history of capital and Caribbean resistance meet in the body. The development of modern capitalism required a "reprogramming of the body" and the creation of a monadic subject while (enslaved, indentured, and colonized) Caribbean people struggled against oppression literally with their bodies and often expressed resistance through creole religions, whose rituals repossessed the body and repositioned the individual in dialectic relation to the community (7). Niblett locates this use of ritual in both Afro- and Indo-Caribbean writing, drawing examples from Brodber, Lovelace, and Michel Ponnamah, and sees possession also as functioning within the narrative form. In Lovelace's *Salt*, for instance, Bango's ancestors take possession of the narration as he tells their story to the Prime Minister. Niblett's engagement with creolization and folk religion makes a strong case that these terms, previously deployed as a means of ethnic or racial exclusion,

are being reworked to conceive of the nation as inclusive, in regard to not only race and ethnicity but also gender and sexuality.

The Caribbean Novel Since 1945 insists that we return to other established tropes and paradigms and see them in new, empowering ways. Niblett's project argues for the primacy of the nation-state as the site for revolutionary transformation and against ostensibly ahistoricist scholars who see us in an age of post-nationalism and celebrate liminality and border crossing. The work is at root also a Jamesonian history of the Caribbean (national) novel, and Niblett makes a persuasive case for the efficacy of Frederic Jameson's long-disputed allegorical mode of reading by identifying a literary corpus that self-consciously presents the reworking of the relationship between the individual and the community as the necessary basis of positive change.

Many of Niblett's insights are important and irrefutable. New and radically empowering representations of the Caribbean self and community, such as Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, effectively rework the limitations of the anti-colonial nationalism of the mid-twentieth century. However, the systematic nature of world-systems theory, I think, derails Niblett's historicist project in key moments. For instance, Niblett presents Myal, a creole religion, as uniting enslaved Jamaicans across ethnic lines during the large-scale rebellion of 1760; he describes Myal as rallying "a resistant Pan-African ethnic identity" and as therefore "inseparable from the development of a kind of proto-creole nationalism" (11). There is no question that Tacky's Rebellion and Myal (and related religions) have played a strong role in the development of Jamaican national consciousness and literature, but to describe the actions of enslaved people in 1760 as proto-nationalist before the modern nation-state had been established anywhere is anachronistic and suggests an inevitable, linear march toward the nation. Jamaica's politics and literature, as those of the region as a whole, have developed unevenly. Their lack of linearity is an important part of Caribbean cultural and political history. Claude McKay's 1929 *Banjo* was, for instance, in many ways more radical in regard to gender, sexuality, and nationalism than was Lamming's *Emigrants* or Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*. Pan-Africanists active in Jamaica in the 1890s, such as Robert Love, likely saw feminism as more important to collective progress than did Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante as they led Jamaica into independence in 1962. I mention this apparent ahistoricism not to criticize Niblett so much as to point out that he has attempted the impossible—a historicized local, regional, national, and global account of the novel of a multilingual and socially diverse region for over fifty years; he has come remarkably close to achieving it. His project requires more than one theoretical and disciplinary approach

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and quite a few scholars. I suggest therefore that we can gain the most from Niblett's brilliant and powerful book by placing its multilingual, regional, and systematic approach to understanding the relationship between global capitalism and Caribbean culture in conversation with scholarship that addresses this relationship from a monolingual, local or national perspective, as well as the scholarship of other disciplines, such as Deborah Thomas' anthropological study, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (2004).

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Works Cited

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