

DREAMING THE OTHER, DREAMING THE SELF: CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF TRANS/ NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Jacqueline Couti
University of Kentucky

Inde je te dirai de l'Ouest: afin que je regagne mon rêve
(Edouard Glissant, "Les Indes").

5

I have English, Dutch, and nigger in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation

(Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*").

This special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, "Discourses on Trans/National Identity in Caribbean Literature," proposes to consider Caribbean literature outside its traditionally restrictive cadre and resituate it within a broader hemispheric context. For a growing number of scholars, overarching similarities between and differences among cultures in the Americas underscore the need to move beyond linguistic and colonial parameters in order to reevaluate the region's cultural maps. Such an undertaking reminds us of Antonio Benítez Rojo's assertion, in *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (1989), that "the Caribbean is a meta-archipelago without a boundary or a center" (v). Other critics such as Michael Dash and Silvio Torres have similarly argued that Western academic discourses often objectify the West Indies and its communities, and thus chronically oversimplify the region's complexities. The contributors in this issue of *CRCL/RCLC* illustrate how colonial and postcolonial discourses contribute to the "transgressive character" of Caribbean literature. Their methodologies underscore the complexity of identity construction in the Caribbean by demonstrating the intersecting and crossing of territorial, liter-

ary and linguistic borders. This volume stems from innovative research generated by the New World Studies program at the University of Virginia. Founded in the early 1990s by A. James Arnold, the program advocates a much-needed interdisciplinary approach to the study of Western hemispheric relations.¹ The New World Studies paradigm incorporates concepts from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and history to advocate for a broader context in which to understand literary production in former Plantation societies. Such an approach reveals layers of meaning that extend beyond national boundaries. This theoretical framework creates a space for transnational dialogue and encourages a new understanding of the interconnected matrices of nation, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in the Americas. At the same time, it also acknowledges the role of the individual state in molding these identities (cf. Green 337-347).

The epigraphs of this introduction—sections from Edouard Glissant’s poem “Les Indes” (1965) and Derek Walcott’s poem “The Schooner *Flight*” (1979)—illuminate and inform this special issue’s approach to New World literature. Glissant opens “Les Indes” with an image of the European explorer initially dreaming the Indies into being and later deciding to bring their creation to life by means of his discourse (Glissant 67).² Glissant’s poetic voice ends by wondering what would happen to the Indies and the New World if its new inhabitants—transported from Africa—decided to dream their own destiny. In the section “Les Héros” the poet wonders: “Mais sur ces Indes déchirées, quelle miracle, ou quel nécessité plutôt a posé sa main laborieuse” (Glissant 111). What would happen if the Indies and its people transformed their identity from object to subject, and in so doing redefined themselves through a new discourse? What consequences would such an act of re-appropriation bring?³ Similarly, in Walcott’s “The Schooner *Flight*,” Shabine, the poet-sailor, refuses to choose between two alternatives: being a “nobody” or being a “nation” (Walcott 346). He also claims: “I had no nation but imagination” (Walcott 350). In so doing, Shabine becomes the embodiment of both and can freely dream or imagine what he has—and can—become. Walcott’s poem imagines a conflicted Caribbean self that eludes definitions others impose on him: Shabine, as a Caribbean Adam, can freely create and recreate his world and “name things for himself,” due to a presumed absence of history and tradition in the West Indies (Breslin 2). “Les Indes” and “The Schooner *Flight*” both imply that the Caribbean exists as an imagined community that has not achieved political embodiment.⁴

This special issue explores how Caribbean societies are redesigning the initial European “dream” that gave birth to the New World and its inhabitants.⁵ More specifically, the essays comprising this volume deal directly with national and transnational identity in Caribbean Literature. Following the trail blazed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, but applying it to a New World context, Tzvetan Todorov argues that the conquest of the Americas is inextricable from a European self-defined in contradistinction to the “otherness” of particular individuals” barely considered to be human (Todorov 11).⁶ For Frantz Fanon, the act of speaking or talking proclaimed the exist-

tence of the self in general, and of the Martinican self in particular, in relation to the Other (Fanon 13). These two theoretical discourses connect the New World and the Old by accepting the impossibility of talking about the Other without talking about the self.⁷

By contrast, Edouard Glissant's "poetics of relation" cautions us to rethink our perspective on identity and culture, since this paradigm encompasses more than a dualistic relationship between the self and the Other.⁸ Creolization, a chaotic clash of cultures and identities, creates an unexpected space of enunciation and creation where a (cultural) dialogue of appropriation and re-appropriation takes place and where old symbols transform themselves in unpredictable ways.⁹ Therefore, the process of identity formation imagined by Glissant becomes less about defining the self in opposition to the Other, and more about defining the self in *relation* to the Other and vice-versa. Glissant's poem pinpoints the complexities born out of the colonial and postcolonial discourses that the conquest of the Americas generated. These formulations of identity construction—of what might be called the problematics of relationality, rather than isolation—matter not only to current discussions about Caribbean creolization, but to theoretical conversations about multiculturalism in the Americas as well.¹⁰ This special volume joins these conversations by examining the web of relationships between Europe and the New World. The essays collected here interrogate the interconnections occurring in nation-building from colonial and postcolonial societies or present metropolitan states (cf. Stoler & Cooper 3). Indeed, after decolonization, new local ideologies keep on reproducing previous colonial ideas.¹¹

The interdisciplinary contributions in this issue also explore mostly how male Caribbean writers' literary creations reflect what Roland Greene describes as "fictions of nationality under pressure" (339). These fictional discourses from emergent societies attempting to define themselves and their identity against a dominant culture, often in a chaotic way, are intriguing.¹² For instance, in the novels about *créolité*, in the works of Rafael Luis Sánchez or in essays of Lafcadio Hearn, female characters are portrayed in ways that sometimes promote Caribbean culture, but at other times criticize the politics of colonization. Patterns such as these remind us that sexual politics and masculine and feminine ideals play a role in nation-building.¹³ Some male writers have portrayed nationalism and politics as discussions distinct from those about Caribbean identity or culture. For Maryse Condé, however, the works of many female Caribbean authors "suggest that before thinking of political revolution, West Indian society needs a psychological one" (131).¹⁴

This issue on *Discourses of Trans/National Identity in Caribbean Literature* covers literary works from the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to Glissant, Europeans may have dreamed the Indies but the Indies soon became master of that dream. As events such as the Haitian Revolution showed, the mastery of the Indies soon became a nightmare for some Europeans. Many novels and poems display how the memory of slave uprisings and of rebellions organized

by *gens-de-couleur* in Saint-Domingue haunted the collective memory of French, British, Spanish, American, and Cuban writers in the nineteenth century (Stoler & Cooper 2). Yet, even if the Haitian Revolution remains alive in the memory of the African Diaspora today, it has all too often been repressed in the European collective memory (Nesbitt, "Penser" 654).

Nick Nesbitt, our first contributor, redresses this situation through a philosophical exploration of the repercussions of the Haitian Revolution. Examining Toussaint L'Ouverture as the embodiment of self-sacrifice, Nesbitt ponders the notion of self-denial and the phenomenological problem of truth inherited from the Enlightenment. So doing, he examines how the politics of dissidence in revolutionary Haiti have impacted nation-building in Haitian literature and culture and informed the writings of authors such as Edwidge Danticat. Nesbitt's discussion of Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* questions the legacy of Toussaint Louverture's self-sacrifice and also highlights the significance of a traumatic legacy of torture, political violence, and emigration for a group of Haitian and Haitian-American subjects whose lives intersect in a transnational space. Nesbitt's essay shows that in the colonies during the Age of the Enlightenment, people, particularly freedmen of color and former slaves, re-appropriated great European ideas in ways that might be read as examples of transnational exchange.

Just as Nesbitt highlights the appropriation of Enlightenment thinking in Haiti, Isabelle Choquet's analysis reinforces the idea that interconnectivity between people and ideas from various parts of the world is integral to studying national and cultural identity in Haiti. Choquet investigates the ways that memoirs of childhood and adolescence frame national discourses in Haiti and Martinique. Such works, she argues, render elusive the definition of a hegemonic Caribbean self. Contemporary Haitian literature demonstrates the complexity of defining nationality for many Haitians who live beyond the borders of the island and who consider themselves to be in exile. For Emile Ollivier and Dany Laferrière, two Haitian authors that Choquet examines, the topos of the return becomes a source of anxiety in the Haitian diaspora. Choquet implies that only the Martinican writers Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau are able to construct an idea of the nation from within.

Following similar transnational networks and ideas, Alex Gil's essay proposes that Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* epitomizes not only national identity but transnational identity as well. He performs a thorough textual analysis of the multiple versions of the *Cahier* and demonstrates the urgent need for a re-reading of Césaire's foundational texts. Discussing the *Cahier*'s role in linking Martinique to New York via Havana during World War II, Gil argues that Césaire's long poem had an American life before it had a European or African one. By analyzing "the inter-American phase" of the *Cahier*, Gil reveals how the self-awareness of Césaire's persona evolved in relation to external influences.

Subsequent essays examine how one individual can affect definitions of identity. In discussing Lafcadio Hearn's paradoxical and lasting influence on French Caribbean

writers, both Valérie Loichot and A. James Arnold remind us that the Caribbean self often needs the other—and in Martinique’s case, a tireless globetrotter—to define its own subjectivity. As they explore how Hearn dreamed and even reinvented the Caribbean Other, Arnold and Loichot identify the intersections and overlapping concerns among the diverse literatures of the Caribbean. Loichot contrasts Hearn’s vision to the *créolistes*’ praise of diversity and their promotion of an Antillean self. She examines how the *créolistes* understand masculine and sexualized language as the matrix for a renewed Creole society, while Hearn understands it as an expression of a nostalgic past construed as an elusive object of desire. Arnold, in turn, questions the problematic way authors such as Leopold Sainville, Aimé Césaire, René Ménil and Daniel Maximin use this journalist/globetrotter’s work to promote Martinican or Guadeloupean cultures in France and the French West Indies. Arnold’s article shows how some Martinican intellectuals in France as well as in Martinique have appropriated Hearn’s vision of Caribbean culture and identity since the beginning of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, Hearn’s vision was indebted to French White Creole Historians from Martinique of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Loichot highlights how Lafcadio Hearn has paradoxically helped contemporary Martinican writers define their own identity while reifying and reproducing the vision of the white Creoles he had embraced. Thus, both analyses reveal Martinican identity as a multi-faceted and complex construction.

If the creation of the New World can be born out of the vision of one man (the European explorer in Glissant’s poem or his heir Lafacadio Hearn), the re-creation of space takes many surprising roads. Danielle Carlotti-Smith examines literary production in the post-plantation societies of Martinique and the Brazilian *nordeste*. Her essay focuses on the way plantation culture, and by extension, national culture, is reflected in two literary sagas, one by the Martinican *Créoliste* author Raphaël Confiant (b. 1951) and the other by the Brazilian regionalist writer José Lins do Rego (1901-1957). As she demonstrates, the serialization of Confiant’s *trilogie sucrière* (sugar trilogy) and Lins do Rego’s *ciclo da cana de açúcar* (sugarcane cycle) makes these works particularly fertile terrain for exploring the function of repetition and self-referentiality as they relate not only to literary production, but also to the construction and promulgation of Martinican and Brazilian national identity through autochthonous discourse in literature.

Paula Sato’s article brings us back to the colonizer’s dream as she reminds us that the New World Other was the creation of colonial discourse long before this character had a life of its own. She shows how questions of bondage and self-determination articulate and replicate the untenable nature of colonial and patriarchal relationships in works such as *The Tempest* and *Jane Eyre*. Then, Sato analyses the construction and deconstruction of the nation in Martinican Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête* and Dominican Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She finds that as Césaire and Rhys transform the monster from the two canonical English texts into the New World protagonist, they reveal the European patriarch to be the true New World monster whose

inclusion into the Caribbean worlds proposed is contingent upon his relinquishing his traditional role of guide for that of follower. Césaire and Rhys's rewriting of the British literary canon demonstrates that the white patriarch will become irrelevant if he does not change his role.

All contributions to this issue remind the reader of the strong interconnections between the *metropole* and its colonies, between the Old World and the New World but also between the different places in the Americas.¹⁵ For instance, Sarah Casteel questions the representation of Native American history in Walcott's writing and reveals the glaring absence of the figure of the Arawak and the Carib in Caribbean literature and identity. She therefore reads Walcott's use of the absent native not as an oddity, as some critics have seen it, but as a shrewd attempt to denounce all the pervasive effects of colonization coming from within the Americas. As a result, the United States becomes the new threatening Other: the *metropole*. What can be said, therefore, about American imperialism? This is the question that I explore in my

10 examination of the relationships between Puerto Rico and the United States, and between France and Martinique. I compare the sexual politics of literary works from Puerto Rico and Martinique—two islands that suffer from similar neo-colonial conditions of administrative dependence—that employ the eroticized female body for nationalistic purposes. I propose that in these fictions both France and the United States appear as threatening mothers (or motherlands), and as vehicles of castration. I argue that the examination of femininity and motherhood in Rafael Luis Sánchez and Raphaël Confiant's works demonstrates how dysfunctions of a fictional Caribbean family may in fact parallel the dysfunctions and the problematic ideals of nationhood of Caribbean society. Thus, an analysis of sexuality introduces another way to see how the nation is being imagined in literature, and how the idea of the self evolves.¹⁶

Collectively, these contributors thus offer stimulating points of departure for (re) considering the Caribbean and its place within postcolonial and nation-building debates. These essays confirm that colonial discourses and colonial rule are not a set project in that they are derailed, they are attacked from the inside and they are rewritten by the self-appointed "subaltern" who often sees himself or herself as the subject of his or her own new life.¹⁷ The process of colonization and the so-called process of decolonization appear in all their paradoxes and show that "colonial discourse places colonial discursive production in a context of conflictive interactions, of appropriation and resistance, of power and domination" (Mignolo 7). Therefore, it is our sincere hope that this project will stimulate not only readers of comparative literature and New World studies, but also those interested in transnational and diasporic theory: in short, all those who are eager to create a bridge between the literatures and cultures of the Caribbean and the continental Americas.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 1983. London: Verso, 2006.
- Benítez Rojo, Antonio. *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna*. Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1989.
- _____. “Creolization and Nation-building in the Hispanic Caribbean.” *A Pepper-Pot of Culture: Aspect of Creolization in the Caribbean*. Amsterdam & New York: Edition Rodopi, 2003.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- _____. “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences.” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. 206-207.
- Breslin, Paul. *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Condé, Maryse. “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer.” *Yale French Studies* 83.2 (1993): 121-135.
- Dash, Michael. *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. Charlottesville: New World Studies, U of Virginia P, 1998.
- Edmondson, Belinda, ed. *Caribbean Romances*. Charlottesville: New World Studies, U of Virginia P, 1999.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil, 1971.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poèmes: Un Champ d’Îles, La Terre inquiète, Les Indes*. Paris: Seuil, 1985.
- _____. *Poétique de la relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.
- _____. *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- Green, Roland. “Wanted: A New World Studies.” *American Literary History* 12.1-2 (2000): 337-347.
- Mardorossian, Carine. *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Writers Rewrite Postcolonialism*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2005.
- Melzer, Arthur M., Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds. *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2007.
- Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization*. Chicago: U of Michigan P, 2003.
- Mosse, George. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. H. Fertig, 1985.
- Mudimbe-Boyi, Elisabeth. “Le voyage sans retour.” *Essais sur les cultures en contact—Afrique, Amériques, Europe*. Paris: Karthala, 2006. 185-202.

Nesbitt, Nick. *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2003.

_____. "Penser la "Révolution Haitienne." *Critique* 62.711-712: *Aux quatre vents de la Caraïbe* (août-septembre 2006): 652-664.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn Warhol-Down. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997.

Stoler, Ann Laura, and Frederick Cooper. "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda." *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. 1-56.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *La conquête de l'Amérique: La question d'autre*. Paris: Seuil, 1982.

12 Torres-Saillant, Silvio. *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*. New York: Farrar, Strous, & Giroux, 1986.

NOTES

1. A. James Arnold has contributed much to the field through his scholarship and his role as an editor. Examples of his scholarly endeavors include the three volumes of *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Comparative History of Literature in European Languages* (Amsterdam: John Betjemans Publ, 1994-2001).
2. For an examination of the parodic reenactment of the New World Other's conquest by the European Colonizer in "Les Indes," see Mudimbe-Boyi.
3. In *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (2003), Nick Nesbitt examines this question in a French context. He claims that the aesthetic practices of twentieth-century French West-Indian authors promote a historical awareness that had been erased by the repressive violence of slavery, the plantation system, and colonial exploitation. Nesbitt also goes beyond the regionalism of Antillean exoticism and examines French Caribbean literature as a vital contribution in the construction of a global modernity.
4. With his concept of imagined communities, Benedict Anderson demonstrates that expressions of nationalism are multiform and are based not only on the ideas of the nation-state but also on the various ways that individuals, who view themselves as subjects, self-identify as members of their own community.
5. Homi K. Bhabha examines this problematic in a broader context through his concept of "hybridity," a subversive resistance to colonialism. See *The Location of Culture*.
6. In 1978, Edward Said explained that "[m]y contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness....As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge" (204). Gayatri Spivak has also examined the relationship

between the self and the Other but her area of study often tends to be more focused on the Indian sub-continent. Spivak explains: “The project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated Other that consolidated the imperialist self” (904).

7. This is what Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry or subversive imitation suggests. Bhabha claims that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite...mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (*Location* 86). Hence, there is always a resistance against something or someone else.
8. See Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* and *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Also consult Homi Bhabha, who inspired by Frantz Fanon also discusses this idea in “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences” (209).
9. Benítez Rojo sees creolization as “unstable states that Caribbean cultural artifacts, continuously transformed by a series of performers, present over time...not a process...but a broken series of recurrences, of happenings whose only law is change” (“Creolization” 19). Walter Mignolo’s research is also useful here, as the scholar explains that he wants “to identify the spaces in between produced by colonization as location and energy of new modes of thinking” (xv).
10. See Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds., *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*.
11. For a fascinating discussion on the relationship between the metropole and the colonies, see Stoler and Cooper.
12. See Dash and Edmondson. In *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (2005), Silvio Torres Saillant questions the Western intellectual industry’s conceptual paradigms when they are applied in a Caribbean context and he still stresses the experiential and cultural particularity of the West-Indies. The significance of such diversity has been underlined by the publication of *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Comparative History of Literature in European Languages* (1997). The insistence on the need to examine the specificities of the Caribbean suggests that the diversity of these cultures is still being chronically misunderstood.
13. See George Mosse in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985).
14. In addition, Carine Mardorossian’s *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Writers Rewrite Postcolonialism* (2005) illuminates such a problematic as she examines how four Caribbean female authors revisit the significance of national, geographical, sexual, and racial notions in the Caribbean.
15. For a study of the complex interconnections between a metropole and its colonies, see Stoler and Cooper.
16. In *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985), George Mosse proposes that nationalism in Europe is constructed around the idea of the National family—the symbolic Father and Mother. In *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1993), Doris Sommer demonstrates that the same idea can be applied to the South American/trans-American context for *criollos* or white Creoles and in a lesser way to the Caribbean. However, she does not address that the concept of family, and by extension that of national family, for the descendants of African slaves. This is an especially pressing issue in the Caribbean, where the father is often absent.
17. See “Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculation on Widow Sacrifice.” *Wedge* 7.8 (Winter/Spring 1985): 120-130.