

Critical Perspectives on Caribbean Literature and Culture

Critical Perspectives on Caribbean
Literature and Culture

Edited by

Dorsía Smith, Tatiana Tagirova,
and Suzanna Engman

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Critical Perspectives on Caribbean Literature and Culture,
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INTRODUCTION

The Caribbean as a region resists a definitive categorization. While the area includes the islands between North America and Mexico, Belize, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana, the historical, cultural, and social connections extend to distant places such as Europe, Asia, Canada, Africa, and the United States (Boswell 19). According to Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *The Repeating Island* (1996), the Caribbean has an identity that is characterized by this plurality, fluidity, and syncretism. It is:

the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings . . .¹

In the Caribbean archipelago, the diverse communities overlap and interlap into a complicated space that defies borders. This space has come to represent a changing framework of multidimensionality in Caribbean literary culture.

The hybridity of the Caribbean domain was the main focus point at the “Caribbean Without Borders Conference: Caribbean Literature, Language, and Culture,” held at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras on March 31-April 1, 2008. Distinguished Caribbean poet and artist Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming in her keynote presentation entitled “Imaging the Caribbean Without Borders: Fruit Salad or Fruit Punch?” questioned the distinct presence of language, nation, geographical, and racial borders in the Caribbean. She also emphasized the problems, including crime, tourism, and disruption of ecosystems, that these boundaries create. The essays in this volume continue Manoo-Rahming’s examination of border localization and dislocation in the Caribbean and refashion the perceptions of the Caribbean within a multiplicity of subjects: gender and sexuality, music, art, language, identity, theory, class, environment, history, culture, and politics. They also give a crucial interrogation to the complicated components of the multifaceted Caribbean experience. As the various worlds of the Caribbean negotiate and blend together, they represent in this collection the numerous complex sociopolitical intersections in the Caribbean archipelago.

When discussing Caribbean identity and literary forms of expression, it is important to emphasize analysis of the experiences of different ethnic groups and their unique ways within the Caribbean region. While it is still possible to speak of Caribbean experience or identity as a whole, it is also necessary to be aware of the nuances of each specific group and its unique experiences and implications. The contemporary analysis of Caribbean literature aids in producing new and more sophisticated readings of West Indian experiences that recognize the continuing drama of Caribbean identity with all its negotiations and transformations.

Divided into three sections, *Critical Perspectives on Caribbean Literature and Culture* uses literary and cultural systems to explore the Caribbean as a diasporic space. “Negotiating Borders: Women, Sexuality, and Identity” examines the creolized identities of Caribbean societies, gender roles of women, impact of sexual tourism, and disempowerment of Latino gays and lesbians. The essayists in this section note that much work still needs to be done in academia to give voice to these repressed Caribbean populations. “Creating Spaces of Caribbean Artistic Expression: Multiple Representations” focuses on how music, identity, art, and language create diverse depictions of the Caribbean experience. In this section, the essayists examine how the process of creation extends to new cultural expressions. “Deconstructing the Diaspora: Caribbean Writers as Political Activists” takes into account the tension between oppressor and oppressed, which has been a pressing issue for many Caribbean authors, and focuses on the role of writers in reconstructing Caribbean culture, politics, and history.

The first section, “Negotiating Borders: Women, Sexuality, and Identity,” begins with Trinidadian poet Lelawattie Manoo-Rahming’s essay “Imaging the Caribbean without Borders: Fruit Salad or Fruit Punch?” in which she symbolizes a Caribbean identity with the images of fruit salad and fruit punch, with the juices of their fruits combining into one fluid identity. Chihoko Matsuda’s essay, “‘Her breathing . . . fills the lungs of the theatre’: A Woman on the Caribbean Stage in Derek Walcott’s *A Branch of the Blue Nile*,” demonstrates how Derek Walcott’s appropriation of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra gives subjectivity to his Caribbean Cleopatra character. Margarita Castromán continues to explore the subject of identity by revealing the pattern of identity repression and resistance of Latino homosexual and lesbians in “Diachronic Silence: The Queer Diasporic Experience and the *Noise of Infinite Longing*.” The section concludes with Rafael Miguel Montes’s “Jockeying for Position: Sexual Perils in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s *Dirty Havana Trilogy*.” This essay explores how economic inequality psychologically and emotionally impacts

sexuality and suggests that Gutiérrez's novel presents Cuba as a nation that has lost its identity by living under the shadow of sexual imperialism and market-driven promiscuity.

In the second section, "Creating Spaces of Caribbean Artistic Expression: Multiple Representations," Josune Urbistondo presents a critical examination of calypso and reggae's influence upon identity formation in "Tuning in to the Role of Music in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *The Harder They Come*." Similarly, Tatiana Tagirova explores the construction of identity in "'What is Art?': Leo Tolstoy in the Writings of Claude McKay" by addressing the significant role of Russian literature of the nineteenth century in Claude McKay's artistic development. This process of creation extends to a new cultural expression of literary ghosts, as demonstrated in "Haunting Literatures of the Americas—the Caribbean" by Suzanna Engman. The section ends with Karen Sands-O'Connor and Caroline Hagood's analysis of how American popular culture references to the Caribbean and to Voodoo are based on reinforced stereotypes in film and literature.

The third section, "Deconstructing the Diaspora: Caribbean Writers as Political Activists," begins with "No Lil Ting": Louise Bennett and Linton Kwesi Johnson's Engagement of Nation Language, Social Commentary, and Irony," in which Dorsia Smith discusses the value of nation language and points to its importance in overcoming the colonial experience. Karen Mah-Chamberlain also examines oppression in "Romance and Romanticism in Samuel Selvon's *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*" by analyzing the author's depiction of cultural exploitation in post-independence Trinidad. By examining the issues of the U.S. presence in Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican migration to the mainland in "Palm Trees in the Projects: Puerto Rican Counterinvasion in Edgardo Vega Yunque's *Loisaida*," Marta Rivera Monclova explores Vega Yunque's role as a political fiction author. Similarly, in "Politics in Words," Mary Jo Caruso emphasizes Edwidge Danticat's incorporation of politics in her fictional depiction of Haiti's troubled history.

In pursuit of a more comprehensive West Indian view, this publication provides a novel perspective on Caribbean literary, cultural, and historical experience. The scholars featured in the collection complement each other in their representation of the multiplicitous Caribbean region with all its claims and anxieties. The publication covers the wide range of writers and diverse cross-cultural encounters within the Caribbean region and reflects on such issues as Caribbean identity, migration, and artistic form of expression. The essays of this collection cut across geographies, cultures, and disciplines, enriching Caribbean scholarship by recognizing the

Caribbean's tradition of resistance and courage.

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Notes

¹ Antonio Benítez-Rojo. *The Repeating Island* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 11.

SECTION I:

NEGOTIATING BORDERS: WOMEN, SEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY

Cuban author Alejo Carpentier envisioned the Americas as continents of “symbiosis, mutations, vibrations, *mestizaje*.”¹ The Caribbean, which includes many island nations that link the Americas, is quintessentially hybrid and characterized by plurality, fluidity, and syncretism. Yet the region is also divided by many kinds of borders—of language, nation, race, social class, geography, religion, and sex. The authors of this section analyze the arbitrary and sometimes artificial nature of these borders, their purpose, and the role that Caribbeanists and Caribbean writers should play in negotiating or dismantling them.

While some borders are already being negotiated, others need to be torn down. Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming in “Imaging the Caribbean Without Borders: Fruit Salad or Fruit Punch?” imagines a Caribbean without borders in which cultures and identities blend together; and Chihoko Matsuda in ““Her breathing . . . fills the lungs of the theatre””: A Woman on the Caribbean Stage in Derek Walcott’s *A Branch of the Blue Nile*” discusses how Walcott’s evolving view of the role of women in Caribbean theater has erased his own borders of bias and created a space for the creative expression of women. On the other hand, in “Diachronic Silence: The Queer Diasporic Experience and *The Noise of Infinite Longing*,” Margarita Castromán examines the glacial pace at which Puerto Rican literature is beginning to address homosexual relationships and calls for more writers to unsilence themselves and write about “the Love that dare not speak its name.” Finally, Rafael Miguel Montes discusses the problems that borders have created in Cuba. In “Jockeying for Position: Sexual Perils in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s *Dirty Havana Trilogy*,” Montes suggests that borders and the trade embargo have caused the commodification of sex in the Cuban tourism industry. These essays show how borders contribute to the Caribbean’s complex identity by simultaneously uniting and fracturing the region.

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¹Alejo Carpentier, "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 98.

IMAGING THE CARIBBEAN WITHOUT BORDERS: FRUIT SALAD OR FRUIT PUNCH?

LELAWATTEE MANOO-RAHMING

While I was attending a conference in Trinidad last year, Hosay, the Muslim festival commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammed's grandsons, Hussein and Hassan, was being celebrated. It was the first time in 26 years that I was back in Trinidad during Hosay celebrations and was excited about the prospect of seeing it again, so I suggested to two Bahamian friends who were also attending the conference that we go. A day later, while discussing religion, and upon learning that I am a Hindu, my friends asked why I wanted to go to the Muslim festival. I explained that in Trinidad we celebrate the different religious festivals. We are a mixture of different cultures, traditions, and religions—like fruit salad or fruit punch. “So are you fruit salad or fruit punch?” asked one of the friends. I subsequently spent many days asking myself, “What am I—fruit salad or fruit punch? Am I several different whole flavors and textures existing side by side in one sweet, juicy pond or am I a melding of juices into one exotic whole, with no distinction between the parts?”

A few weeks later, when this same friend discovered that I was participating in a conference in Puerto Rico, with the theme, “The Caribbean Without Borders,” his response was, “Imagine the Caribbean without borders—now what would that be like?” Because I was still meditating the fruit salad versus fruit punch question, it was not difficult for me to contemplate whether a Caribbean without borders would transmute us all into either fruit salad or fruit punch.

The underlying difference between fruit punch and fruit salad is that in the latter it is easy to distinguish the constituent fruits whereas in the former it is almost impossible to do so unless one's tastebuds are extremely sensitive to the different fruit flavors. So, in a Caribbean without borders, will we be together yet separate and distinct as in fruit salad or blended together like fruit punch with no beginning and no end

between us?

In much of the discussions surrounding the concept of a Caribbean without borders, it appears that the major obstacles to imaging a Caribbean without borders are the borders themselves, whether we construct them as geographical, philosophical, theological, psychological, ideological, anthropological, sociological or, in some cases, even biological. We have become so attached to our borders that we carry them around, or hold them close to the heart like dearly beloved family and friends. We dare not even entertain for one second the thought of their permanent absence for fear that just by thinking the idea of their deaths, they become dead. And sometimes we cling to our borders because they seem to be the only things in this impermanent life that offer us security and protection. However, when the borders, like everything else in this world, start to crack and break down with wear and tear, we, like the monkey in the Bahamian folklore ditty, "Once upon a time, was a very long time, monkey chew tobacco and he spit white lime," we, the descendants of both the masters and the slaves, take the tobacco of our history, chew this tobacco and spit pure white lime that we lovingly use to patch and smooth over the cracks and holes in our borders, seeming to make them whole once again, making us whole once again.

A recent example of this attachment to our borders happened when, as a member of CARICOM, The Bahamas was asked to consider signing on to the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). The ensuing discussion brought out many deep-seated opinions about what Caribbean integration meant to the Bahamian people, but the dominant objection to the CSME was the free movement of people and the common currency aspects that the CSME entailed. Further, the debate was characterized by sentiments such as, "but we are not part of the Caribbean; we are geographically situated in the Atlantic Ocean, not the Caribbean Sea." And while some Bahamians may appreciate their shared history with their Caribbean neighbors to the south, they are quick to point out that The Bahamas, so much geographically closer to its great neighbor to the north, should look instead at developing greater ties with the USA. In the end, it was decided that The Bahamas was not ready to embrace the CSME.

In seeking to safeguard our borders, we seem to forget that our region has a long history of free movement of people, starting with the indigenous peoples who traveled between South America and the Caribbean and reached as far north as The Bahamas. Once the Europeans arrived in the region, they began a process that see-sawed, at various times, between the free movement of people within the region, and the fortification of territories designed to keep out foreigners and protect the

locals. The Europeans were also in the habit of dispeopling and repopling these Caribbean islands as their economic and political ambitions dictated. The most bizarre of these territories was the illusory provinces of El Dorado, the “Ghost Province” as V.S. Naipaul called it, that included Venezuela, Guyana, and Trinidad as one huge territory with a mighty river, the Orinoco, opening into the great delta, the Gulf of Paria, guarded by a large island, Trinidad, and containing in its deep forested belly the Garden of Eden. The borders of this El Dorado were destroyed when Governor José Maria Chacón surrendered Trinidad to the British without a shot being fired.

The British broke up the provinces of El Dorado in 1797, and 14 years later, they passed the 1807 Act in Parliament to abolish the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which culminated in the emancipation of slaves beginning in 1834. But with this freedom came more borders when Britain instituted and developed a system of colonial government, the Crown Colony system, started in Trinidad and exported to the other Caribbean territories that Britain had claimed. The British then created even more borders when they agreed to import indentured laborers from India to the Caribbean to maintain the economies of their colonies through the sugar plantations.

Lommarsh Roopnarine, in his book, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920* (2007), explains that, “Although East Indian emigrants were drawn principally from North and South India, and were mainly young, single male agriculturalists, they were diverse in language, culture, caste, custom and occupation.”¹ During the indenture period, East Indians in the Caribbean spoke 20 different Indian languages, including Hindi and Bhojpuri, which are still spoken by a small segment of the Indo-Caribbean population. The religious composition of the East Indian indentured laborers was 83.6 percent Hindu, 16.3 percent Muslim, and 0.1 percent Christian. The caste composition of the East Indian indentured laborers reflected that of India, namely: Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaishya (business and agricultural castes) and Sudras (menial castes). Furthermore, the East Indian emigrants to the Caribbean were, in their homeland, musicians, cooks, sweepers, coachmen, washermen, grooms and schoolteachers.² With the importation of East Indians into the Caribbean came new languages, religions, and castes, which created borders among the East Indians as well as between them and the African and European people they met in the Caribbean.

The present-day borders were now set. The Caribbean islands belonged mainly to four major European powers: Britain, Spain, France, and Holland. The majority of the underclass were composed of people from the African Continent and the Indian Sub-continent, with a smattering of

indigenous peoples (those left over from the partial genocide). Among her Caribbean colonies, Britain was in the habit of using the constabulary from one territory to police the citizens of another territory, enabling tensions and antagonisms between the islands. To paraphrase Dr. Eric Williams from his book, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1993):

the national character [of the Caribbean person was] developed and encouraged by generations of slavery and colonialism, by harsh pressures, political, economic and social, to which they have been subjected, by the domination in theory and in fact of the metropolitan organization and the metropolitan civilization personified by the expatriate officer who ruled...without any reference whatsoever to the wishes, or opinions or needs of the [Caribbean] people.³

Dr. Eric Williams wrote those words on August 31, 1962, the day when Trinidad and Tobago achieved independence from Britain. It was a time when the independence movement was sweeping through the Caribbean. But that movement created even more borders, and the question then became one of who belonged versus who did not. As Sir Ronald Sanders, the former Caribbean diplomat wrote in his online article, “Political Union? Dreaming Again” (2008), “Many politicians have promoted nationalism at the expense of regionalism and so imbued in their people the idea that they can prosper on their own. In turn, this has fostered rivalry and resentment between Caribbean peoples.”⁴ It is not difficult to understand the development of this nationalistic philosophy, especially in light of the more than three centuries of metropolitan governorship in an era of genocide, slavery, and indenture, when identities were destroyed and those that were not destroyed were denigrated as being less than human. Lumping together Africans and Indians, Lord Harris wrote these words in the 19th century, which Dr. Eric Williams quoted in *History*: “They must be treated like children—and wayward ones, too—the former, from the utterly savage state in which they arrive; the latter, from their habits and religion.”⁵

Political independence then became intricately bound with concepts of identity and nationalism, thus preserving borders in a post-independence Caribbean. Of course, we cannot forget that not all of the Caribbean islands are independent, and in some instances this creates another border that separates Caribbean people into us and them. Even within the non-independent territories, there are those who are fighting for independence and nationalism as opposed to regionalism. Returning to the identity question, and to paraphrase Edward Said’s idea of identity, we are all dislocated people exiled from our homeland, but we are constantly

attempting to enhance our identity in the world in which we find ourselves or in the world in which we consciously locate ourselves.⁶ We constantly seek to renegotiate the interstitial spaces of our realities, and in the process our cultural and political identities seem to shape-shift accordingly.

Historically, race and social class have been used as borders to separate us, even though, as Dr. Eric Williams wrote, “The Negro, the Indian, French and Spaniard, English and Portuguese, Syrian and Lebanese, Chinese and Jew . . . all are victims of the same subordination, all have been tarred with the same brush of political inferiority.”⁷ Yet, in the 21st century, we continue to border ourselves with race and social class. In Trinidad and Guyana, many of the socio-economic and political challenges stem directly from politicians “setting fire” to historical kindling, inflaming passions, and igniting tensions in communities that could most probably heal themselves and make themselves whole, given the benefit of political nurturing.

The borders are not just geographical. For nearly 50 years, we, the people of the Caribbean, have been encouraged to border ourselves for our own well-being and protection against the socialist ideology that exists in Cuba. Always, when the question of the opening of Cuba’s borders comes up, the rest of the Caribbean, especially those of us whose economies are heavily supported by tourism, become concerned for our economic prosperity, which we believe is only able to thrive in the presence of economic borders around Cuba.

We also use language to create borders that keep us separate: the languages of our colonizers (Spanish, French, English, and Dutch) continue to keep us ignorant of each other and foster attitudes of superiority over those who speak a foreign tongue. This happens not only between the different Caribbean islands, as for example the case of Creole-speaking Haitian immigrants in the English-speaking Bahamas, but also within communities, as for example in Trinidad and Tobago where the Patois language is rapidly disappearing and Hindi, Arabic and Chinese are hardly spoken anymore. In the English-speaking Caribbean, the language that identifies an educated person is proper English. French and Spanish are taught in the schools but little value is placed on one’s ability to speak Creole, Hindi, Arabic or Chinese, languages that have survived, albeit tenuously, slavery and indenture. The languages of the indigenous peoples are hardly even known by the rest of us and their cultures and beliefs are similarly great mysteries to us, maintaining borders that have existed since 1492.

We also use religion to construct borders, in an attempt to keep alive the demonization of and prejudice against religions such as Hinduism,

Islam, Vodoun, Santeria, and Orisha, to name some of the more common non-Christian religions found in the Caribbean. In the Jehovah's Witnesses online *Awake!* Magazine, July 8, 2000, an article on Santeria concluded that, "Santeria, which has its origins in Ancient Africa, is closely connected with spiritism, a form of worship that is condemned in the Bible."⁸ In the Jehovah's Witnesses online *Watchtower* magazine of August 1, 2002, in an article exploring the nature of yoga, it was concluded that:

Yoga, which can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization and which is a common practice in Hinduism, employs divination and magic, which are detestable to God because they are works of the demons and the fallen flesh.⁹

In an online article titled, "Hindus and Christians gun for each other in Trinidad and Tobago," Indian journalist J Sesha Sai, reported that in February 1999, a war of words erupted in Trinidad and Tobago when a Seventh Day Adventist Minister, Noel Emmanuel Jack stated in the *Trinidad Guardian* newspaper that Hinduism was a pagan religion.¹⁰ The ensuing debate over whether or not any religious group should be allowed to harass another group, especially during times of religious observances, prompted calls for the constitution of Trinidad and Tobago to be amended to protect all religions against discrimination and blasphemous libel. In June 2000, the Equal Opportunity Act of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was amended to make it a criminal offense for any person to publicly offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of persons with the intent to incite religious hatred.¹¹ One of the lines in the National Anthem of Trinidad and Tobago is, "where every creed and race find an equal place." It is hoped that the Equal Opportunity Act, 2000, brings every creed and race in Trinidad and Tobago closer to finding their equal places.

Religion also plays a role in maintaining borders created by gender discrimination. The Caribbean region enjoys the privilege of Universal Suffrage, yet women's enfranchisement is still regarded with distrust by many. We are still bogged down and bordered by what is woman's work and what is man's work; where is the woman's place and where is the man's place; who should be at the head of the family and who should not; and whose brain is wired for science and mathematics and whose brain is not. And in many instances, proof for the argument in favor of man's superiority is directly tied back to the religious texts and God. Despite the fact that the Caribbean has already elected women prime ministers, for example Dame Eugenia Charles in Dominica and Portia Simpson Miller in Jamaica; and acting prime ministers, for example Kamla Persad-Bissessar

in Trinidad and Tobago and Cynthia Pratt in The Bahamas, the overarching sentiment throughout the Caribbean is that women are not zealous enough to be prime minister. Men, on the other hand, are never required to be zealous enough before they are elected and selected to occupy leadership roles in our societies. And so we perpetuate our borders between the genders.¹²

It is easy to understand our tenacity towards our Caribbean borders. They have been with us since 1492, and we have been well conditioned to believe that they serve our purpose without prejudice, keeping us healthy and wealthy. As we negotiate our way in a world that is becoming increasingly smaller and more interconnected by the explosion of the Internet, some of our less useful borders are being broken down. But it seems that for every border we try to break down another is constructed. Non-heterosexual relationships and alternative lifestyles are not new in the Caribbean, as indeed they are not new in the world, yet they are treated as foreign imports or infectious diseases. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people exist within our societies, within our own families, yet in many, if not all Caribbean countries, the walls that keep these persons in closets are so strong and buttressed so well that we do not yet have the ramrods with which to break them down.

The latest border that is being created is that of crime. The online 2007 World Bank Report on “Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean,” provides statistics on crime and violence in the Caribbean. According to this report, The Bahamas had the highest rate of reported incidents of rape (133 per 100,000 population) in the Caribbean.¹³ The World Bank Report also indicated that the kidnapping rate in Trinidad and Tobago nearly doubled between the years 1999 and 2005, increasing from 10 kidnappings per 100,000 population in 1999, to 19 kidnappings per 100,000 population in 2005.¹⁴ In terms of gross domestic product per capita, the World Bank Report indicates that Haiti and Jamaica have the highest murder rates per 100,000 population in the Caribbean.¹⁵ The report also mentions that the Latin America and Caribbean region has the highest homicide rate in the world of men between the ages of 15-29 (68.6 per 100,000 population).¹⁶ The World Bank Report found that murder rates in the Caribbean, at 30 per 100,000 population annually, are higher than for any other region of the world.¹⁷ So what is the importance of these rankings? Despite our head-in-the-sand response that “crime happens to them other people, not us,” these rankings are used by others, outside our region, to determine and issue travel advisories for the different Caribbean countries. Why are these travel advisories so scary, even scarier than the effect of crime upon our own

nationals? It is because we have made and continue to make tourism the bedrock of many of our economies. We market ourselves according to outside rankings, which define such things as who has the best beach in the Caribbean, the best hotel in the Caribbean, the best carnival in the Caribbean, and lately, the best eco-resort in the Caribbean. We fight among ourselves to retain and/or exceed our ratings and our tourist arrival numbers. Dare we then imagine a Caribbean without borders offering all of its beauty, in all its variety, to the world?

What about our natural environment, our marine and land resources? Can we preserve these without breaking down our borders? Fishes and dolphins, sharks and turtles, pigeons and butterflies do not know borders within their habitats. Species move freely across artificial boundaries that separate nations, migrating to the feeding and mating grounds, laying their eggs and birthing their young in areas where their species have been doing so for millennia. But there are some species of Caribbean wildlife that are either critically endangered or near threatened. The White-crowned Pigeon, a migratory bird found primarily in The Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica and Antigua, has a conservation status of Near Threatened. According to the online web site Birdlife International 2009, the White-crowned Pigeon requires isolated offshore mangrove islets with limited disturbance for breeding. Its feeding habitats are hardwood where they feed on the fruit of hardwood trees. The fruit of the Poisonwood tree is an important food for the White-crowned Pigeon. Some of the measures recommended by Birdlife International for the preservation of the White-crowned Pigeon include protecting breeding grounds; discouraging the removal of Poisonwood trees; and enforcing hunting regulations.¹⁸ But the effectiveness of these measures depends on a concerted preservation effort by all the countries where the White-crowned Pigeon feeds and breeds. If only one of these countries enforces hunting laws or preserves the breeding grounds and hardwood trees but the others do not, then the population of White-crowned Pigeons will continue to diminish in size. Another species of concern is the Hawksbill turtle, which is classified as a Critically Endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Marine Turtle Specialists Group. Hawksbill turtles are found throughout the world, including the Caribbean where they are known to nest in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Antigua and Barbuda. Major threats to marine turtles, including the Hawksbill, include unsustainable exploitation; destruction of nesting and feeding habitats; and incidental mortality in fishing operations. Nesting habitats for the Hawksbill turtle include the shallow lagoons found near the shore.¹⁹ Efforts to conserve the Hawksbill turtle must involve all the countries, not just some, where Hawksbill

turtles nest and feed. This may require harmonization and enactment of wildlife and habitat preservation laws across borders within the Caribbean.

Increasingly, as Caribbean governments seek ways to develop their countries, they are encouraging foreign investment in the hotel and resort sector. However, there are indications that some of these hotel and resort projects are being proposed for areas that include mangroves and hardwood forests, which are habitats for many wildlife species. In The Bahamas, for instance, approval was given to foreign investors to develop The Bimini Bay Resort in an area that contained mangroves. There is no evidence that the developers were required to conserve or preserve the wetlands or any of the wildlife species that lived in the area encompassed by the project. If Caribbean countries allow the development of their countries at the expense of wildlife species, then they will be contributing to the demise of the wildlife that exists within their borders and those species that migrate freely across borders.

With all of these borders in place, the question that begs to be answered is, "Who benefits from these borders staying in place?" As academics and professionals; writers and artists; Caribbean people and friends of the Caribbean, what are we prepared to do about these borders? Do we wish to break them down? I agree with Edward Said's view, that the literary text has political, social, and cultural connections with the world. Our role as academics and professionals; writers and artists; Caribbean people and friends of the Caribbean is one of praxis. Yes, I am advocating that our work have practical applications and not just exist in an institution of specialized intellectual work. I believe that we, the intellectuals in our societies, have a responsibility to help break down the borders to help solve the problems of our communities.

About two weeks prior to this writing, in March 2008, I was thrilled to discover on the Internet, the Anthony N. Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence program which was launched by the ANSA McAL Foundation in Trinidad and Tobago.²⁰ Although the program was launched in late 2005 and had since given out two sets of awards, in 2006 and 2008, I had never before heard of it. The Foundation also commissioned a series of essays on Caribbean Excellence by such persons as Professors Edward Baugh and Ken Julien; Grenadian author and lecturer Merle Collins; and Jamaican journalist Barbara Gloudon. I was excited by that discovery because it is an extremely tangible expression of what we can achieve as Caribbean people when we look past our borders, when we envision a Caribbean without borders, when we dare to look at ourselves as the people of excellence that we can be. The Sabga family came to Trinidad from Syria in the 1930s and was able to create wealth as a member of the

merchant class. It was indeed heartwarming to see that one of their sons had helped to create this program, which seeks to award Caribbean people who are working diligently to improve the welfare of their communities, their environments, and their region. The 2008 recipients included a UK-resident Guyanese writer and academic, Professor David Dabydeen; a Barbadian businessman and entrepreneur, Mr. James Husband, who is pioneering the use of solar water heating in the Caribbean; a Guyanese environmental activist, Ms. Annette Arjoon, who is project coordinator of the Guyana Marine Turtle Conservation Society; and a Jamaican social activist, Ms. Claudette Richardson Pious, a former drama teacher who co-founded the NGO Children First, in Spanish Town, Jamaica.

What we need now is for more such foundations to be created to demand excellence from us, from within us, excellence from our own, recognized by our own, that can hold its own torch to the world. But this excellence cannot be a compromised excellence. "Excellence does not stand in isolation," noted Barbara Gloudon in her essay, "Salvation Through Excellence?" (2006), which appears in The Anthony N. Sabga Caribbean Awards For Excellence Essay Series, available online.²¹ Professor Edward Baugh, in his essay, "The Habit of Excellence" (2006), wrote that "the opposite of excellence is not failure, but mediocrity."²² We, as Caribbean people, are capable of excellence but in so many cases we settle for mediocrity and we award mediocrity, as some sort of substitute for excellence. How can we be truly excellent Caribbean people without destroying our borders? Professor Baugh wrote about an excellence of spirit and humanity that comes out "of a quality of character, of integrity, of attitude, a heightened sense of responsibility toward one's brother or sister human being."²³ He further stated that, "Where this excellence of spirit and humanity is lacking, the other kind of excellence, the excellence of superlative prowess, may be severely compromised."²⁴

So what do Caribbean borders, fruit salad, fruit punch and excellence have to do with each other? Well, as I have attempted to show, there are many borders separating us as Caribbean people, and these borders are not usually conducive to the development of our people and our region and the development of an excellence of spirit and humanity in our people. But maybe, if we can look at ourselves in terms of fruit salad or fruit punch, maybe we can each decide what kind of region we wish to create. Are we to be like a fruit salad where we all keep our different beliefs, languages, races and play our different roles, like the different fruits that make up the salad, in the excellence of spirit and humanity juices surrounding and joining us into one? Or are we to be like fruit punch, totally blended, all borders destroyed, existing only as an excellent juice of spirit and

humanity? And should we then go even further and maybe claim both the separate yet together nature of fruit salad as well as the all-encompassing nature of fruit punch? Should we embrace the natures of both fruit salad and fruit punch as tools, of equal value, that we can utilize in our pursuit of Caribbean excellence?

In closing, I wish to share this poem from my book, *Curry Flavour* called “Carifesta Five—Rebirth.” It is a poem that I believe speaks directly to the question of Caribbean identity.

Carifesta Five—Rebirth

I

I dream of this sea
black and brown consciousness
flowing like pitch
on Point Fortin roads
pulled by Chaaan Mama
in a swollen tide
of re-discovery

but now and then
the blackness breaks
and the red belly
of the sea pushes up
through needle chooks
lifeblood of Caribs and Arawaks
Africans and Indians
buried forever in the
Caribbean Sea

out of the belly
comes pain from inhumanity
injustice of genocide
indentureship and slavery
hidden behind carnival masks
of humming birds and hibiscus flowers

green fields and blue mountains
white sands and waterfalls
in this oil drum steelpan
reggae soca zouk
tourist paradise

II

I dream of the kala pani
and see lighted deyas floating
on this sea of darkness
dispersing poisonous snakes
spiders and tigers
unknown creatures
of the night

then like Maha Lakshmi
rising from the churning
waters in the beginning
I see bodies rising
from beneath the deyas
I see men and women
in each hand a lighted lamp
standing straight and tall
black and brown faces softened
in the flickering flame

over here I see Dessalines
over there Jose Marti
and while Garifuna and Kuna
chant life poetry
with Invader and Destroyer
Lokono and Shango
dance the monkey dance
till I dream that even
Hanuman has been reborn
in this Carifesta Five
of my Caribbean Sea²⁵

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Notes

¹ Lomarsh Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), 31.

² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³ Eric Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (New York: A&B Publishers Group, 1993), 281.

⁴ Sir Ronald Sanders, *Political Union? Dreaming Again*, accessed March 11, 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/caribbean/news/story/2008/03/080307_sanders_mar05.shtml.

⁵ Williams, 111.

⁶ Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, Edward Said (London: Routledge, 2001), 2-6.

⁷ Williams, 278.

⁸ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "The Lure of Santeria," *Awake!* (July 8, 2000), http://www.watchtower.org/e/20000708a/article_01.htm

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¹⁰ J Sessa Sai, "Hindus and Christians gun for each other in Trinidad and Tobago," *Rediff on the Net* (February 9, 1999), <http://www.ofbjp.org/news/0299/0018.html>.

¹¹ The Equal Opportunity Act, 2000 of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (2008): Part 11, Section 7. (1) (c), http://www.ilocarib.org.tt/projects/cariblex/tt_act8.shtml.

¹² Subsequent to completing the writing of this paper, on 24 May, 2010, Kamla Persad-Bissessar's political party, The People's Partnership, won the general elections in Trinidad and Tobago, making her the first woman to be elected Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

¹³ World Bank Report, 2007, *Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean* (2007):12, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INHAITI/Resources/Crimeandviolenceinthecaribbeanfullreport.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ Birdlife International, *White-crowned Pigeon: BirdLife Species Factsheet*, <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html?action=SpcHTMDetails.asp&sid=2475&m=0>

¹⁹ Jeanne A. Mortimer and Marydale Donnelly, assessors, Marine Turtle Specialist Group, *ICUN Red List Status Assessment Hawksbill Turtle* (*Eretmochelys imbricate*). International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Marine Turtle Specialist Group, (2007), <http://www.iucnredlist.org/documents/attach/8005.pdf>

²⁰ The Anthony N. Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence, <http://www.ansacaribbeanawards.com/index.php>.

²¹ Barbara Gloudon, "Salvation Through Excellence?", http://www.ansacaribbeanawards.com/essays_excel_no04.html.

²² Edward Baugh, "The Habit of Excellence," http://www.ansacaribbeanawards.com/essays_excel_no08.html

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming, *Curry Flavour* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2000), 112-113.

“HER BREATHING... FILLS
THE LUNGS OF THE THEATRE”:
A WOMAN ON THE CARIBBEAN STAGE
IN DEREK WALCOTT’S
A BRANCH OF THE BLUE NILE

CHIHOKO MATSUDA

Derek Walcott (1930–) once insisted in his essay “Meanings” (1970) that women were unnecessary for developing Caribbean theater. However, Sheila, the heroine of his two act play, *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1983), illustrates a reversal of this opinion. In *Branch*, Walcott portrays a woman’s active dedication to the development of a Caribbean theater linked to the issues of society and culture. In this chapter I contextualize Caribbean theater and culture in the early 1980s in order to demonstrate the social and cultural backgrounds of Walcott’s theatrical text. By tracing the history of Cleopatra’s representation in the Western world, I will show first how Walcott creates his Caribbean Cleopatra. Then I demonstrate that in *Branch* Walcott presents a new positive image of a woman who plays an active part in the creation of Caribbean culture and identity.

Other scholars have paid close attention to the connection between Walcott’s 1983 play and its source, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (circa 1606). Tobias Döring, for instance, in “*A Branch of the Blue Nile: Derek Walcott and the Tropic of Shakespeare*” (2005) explicates how Walcott, a postcolonial writer, adapts the English canonical literary work. This chapter will analyze Walcott’s rewriting of Cleopatra from a gender specific viewpoint, not only focusing on Shakespeare’s play as a textual source, but briefly tracing back two thousand years of Western representation of Cleopatra. I will demonstrate that the heroine’s character is not simply modeled on the Bard’s Cleopatra but can be regarded as an “offspring” of the repeated representation of Cleopatra in Western culture and literature. Reinforcing my hypothesis that Walcott refused to follow Shakespeare’s representation of Cleopatra, I argue that a more expansive

view needs to be taken of Walcott's rewriting of Cleopatra in order to see that Cleopatra exceeds a mere image of Shakespeare's Cleopatra.

The Appropriation of Cleopatra by Shakespeare and Walcott

As a Caribbean writer who was born under British colonial rule and experienced anticolonial movements and independence, Walcott works on the subject of how to deal with the unavoidable influences of the colonizer's culture, society and literature that are woven into his own society. The plot of *Branch* revolves around a Caribbean theater company's struggles to put on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is through this plot that Walcott's postcolonial strategy, the appropriation of a canonical work of the suzerain comes to light. This word, *appropriation*, has come to signify a practice or technique of reworking images or styles contained in earlier artistic works, including writings and paintings. In so doing, new possibilities of interpretations or contexts and existent ideas or criticisms are suggested. Appropriation in an Imperial context may imply that the colonizer employs the culture of the colonized as its own, while in a postcolonial context, the colonized employs the culture of the empire to express its own culture or society. Cleopatra as a literary icon was appropriated, or rewritten or re-represented, by Western writers and painters, old and new, as well as by postcolonial writers such as Walcott.

Shakespeare's use of the image of Cleopatra should be mentioned at the outset, before entering directly into Walcott's strategy of appropriating Cleopatra. By adapting information in *The Parallel Lives of the Most Noble Grecians and Romans* by the Greek historian Plutarch, Shakespeare rewrote the story of Antony and Cleopatra within Western imperialistic and patriarchal contexts. As Japanese feminist critic Emi Hamana points out, Shakespeare himself appropriated the 'wonder' of the Orient, a term first presented in Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (1991).¹ This text serves as a touchstone to establish Hamana's hypothesis that "gender works as a wonder."² According to Hamana, *Antony and Cleopatra* obviously shows the Imperialist strategy of early modern England for defining non-European regions as targets to be invaded and exploited for their cultural and material riches.

Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* in the period when England, with obvious imperialistic ambitions, began encroaching upon Africa and Asia, the regions located east of the Cape of Good Hope. At that time, for the English, African and Asian people were not only religious, racial, and ethnic Other,³ but they also functioned as the "wonder."⁴ The English

strategically exaggerated non-Europeans' racial and gender Otherness in order to appropriate such "wonder." For example, Shakespeare's text demonstrates the typical binary structure that Europeans employed. That is, the Western world represented by Rome symbolized masculinized reason, while the Orient—represented by Egypt and her symbol, Cleopatra—indicated the feminized wonder and the Other gender. Imperialistic devaluation of the non-European, including Africans and Asians, was thus carried out by means of utilizing the discourse of gender, the social and political power imbalance between the two sexes. In this sense, *Antony and Cleopatra* clarifies the Western strategy of appropriating the Orient by labeling it with inferiority from the viewpoints of Eurocentricity, colonialism, and patriarchy.

At the same time that the Orient was portrayed as inferior, however, it also showed irresistible lure and richness. Thus, the Orient, Cleopatra, or the feminized Other is characterized with ambivalence throughout Shakespeare's play. Shakespeare appropriated the Orient and Cleopatra as his play's symbol of Otherness. Similarly, 20th century Walcott appropriates Shakespeare's text from the viewpoint of the colonized in two of his works, the poem, "Egypt, Tobago" (1979), and *Branch*. His poem, also a large scale appropriation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is narrated from the cynical viewpoint of embittered Antony. This Caribbean Antony is in an imaginary place called 'Egypt, Tobago,' coined to contrast with "Rome," which represents the European countries that once colonized Egypt and the Caribbean. Both Egypt and the Caribbean, areas with tropical, hot weather, have been overwhelmed by political tension concerning European colonization and resistance to it. Taking these affinities concerning politics into consideration, Walcott suggests an analogy by linking the poetic imagery of a tense relationship between England, the colonizer, and the Caribbean region, the colonized, with that of the Roman Empire and Egypt. Torn between the cultures of the colonizer "Rome" and of the colonized "Egypt," Antony foresees that he will lose "Rome" soon because he chooses love towards his beloved Egyptian queen.

Walcott also appropriates Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* in *Branch*, first staged in Barbados in 1983. However, from the perspective of gender concerns, the construction and representation of Cleopatra figured in Walcott's two works are remarkably different. In "Egypt, Tobago," old Antony is focalized, and he describes Cleopatra as "a woman not [Antony's] mistress/ but his sleeping child"; even her name is not mentioned.⁵ In addition, this anonymous Cleopatra is excessively sexualized in a negative way from Antony's viewpoint throughout the poem. For example, her sexual organ is described more than any other

characteristics she has, as Antony stretches “her inert sex”⁶ and compares it to a “salt marsh [that] dries in the heat.”⁷ This poem certainly takes a male chauvinistic view of the female by portraying a woman as a peripheral object of sexual desire. Contrarily, in *Branch*, Walcott presents a new positive image of a black Caribbean Cleopatra through the lively character of the heroine, Sheila Harris, who plays the role of Cleopatra in a Caribbean production of Shakespeare’s play.

Playing Shakespeare in Caribbean Theater

The plot of Walcott’s *Branch* depicts the tribulations of the actors and directors engaged in the Trinidadian adaption of *Antony and Cleopatra*. As the curtain rises, a small theater company in Trinidad is rehearsing the play. A white director, Harvey St. Just orders Sheila to identify herself with the role of Cleopatra and abandon her own “personal pride.”⁸ Although she is a talented female actor, Sheila struggles with the role because her socio-economic position is so different from that of the noble, ancient queen. Succumbing to the pressure of playing the role of Cleopatra, Sheila runs away from the stage on opening night, and the understudy Marilyn, or “Mary La Lune,” takes over the role. In the next day’s newspaper review, Harvey’s direction is accused of being “terribly embarrassing,” and the company is completely torn asunder by the production’s failure.⁹

Walcott explores the possibilities of developing Caribbean theater and drama by depicting the severe social reality of Caribbean theater and how the company members deal with obstacles. An experience of black male actor Gavin, for example, demonstrates how racial discrimination prevents a colored, colonial actor from a successful career in large scale *metropolitan* theater in the centers of Western theater industry such as in New York or London.¹⁰ When Gavin had pursued professional acting in New York, he became disillusioned by the prevailing discrimination toward black people. Finding that there is neither equal opportunity nor “universality of the theater,” Gavin begins to appreciate that the principle that motivates metropolitan theater is “economics, and economics means race.”¹¹ In New York, London, or any metropolitan theater, black actors have no chance to play the main roles and can take only a black or secondary role at best because the theater ‘belongs’ to white actors and theatergoers.¹² “I went up there as an actor and found out that I was a nigger,”¹³ says Gavin:

At first off, I didn’t see myself in the mirror. I just plain refused what they wanted me to see, which was a black man looking back in my face and muttering: ‘How you going handle this, nigger? How you going leap out of