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Precarious Gaps: Refugees and the Limits of Diaspora

Donette A. Francis, Binghamton University

April Shemak, *Asylum Speakers: Caribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse*.

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 310 pp.

Smartly conceived, theoretically sophisticated and timely, April Shemak's *Asylum Speakers* puts political and economic refugees in the same conceptual field. Shemak draws parallels between economic conditions that render citizens equally vulnerable without state protection and conditions that lead to political persecution and banishment from one's national community without state intervention. Thus, with the figure of the refugee, Shemak underscores one of the precarious gaps in contemporary theories of migration and diaspora. Moving beyond tracking the transnational movement of peoples, recent Caribbean literary projects have turned to the material quotidian ways in which citizenship is lived both within the region and the diaspora. Keen attention is paid to how states enforce their borders through policing proper documents and passports. Faith Smith's edited collection, *Sex and the Citizen* (2011), for example, focuses on how belonging is mediated through the sexed body. In a similarly material vein, Kezia Page's *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature* (2011) examines how representations of deportees reveal the vexed relations of a subaltern population rejected from home and host societies. To this growing body of literature, Shemak adds the figure of the refugee. That the book is entitled *asylum speakers* and not *asylum seekers* emphasizes an attention to the steps various actors take to speak on the refugee's behalf in spite of limits imposed by US governmental structures. What happens between the processes of *seeking* and *speaking* animates this rigorous interdisciplinary study that persuasively reads novels, poems, short stories, films, United States Coast Guard photographs as well as the individual testimonies of refugees and translators.

Grounded in theoretical debates about hospitality and cosmopolitanism, Shemak examines the challenges of seeking asylum both in the region as well as the United States. While rooted in Caribbean Studies, the inclusion of Central American narratives makes the project comprehensively hemispheric in content and conceptualization. An additional conceptual

strength is her attention to the sea—how “[c]oast guard ships, refugee boats, rafts and cargo ships become sites of New World refugee experience of inhospitality” (22). Complicating the boundness of territories, the sea highlights instead the elusiveness of waterways in terms of who has jurisdiction over the stateless bodies of the refugees. Each chapter carefully details the operational biases of US foreign policy throughout the hemisphere, which creates the conditions that lead to seeking asylum, to reveal a long history of an inhospitable US state.

Asylum Speakers is especially concerned with how testimony operates in fictional texts and well as in public discourse. Shemak analyzes in acute details governmental-structures, such as congressional hearings, that administer human rights. Under these conditions, the importance of language—both one’s acquisition and performance of it—emerge as a paramount in giving testimony. Despite obstacles such as “trauma, memory, cultural differences, translation, and political ideologies,” Shemak notes “*those seeking asylum must become eloquent, persuasive speakers*” (3). Particularly in such performances, the refugee’s paradoxical role as native informant emerges since she has to perform persuasive narratives that construct the homeland as an uninhabitable and dangerous place while simultaneously gesturing to the democratic freedoms granted on US soil.

While the last two chapters explore narratives of Central American, Cuban and Dominican refugees, the challenges posed to Haitian refugees engaging the US and Dominican states form the book’s core. Opening with a discussion of Edwidge Danticat’s memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, Shemak demonstrates how through literary testimonial, Danticat painstakingly reconstructs the events leading to her Uncle, Pastor Joseph Dantica, inhospitable death in a Miami detention center while seeking political asylum. Despite the violently repressive Duvalier regime and subsequent erosion of the Haiti state, Haitians are nonetheless conscripted by the US state as simply fleeing economic strife; they therefore are not deserving of protected status. Thus in spite of her uncle’s obvious physical disability—he literally speaks through a voice box, and has seizures while in the Krome detention center—his testimony remains unpersuasive.

Shemak engages in a compelling, but haunting reading of the United States Coast Guard photographs that show Haitians seeking refuge at sea. Here she explores both the space and the process of interdiction, where “Haitian boat refugee testimonies are articulations occurring in the transnational, in-between, indeterminate spaces of the seas” (47). Functioning as a panopticon with an ever-ready camera, the coast guard amasses numerous pictures of guardsmen rescuing

Haitians, especially young infants at sea. Thus even though many will be sent back to Haiti, the photograph seizes on a humanitarian moment of rescuing these black bodies on the perilous seas. Interesting too, that in many of the pictures with young children, the adults are cropped out—framing the black children as orphaned with only white US state intervention.

Chapter 3 highlights the book's attention to regional specificities, showing, for example, how US foreign policy and neoliberal economic policies adversely impact the region, while also attending to how Caribbean nation-states commit quotidian acts of violence against citizens of weaker states. Shemak addresses how Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic have, for over a century, consistently propped up the DR's economy (133). And because what is ultimately at stake in this project is always the persistent question, "what kind of structures are in place to witness and testify to migrant worker abuses," she juxtaposes official state documents with creative works that aim to serve as countertestimonial. In this case, she reads the 1991 US congressional hearing on Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic alongside Edwidge Danticat's 1998 novel, *The Farming of Bones*. The novel chronicles an earlier historical moment when in the 1930's presence of Haitian cane workers lead to their mass execution by the Dominican state. With the novel serving as case study, Shemak raises questions about the limits of the testimonial.

Caribbeanists will be familiar with the books explored in the early chapters, but chapter 4's reading of Francisco Goldman's novel, *The Ordinary Seaman*, will be a welcomed introduction. Set aboard a ship docked in Brooklyn, the novel engages the tenuous legal status of refugee seaman from Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. If in earlier chapters Shemak explores interdiction at sea, she now examines what happens when a ship docks in a territorial port, where it has no governance. How is it that those laborers become illegal within a matter of days? And, how do they navigate the city and learn the proper and most convincing tales to craft in order to gain asylum? In the midst of a Central American diasporic immigrant community in Brooklyn, we see refugees finding home and solidarity: "The refugees become most effective asylum speakers when they communicate with each other and form new solidarities that help to create a diasporan community outside the native space" (206). This chapter, in particular, offers a sobering counter balance to Atlantic studies scholarship that casts the sea as simply an extra-national space for the gathering of radical ideas.

The final chapter considers what happens to those who actually gain asylum and even US citizenship. With novels and short stories giving testimony to Cuban and Dominican experiences, Shemak explores the “new immigrant as native informant.” Challenging the dominant narrative of successful Cuban-American integration, she shows instead that the 1980s Mariel boatlift reveals internal fractures within the Miami-based Cuban exile community. While the earlier refugees were predominantly white and professionals, this latter population were predominantly Afro-Cuban, single males and were effectively racialized and criminalized by both the US as well as the Cuban-American community.

Through this diverse and extensive archive and analysis, Shemak successfully demonstrates that a new world approach to US American, Caribbean, and even postcolonial studies broadens the geographic expanse of the Americas, even while attending to each locale’s divergent imperial relationship to the US. Refugees, in Shemak’s apt words, “change the whole horizon of what is “political” in citizenship, of what it means to belong to a nation state” (248).

The book closes with the author’s powerful reflection about having written a book largely on the plight of Haitian refugees as she watches the unfolding events following the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti, which left millions more Haitians seeking asylum. Herein marks both the book’s timeliness and timelessness. Opening the fields of US American Studies, Caribbean literary and cultural studies to include various New World locations, *Asylum Speakers* compels a practice of diaspora that attends to the nuances of those seeking political, as well as economic asylum. The depth of Shemak’s research and analysis provides keen insights, as well as key conceptual frames, for grappling with the complexities of our present moment.