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Review of Caribbean Literature After Independence: The Case of Earl Lovelace

Edgardo Pérez-Montijo

University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo, edgardo.perez4@upr.edu

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The Works of Earl Lovelace: A Trinidadian Perspective on Life and the World

Edgardo Pérez Montijo, University of Puerto Rico, Arecibo

Bill Schwarz, editor, *Caribbean Literature after Independence: The Case of Earl Lovelace*. (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2008), 195 pp.

The work of Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace has received surprisingly little literary criticism despite the quality and scope of his work that includes short stories, novels, plays and essays. Even *Salt*, awarded the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize for best book of the year, has been the subject of no more than a handful of critical studies. Furthermore, as of the publishing of *Caribbean Literature after Independence: The Case of Earl Lovelace*, there was no published book-length study of his work.¹ As several of the authors included in this collection underline, the fact that Lovelace remains a full-time resident of the Caribbean— notwithstanding several stints abroad as visiting lecturer—has kept him under the radar, basically unknown in literary circles outside the region. Part of the goal of this volume is precisely to bridge this gap, and introduce Lovelace to a larger audience within the community of literary scholars.

The title of the collection, *Caribbean Literature after Independence: The Case of Earl Lovelace*, reveals the main thrust of the analyses contained in it. Lovelace's works are examined principally in terms of their social and political ideas. In spite of the various approaches taken by the critics, the issues discussed in most chapters are related to such postcolonial concerns as national identity, social cohesion, political independence and the effects of colonialism. This is particularly significant since the articles provide the opportunity to reflect on these issues as Trinidadian independence reaches half a century this year.

In his Introduction, Bill Schwarz presents a general overview of Lovelace's work and ideas. According to Schwarz, Lovelace's work does not depict the Trinidad of official government discourse, but the "other" Trinidad, that of the poor and dark. According to Schwarz, for Lovelace, the struggles of the characters encompass both the degradation of their lives and the seeds for their social and political salvation. Furthermore, Schwarz looks at the overlap between the cultural forms and social forces that inform the lives of Trinidadians and the literary tools available to writers such as Lovelace in their attempt to portray these everyday struggles. Many distinguished writers straddle both worlds and have developed a particular poetics which incorporates the rhythms and forms of nation-language, carnival and

calypso. According to Schwarz, the cohesion experienced by Caribbean writing in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, which can be seen as the aesthetic counterpart to the political struggle for independence, resulted in new aesthetic forms that reached beyond the region. Lovelace is a prime example of this. Thus, this volume examines his work from a non-Caribbean perspective, and considers the merits of Lovelace's fiction to determine its general significance and its value to readers outside the Caribbean, as well as readers in the region. Schwarz points out the marked differences between Lovelace and the better-known Trinidadian, V.S. Naipaul. The latter tries to escape the local Caribbean label and prefers to define himself as a "universal" writer. Lovelace, on the other hand, searches for the universal within the Caribbean. The Afro-Trinidadian examines the island during the period after independence and considers the struggles of the people for self-definition in the newly independent nation. The characters in Lovelace's works move within a fictional world fully based on Trinidadian reality in which both protagonists and antagonists live and struggle within the island. He examines this world by complex literary means, shifting narrators and broken chronologies that enrich both the political analysis and the aesthetic creation.

The Introduction also provides an overview of the influence of folk culture (dance, Carnival, steelband, etc.) in Lovelace's work, both in form and in content. Recognizing the difficulty of the term folk culture, Schwarz describes the tensions that arise when attempting to define tradition and modernity, and the arena that the writer creates in his fiction for the interplay between these two forces.

Kate Quinn continues the overview of the Trinidadian environment in which Lovelace produces his work. In "'I will let down my bucket here': Writers and the Conditions of the Cultural Production in Post-Independence Trinidad," Quinn describes the cultural project of those writers of the post-independence Caribbean that chose to remain in the region, as opposed to those who emigrated to the metropole. She centers on Trinidad, "focusing briefly on the cultural policy of Eric Williams administration, and then primarily on the vexed question of publishing" (23). She describes the disappointment of artists who originally held high (although diverse) hopes for the Williams government for what they perceived to be his commitment to culture and art. For example, Derek Walcott believed that art needed to be fostered through formal training of artists and not only by celebrating the limited concept of unsophisticated national culture. Lovelace, on the other hand, defended national culture from being co-opted by government intervention and stripped of its liberating potential. Quinn also presents an overview of the publishing outlets for writers in Trinidad during the colonial period and after independence. She points out that the official educational project

downplayed the importance of the literary, while favoring more technical and specialized reading.

The following chapters deal directly with specific novels and short stories. In “Nostalgia for the Future: The Novels of Earl Lovelace,” J. Dillon Brown analyzes the ambivalent view of nostalgia in Lovelace’s novels. Brown argues that they contain a problematized depiction of nostalgia that falls somewhere between a romantic attachment to the past and the recognition of the need to move forward and to look for new ways of dealing with the problems of the future. Brown examines the novels up to *Salt* and describes the evolution in Lovelace’s view of nostalgia: from his rejection of nostalgia in the *While Gods are Falling* to the more subtle and problematized view of nostalgia in later novels. Brown argues that more recent works allow for the careful consideration of longing for the past when articulating a project for the future.

In “Illusions of Paradise and Progress: an Ecocritical Perspective on Earl Lovelace,” Chris Campbell examines the role that the physical natural world plays in the ideological contents of Lovelace’s *The Schoolmaster* and *Salt*. According to Hill, the treatment of the environment in these novels is closely tied to the conflicting views of the Caribbean landscape as a pastoral paradise and the view that recognizes the need to reconfigure human relations with the land to allow for progress and development. However, this article gives very little about the specifics of the landscape in the novel, and reads more like a discussion of Caribbean landscape in general.

“The Crisis of Caribbean History: Society and Self in C.L.R. James and Earl Lovelace” deals with the “problem of the politics of subjectivity” (77). Aaron Love draws a comparison between these two Trinidadian authors in terms of their views of the relationship between self and society. He examines the evolution of James’s views from his days abroad to his return to Trinidad and argues that from his government position back home, James places the mass party above the interests of popular subjectivity. As a point of contrast, Love uses *The Dragon Can’t Dance* to illustrate Lovelace’s view of a future in which individual subjectivity can serve as the basis for a more just society.

In “Writing Trinidad: Nation and Hybridity in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* and *Witchbroom*,” Patricia Murray examines the two novels as representatives of an attempt to create a Trinidadian identity based on hybridity. The critic suggests that in spite of their differences, these two works point toward the same problem: the need to create “a more coherent version of nation” through cultural hybridity. Although Murray states that she

intends to discuss the artistic form as part of her argument, the article reads more as a socio/political analysis with only a cursory examination of the literary form.

Nicole King's "Performance and Tradition in Earl Lovelace's *A Brief Conversion: The Drama of the Everyday*" analyzes some of Lovelace's short stories ("A Brief Conversion", "Call Me 'Miss Ross,' for Now" and "Jobell and America") to illustrate the manner in which the characters perform their identities while trying to cope with the challenges of post-independence Trinidad. King concludes that each of these characters "manipulates a performance dictated by the imperatives of colonial order" (125).

"Brevity and Lovelace's *A Brief Conversion*" is one of this volume's most interesting articles inasmuch as it includes a discussion of the aesthetic considerations and literary craftsmanship of Lovelace's short fiction. James Procter looks at Lovelace's collection of short stories with an emphasis on form, particularly the role of the narrative voice and its relation to the events chronicled. He argues that the stories successfully combine the use of modernist techniques with narratives that present the problematic nature of that very same modernity, a universe characterized by contingency and conflict.

John Thieme, who has written extensively on the Caribbean, traces in his collaboration to this volume, "'All o'we is one': Carnival Forms and Creolisation in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt*," the role of creolized carnival forms in Lovelace's representation of social cohesiveness and sense of community. He analyzes the major characters in these two novels to explain their perception of cultural imagery, particularly carnival, as either empty nationalistic slogans or genuine expressions of a project for an inclusive society. Thieme includes Lovelace's use of language rhythm and syntax.

In "Engaging the World: Lovelace's *Salt* as a Caribbean Epic," Louis James examines *Salt* as a "national epic" which he defines as "a work of the imagination conceived on a heroic scale, in which individual narratives become representative of the cultures within which they have evolved" (161). In the first part of the article, James traces the writing of national epics by such significant authors as Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Maryse Condé, Wilson Harris and Gabriel García Márquez whom he considers part of the Caribbean experience. By placing *Salt* within this tradition, James presents the novel as a statement about the social and communal history and future of Trinidad. His discussion includes more than just the themes of the novel, such issues as ethnic tension, land ownership and national unity; he also analyzes how Lovelace uses language, narrative voice and plot structure to create a complex epic narrative that shies away from facile solutions to the challenges confronted by Trinidad.

In “‘Beauty and Promise’: Sonic Narratives and the Politics of Freedom in the Literary Imagination of Lovelace,” Tina K. Ramnarine presents an ethnographic view of *Salt* by tracing the relation between performative expressions of Trinidadian culture and the political views espoused by the novelist. The article focuses mostly on the sounds of music, nature and the Carnival tradition. According to Ramnarine, political life is depicted in the novel as being intertwined with acoustic ecologies. The differing perception of these acoustic ecologies by the main characters of *Salt*, reflect conflicting views of the political project for post-Independence Trinidad.

The volume concludes with Trinidadian writer Lawrence Scott’s reflection on Lovelace, particularly an evocation of language and landscape as central elements of Lovelace’s narrative. Despite the lyrical value of this coda, Scott’s musings about language remind the reader about the major drawback of this collection: a lack of any significant reference to Lovelace’s dramatic works, in which language plays such a central and defining role.

Ultimately, this volume constitutes a welcome addition to Lovelace’s bibliography and an illustration of the richness of his work for readers everywhere.

¹ There is a 2006 special issue of *Anthurium* devoted to Lovelace, available at <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss2/>.