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Teaching and Studying the Trans-Caribbean: Review of Valérie Orlando and Sandra Cypess *Reimagining the Caribbean: Conversations among the Creole, English, French, and Spanish Caribbean*

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“Teaching and Studying the Trans-Caribbean: Review of Valérie Orlando and Sandra Cypess *Reimagining the Caribbean. Conversations among the Creole, English, French, and Spanish Caribbean.*” (Lexington Books, June 2014)

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How does one teach or study the Caribbean’s many varied cultures? The eight essays in Valérie Orlando and Sandra Cypess’ *Reimagining the Caribbean: Conversations among the Creole, French, and Spanish Caribbean* provide thought-provoking, plentiful models and suggestions for teachers and students of the Caribbean. The book offers a Caribbean trans-lingual panorama that explores specific national cultures as well as encompassing the area’s inter-relatedness. The essays also touch on many different kinds of cultural production: literature, film, art, music, dance, etc. Covering interpretative fields as diverse as poetics, translation, gender studies, culture theory, and national identities, they provide an extensive sampling of primary and secondary works from the entire area, going beyond the traditional borders of monolingual countries and their national production. The editors stress that sticking to specific linguistic areas almost always leads to Balkanized Caribbean studies, with Spanish here, English over there and French a little further away. The essays go beyond just those three better-known language-based studies and explore Creole culture as well as works with roots in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Of course these areas all share legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism. The essays highlight the diverse socio-historical conditions that appear and reappear in the cultures springing from the socioeconomic stew which are the islands’ history.

Even more valuable are the models of interdisciplinary approaches that the essays offer for teaching the area’s complex web of politics, race, class, gender and national identities. Theory from the region provides guideposts -- the editors declare they kept Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* in mind throughout. The editors also state that the shared approach of the essayists is that, “the ‘poetics’ of the Caribbean are found in the beauty of the connections and relationships between peoples, languages, historical events and geographies that make up the intricate ‘web’ that renders this region so unique.”

The seeds of the volume were planted during a graduate course taught jointly by Orlando and Cypess at the University of Maryland which focused on the work of women writers in the Caribbean and its diasporas; and from a subsequent MLA roundtable discussion in 2013 on teaching Caribbean literatures. That is why the essays focus on pedagogical tips and tools, on selecting primary and secondary materials, and on crafting syllabi that encompass the book’s shared framework of “teaching the Caribbean across languages.”

The many topics vibrantly mix things up and present interesting and innovative interpretive lenses for looking at the inevitable questions for the teacher of Caribbean cultures: How does the region fit within Latin America? How does a teacher/researcher work with translations? How do language differences divide the area? What themes extend across languages? Furthermore, the editors state that "teaching about the Caribbean need not be limited to literature" and to that intent the essays range far and wide into other cultural modes.

Unfortunately, the shared questions lead to some repetitiveness in, for instance, the explanations and definitions of the Caribbean and Latin America; this gets wearisome when one comes across repeated information—as is inevitable given the essays' copious use of scholarly endnotes. Fortunately, each essay has a distinct subject matter and there are no repetitions of readings or analyses.

A subject matter common to many of the texts is the diversity of geographical designations for the islands: "Caribbean," "West Indies," "Antilles"; terms which the editors find are fraught with "misconceptions, ideologies, historical legacies and ways of looking at the world that differ on many levels." The essays focus on creative works coming from Hispanic, English and French-speaking islands as well as Creole, Dutch, Afro-Caribbean legacies and their numerous diasporic contingents.

Sandra Cypess's essay, "Approaching the Caribbean from a Latin American Perspective," boldly scrutinizes how the Caribbean fits into the context of Latin America. Cypess begins with the "I" question, "How does the professor who was a Latin Americanist deal with 'the Caribbean'?" Her essay traces her own professional trajectory before offering an overview of how Latin American and Caribbean studies intertwine across the United States. She compares academic programs and journal names across the United States, detailing how complicated it is for academics to grapple with the classifications in the Caribbean when, "very often Caribbean nations are not included as part of Latin America." A further complication is that Latin Americanists traditionally devoted themselves to studying Spanish-speaking cultures. Cypess highlights and clarifies the hemispheric context going well beyond just the well-known Iberian heritage. In turn, this yields new gendered, geographical and temporal definitions of both the Caribbean and Latin America. She also offers guideposts for exploring the most famous Caribbean names (Puerto Rico's Luis Rafael Sánchez) as well as lesser-known figures (that island's María Bibiana Benítez). The essay likewise presents transnational possibilities for exploring alternative topics such as: the Haitian diaspora, Haitian Creole, Papiamentu, Dutch Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean works, etc.

More limited in scope is Véronique Maiser's "Teaching the Caribbean across Borders: the Web Approach," which takes as its topic novels that use, not

the Internet (as one would expect from that word nowadays), but the metaphor of the spider web throughout Caribbean cultures, especially instances that evoke the inheritance of African cultures through tales of resistance representing the figure of the spider Anansi. The author further states that indeed "the Caribbean nations have borders and to ignore these borders is to disregard their specificities, to homogenize diverse societies, and to fail to take advantage of the wealth of information that can be drawn from their pluralities." As a welcome tangent to an exclusively literature-based analytical focus, this essay includes dance studies.

In "Islands without Borders: Teaching the Caribbean across Languages and Cultures," Anne François and Cécile Accilien emphasize an interdisciplinary perspective by focusing on the islands' pluralistic racial identities. They look at common themes in novels, films, painting and music. The authors, as do other essayists in the volume, note the all too frequent exclusion of Haiti in the Latin American perspective of the Caribbean. They, as well as other essayists, use as theoretical reference Antonio Benitez Rojo's *The Repeating Island* – which has become a go-to text for teaching the wider Caribbean. Oddly, though, François and Accilien maintain that Benitez Rojo's opus replicates the stereotypical view of the Caribbean as one unit (overlooking that it deals intensely with colonial and postcolonial meanings using, for instance, the allegory of the plantation). The two essayists stress the multifaceted linguistic and ethnic identities in the region's writing, looking at the cultural stereotypes attached to, for instance, the perceived value of French versus Creole. They also stress how in the 20th century the region has produced larger cultural movements, from indigenism, *négritude*, *antillanité* to *créolité*. The essay is marred somewhat because the authors assume that students will be able to read English, French and Spanish, which is useful for graduate courses but unlikely when teaching undergraduates. The essay is slightly marred by the gratuitous advice to the readers to teach the Caribbean "with an open mind," which would already be the default mode for anyone reading this book. The essay is more useful when it emphasizes the deployment of film (particularly documentaries) and music as trans-Caribbean pedagogical tools. Also interesting is the section on food.

How do you understand a Caribbean text when you don't read the language? Krista Slagle's "Islands without Borders: Analyzing the Caribbean through the Vehicle of Translation Studies" problematizes the Caribbean through translated French Caribbean texts such as Guadeloupean Maryse Condé's plurilingual novels (written in a mix of French and Creole), specifically her famous *Traversée de la Mangrove*. The essay meditates on the theoretical underpinnings of "the transfer process of oral storytelling methods, written into French and Creole languages, and then how they are translated into English." The author also focuses on how the translator acts as a mediator of "The way French Caribbean

literature is translated into English for a North American audience." The essay features detailed textual comparative analyses leading to "multiple layers of language, country and identity."

Camille Stevens' "Caribbean Drama: A Stage for Cross-Cultural Poetics" posits that although drama studies are lacking in much Caribbean criticism, "performance is continually invoked in other genres in the Caribbean literary canon." Stevens summarizes the overarching problem of teaching the region given "the geographic challenges, the diversity of languages, social structures, economies, and political configurations ranging from independent nation states, overseas departments, and commonwealths." She uses plays from multiple linguistic regions and focuses on Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours* because of its pan-Caribbean characters and settings. Here the discussion of the relationship between "Caribbean," "West Indies," and "Antilles" is foregrounded by the work of Dominican theorist Silvio Torres-Saillant. Stevens looks at Caribbean writers that use theater and performance throughout the region with a particular focus on the centrality of popular culture and folklore. The contributions to the notion of Caribbean theatricality by Errol Hill (Trinidadian actor and playwright), Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott are key matters to the essay's understanding of a specifically Caribbean use of performance. She discusses Puerto Rican playwright Francisco Arriví as well as Martinican Ina Césaire, playwrights who recuperate "collective identity by celebrating everyday lives." The third play that she reads closely is Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*.

The next essay is exemplary of wider conceptual tools for teaching Caribbean culture. In "Plantation Portraits: Teaching the Hispanic Caribbean through the Arts" Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert uses the recent critical mode of ecocritical theory as a broad and effective instrument for analyzing "the islands' history of sugar cultivation as a phenomenon with profound human and environmental costs." The industry that thrived on the inhuman practices of slavery left a legacy of irreversible environmental damage (such as massive deforestation). Paravisini-Gebert looks at artistic representations associated with the sugar plantation since Caribbean landscape art of the 17th the 19th century which "often subsumed the realities of plantation life (which included increasingly global patterns of exchange dependent on the subjugation and exploitation of poor labor forces of the global South) to the desire of creating consumable images of this picturesque otherness." After looking at many examples throughout the centuries – including the work of iconic Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller and the photography of Frank Delano, among many others –she looks at contemporary art and literature from Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, the French Caribbean islands and Trinidad and Tobago. Paravisini supplements art with references to literature throughout. This wider context leads to an analysis of the "problematic legacy of the plantation system" in the

photographic work of Atelier Morales. The "ephemeral installations" of artists like Charles Campbell, a Jamaican-born artist, also offer compelling examples.

In "□A Hispaniola Conspiracy': Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz Performing (in) the Caribbean Public Sphere" Elizabeth Russ explores how to teach the problematic interrelationship of the island originally called Hispaniola in a new and exciting way, using the counterpoint offered by the two most famous Haitian and Dominican writers in the U.S. Russ looks at how their works show the underpinnings of literary and artistic traditions from two distinct cultural nations in an island that is the poster child of national, linguistic and racial borders. Searching for ways to cut across differences in the languages and cultures, she finds both similarities and cultural, historical, and symbolic differences. Her interesting take on these two major writers is an analysis of not only their works but particularly the effects of their success and the media attention it has afforded them. She searches for the pedagogical opportunities to "fill in the gaps between the two cultures." Of particular note is her analysis of the different approaches taken by Danticat and Díaz to the matter of how/if Dominican culture represses notions of black female beauty. The aim of the essay is to find "a dynamic model for uncovering a transnational Caribbean tradition that perceives commonalities, respects the opacity of difference, and searches for places of solidarity if not sameness."

In "Defending Freedom and Human Rights: Teaching Toussaint Louverture and Haiti's History" Aude Dieudé gives us a method of teaching Caribbean culture through writings about that famous Haitian historical figure who "received significant attention from the 19th to the 21st centuries from English, French, German, Creole and Spanish-speaking authors." This is another innovative way for the teacher to cross-reference the meeting points in the Caribbean using one figure who has been interpreted by different cultures. Using literature, archival documents, documentaries and art, Dieudé looks at how these texts reveal "the significance of his influence on the Caribbean and beyond." She examines how his legacy has been portrayed by Joseph-Anténor Firmin, Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. She illustrates Caribbean history and culture across disciplines and languages.

This volume joins the ranks of trans-Caribbean cultural studies in books such as Knight and Martínez-Vergne's *Contemporary Caribbean Cultures and Societies in a Global Context* (2005), Lewis's *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* (2003) and Arnold, Rodríguez-Luis and Dash's *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Cross-cultural studies* (1997). Cypess and Orland, however, gather essays whose primary focus is on pedagogical approaches. This does not mean that the essays are not scholarly; on the contrary, they also offer excellent socio-historical background as well as analytical materials for scholars who research the many language areas of the Caribbean.

They also cite multi-lingual primary and secondary sources, authors, titles and references that will suit courses about the larger Caribbean (or the monolingual regions, if that is what suits). Some of the teaching scenarios are better suited for graduate courses but in all they offer ample material to choose from for undergraduate courses as well. It should also be noted that each essay offers scholarly notes and bibliographies.