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The “Two Placed Gaze” of Diasporic Caribbean Literature

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Kezia Page, *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature: Remitting the Text*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 158 pp.

Kezia Page’s *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature: Remitting the Text* is a timely and engaging re-thinking of migration discourse. By examining the tropes of remittance and deportation in migrant Caribbean literature, Page argues that while the general trend in Caribbean literary studies privileges the experiences and conflicted identities of diasporan subjects outside the Caribbean, full understanding of diasporan subjectivity necessarily involves recognizing and examining the relationship, the interrelatedness, between migrant communities and their origins in the Caribbean. The book convincingly addresses questions that have become increasingly important to scholars of Caribbean and other diasporic literatures and reaffirms the value of sustained academic reflection about the meaning of transnationalism in literary studies.

As Page point out in a brief but comprehensive review of recent studies on postcolonial transnationalism, diasporan subjectivity has been and continues to be a central concern in both imaginative writing and scholarly discourse. Writers like Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Carol Boyce Davies, and Gayatri Gopinath all privilege the diasporan perspective and suggest that it “resists the perceived binaries of colonial discourse” as “global” cities like London, New York and Toronto “displace the geographical Caribbean as the site for cultural production” (2, 4). On the other hand, between 2004 and 2006, studies by Alison Donnell, Shalini Puri, and Brinda Mehta call for an attention shift towards the local in order to recognize the subjective potential of the regional Caribbean. Page intervenes at the precise moment in which Caribbean literary study is negotiating the meaning of diaspora in the face of both increasing transnationalism and a preoccupation with regional spaces, “not by theorizing the local” or focusing on categories of identification such as gender, ethnicity, or ideology, but by examining texts and contexts that represent the “mutual negotiations” between the regional Caribbean and its diaspora (5).

By utilizing both literary fiction and documents drawn from a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, economics, and law, Page focuses specifically on the manner in which identity politics are arranged “according to different but related dynamics in diaspora and the local space” and how the literal and figurative distance between the two makes dialogue possible (1). She adopts a “two placed gaze” to theorize Caribbean migrant literature that navigates the

diaspora/nation relationship in a way that reflects the “mutual inter-dependency of the two locations.” Rather than validate binaries such as diaspora/exile, transnationality/provinciality, and global/local that have come to characterize diaspora discourse, resulting in “a corollary erasure of the Caribbean perspective as expressed in and from its geographical location,” Page wishes instead to examine the “in-betweenity” explored by the Caribbean fiction writers whose work her project engages (3). In particular, her analyses throughout this book compel readers to consider the use of remittance and deportation not only as tropes in Caribbean migrant fiction, but also as a means by which to theorize the literature.

Remit, remittance, and deportation are concepts that interest Page because each has to do with the idea of return. When used as either a noun or a verb, the word “remit” also conveys a preoccupation with authority, which allows Page to address “how ‘belonging to two places at once’ produces anxiety around questions such as identity, audience, and authority” (9). She utilizes remittance, the money and goods a diasporan migrant sends back to family and friends who stayed behind, as a way of considering Caribbean migrant fiction; in other words, the texts themselves are a form of cultural remittance. According to Page, considering remittance in this manner complicates how it is understood in economic discourses, as “a one-way street where the diaspora is implicated in positions at the center” through the “dependency syndrome” perceived in the sender’s financially supporting those “back home” (11). In a similar way, Page addresses deportation as a much darker and less talked about “sending back” that also raises questions of authority and political economy in Caribbean migrant fiction.

Before turning to the contemporary women writers whose fiction she addresses in four of her five chapters, Page dedicates her first chapter, “Creating Diaspora,” to providing a historical literary context for her analysis. She examines novels by “literary forerunners” George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, and Austin Clark, male novelists writing in the 1930s-1960s. Although critical discourse has maintained that the pre-1970 generation of Caribbean writers are exceedingly masculinist and exile-oriented, Page contends that these novels “anticipat[e] much of the discourse associated with later works on Caribbean migrancy and diaspora by Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat, Dionne Brand, Michelle Cliff, NourbeSe Philip, and others” (13). In arguing that Lamming, Selvon, and Clarke “create” diaspora, Page articulates the manner in which she distinguishes exile from diaspora (the experience of exile is characterized by loss and displacement while diaspora is often celebrated as the dispersal of communities), and she suggests that these writers contributed to “an involvement in diaspora as a process and in the shaping of diaspora as an ideology” (17). This point is made persuasively, as Page is committed to showing how their novels lay the groundwork for the

diasporan “twoness” that informs her analysis of contemporary migrant writers in subsequent chapters: Lamming, Selvon, and Clarke “colored the new landscape with their varied hues and accents,” while “concomitantly...their own psychic landscapes were colored and shifted by the new terrain” (17).

In “Migrant Bodies, Scars and Tattoos,” Page examines Edwidge Danticat’s use of corporeal imagery in *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and *Brother I’m Dying* (2007) to argue that the texts engage with remit/tance and deportation to complicate “issues of origins, location and perspective” (45). Danticat’s portrayals of bodies draws attention to the migrant subject’s ability to physically navigate and diaspora: these bodies simultaneously represent and produce “histories, communities and lasting legacies and complicate spaces among which such [migratory] movements are made” (43). In both *The Dew Breaker* and *Brother I’m Dying*, Page observes a “dialogic” and often “symbiotic” two-way relationship between Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Danticat explores her own authority to represent in fiction the horrors suffered by Haitians during the Duvalier years and to utilize the painful loss of her uncle Joseph to speak about the injustices of U.S. immigration policy. According to Page, Danticat also uses deportation to represent the authority of the state and to show that her uncle’s death in an immigrant detention center – a nightmarish “in-between” – is the state’s responsibility. But perhaps the most provocative point Page makes in this chapter is that in Danticat’s texts “the body...exposes art as ‘mere imitation’” (50). This statement not only raises questions surrounding the authority of discourse, but also suggests that the body itself serves as remittance; it is the thing “sent back,” bearing scars, tattoos, and other physical evidence of movement, change, abuse, and torture.

Page goes on to examine Erna Brodber’s novel *Louisiana* (1994) as a community, activist, and diaspora text in chapter three, “‘Two places can make children?’: Metaphysics, Authorship and the Borders of Diaspora.” As a “community” text, the novel’s authority is not consolidated in the subjectivity of the writer, but dispersed between the writer and the people for and about whom she writes. This sensibility is represented within the novel by the protagonist, an author turned spiritual conduit whose story becomes “one among many” (67). As an activist text about a Jamaican academic who makes meaningful connections with African Americans while living and working in the southern United States, the novel creates a space for what Brodber has called “the getting together of black people” (65). Shared geopolitical histories create “unity and unification,” solidarity between African Caribbean migrants and African Americans. Finally, the text creates an African diaspora rendered borderless by the spiritualist discourse of the novel, but which is also conscious of how it complicates national identity.

Page argues that Brodber utilizes spiritualist discourse to develop her vision of diaspora, whereby transmigration or metempsychosis facilitates metamorphosis, or a psychic change that “esteems...oneness across ethnic and national differences” (66). This metaphysical context allows Brodber to explore important cultural and religious similarities among the African-American and African-Caribbean characters in her novel. And although early in the chapter Page describes Brodber’s spiritualist theorization of borders “problematic,” “radical,” and “far-reaching” in how it privileges “the acceptance of similarities across nationality and ethnicity...by ignoring the material restrictions blacks face in the diaspora,” her subsequent analysis of the novel shows how rich and complicated she believes Brodber’s project to be (66). Ultimately, *Louisiana* suggests that movements to, from, and across the African diaspora are productive in how they facilitate the mutual negotiations central to Page’s argument; for “if the spiritual dimension that makes unity and reconciliation effective appears limited in its reach...it also shows that community is at the heart of African diaspora religion, spiritualism, and philosophy” (81).

In “Rethinking a Caribbean Literary Economy,” Page changes her focus from the “new spaces of negotiation” made possible by literary remit to the remittance text, arguing that such texts highlight the inequalities that exist among Caribbean people (82). In particular, she turns to Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* (1997), and Beryl Gilroy’s *Frangipani House* (1986), texts that represent “how monetary remittances or unilateral transfers to the Caribbean mirror other cultural transactions...that are themselves fraught with problematic social and political implications” and that consequently invoke the tension between center and margin in which the diaspora is recast as center while the Caribbean region remains peripheral (83). Page includes statistics showing the increase of monetary inflow to the Caribbean between 2001 and 2007 – it more than doubled – and its effect on GDP; moreover she notes that sociologists and economists are concerned about the implications of remittances and whether they have a negative effect on development in the receiving nations. In examining “remittance texts,” however, Page is interested in how migrant literature depicts remittance as central to an ongoing and two-way relationship between the Caribbean communities in diaspora and those that remain in the region, a relationship which disrupts the “easy dichotomy of privilege and dependence” that characterizes most remittance discourse (85). While remittances affect the economy and socio-political relationships in the Caribbean, the remittance text allows the migrant writer abroad to recreate the Caribbean she remembers.

According to Page, Jamaica Kincaid’s nonfiction narrative about her brother’s battle with HIV-AIDS, which ultimately kills him, functions as a remittance text in two specific ways. First, it represents economic remittance, for Kincaid sends money and medicine to her family in Antigua to help take care of

her brother. Second, it participates in a literary economy in which Kincaid’s text remits her memories, her construction of the place where she was born, which she left to pursue her life as a writer in the U.S. The effects are two-way: Kincaid sustains her family back home financially, but through writing she also sustains herself, working through the trauma of losing both her brother and her connection to Antigua. Throughout this analysis, Page also suggests that *My Brother* represents Kincaid’s remit in rendering her own “version of her brother’s life and death,” since, admittedly, she hardly knew him (88). By raising “issues related to the relationship between public narrative and private experience, issues that are as much ethical as they are political and narratological,” Page reveals that even when her focus is on the migrant text as remittance, concerns over authority remain crucial to her analysis.

In her final chapter, “‘No Abiding City’: Theorizing Deportation in Caribbean Migrant Fiction,” Page examines fictional narratives that portray deportees being sent back to the Caribbean from North American diasporan communities. She argues that such depictions in migrant fiction invites readers to “rethink the tensions and assumptions implicit in the relationship between Caribbean communities in the region and in the diaspora” and consider more carefully “the reality behind fictive presentations of migrancy,” thereby questioning the easy privileging of “transnationality and diaspora” that occurs frequently in critical discourse (117-8). Page calls Deighton Boyce’s deportation in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) a “caricature of return” that highlights the contradiction inherent in his belonging neither to his family/community in the U.S. nor to his native Barbados (119). Deighton makes himself invisible to the state by looking and behaving like everyone around him, but is given up by the diasporan community’s self-serving collaboration with the state to rid itself of an undesirable and illegal member. Page notes that “where there are shared values between the state and migrant community, the symbiotic relationship... functions to regulate the migrant community, as well as decide the contours of transnationality” (120). This statement aptly supports her contention that the presence of deportees undermines the claim of agency frequently ascribed to diasporan subjectivity. Moreover, her reading of gender and illegal migration in Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) shows that women facing deportation often pay for their (lack of) status “with their bodies...used, damaged, and then discarded” (121). Unlike Marshall’s Deighton, Brand’s protagonist Elizete cannot live a full, normal life because as a woman she is always visible. But read alongside Deighton’s deportation narrative, Elizete’s experiences living on the margins show that “the state’s borders do not stop with the physical containment of bodies; they are able to extend into the psychological domain and affect migrant subjectivities (122). Both characters are left exposed and vulnerable to the will of the state due to their placelessness.

This sense of placelessness, which characterizes the manner in which deportees complicate the discourse of the Caribbean diaspora, brings Page back to her central concern with “keeping both the diaspora and the nation in focus” (126). The questions of citizenship and community that arise out of her consideration of deportation and deportees beg to be addressed through a Caribbean discourse that acknowledges and even privileges what Page calls “the centeredness of the region” (126). In her thoughtful analyses of both early and contemporary Caribbean texts, Page provides a valuable reminder to writers, readers, and scholars of Caribbean literature to utilize a “two-placed gaze” in order to critically address the “‘discontents’ of transnational crossing” (127).