

# Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

---

Volume 10

Issue 2 *Intellectual Formations: Locating a Caribbean  
Critical Tradition*

Article 18

---

November 2013

## My World ... In Fragments

Gerard Aching

*University of Miami*, [g.aching@miami.edu](mailto:g.aching@miami.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

---

### Recommended Citation

Aching, Gerard (2013) "My World ... In Fragments," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol10/iss2/18>

This Part III: Locating a Tradition of West Indian Criticism is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [repository.library@miami.edu](mailto:repository.library@miami.edu).

About twenty-three years ago, a friend and I had been driving through Louisiana on holiday during the first week of June, when we stopped to have a look at some bayous. Temperatures were already hitting the nineties at that time of the year. After recently consulting some Google Maps to refresh my memory, I have concluded that this place probably stood on the shores of Lake Palourde. This spot would have been almost midway between the city of New Iberia, which I recall visiting, and Houma, a small town in the middle of nowhere, apparently known for its alligator attacks, where I remember overnighing. (By the way, alligator tail is also a regional delicacy.) Two natural phenomena took me by surprise when we entered a local restaurant-fishing supply store. The first was an open wooden box, about three by five, that was filled with chirping grasshoppers, so large that I took them to be locusts of biblical proportions. To this day, I still have not been able to figure out why these insects, which I believe were being sold for bait, could not fly out of the open box. The second phenomenon was more consequential. It was there and then that I stumbled across the word, *lagniappe*, written on the wall of this establishment. I don't recall the exact reference. Was it the name of the restaurant-supply store? I doubt it. The only thing that I could think was, how did this word find its way there? I had often heard it as a child in Trinidad until I was eighteen, when I left to study in the United States. This "discovery" complicated cultural geographies that I had long held, in a good way, I think, because the experience made me thirsty for history.

Now, I could have begun this account of my intellectual formation as follows. I came from a generation of students who straddled pre-independence and the first decade of Trinidad and Tobago's political independence (1962), when we prepared for and sat Cambridge University's Ordinary and Advanced Level secondary school exams while crossing the threshold into our postcolonial history. Was I supposed to study something "constructive" for nation building? Spanish, French, history, and geography were consistently my strengths throughout my secondary school education, even though, in my estimation, I was a poor reader. By that I mean, I was trained to read literature for designated facts about places, dates, and characters and was examined on my ability to remember them. The whole living, spectacular world of irony, satire, and every ingenious, rhetorical device you could imagine that belonged to popular culture and, in particular, to calypso and carnival did not enter our curriculum. How could there have been so wide a gap between schoolyard and classroom? This segregation of resources for learning about oneself is familiar to anyone who has lived through the transition to postcolonial history anywhere. The unevenly distributed acquisition to knowledge persists, but on a much larger scale than I suspected as a young adult, including with my complicity. It is undoubtedly a privilege and a luxury to undertake research on the Caribbean in the nation with the most resources for research in the world, but, to recall Jamaica Kincaid's critical language in *A Small Place*, there is a whole world in my becoming a Caribbeanist in the United States that I cannot get into right now.

What I can say is that my path through academia was unplanned. My interest in languages and social sciences led me to an undergraduate degree in political science, principally international relations, though I was drawn to political theory to which I had had minimal exposure. Pursuing a doctoral degree in Romance literatures would come later, after the adventure of teaching English in Madrid for two years at a time when the Socialists had just come to power in Spain, merely seven years after the death of Franco, and when the renaissance of creative, youth culture, know now as *la movida*, was fast emerging but still did not have a name. Here were political and cultural experiments that the world had not yet seen. There was something about this other (non-American) path to modernity with ancient roots that stimulated me to read everything in Spanish that I could find. That was my mood when I returned to the United States to study.

Yet I began this account with a personal discovery that took place years ago, when I was still a graduate student, in order to offer a sense of the motives, impulse, and passions that contributed to my formation. In Trinidad, “lagniappe” refers to the extra rice, sugar, or length of cloth that a merchant would give to a customer in order to maintain favorable business relations. It is an ancient, global practice. Because it belonged to a living language, the term also possessed local, metaphorical uses. For example, the child who is born into a family years after his or her siblings may affectionately be called a lagniappe. Until I came across it in Louisiana, I thought that the word was simply part of a vernacular that I shared with my compatriots, an element of local and, for me, even personal history. My paternal grandmother, of Venezuelan origin, was bilingual in Spanish and Trinidadian and could carry on conversations in what we called French patois, the lingua franca that French Creole cocoa plantation owners employed to communicate with their Venezuelan laborers. She would have been the source of the word in my household.<sup>1</sup> Stumbling on the word in Louisiana suddenly opened historical vistas. “Lagniappe” was living proof of the movement of French and Créole-speaking peoples across the islands and greater Caribbean region as a consequence of the French and Haitian Revolutions. In this new context for me, the word substantiated political histories, migrations, and labor and economic transactions across colonial borders. Like Alejo Carpentier’s romantic revelation, upon contemplating the ruins of Henri Christophe’s La Ferrière citadel and Sans-Souci palace for the first time, that this legacy belonged to all of the Americas, my “discovery” suggested that there were countless unofficial histories about the Caribbean that could be narrated by investigating such linguistic traces.<sup>2</sup> Here was

---

<sup>1</sup> Though I never heard my grandmother use the Spanish version of the word, the Wikipedia entry on *lagniappe* describes the term’s transpositions between Spanish and French. As it turns out, Mark Twain also wrote about the word after he encountered it in the Mississippi Delta. Today, even Microsoft Word 2011 recognizes it!

<sup>2</sup> A “trace” in the mostly French and Créole-speaking islands refers to a path that foot traffic creates in or on the outskirts of urban areas. It normally begins as an unmarked route and address that, with increased use, eventually acquires a name.

an inkling of the world of comparative research and pan-Caribbean studies to which I wanted to make scholarly contributions. The activity of reconstructing a world through its fragments can be archeological, positivist if the goal is taxonomy, and romantic in the urge to imagine a Caribbean that could be reconstructed on the basis of its unofficial histories. Fragments that substantiate alternative histories were and still are concrete, and my generation of graduate students was fortunate to witness the emergence of a different way to think about fragments that would not connote only loss, inadequacy, and other post-nihilistic allusions (fragmented nationalism, balkanization).

Our deep awareness, without despair, that the world becomes tangible to us in and through fragments is a modern, global experience. In the late eighties, the post-structural theorizations that led to deconstruction and post-Marxism were often critiqued as the nihilism that a group of French thinkers, disillusioned by the failure of students and workers to bring down the French government in 1968, unleashed on its nation's, if not, on Western civilization's vaunted institutions. Post-structuralism's idea that meaning was never stable because every signifier led to another, or that meaning is constituted through unstable binary oppositions, led to a radical questioning of ideas and values, such as the author, gender, God, and country. In fact, I recall a fellow graduate student who intimated in jest, but could not conceal his worry, that critics might soon begin to deconstruct the Bible. Yet, intuitively, it did not surprise us that postcolonial theory would also rendezvous at this theoretical junction: after the apparent departure of Prospero, the decolonizing world was free to decolonize the mind, as Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Said, and other put it, and to question some of the same ideas and values that the post-structuralists targeted and that the Western European empires had instituted globally with varying degrees of success. World literatures that described decolonization, independence, and the difficult road to self-mastery required ways of analyzing the world that would interrogate and denounce Prospero's ways, yes, but that would also reveal the inventiveness of the world's Calibans. In "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?", Derek Walcott critiques V.S. Naipaul for his pessimism about Caribbean originality and highlights the ability of Caribbean peoples to create something out of nothing noting, to wit, that "[m]ost of our definitions of American culture are fragmentary."<sup>3</sup> In my first book, which examined the late nineteenth-century Spanish American literary current known as *modernismo*--in some respects, one of our first postcolonial literatures--I was inspired by the descriptions of the Latin American that José Martí, the foremost *modernista* thinker, offered us in his classic essay, "Nuestra América": "What a vision we were, the chest of an athlete, the hands of a dandy, and the forehead of a child. We were a whole fancy dress ball, in English trousers, a Parisian waistcoat, and a Spanish bullfighter's hat." And, "Our feet upon a rosary, our heads white, and our bodies a motley of Indian and criollo we boldly

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://otherenglishes.pbworks.com/f/Walcott\\_cultureasmimcry.pdf](http://otherenglishes.pbworks.com/f/Walcott_cultureasmimcry.pdf)

entered the community of nations.”<sup>4</sup> Here was a figure that emerged in all its originality, depicted in a way that uncannily reminded me of the aesthetics of carnival, yet waiting for its proper assessment, especially among its own people.

Contemporary notions of diaspora have become thinkable, useful, and worthy of celebration in the wake of post-structuralist and postcolonial theorizations. It is comforting to know that cultural fragments, scattered across specific geographies, can tell us about how our communities managed to conserve an idea of their belonging to a greater whole in spite of the ravages of exile, exploitation, decimation, and alienation that empires and some of their capitalist practices wreaked around the globe. In my view, and until recently, being a pan-Caribbeanist scholar meant participating wholeheartedly in this reconstructive and admittedly utopian endeavor. Today, however, I concentrate my research on Caribbean insularities, to the things that we say about ourselves that we consider unique and untranslatable. This reversal responds in part to my view that, unless we are careful, pan-Caribbeanism and the claims for diaspora without nationhood run the risk of homogenizing the region into a collection of undifferentiated, repeating islands. Both the revelations that become visible through the prism of pan-Caribbeanism and the legitimate claims of belonging to a diaspora challenge us to articulate moral responsibilities to and civic engagement with *all* the citizens in our nations. Perhaps celebrating creolizations and exceptionalisms are some of the psychological and political resources that we currently employ in our continuous efforts to come to terms with the unsettling knowledge of having been born native to the aftermath of some of the largest labor experiments the world has ever known. Yet, it would seem that our island-nations are all that we concretely and truly have for the collective and competing expressions of our ingenuity. Together we aspire, together we achieve, and, if not, together we all fall down.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/marti/America.htm>